FAMILY LOVE: A MEMOIR AND WRITING
FAMILY LOVE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
NOVEL TO MEMOIR, AN EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT

When I first started thinking about writing *Family Love* I wanted to write it as an autobiographical novel. This meant a radical departure from my usual writing methods. For one thing, it was the first time in my writing life that I was interested in the conscious use of a period in my life as material for a novel. I had never before attempted this and felt a certain amount of apprehension in abandoning tried and true approaches for something so new and risky. The label, autobiographical novel, seemed to define most accurately for the purposes and process of the thesis what were in fact a series of decisions, vacillations and rationalisations. An autobiographical novel seemed the best form for what I wanted from *Family Love*, a book that combined the fictional momentum and surprises of a novel with the added depth of personal and political material consciously drawn from real life and living people. I believed that the detailed evocation of a specific time and place my childhood and early adolescence in Sandringham and Titirangi in New Zealand, aided by diaries and memory would allow the story to follow its own fictional bent, and to have the emotionally truthful resonance of fiction without necessarily being completely factual.
Writing Family Love:
Autobiographical novel to memoir

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Definition of an Autobiographical novel</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The ‘Commentary’</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Narrator</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The First Draft</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fictional Memoir</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Problems (Part 2)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>‘Autobiographical novel to fictional memoir’</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Analysis of process in Chapter 13</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Three Memoirs</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Writing in an Academic Context for the first time</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Discoveries</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>In Summary</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When I first started thinking about writing *Family Love* I wanted to write it as an autobiographical novel. This meant a radical departure from my usual writing methods. For one thing, it was the first time in my writing life that I was interested in the conscious use of a period in my life as material for a novel. I had never before attempted this and felt a certain amount of apprehension in abandoning tried and true approaches for something so new and risky.

Until then Fellini’s comment that ‘everything and nothing in my work is autobiographical’\(^1\) was the best way to describe how my fiction and life meshed. Obviously there is an autobiographical basis to all my work but it expresses itself not in facts or events so much as oblique flashes, subconscious truths that arise out of the process of writing.

In the creation of fictional characters in my novels, for example, I had never before set out to write about a particular person in the naturalistic sense. I have not been interested in telling someone’s story so much as becoming involved in the process of discovering and developing characters constructed from many sources including my own
fantasies. These characters often emerge from the story itself and in turn drive it. An analysis of the characters in my novels reveals the similarity of their genesis; a complex process of observation, immersion and discovery.

Such characters can be divided roughly into three categories: those that are almost purely works of imagination, created from thin air as it were, with no resemblance to living people, (for example, Glory Day or Violet Singer); those that are an amalgam of people I know, (for example Roxy or Faith Singer) and thirdly, a very small number (probably no more than half a dozen) that are portraits of living people. None of these characters in any of the categories were consciously drawn from real life, in that I didn’t deliberately set out to write about them, and only found this was happening during the course of the novel.

Of the second category, for instance, Faith Singer was not taken from real life so much as recast. The inspiration for her came from many disparate sources, including elements of the fearlessness and natural unconventionality I admired in Dorothy Hewett, and women rock singers with their distinctive style.

A critic once described me as a method actor in the way I went about writing fiction, and, in particular, finding the voice of a character. This is an observation I find useful because there is something almost ‘actorly’ about my immersion into fictional characters’ lives. It is a complete identification which results in what could be loosely described as super realism. I am writing from life but from my own intensely observed construction of a life — a construction which has its own rules, logic and momentum and often bears little resemblance to the ‘facts’ or the real people.
This process of immersion and total identification with a fictional work is most memorably analysed by Janet Frame in her autobiographical trilogy *Angel at my Table*. In *Envoy from Mirror City*, she wrote, ‘If I make that hazardous journey to the Mirror City where everything I have known or dreamed is bathed in the light of another world, what use is there in returning only with a mirrorful of me…the self must be the container of the treasures of Mirror City, the envoy as it were, and when the time comes to arrange and list these treasures for shaping into words, the self must be the worker, the bearer of the burden, the chooser, placer and polisher…these are the processes of fiction. “Putting it all down as it happens” is not fiction, there must be the journey by oneself, the light focussed upon the material, the willingness of the author herself to live within that light, the city of reflections governed by different laws, materials, currency. Writing a novel is not merely going on a shopping expedition across the border to a real place; it is hours and years spent in the factories, the streets, the cathedrals of the imagination, learning the unique functioning of Mirror City, its skies and spaces, its own planetary system.’

Even my own fictional characters belonging in the third category — those that are direct portraits of living people — are not arrived at by conscious intention. This can be illustrated most clearly by the fact that it is generally only towards the end of the novel that I recognise where they come from and who they are. It is as if I am unconsciously drawing upon my knowledge of the person to create a portrayal of them.

Two examples of this strange process of discovery are ‘Sam’ in *Glory Days* who turned out to be a caretaker and cleaner at a clinic I once worked in as a counsellor, and ‘George the Horse’ in *Lives on Fire*, who ran a camping ground, Early Storms, outside Injune in Western Queensland, where we stayed once.
The closest analogy I can find to this process of discovery in writing fiction is that flash of recognition you have when you have just woken from a dream. It is a recognition of the emotional meaning of the dream and often, too, of the real identity of the people in it. In the clear light of morning, the mysterious events you have been so intensely experiencing in your dream, the strange behaviour of the people you met there suddenly make sense; you recognise their relationship to you and the particular meaning they have in your life and thought.

A striking example of this in my own writing experience was the genesis of Angel, one of the main characters in Faith Singer. I had seen a young girl working the streets of Kings Cross once or twice – she was a very young, dreamy-looking girl wearing elegant 40’s clothes; she had an innocent, otherworldly air about her. I had a strong emotional reaction to what I sensed was her quality of thoughtful vulnerability. This was so strong that I even had the impulse to go up and talk to her, invite her to come and stay with me, and so, somehow, get her off the streets. I only glimpsed her twice or three times at the most, and had no conscious knowledge of how much she had really affected me.

A year later I saw her face again — on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald. She had been murdered and her body dumped in a back lane in Kings Cross. By that time I was already writing Faith Singer and realised that this girl had somehow transmogrified into Angel, Faith’s eccentric friend and surrogate daughter, a haunting presence in the novel. It was only when I saw the photograph that I realised where Angel had come from.
Quite a few influences went into the creation of Angel. The most powerful was that glimpse of a young streetwalker, which elicited such a strong emotional reaction in me at the time. Her childishness and my later knowledge of her fate fixed her image in my memory — as did my feelings of pity and anger that, like so many other young drug addicts, she had died needlessly on the streets of our wealthy city. There was also a sense of shame around this memory, the feeling that maybe if I had followed my instinct, however ill-advised it seemed at the time, her fate would have been different. All of these layers went into her final portrayal and the fictional story of her life.

This is not to say that the act of writing fiction is a kind of trancelike state; far from it. It is (apart from obvious requirements like intellectual analysis, knowledge and empathy) the recognition that a respect, trust and openness to the workings of the subconscious and a truthfulness in the expression of them will lead a writer to places she did not necessarily intend or expect. These are the places that are most fascinating to me as a writer.

In an interesting passage about Jackson Pollock, Kurt Vonnegut quotes him saying, ‘I must lay on the first stroke of paint. After that I insist that the canvas must do at least half the work.’

Vonnegut goes on to speculate, ‘Was there ever a more cunning experiment devised to make the unconscious reveal itself? Has any psychological experiment yielded a more delightful suggestion than this one, that there is a part of the mind without ambition or information which nonetheless is expert on what’s beautiful?’
The kind of fiction I’m interested in is that which deals with the gap between the rationality, conscious intention and externalities of our ordinary life and the hidden life we all lead.

I am interested in the workings of the subconscious, the slow seep of ideas, emotions, and dreams, the underworld we all inhabit which feeds our daily lives and can be triggered by music, sex, paintings, a walk in the bush, a certain cast of light.

In 1996 in a paper I gave to the Association of Australian Literature at the Brisbane conference, later published in *Southerly* and in my essay collection *The Red Heart*, I wrote, ‘For me, as for other writers, writing from the events of my own life is mostly impossible. In a recent interview David Malouf said he found it boring to write about his own life and himself, and that seems to be my problem too, though in my case a certain lack of courage comes into it as well. In any case I don’t seem to have a choice other than to create a fictive voice and find his or her voice through it. Being bogged down in the facts of my own life I find constraining. I feel I cannot be so honest or take so many risks because of the voices in my head. Grace Paley says she writes fiction to find out what she knows and it is this freshness and discovery I need too. I already know too much about myself — living inside my own life is often extremely wearisome and boring. The problem is that I can’t seem to make sense of my life by writing about it directly. This is one of the reasons writing fiction is so satisfying — there is no need to pursue facts in your search for truth.’

There is of course another dimension to the use of real or created events, which is brought about by the subconscious influences that work on fiction. In fact, all the fiery material of our lives is pushed through this filter whether we like it or not, and some
strange material can come through. It is this dimension that allows writers to produce some of their most interesting work, because their imagination is working on several levels at once (much as they do in life). Providing always that the process is truthful, anything is possible within the layers of narration that are set up. Writing from life, the truth of fiction is somewhere in the middle of this process — a fusion of intellect, imagination and the revelations of the subconscious, that sense of recognition and sheer curiosity.

In his book *It All Adds Up* Saul Bellow said of fiction, ‘The essence of our real conditions, the complexity, the confusion, the pain of it, is shown to us in glimpses, in what Proust and Tolstoy thought of as true impressions. The value of literature lies in these intermittent true impressions. A novel moves back and forth between the world of objects, of actions, of appearances, and that other world from which these true impressions come, and which move us to believe that the good we hang on to so tenaciously — in the face of evil so obstinately — is no illusion.’

This wonderful description of the value of fiction and its expression of glimpses of reality or true impressions has always been very helpful for me in understanding the nature of fiction and the process of writing it. It is interesting that I was to find that, for me anyway, it also applied to the writing of autobiography. This is an idea that will be elaborated further in this exegesis.

In the eight years since giving the paper, ‘Everything is Copy’, outlining my personal objections to writing autobiography, my extreme opinions have mellowed. For one thing, since that time I have been commissioned to write a number of short autobiographical pieces. I found them as interesting and complex to write as fiction, with
surprising parallels in the techniques used — techniques that lead to the same unexpected and interesting revelations. And it was also possible that the certain lack of courage I mention no longer applied and I had become more open to new ways of writing.

As I wrote in my preliminary notes for *Family Love*: ‘… it’s quite possible things have changed a little since I wrote that. The facts of my life may be more accessible for different reasons. I may be able to cast them in the unity of experience more. I may have more perspective, more courage. I have been writing about my life as all novelists do, of course, but obliquely. Now I am saying to myself I can do this directly. Whether it’s a good thing or not who knows? I can certainly escape safely back into fiction but then again — it’s not exactly an escape…’

‘I’ve always enjoyed working in private,’ Bruce Springsteen said. ‘But over time you tend to have more flexibility. Everything seems like less of a big deal now.’

My lack of courage now seems to me also to be connected with the fear of the exposure of my most private self and also of my family, and perhaps also the feeling that it was presumptuous of me to write about, for how could anyone be interested?

Certainly and for whatever reason, by the time I began *Family Love*, and after having written two more novels since the paper I have just quoted, I found that I wanted to try something new. For the first time in twenty years I wanted a break from writing fiction. It is also quite possible that I had more self-confidence as a writer, so that I was ready to explore the material of my own life without feeling it was presumptuous and boring for the reader.
As I began writing this book and reading extensively in this genre I was reminded that my conception of autobiography as a limited form — a one-dimensional, self-serving string of facts and events — was quite inaccurate.

The traditional autobiography charting the life and achievements of the great man for instance had always bored me. It does not allow for the vulnerabilities and nuances of a person’s life that are most interesting. Point-scoring, rewriting of history, a lack of insight into the subject’s emotional life, a sense of the narrator as superior and separate, are often features of this kind of autobiography. In some cases they are clearly mendacious.

The existence of autobiographies as trenchant political statement, psychological and social analysis, classy confessional, or a rich mixture of all these, made me increasingly aware of the possibilities of the genre.

Autobiographies by the likes of Pablo Neruda, Colette, Janet Frame, Edmund White, Andrea Dworkin and Arthur Miller were inspiring examples. In the writing of my own commissioned autobiographical pieces I discovered too that the same processes I used in fiction were often at work: ‘the distant past far removed enough to attain that kind of fictional glow, allow a shifting and softening of the light, the possibility of replacing certain irreducible facts by a story that has the shapeliness of fiction, the same, safe blurring of boundaries.’

It is interesting that I thought of the writing of autobiography as ‘safe’, a manageable enterprise for a writer. This was only one example of how wrong I was and how far from an understanding of what I was about to attempt.
“FAMILY LOVE”

A MEMOIR
My father was born in a farming town legendary in New Zealand for its dullness.

In those days it was a blind town of closed-in houses and silent streets frozen on a plain in the middle of nowhere. The wind blew every day. Around the town stretched hundreds of acres of farmland, cows grazing in the shade of the ragged macrocarpas at the fences.
In his childhood house, his mother, tall, dark-browed, waited out her life. For forty years she lived in a museum of polish and silence where laughter, sun, sensuality, books, music were largely absent.

The farmhouse was on a plain surrounded by the immaculate garden, the farm beyond. Inside the sunless rooms every surface gleamed with polish, the silence unbroken except for the chiming of the grandfather clock in the hall, heavy curtains perpetually drawn against the light, the smell of mothballs.

The family marvelled about her in that playful, merciless way of theirs — what had she done all the days of her life? What did she do all day? What did she think about? Her one and only son Dick dressed in white cotton gloves whenever he left the house, his hair shining clean and falling in a wave of gold, that sharp little mouth filled with crooked teeth even as a boy. Her endless house-cleaning.

She rarely left the house, didn’t drive a car or work at a paying job, she didn’t read or sew or listen to music or garden or make anything with her hands. She didn’t like cooking, had few friends and fell out with her sisters one by one over the years.

It was the kind of senseless life that is almost impossible to imagine; she was a woman frozen in time, blind, deaf and dumb to the world outside and her to own longings, if she had any. She seemed to want nothing besides the perfection of her house, her possessions, walking
from room to room, her own face in the mirror. She might as well have been in self-imposed purdah.

She was fierce about two things in life: the maintenance of gentility at all costs and her only son.

Her husband, small, square and nuggety, a hard worker, did not seem to register in her emotional life. She contained him, teetering as he did towards uncontrolled liveliness, ever mindful that he might let her down by his common ways. His masculinity was corralled inside demarcation areas — the narrow tobacco-smelling bedroom where he slept in his neat single bed, (beside it his pipe, his spectacles and a green china frog, a Christmas present from me,) the vegetable garden and shed out the back; the rack outside the back door where he set his shoes before entering her domain. And then there was the outside, that vague, threatening masculine world he inhabited, which involved the work on the farm, drinking at the pub, in other words the life outside the house.

There was never any doubt about his masculinity though; he had the hard hands of a man who worked all his life, a warm beery smell, a twinkle that life never quite extinguished. He never seemed to have to prove his masculinity the way his son did; his ‘little fella’ was the love of his life and he simply got on with the complicated business of living with her. He took his pleasures where he could find them, increasingly at the pub.
So how could it have been for that acerbic young man, the only son, loved to suffocation by his mother, resented by his father?

A boy so desperate for a kindred soul that for years he imagined amused recognition in their neighbour’s eyes whenever he looked directly at him. He saw and cherished the gestures of this quiet man as signifying a whole world of unspoken understanding between the two of them. When he was older he discovered, to his chagrin, that his silence was indifference, nothing more.

He had so little to go on, this ferociously intelligent boy — his father’s farming magazines and the radio playing dance music very softly, the albums his mother kept from her youth, he turning the pages in silent rooms, looking at the faded aphorisms written out neatly in her old fashioned writing; kittens and pretty maidens carefully cut and glued in artfully arranged showers of roses, the faint smell of lavender.

It was all pure Victorian — the family language, shrouded by genteel euphemism, his parents’ dim comprehension of the world outside their farmhouse, an atmosphere of half-truths, secrets, repressed emotions.

He was like a cuckoo in the nest. His formidable intellect, naturally subversive cast of mind and irrepressible sense of humour were all equally baffling to them — threatening even — potentially disruptive of everything they lived for.
In the end he and his father had a savage fistfight before he left home forever. It is hard to imagine the provocation, the murky unspoken competition for my grandmother’s love the two of them were immersed in. What kind of relentless rejection would lead Dick the elder, my grandfather, schooled as he was in the religion of respectability at any price, to do such a thing? Punch his own precious son square in the face? They looked the same although my grandfather was better looking — they both had that protuberant stubborn jaw; they were shortish men, wiry, energetic, doughty. After all, my grandfather was from the wrong side of the tracks, the son of a drunken miner and a midwife and he had won the hand of the proud-looking daughter of the bank manager, leader of the town’s small elite. She married beneath her and her unrelenting purpose in life was to bring him up to her own standards of gentility. There must have been a powerful sexual spark there to motivate the two most significant actions of her long life, marrying him and having a child.

So there they were, husband and son punching each other out in a house where the open expression of emotion was unheard of. She would have been deeply ashamed and anxious about letting the news leak out. Once her beloved son was gone, they went on living together, husband and wife in that chilly house, her one obsession churning away all those long years, mourning her son, blaming her husband, he endlessly trying to make amends. It was unlikely that he ever realised the full extent of the painful truth; that once their son was born no one else existed for her.

Coming from such an obsession, such ferocious gentility, how could any child survive? Dick probably knew at an early age that if he didn’t do something drastic his mother would see
nothing wrong with him living in the farmhouse forever, eating poached eggs at the Formica table, father and son in endless competition, the silence eating away at his bones till he died. As it was, he came perilously close to submitting and living out his mother’s fantasies. He did an agricultural diploma while still living at home.

There is a photo of him standing skinny and irresolute beside a huge bull as if he didn’t quite know what he was doing there.

It was an aberration, a blank point in his life he never talked about much, to me anyway. It was an immersion into the airlessness of his mother’s world. That his mother in her ignorance and neediness would wish such a life on him, the fact that he even came close to acquiescence caused a lifelong resentment he never learnt to discard.

He recovered himself quickly though and plunged suddenly and fiercely into life; blowing the loudest raspberry to respectability he could think of by having a fist-fight with his father and leaving home to live with a young Maori woman in a sharemilker’s hut. Then, shaking the dust of Palmerston North from his shoes, he left permanently for Wellington where he joined the Communist Party and met the woman he was to marry. He was only twenty.

The rigours of his childhood were the making of him as well because they instilled in him a lifelong scepticism about reverently held fashionable truths, giving him special insight into the obfuscations and hypocrisy of gentility. They turned him into a stubbornly truthful
historian on a permanent mission against cover-ups and even the most seemingly unassailable orthodoxies. They made him constitutionally unable to toe the party line.

At the same time, it wasn’t so easy for him to throw off the emotional weight of his mother’s influence. He spent the rest of his life escaping her; his life task was to expunge her and the memory of his possible fate and a childhood dreary beyond imagining. She was the axis of his life, the black star, the standard by which his emotional life was judged ever after.
2 Definition of an Autobiographical novel

One of the technical problems I saw in writing autobiography was that I feared there would be none of that necessary tension and drive that I usually experienced in writing fiction. As I suggest in the previous chapter, writing fiction is for me a process of discovery — I never know exactly how the novels will end, nor which characters arrive to join the story.

To avoid this problem and also the constraints of traditional memoir — the boring facts of my life — I decided to apply the techniques of writing fiction to the real events and people of my life, if necessary fictionalising them when it seemed appropriate. In other words, I decided to write an ‘autobiographical novel’. I also thought the subject would make very interesting fiction — a coming of age in an exotic and in some ways dysfunctional family.

As I wrote in my notes, ‘A memoir — blah blah, we did this and that, the sky was blue to me is boring as batshit to read and to write. Unless it’s told like a novel. Like a story. Full of life and colour. It’s an intellectual leap of course. The other story I wrote in my 20’s I think, the girl in a psychiatric ward thinking back… Too sad… an elegy. Now it is a woman telling the story who appreciates the nuances, who has been wounded but recovered, sees things in the full perspective of adulthood. Colette? Landscape is
certainly a key of course, sexuality. *The Ripening Seed*… just thinking of third person, that’s a possibility. Third person. Is it about the burgeoning of sexuality? I think so…’

The label, ‘autobiographical novel’ seemed to define most accurately for the purposes and process of the thesis what were in fact a series of decisions, vacillations and rationalisations.

An autobiographical novel seemed the best form for what I wanted from *Family Love*, a book that combined the fictional momentum and surprises of a novel with the added depth of personal and political material consciously drawn from real life and living people. I believed that the detailed evocation of a specific time and place — my childhood and early adolescence in Sandringham and Titirangi in New Zealand, aided by diaries and memory — would allow the story to follow its own fictional bent, and to have the emotionally truthful resonance of fiction without necessarily being completely factual.

However it is the consciousness of the intention to use real life material and people that is the defining factor in the autobiographical form, determining both its limitations and possibilities. For instance, some novelists who end up with an autobiographical novel do not start out with the conscious intention of writing in that genre. A complex interweaving of narrative and theme, driven by their own subconscious needs and obsessions shapes the story, and decides their material. This was not the kind of book I had in mind.

On the other hand, writers consciously lifting events and people out of their own lives have a long and honourable tradition in literature: from De Beauvoir’s *The Mandarins*¹² to Dickens’s *David Copperfield*¹³ to Frame’s *Owls do Cry*.¹⁴
Our best Australian writers — people like Dorothy Hewett and Helen Garner — have always been open about the autobiographical basis of their fiction, to the point where both have been involved in legal wrangles with aggrieved friends and ex-lovers after they recognised themselves and took offence, so obvious is the resemblance. *Neap Tide* for instance, contains many portraits of Dorothy Hewett’s friends, as does Garner’s *Monkey Grip*.

Dorothy Hewett’s approach to writing fiction was very naturalistic in the sense that she was mostly telling stories involving people and situations she was very familiar with in her novels and short stories. Her vivid evocation of working class life in Sydney of the 1950s in *Bobbin Up*, her first novel for example, is based very closely on her experiences in the Alexandria Spinning Mill and nine years living in the inner-city suburbs of Sydney with her boiler-maker husband and their children. Even her last novel, *Neap Tide* which has a plotline involving the ghosts of drowned lovers, is about people she knew in Bermagui. In one of the many conversations I had with her about the book, she told me she was partly inspired to write it when she had a dream about a ghost on the beach there.

Helen Garner’s novels and short stories are of course another great example of this blurring of fact and fiction — and she has always been open about their autobiographical base. She tells the stories of her life and loves with almost no fictional ‘masking’ of facts in stories like *Children’s Bach*. Like Hewett, it seems to be the way she works naturally. My feeling is that neither of them saw the reason to create elaborate fictional structures and characters out of thin air, when the material of their own life and the richly creative way they processed it themselves was enough. The way they work is
also probably about what interests them most and like many other writers like Edna O’Brien, Colette et al, the extensive working and reworking of the material of their own lives in their fiction is what they are most concerned with.

So although this kind of fiction can probably not be categorised as either memoir or autobiography, the boundaries these writers have drawn between fact and fiction are very fluid. This can be seen graphically in Garner’s recent work. Though she has indicated she is no longer so interested in fiction, her two recent non-fiction books still have a strong fictional element, both in the subjectivity and intimacy of her personal narrative and reactions to events, and also, (less successfully) in a shaping of the ‘facts’ as a result of an unacknowledged agenda. Her interest in Christian morality and the question of individual evil in *The Consolation of Joe Cinque*,\(^{20}\) lead her to ignore the important fact that the main protagonist is suffering from borderline personality disorder. At no point does she describe the symptoms of this highly damaging and unpleasant condition, a mental disorder that leads to a very high rate of suicide and self-harming. Such a description would change the whole weight of the book which, as it stands, is a very critical, slightly sensationalised and probably much more ‘interesting’ account of a manipulative, spoilt woman, an amoral and seemingly heartless killer.

From the outset of *Family Love* I was aware that I was attempting something personally ambitious in writing what I had tried to define as an autobiographical novel. This was not only because it was such a radical departure for me but also because of what I was hoping to achieve.

Writing a true story in the guise of fiction and using fictional techniques seemed to me a very difficult balancing act. It wasn’t that I had a theoretical objection to using
the material of my life in a novel, keeping in mind Virginia Woolfe’s memorable dictum in her essay *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*. She wrote, ‘Any deductions that we may draw from comparisons immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with the view of infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon and that nothing; no method, no experiment even of the wildest is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. The “proper” stuff of fiction does not exist…’

I first envisaged writing about the period of my life in the sixties and early seventies when I was a student and traveller. I was interested in that time because it was so anarchic. By leaving home at seventeen I hoped to shed in one dramatic gesture the mass of identity problems and confusion brought about by living with my alluring, bohemian and dysfunctional family. In fact I had to spend the next few years urgently trying to make sense of it all. At the same time the creativity, originality and intellectual stimulation of such an upbringing were good training for being a young woman in the sixties. It was probably the first and last time I and many others, felt at home in a world where idealistic political commitment was not only acceptable but expected, at a time when a kind and optimistic view of human nature was in general currency and the possibilities for change and reform seemed endless.

The problems of shaping this into a novel were complex and, in any case, this particular slant on the subject was abandoned once I began the actual writing.

At first draft I became very interested in the discovery of the way the life histories of my forebears unfolded into a larger story, revealing how each person influenced and in turn was influenced (and sometimes damaged) by all the intricately interrelated emotional, psychological, aesthetic, political and cultural forces which make up a family
history. I became fascinated by the clearly emerging patterns of connection between our immediate family and our forebears; the way their dramas, pleasure and suffering influenced us so strongly in a direct line from the past. As a result of this Family *Love* became, in the beginning, anyway, much more a story about my early childhood and family and these family connections.
The ghost of our father as a small boy was still around in Grandma’s house. It was like walking into a sealed capsule, a place frozen in time. We had an immersion into our father’s childhood every time we stayed there. She had managed to transfer her gloomy empire intact to Remuera, where they had moved after selling the farm. When we stayed there, we children entered the house in awe; it was like stepping back into the shadows of the ‘olden days’ as we used to call them, the silent rooms with their solid Victorian furniture, heavy drapes, museum mustiness. You could almost glimpse the little blonde boy moving quietly through the rooms of the lonely house. What did he do there? We knew from our own experience with Grandma that he would never be allowed to get dirty, play with other children or make loud noises. We imagined his cold clean bed at night, his mother always there, the discomfort of being watched all the time in case he made a mess. He could never be just an ordinary kid mucking around. The stakes were too high — mess, dirt, disorder were not to be tolerated.

Was he lonely or did he enjoy his life — playing with his dogs, escaping into the countryside occasionally to do his boy things without much angst? Reading and doing his schoolwork with that characteristically steely single-mindedness of his?
It was strange to think that the old-fashioned solitary boy we pictured would turn out as our scruffy, messy, boisterous father.

Grandma’s house always felt grand and unfriendly in contrast to the cheerful homespun disorder of home and I knew instinctively that when we were staying there we had to keep up a respectable front for the family honour. Jo, my elder sister, found it easier. She was Grandma’s favourite and they understood each other more. I always felt off track when I was with them, trying too hard. I talked in a silly unnatural way and pretended to be interested in subjects I found puzzling and boring, laughing affectedly at jokes I didn’t understand. ‘Grandma thinks having any more than one child isn’t nice,’ my mother, Elsie, explained to us, pronouncing it ‘naice’. ‘So she’s never really accepted the rest of you.’

I knew it was very important not to get caught out, to reveal the true nature of my wild and outrageous family and myself to her, bring us all undone.

I felt trapped there, cut off, muffled against the ordinary life going on outside, beyond my reach. Even when we just wanted to play outside we had to put on good clothes, have our hair brushed, hands washed. We felt like freaks sitting out on the neat front lawn, too stiff and proper to play any of our usual killer games, weighed down by our clothes, exposed, only a low wall separating us from the passersby and the traffic.

It frightened me to discover how quickly all the certainties about who I was could disappear. I became a prig wearing gloves and scarves, playing my part within hours of arriving. The only
way to escape was by climbing a pepper tree in the garden to hide in the leaves. I sat for hours wedged amongst the friendly knobbled branches, enjoyably turning things over in my mind; thinking intensely about my grandmother and grandfather, the strangeness of their life, the boy that became my father. It fascinated me. I was like a little alien spying on a strange new country from my hidden vantage point: Granddad’s vegetables planted in orderly lines behind the shed, the solid white stucco walls of the house, it’s neatness. It was the power of the physical world my grandmother created, the empire with her as undisputed queen that fascinated me, this strange world of hers we entered every now and then and were taught to mock. There was always a little ache of homesickness in me at the different ness of it all.

The house was like a castle in my imagination, there was the same cold grandeur; troubling dark corners, rooms dripping with treasures — jewellery, china, crystal gleaming in glass-fronted cabinets. It was the kind of intricate, sentimental, faux Victoriana that we children loved guiltily — such bad taste was despised in our stripped-back modern fifties house. We would sit for hours with our grandmother as she described each piece.

‘And you can have that one,’ she’d say. ‘I’ve put a piece of paper underneath it with your name on it so when I die you can have them.’

‘Oh you won’t die Grandma,’ we girls protested hypocritically, eyeing the porcelain ladies and glittering daubs, longing for the day when we could unlock the doors with the key and take our treasures out — the silver box for Jo, a gold thimble for me, a tiny pair of tongs for Jackie, my younger sister.
We deeply admired the heavy gold brocade bedspreads and matching curtains, thick carpet and cream walls, the sheer weight of luxury of the room where we all slept together in the big bed. We called it the Golden Room and played queens and princesses, ordering servants about, but never very boisterously, because we were intimidated by the grandeur of it. The house had a special Grandma smell of mothballs, lavender, a kind of mustiness to do with unaired rooms and extreme cleanliness.

My sisters and I appreciated our grandmother’s conventional femininity because it was so exotic to us. We went willingly into her girlish world when we stayed at her house. She wore hats and perfume, her shiny red hands had glittering rings loaded up on her wedding finger. Her expression was always genteel except for the occasional savagely calculating glance shot out from beneath the iron curls of her perm. She was always dressed up. Our mother and her friends were plainer and unadorned, their hair was straight, they didn’t wear makeup, they were witty and loose and smelt of cigarettes, they only had one gold band on their fingers, they were sceptical and self-critical.

Grandma was interested only in her house, her possessions, her physical grooming, and she made no apology for it. She acted as if there was no other world worth considering. She had no doubts about the way she lived her life, the way she made Granddad smoke in the shed and take his shoes off before he came inside, for instance.
‘I don’t want you bringing all the muck inside,’ she’d tell him sternly in front of us, her voice losing some of its gentility.

And there he was, our grandfather, meekly complying. We liked him very much for his habit of popping his false teeth out for us behind his wife’s back and because once he put a dollop of putty in our wetty doll’s nappies.

‘What will Grandma think,’ we said, rolling our eyes with that awful gentility we took on in our grandparents’ presence.

Once he made us a miniature Japanese garden with a bridge over a pond, a fisherman sitting there with his miniscule fishing rod, peaceful: it was full of aching little details which we instinctively recognised as expressions of love.

Did he love his son with the same tenderness — or was it squeezed out of him by his wife so that only the hidings and sternness Dick spoke of so resentfully survived? His wife and son were too strong and cold for him; he had no room to move.

All the same, on one memorable, never-to-be-repeated occasion, Jo and I opened the door to a funny old tramp, a sexless battered person.

‘Where’s your grandma, children?’ she kept asking us in an insinuating voice. ‘I’d like to come inside.’
‘I’m sorry. Grandma’s not here,’ we kept saying, brought up to be polite whatever the circumstance.

We were petrified and kept calling back into the house, guarding the door valiantly— there was something knowing about the strange woman, the way she stood in Grandma’s neat back verandah with her wicked smile.

When it finally dawned on us that this bedraggled creature was in fact our own Grandma we were shocked as well as deeply impressed that she would do something so wild. She was exultant at the success of her trick, and we all laughed with relief. It was reassuring and exciting to us that she could do something so un-Grandma-like, although she never did anything like that again.

Did she play mischievous wonderful tricks like that on our father? It seemed so out of character, a side to her we would never have imagined. There was one other hilariously uncharacteristic and endearing action of hers — the cartoon she drew of a man standing out on a balcony, an erection plainly bulging under his nightdress. He was saying ‘Juliet, where art thou?’

And yet for all the interesting strangeness of her house, when I woke in the middle of the night I was frightened by the coldness of it, the unfamiliar shadows on the wall, the sinister way the grandfather clock chimed away the hours of the night so relentlessly. There was a
sense of unease, half-stifled unhappiness, old ghosts. I knew it wasn’t the sort of place where I could get out of bed to go and cuddle up to my grandmother if I was really scared.

The very idea of it was unusual, as none of the adults I knew cuddled very much. I wondered if he ever got scared in the night and called for his mother when he was small. It seemed unlikely. I already knew that he thought quite differently from me about things like that. Those dark secret places of the heart where emotion and vulnerability lie were not to be discussed seriously; if they were ever acknowledged it was always mockingly.

For all his disparagement of her, Dick was bound to his mother for life and still played by her rules though he would never admit it. A regular family ritual was Grandma and Granddad’s visit for afternoon tea and cakes. It was like a royal visit — all of us girls and Elsie rushed around cleaning and tidying beforehand, and dressed in our best. It was quite a tense moment when they arrived at the door, Grandma in her coat, hat and gloves, slightly hunched, her jewellery sparkling, her eyes darting everywhere, ready for the grand tour, Granddad like the duke, all smiles and pleasure at being there, a few steps behind. It was probably the only social outing they ever had in their old age.

Dick colluded in all this, though it was necessary for him to shock her at least once during the visit. Granddad was deaf and missed most of it, but Grandma would smile politely, a baffled look in her eyes, most of his carefully constructed barbs going right over her head. She would say how quaint everything was — her code for peculiar — the paintings of nudes, wooden
bowls and pottery, carpetless wooden floors, the bohemian décor that no amount of tidying could make acceptable in her eyes.

It was the family rule, hard-wired, that no matter what you did, it was implied that there was there always something wrong with it, though no one would tell you exactly what it was. .

Mother and daughter-in-law were on the surface very different, Elsie big and frankly country with her straight brown hair and hearty ways, her Communism, her slap-happy housekeeping. Perhaps the two women understood each other in ways Elsie never let on to Dick. After all they had to share a man who was, for both of them, their lifetimes’ business. They probably made one of the silent deals that women are so good at;

‘We know we don’t much like each other but let me see my son and I’ll overlook your common ways.’

‘ Don’t criticise me and give me a hard time and you can have him.’

A sort of respect probably grew up between them over the years. In the circumstances it was an honourable arrangement, and they kept to it all their lives.

The myth of Grandma as family monster was so deeply embedded in us by Dick that our own experience of her had no weight. We could not admit we liked her, the drama of her, her uniqueness in our life, the fact that she was kind to us in her own way. Dick’s fund of rage against her was so unlimited that there was no room for dissent. He led the charge with his
savagely mocking stories of his childhood which by their sheer intensity and vividness became our own. Little Dicky in his white gloves, the child imprisoned with his smothering, ball-breaking mother and weak strict father. In his eyes she was the apogee of everything absurdly genteel, bizarre and contemptible.

How she would go on for days beforehand complaining about cooking a roast and the intricacies involved for such a complicated activity. There were the potatoes and the lamb and the vegetables, all to be collected from the garden and the farm, washed over and over, cut up into tiny pieces and then finally cooked to within an inch of their lives. All this involved many long hours in the kitchen and a great deal of crossness and martyrdom on her part and husband and son tip-toeing around guiltily until the great dish was finally prepared. My father said that years later when he first cooked his own roast, he was infuriated to find how easy and quick it was, having always believed it was an almost Herculean feat of cuisine.

She complained endlessly about mysterious aches and pains that never seemed to come to anything nor quite disappear. We listened open-mouthed to the story of how she had never walked out to the farm or even around the house in all the years they were there. We’d seen the gaunt stone farmhouse in photographs, the flight of heavy stairs, her face at the window with her hooded stare, a willing prisoner. In those days no one had heard of agoraphobia.

We appreciated her magnificent monstrosity, fascinated and incredulous at his stories. In the end though, like the good daughters and wife we were, we took our cue from him, remained exaggeratedly respectful and polite to her and underneath felt the superiority so
ingrained in our family. We could not see her as a real person. She was a caricature to be mocked and marvelled at behind her back, an effigy our father set up for us to dance around. Dick looked after her in her old age, gave her a comfortable flat next to his own house. She sat there at the table, white-haired, blind, her husband long dead, waiting for visits from him, the love of her life. She was softer in her extreme old age, more vulnerable, with her Grandma-smell of mothballs and talcum powdered flesh. In my diary I describe her as ‘translucently thin, with her bleary smeared blind eyes and a cloud of the purest white hair — she has reached a serenity and beauty which she never had before — in her long barren lifetime. Her skin is so papery soft to touch, she is so gentle and wistful and faraway.’

Forgiveness after all is the only fluid that shifts the rusted-down damage of the past, but whether Dick did forgive her is unlikely. It was not in his nature. The bon mot delivered in his usual self-mocking way was, ‘An Edwards never forgets.’

Her lifetime’s love affair with her son, her selfishness and implacable will scarred us all directly or indirectly — husband and son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. She lived on in her son all his life — in his ambivalence towards women, endless attraction and repulsion, dependence, bottomless contempt.
As is usual with all my books, I began *Family Love* by making notes in my diary of process, a diary which I call a commentary. The commentary usually begins with a flash of premonition about the meaning of the book I am starting, a phrase or idea that I only fully recognise once I’ve finished.

The commentary is a series of personal ruminations and notes about the book I’m working on. It is an analysis of the themes that interest me, my motivation, technical and aesthetic problems, scraps of dialogue and description; a kind of running commentary which acts as a monitor of the fictional process and an important source of ideas and images.

It is also a ruthless winnowing process intimately connected with the structure — a critical evaluation where material is discarded and refined, and which allows for the essence of what I want to come through. In this often confusing and roundabout process I can also eventually, and with great difficulty, discover exactly what that essence is.

In all the commentaries for all my books — faithful mirrors of the way I write fiction — I try out and discard many different versions. The voice, events, characters disappear and return in another guise; the story begins and ends in many different ways.
Themes are refined and defined, enlarged upon as I write. It is a constantly shifting, contradictory stream of consciousness, an idiosyncratic analysis which I never usually show anyone.

The commentaries are essential for me in the writing of fiction because they are as truthful as it is possible for me to be. This I can achieve partly because I am not writing for anyone but myself, so they are written in a personal shorthand style. This is a crucial critical yardstick for me until the manuscript is submitted to outside editing.

With their intense mix of intellectual analysis, stream-of-conscious rumination and reckless honesty about myself, the commentaries are a reflection of how I go about writing. I have always kept them private because I want them to remain unselfconscious and self-reflective without any inhibiting outside influence.

In *Family Love* I realised straight away that the commentary would assume even more weight. Not only because there was a lot more to sort out in structure and theme and the techniques I was going to use, but also, in finally writing about my life with no holds barred, it seemed necessary though risky, that I also uncover these private and difficult thought processes for the first time as well. I became interested in the idea of the unselfconsciousness of the commentary being reflected in the story of *Family Love*. It seemed to me that the two were much more closely linked than in any of my previous books and that sometimes they became indistinguishable. I even toyed with the idea of writing about the actual process, as I wrote in the commentary — ‘the cogs and bolts and nuts and rafters of it, all the grinding machinery underneath. But of course what is slightly intriguing is for instance the rafters which are beautiful in their own way and the intricacy and perfection of a watch’s innards once you take off the outer casing, the
beauty of its working in other words. Not as a negative thing but to seamlessly fit the workings of it into the story, a) because it’s a commission in a sense and b) because its memoir-ish.’

Very soon I realised that using the ruminations about technique for the ‘novel’ would not work at all, the self-consciousness of such descriptions would bog the memoir down. And so I discarded that idea. As I wrote in my notes, ‘Normally the commentary consists of my thoughts about the writing process, rather like talking to an extremely close friend who understands and is on my wave-length, a one-sided conversation but very satisfying and comforting and also extremely useful. Extremely honest too, which is the key to it. Rigorous in fact. Without the honesty it is a completely useless exercise.

‘This commentary has all of that but there are other dimensions, there is a slight self-consciousness, as well as something more — the fact that what I’m writing and the way I’m writing it is very similar to what I want for the book itself. This happens with my novels — yes, there are lots of overlaps — but this is more so. This book is much more self—

conscious than a novel…I most emphatically don’t want to use the bits about the technical difficulties of writing which is what a lot of the commentary is about — but I want to use the stream of consciousness about what childhood meant to me. The notes that examine the process, here I am, this is how I saw it, this is what I think it meant. A woman wounded but recovering, as all we women are…’

Finally I decided, ‘it’s quite possible a lot of this commentary is part of the book. Not the self conscious how-to-write stuff but the integration of it all — the person who is writing about her life and the way she does it inextricably linked… I think and write in
such shorthand sometimes that people see it as substance-less, in a book like this I need to flesh out my own thought processes as I do in this commentary.’

In the event, I spent many more months than usual on the commentary before venturing into the actual writing. This partly resulted from the nature of the genre and its unfamiliarity to me. I also discovered that the subject triggered an avalanche of emotional childhood memories. My attempt to write the story as truthfully as possible meant a long and continuing unravelling of the emotions, events, traumas and joys of my childhood in the commentary, which was sometimes painful, always absorbing.

‘I have to crash through… I also have to trace back the first things I wrote about the original idea. I need to get rid of voices. Because this is the white-hot core of me really — the father thing, all that. Is this a real psychodrama? How to deal with it? It sure as hell isn’t going to work unless I’m honest. How to convey all that? Truthfulness intimacy, joy, delight, sexuality. Family. That family stuff in my diary. Am I really prepared to be utterly honest? In what way though? Through the prism of Lou’s feelings? Dorothy for instance wouldn’t have even thought about it really. I mean you either write truthfully or you don’t. Do I have the egoism to write this? Am I going to make it oblique? Through a glass darkly? That eye of God thing, third person, distanced description — she walked down the soft road which smelt sweet after the rain. Or another distance again. The narrator looking at her with the eye of God. A kind of straightforward novel.

Using Russian novels as model – just discovered one I’ve never read before — a novel by Turgenev which is a real treat. That wonderful way they have of introducing everyone and telling their stories. Then the moments of epiphany — with the birds
singing and the country scents. To start in such a conventional way may well be impossible. The family settled into the house. Can the truth be freeing because in the end it is so fair?…I have always written to make sense of things, specifically of my life, clear out the detritus, be as truthful as I can. In this, is the most comprehensive attempt of—instead of circling my childhood, go into the centre of my creativity, all the loathsome and frightening stuff of my psyche and also the wonderful, illuminating and joyful aspects of it. But I instinctively know that to write it straight will obscure the truthfulness of it. A linear narrative or the adolescent view of it – neither will convey what it is I want.’

‘Suddenly a collocation of currawongs, a choir of them singing and calling to each other with that dingo cry, the wolf whistle, the chuckle, they are having the soft get-together I remembered at Darghan Street — suddenly the air is full of them for maybe ten minutes. It’s the same with the kind of memoir I want to write. It’s not a memoir for a START. I want it to be white hot, a story, rich layered, ironic full of bush landscapes and sex and sharpness and yearning. Their sinister shiny black presence half-hidden among the leaves looking for little birds to kill and eggs to smash, singing their heartbreaking songs. Not sure how it ends of course. Layer upon layer… A new kind of honesty in this book? In the sense of writing about my own feelings instead of fictional people’s feelings – transposing? Talk about it, shape it. Shapely. They’re back again. They pass and return and sing so softly, their sweety whistles, flocks of them overhead.’

*Family Love* was to be a novel about a certain period of my life – childhood and adolescence. The literary antecedents of this are of course legion to the point of cliché, for example Colette’s *The Ripening Seed*.22
It is one of the classic storylines of fiction — the journey from innocence to knowledge, that vividly intense time in everyone’s life when the certainties of childhood give way to the pain and pleasure of ‘growing up’.

‘I wanted to capture Titirangi, the centrality of it in my life. The story of my adolescence in other words. I want that brilliant wounded secretive intelligence in it, humour, but the face of the girl with those alert cloudy private eyes, the little girl I loved and lost…. Innocence gone and in its place steady knowledge. The celebration of the life of a woman’s mind…I am approaching it differently I notice, much more forthright, much more planning and intellectual about it? Dare I say less afraid? Less superstitious? What does that mean in the end? Less reverential? I usually approach novels, hands on heart, like poetry, I want to coax and nudge — here it is different’ (commentary)

In the beginning I was very clear about what I didn’t want with *Family Love*. A traditional memoir didn’t interest me. The tone of many second-rate memoirs was something I particularly wanted to avoid. Self-pitying, self-aggrandising creations of a closed solipsistic universe where social and political events are tacked on in a transparent effort to introduce relevance.

And although I wanted the narrative to be closely observed through my eyes I did not want an adolescent narrator. I had already explored this voice in other novellas.

‘Do I want an adolescent narrator? It’s so limiting. Maybe the non-fiction aspect is the straight narrative which genuinely exists, in reality the first person veering in and out of childhood, layers of the past. Not trapping it in a set fictional form in other words. I’ve tried that with my two novellas and it’s fine but very short which is fine too but I don’t really want to do that again. It’s more than a confessional, it’s to do with the point of it
all. The meaning’s not just there left to dangle, but fleshed out, full of reality. The reality of the unconscious, the layers of it and the in and out of it. The loss of innocence. I keep coming back to a kind of melding, a seamless melding of reality… ‘

For what other reason would one write autobiography than to celebrate life and the gift you have, to make connections, to show how things are linked so magically, to thoughtfully draw conclusions from one’s past. There are moral connections as well; Miller’s autobiography certainly had them or food for the mind and heart and spirit, poetic ones; Frame had – a richness, a fearlessness about looking into the heart of things. The flat recital of facts of a life was not what I wanted at all.
It was harder to visualise my mother Elsie, have a clear picture of her and her life. For one thing the emotional and intellectual connections she made to explain the directions her life took didn’t seem to add up in the same way as they did with my father — there were non-sequitors, mazes, puzzling blanks. For another, there were none of those well-articulated masculine certainties, cause and effect, lifelong hatreds and obsessions to spice up the momentum of it. The patterns of her life were faint and sometimes seemed to fade out altogether, there was no obvious credo — at least nothing that stood her in good stead in her old age. It could have been simply that it was her aching lifelong need for love and attention that was buffetting her so mercilessly; if so, she never acknowledged it, let alone found how to satisfy it.

There she was in her dazzling youth; curve of shining hair, creamy skin, glowing with life. She looked robust and fearless in her photos, a country girl with style and chutzpah, the first woman in her home town to be daring enough to wear shorts, (she was nicknamed Pants
DuFresne) small town glamorous. A working class girl, baby of the family, protected by a football team of brothers. All five of her brothers were working class and proud of it, sons of a carpenter, carpenters themselves — opinionated, left wing, musical to a man, with their big wrinkled Danish foreheads and earthy ways.

When she died, I made a list of Elsie-ism as a private memorial for myself, because her language was so direct and forceful, full of vivid New Zealand working class slang, an expression of a side of her personality that never left her and which I loved. It was, feeling like a box of birds if you were happy; if you were angry you could spit tacks, or you were fed to the back teeth. If you had a sore tummy she told you to rub it with a brick, if you were being annoying she said ‘stick your head in a sack’, if you were thirsty there was ‘water in the tap’. Silly people had the brains of a louse, intelligent people were as shrewd as a cartload of monkeys. If everything was good it was jolly dee, it’s all grist to the mill or she’s jake. She was always thanking her lucky stars or swearing black and blue, we never just left; we were always away laughing and we said hooray instead of goodbye. It was always from that day to this, come hell or high water, there’s hell to pay, or mark my words, and if you had a triumph, hooray for our side. If you were poor you hadn’t got a brass razoo, if you complained about being bored, there was a good time coming. She described people as bottlers and munchkins; getting up early you got up at sparrow’s fart and if you made a noise while eating you were smusking (one of the only Danish words she used.)

She was a wholesome young woman and stayed close with her round-faced, jolly school friends, country girls like herself, all her life.
She was also an enigma — what was a sunny young girl doing with such serious politics, the only one of her family to actually join the Communist Party? What strength of mind led her down to the shabby office where she signed up? I like to think it was her courage, and her passionate desire for social change. In her practical way, she wanted to do something positive rather than just theorise. She must have looked around for what seemed to be the most effective organisation to work for, and decided, like many New Zealand intellectuals and writers of the time, that it was the Communist Party.

She fell in love with a handsome American airman — we girls gazed in fascination at the dark-haired, handsome, smiling young man in the photo who could have been our father. It was a poignant story and one we always liked hearing. My mother told us that even though she loved him, in the end she had to turn him down. She couldn’t bear the thought of leaving New Zealand to enter the belly of the capitalist beast. She gave us the impression that she still thought of him fondly, she always told us the story smilingly and sadly, as if she were still slightly regretful about her youthful decision.

There was a sense of exuberance, joy in life, substance about her then — the sun-filled home in Eastbourne where they played classical music in the evenings to their friends, talked radical politics, the young firmly and benevolently in charge of the household.
So what happened to her, this young woman in shorts, with beautiful long legs and tender face, the idealist who joined the Communist Party to change the world, played the cello, this glowing girl with sea blue eyes?

It was hard to guess whether she was happy or sad as a child. Did she herself know? Her childhood seemed to me to be a series of facts without emotional connection, a Gothic tableau unrolling distantly before our eyes. In photos our grandparents looked ancient and unbending – long dead, her mother a thick-faced Dane in a forbidding black bonnet, shrewd, her father saintly with his handsome soft dreamy face and white beard.

Maybe it was their Huguenot heritage that had set them travelling again, this time to New Zealand, as generations ago their forebears left religious persecution in France to settle in Denmark. Her mother’s family arrived in New Zealand in 1876; her mother, the youngest of six, was born in New Zealand.

Just before she died, my mother sent me four or five pages of closely typed memoir, which, though there were a few drafts and many deletions, conveyed a vivid and often humorous sense of her early life.

‘They joined a settlement for disenchanted Danes after Denmark had lost a war to Prussia,’ She wrote. ‘By 1890’s the Clausens had established a farm on the outskirts of Palmerston North and were known for their hospitality to wandering fellow countrymen, which was where my grandfather came into the picture. He came to New Zealand to see his cousin
Abraham Honore, a Jutlander who had enjoyed a certain reputation as a preacher in Germany in 1890,’

When she was very small they were so poor she only had a stone to play with instead of a doll. In an agony of pity, I pictured her, my mother, the silent child, sitting on a flat hard landscape which stretched to a grey horizon, rocking the stone in her arms. It was almost impossible for me to imagine. Another fact that was mysterious to me was that her farm was only a few miles away from where my father was living out his pampered claustrophobic childhood, yet the families never knew each other.

Elsie used certain mysterious phrases, which seemed sinister and portentous, to describe that time. The family had to walk off the farm during the Depression. Those sombre images echoed around my childish imagination – our mother, the child, alone, playing with the stone in the grey landscape, the family stumbling away from their house, small dark figures bowed against the gloomy sky, bundles in their arms, the Depression, a black cloud pressing them to earth.

Elsie described her own mother as lazy and selfish in that vigorous matter of fact way of hers. Elsie had been rejected by her mother, leaving her to be brought up by her seventeen year old sister, Nan. Elsie was a skinny baby who cried all night and needed endless soothing. She remained her birth weight until she was six months old. It became a family joke that her brothers and Nan spent half their life rocking the cradle to put her to sleep. Nan finally heard
of the newly founded Plunkett Society and was taught the correct formula to feed her baby sister, which was apparently a turning point.

Elsie never felt loved by her mother and returned the compliment. When she was very young, Elsie occasionally had to sleep in her bed. She passed on to her own children her visceral distaste at her mother’s physicality — the snoring, the brimming potty under the bed — still vividly felt after sixty years.

In the last years of his life her father had some paralysing disease. I imagined him as a sad figure in a dark room. She noted briefly and enigmatically in her memoir that he had a nervous breakdown. She loved and respected him, seeing him as a kind and intelligent man drained by the selfishness of his wife.

Her mother became obese and took to her bed. She had given birth to nine children on that poverty stricken farm; her second and favourite son drowned when she was heavily pregnant with her seventh child. At the age of 41 (her husband was 54) Elsie was born. Maybe it was simply that she had nothing more to give. Like many women of that time, after years of unremitting mind destroying donkey work, she had a life of exhaustion and resentment to catch up on.

Elsie was brought up by her oldest sister who devoted her life to the family. With her strong horse face and stubborn ways, Nan was destined never to marry. She set up house with her long, thin, shy brother, a carpenter and prize-winning athlete. He had slicked-back hair and a
bony Scandy face; he rubbed his hands together with a rasping sound as a wordless sign of his pleasure in life.

Nan was a pagan, ahead of her time, full of interesting information, an untamed soul who roamed the countryside, sleeping in a tent. Her special love was children and she understood us all perfectly, though she never had any of her own.

After bringing up Elsie, she and Bert spent their life loving the rejected children thrown out from the huge wheels of their brothers’ families. The odd ones, outcasts, the unloved ones were under their special protection. The two of them were probably happier than most couples. He was a kind, reserved man, adorable, with his warm crinkly smile and self-deprecating way of standing slanted slightly against the wind, hands behind his back. His bedroom smelt of tobacco and warm clean male articles, and when he came to pick us up at the train station he drove his Volkswagen insouciantly up onto the footpath, smiling fondly at us through the windscreen.

When we children stayed with them, we used to wait patiently at the end of the drive for him to come home from work just for the joy of catching a ride on the jolting tray of his truck back up to the house.

I loved staying there, their sunny house in Johnsonville with its yellow walls and comforting smell of toast and sun, the mysterious whiff of love. She had a garden full of flowers. There
was a little pine forest at the back, which you entered through an old wooden gate. Inside it was still and dark, with slippery pine slopes and intoxicating piney smell – a place to dream.

At 15 I wrote in my diary, ‘Saw an old lady on the bus, mottled spotted hands, frail wrists, blue coat and frothy white hair and a quick nervousness of her head exactly like Nan’s and suddenly in the swaying bus I remembered me, small, and gasping and rattling with asthma curled up in the bed listening to her beautiful wavery voice singing ‘Husheen’ and the memory is so clear that I remember the creaking of the wicker chair on which she sat and the faint light from the window aureoling the outline of her hair’.

The sense of love and safety, of my aunt singing to me in the dark, an aureole of light around her head, the creak as she moved, her lovely voice catching with emotion — Nan singing to me in the dark was a central emotional memory for me. All my life I could hear her voice, its exact timbre, the loving crack in it, the creaking of the chair as she moved. I could feel that blessed warmth, the love filling my heart.

Did Elsie receive the same blessing, that bountiful love from her sister, as she too lay in her crib, motherless, crying her heart out?

Elsie was eight when they left the farm ‘without a cent’ and, after living in a tiny flat in Wellington central for a while, the family moved to Eastbourne by the beach. It was ‘The Bay’ in Katherine Mansfield’s famous story. It was here around 1933, when Elsie was 17, that the family began their monthly music evenings. As she wrote in her memoir, Chris, her
younger brother, built ‘a large room whose props rested on the banks of a stream 30ft odd feet down among the bush, over the top of which we had a view of Wellington Harbour.’ He had studied acoustics, so the room was perfect for the musical recitals. Elsie met many people during these evenings, including classical musicians who went on to become top flight performers, like Marie Van de Voort, and her first ‘foreigner’—Wolfgang Rosenberg who ‘created a sensation at a Days Bay Ball by wearing his European plus fours, a Panama hat and carrying a bouquet of flowers.’

My mother goes on to write, ‘it seemed that the neighbours were convinced the meetings were sinister and suspected to be Communist…this conclusion wasn’t helped when Chris raised a red flag on the roof when he finished for all of Eastbourne to see with their own eyes…. It wasn’t very long before the local Mr Plod called around.’

The sons and daughters took over the family home, turning everything joyously on its head, children looking after their weary parents, bringing up their youngest sister themselves, pouring light and life and music into the dark house of sickness and old age, the brothers giving their earnings to the family. Wasn’t that a healing time for her? Her late adolescence and early twenties may have been the happiest time of her life. She loved Eastbourne and Wellington ‘with the sea on one side and bush-clad hills with walking tracks which lead over these hills into valley after valley with streams which in places enlarged into swimming pools.’ She writes of a ‘never to be forgotten’ camping expedition with her father and brothers and being terrified by the sound of a possum. She attended Wellington Girls’ College ‘which is still one of the top secondary schools in Wellington’ and she sang in the choir, having a
very good singing voice. As the baby of the family grown into young womanhood she had few responsibilities, she was protected, cosseted, loved, living in a household alive with music, the young firmly in charge, the sun always shining. She had all the loving masculine attention she craved.

Finally World War Two interrupted their life at Eastbourne, the brothers sold up and moved to Paparangi and Elsie moved into a flat in Wellington with the redoubtable Rona Bailey. It was wartime but no one close to her was killed, her brothers were safe, rationing was nothing to her because she was used to doing without, she was playing a part in bringing about a glorious new future for humankind.
4. **The Narrator**

In one of the first notes of the commentary, I wrote, ‘for instance, where am I, the narrator? That’s the big question which in some ways has to be solved before I start. It’s pretty sure that it’s first person, but the eye of God thing looms. My last book is third person and it’s fine, but it’s distancing for me. For this book anyway. Looking back, I certainly had a lot of trouble with voice in some of my novels, which I think is a symptom of unease — the to-ing and fro-ing. I want both, that’s the problem. But it smacks of contrivance. Being in the midst is not what I want, as it would have to be an adolescent voice. I know that! No adolescent voices again. But I want her voice. I don’t want a memoir-y autobiographical tone. I want an intimate voice taking the reader into her confidence. Is it the essay voice?’

The position of the narrator was the key to *Family Love*. Who was telling the story, why and how, became the constantly recurring preoccupation in my working notes and in the writing of the book. It was also about addressing the fears I still had about exposure, both of myself and of my family. I had a sense that I could perhaps soften some of the harsher facts, be more compassionate about events and people by introducing the wiser and less judgmental perspective of a more objective, shaping narrator.
‘I have never done this…’ It’s a bit scary. All my personas have been various fantasies of me as are all novels. Is it possible to write a story told by me, all of me instead of selected aspects? My fiction is deeply disguised, this is the taking off of the veil. The full-bodied voice…telling it urgently. Something to say. About women being fucked over for instance, about resilience, courage humour, sex. Life. No self-pity either. This book my naked voice. Stream of consciousness? Well as far as that’s possible in the sense that every authentic voice operates like that. So I’m not addressing all the clichés inherent in this kind of voice but operating on another layer, the layer of my mind, my developing mind as a child. As a celebration. I have the girl, the time, the place, everything. That’s the baseline. Navigating new territory. Sticking to old tried and true methods is for various reasons becoming more difficult.’

In the event, it became clearer as I wrote *Family Love* that one conventional narrator did not cover the kind of territory I wanted. I wanted myself as a child to tell the story vividly with that immediacy and freshness of the present, and I also wanted myself as an adult with the perspective of time and distance, in effect, the commentary I was writing at the same time. As well, I wanted another much more objective narrator, someone who provided another dimension again, that of someone outside us both. This last narrator was more like the fictional voice shaping and describing the story. I needed to incorporate these different narrators who are in fact variations of the same, in a way that joined all the dimensions of the story as seamlessly as possibly.

Attempting to integrate the voices of the raw, fresh, uninhibited child, the older and (hopefully) wiser woman she grew into and the shaping story-teller and shaper
outside both of them, was like trying to ride three horses at the same time, at once exhilarating and terrifying.

It wasn’t until after I’d finished my book and begun writing the exegesis that I read a relevant speech by Graeme Blundell, in which he quotes extensively from Vivian Gornik’s *The Situation and Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*.

He says, ‘Out of the raw material of myself I needed to create this narrator whose existence on the page is integral to the tale being told. The narrator, says Gornik, becomes a persona – its tone of voice, its angle of vision, the rhythm of its sentences, what it selects to observe and what to ignore – are chosen to serve the subject. This narrator — or the persona — sees things; but what is actually happening is the thing being seen…Gornik says ‘a novel provides invented characters, dialogue and speaking voices that act as surrogates for the writer. Things can be made up, polished and coloured. Into these surrogates will be poured all the things that the writer doesn’t want to directly address – inappropriate longings, defensive embarrassments, antisocial desires and even lusts — but the memoir writer must deal with these slightly sordid often sad and gloomy things to achieve something that seems authentic to the reader. The novelist can do this at a distance from who they themselves are…The narrator you choose has the huge task of transforming an obsessive infatuation with the way you once were into a kind of ‘detached empathy’. This she calls ‘the steady application of self-understanding’ of trying to get a handle on the hard truth about yourself’ She suggests we all need a narrator in our lives to tell us what we are capable of, what we have done, and how to go with the flow and to stop us drowning in remorse and self-hatred and sorrow when we consider the choices we have made through our lives.’
You imagine yourself in other words, it is not what happens, but what you make of it.

As Blundell writes, ‘the narrator — the First Person — is not simply oneself but one among many, the one you choose.’

‘I need a break in, a lever. It’s all there — everything. That’s the good thing. Its just the form of it and whose voice. I have a voice, I have a few voices — it’s whose. Does it automatically make it a problem that I don’t know whose voice it is? Does that mean it’s artificial? That I have to fret and set up and find parameters and sniff around? Maybe it’s ok. It’s just that it would be nice just for once to be able to put the paper in the typewriter and begin, ‘once upon a time…’ (commentary)

Or as Judith Wright put it: ‘“I” is a shimmering multiple and multitude it seems.’
CHAPTER FOUR

Just after the war, my mother and father met in her flat in Wellington. He was staying overnight at her place after a commo meeting in some shabby hall. He slept on a divan, a word he’d never heard before. She wafted past him early next morning, a beautiful woman in a glamorous peignoir, and asked him if he wanted his coffee black or white. The boy from the farm had only known a kind of syrup you added hot water to from the tap — her sophistication amazed him.
Knowing him, he would have managed to keep his nerve. He’d have hidden his awe and stayed in control of the situation. He was such a young man, stiff and skinny, confident, and was instantly attracted to this warm, curvy older woman with her lock of shining hair, the engaging gap in her back teeth when she laughed. They never told us children the usual family stories of their courting days; they were too caught up in the battle of their marriage to surrender to the luxury of fond sexual reminiscence. The only thing we knew was that Dick wrote a poem to her praising the blue of her eyes. By the time I was old enough to understand, this poem seemed as embarrassingly strange and powerful as the only tender kiss between them that I ever witnessed, one shadowy afternoon in the car at the bottom of the drive.

Elsie was his equal in those days, earthy, full of vigour, with her easy laugh and confidence. There was a certainty about her, she had the habit of giving out down-to-earth items of information that seemed to come from some mysteriously infallible source, a habit she never outgrew in spite of all his attempts to stamp it out.

They easily met each other halfway in their exuberant plans. To her he represented the new man, shining with intelligence and optimism, committed to political action, witty and charming to boot, and so she loved him till she died and never looked at another man. To him, she was everything his mother was not — gloriously irreverent, her own woman, sensual and fearless, a beautiful revolutionary. They were a dynamite couple arriving out of nowhere from their shuttered pasts and bourgeois present, full of the joys of life, ready to have children and win the revolution.
They believed in a shining new world where poverty would be eliminated once and for all. Even if they weren’t consciously aware of it, the blood of their families ran in their veins, a silent call to action for old injustices — the grandmother struggling to feed and clothe her children in the bush, the family thrown out of their house by the bank, men and women worn out and still penniless after a lifetime of struggle and hard work.

These innocent dreams in their early years were a source of pride to me, even when I was very young — part of the electric mythology of the family. I loved the fact that my parents were so passionately committed to a cause that they didn’t bother with the usual bourgeois preoccupations of young couples: hooking up to a mortgage and credit, fitting out expensive nests. All those inward-looking material goals were blown away by the great wind of their optimistic undertaking. I loved the stories illustrating the casual energy of their life — the friends and parties, political talk, excitement.

There they were at the registry office then; he ridiculously young, she with her Greta Garbo hair, full of *joie de vivre*, three months pregnant with Jo.

It was a romantic time — their bohemian life, plotting against the system, persuading workers they had only their chains to lose. How loveable they were, the young country couple with their babies and idealism, editing Communist newspapers, selling them on the streets, organising meetings, sailing close to the wind.
He was such a lean, hawklike man with his biting wit — sharp featured, watchful, with severe blue eyes, a hard drinker, no one’s fool. His intellect was clear and powerful, immediately present, it emanated from him like a flood of light.

Once, they thought of a plan which involved having a scientist staying in the basement of their house to build a radio. It was during the wharfies’ lockout when government censorship was total. It was in fact illegal to give their side of the case. It was a drawn-out struggle so bitter that a cartoonist drew the workers as rats. Dick later wrote a history of it called, ‘151 Days’.

Their idea was to load the radio on the van, drive to some lonely spot and broadcast the real facts of the lockout, then speed off to another spot before the cops caught up with them. The scientist began making a stream of requests for this and that, delaying, inventing mysterious obstacles, until they realised he was cracking up from the sheer stress of it. Sure enough one day he disappeared, the radio unfinished. I loved that story, the scientist with mad eyes, the concrete floor of the basement, a knot of valves and wires in front of him which he tinkered with meaninglessly, his sideways paranoid glances to the door whenever they knocked to bring him in a cup of tea.

Once, years later, Dick passed him on a city street; they met each other’s eyes briefly before they both hurried on, never to see each other again.
During the lockout, cops raided our house. They pulled aside a curtain dramatically, hoping to find the cache of illegal pamphlets they believed were hidden in the house, but found only a baby peacefully asleep in her cot. I always hoped it was me but was never quite sure.

Elsie, the soft country girl, turned into a young revolutionary matron, giving out leaflets, going to meetings in draughty halls, involved in daring acts of civil disobedience, making a home for her wayward husband and children. In throwing away the kind, devoted American, marrying the cruel nuggetty little man shining with intelligence and promise, she laid up treasures of a different sort. Was she happy in her married life?

She loved the role of mother and wife in a dynamic household alive with visitors and parties, political meetings and discussions, the aura the family gave off of being in the centre of things, of excitement.

He edited a communist paper, worked as a union official, she always said trying to be fair in the later bitter years, that he was a good provider.

But there was a serious downside; it’s hard to imagine what it was like to be a wife in those days when every domestic task was the woman’s duty. Did she accept that after years of being her own person? She was 30 when she gave birth to Jo. Three babies were born in six years, Jo the eldest, then me, then Jackie. Our brother Mark was born when she was 40. In those early days she had a crippled daughter to cope with, endless trips to hospital for three years, me to be lumped around in a wheel chair with my legs in plaster at right angles to my
body. She had to work to support the family while Jackie was a toddler and Dick was writing *151 Days* and worried that Dick might be neglecting her without meaning to as he got absorbed in his writing. She typed all his manuscripts on the big black Barlock typewriter and gave him editing advice which he valued.

And how long did he stay in love with her? A year? Two years? Five years? She continued to play the role she had learnt so well in her youth, just in case, of the lovable desirable woman used to being in the limelight; the coy badinage, a twinkling kind of preening long after she had lost all certainty of being loved by him. In her photos she looked serenely sensuous as a young woman — but over the years you could see the tenderness of her body drying out, lines of resentment forming on her mouth, while the grind of domestic life, lovelessness, her husband’s contempt and her own tendency to martyrdom closed her down inexorably, bit by bit.

The irony for Elsie was that she had believed it was a new era of equality and sexual liberation for women. For a Communist Party member like her, it was the Russian revolution all over again — the first electrifying years of free love, liberation, intense creativity very quickly giving way to the Stalinisation of everything — greyness, burnt-out hopes, death — all cleverly disguised as progress.

In the end she looked back on her life in a spirit of self-pity and sadness, regret at vanished dreams, the damage of it all leaking back and corroding even the best memories. Who was she then?
The child brought up in poverty by her sixteen-year-old sister with an aging, unloving mother and dying father, the socially adept sunshiny young countrywoman, with handsome beaux and brothers giving her all the teasing masculine attention she could want, or the sophisticated committed radical Communist woman who dedicated years of her life to social change? Was she the sexy young wife of a hip couple in the thick of things, friends of the movers and shakers, intellectuals, writers and painters of New Zealand, the devoted mother and beloved friend of many, or the put-upon, rejected, humiliated wife, the embittered martyrish game-playing woman her children knew in their adulthood obsessing over past wrongs, anxious, most of the joy knocked out of her before her time?

There were still unanswered questions for me — where she drew her emotional sustenance, for instance, what she really felt. It was hard enough to guess at the inner life of a woman in the sort of milieu where her main function was to be the uncomplaining muse, but with Elsie there were other blind spots — how her well articulated sense of bottomless grievance was never translated into action, what she really felt about her children, herself, her life, if she even knew. My confusion about my mother’s real identity mirrored the strange numbness I felt in my heart about her. I didn’t have any clear emotions towards her, only murky layers of guilt, love, pity, irritation, and resentment. I could never get a satisfying fix on what I really felt, what my own emotions were, let alone my mother’s.
I only knew that my mother’s light seemed to grow dimmer as the years went by, until in the end, the young woman I imagined and the old one I knew were worlds apart, two different people separated by a life that had become ashes in the old woman’s mouth.
5 Problems

The problems were apparent from the beginning and centred on these splits in the narrative voice which I could not resolve.

‘I’ve just read the commentary up until now, it’s hard to digest all that, it was very intense thinking... I might just have to read it again. Little delicate footsteps, a tracery of them in the sand. I’m trying to do something very difficult here. I think I’m trying to do something discursive, overarching, not from inside someone. That’s what it is. It’s the voice from outside and above. It’s that masculine thing of taking yourself very seriously. Which is, in a sense what my diaries have already done, somewhat chaotically....’

In fictionalising my main character by telling the story in third person, I was setting up a split in the narrative which became more and more difficult to reconcile. In the beginning, the use of third person worked because the subject matter was the story of other peoples’ lives. In the first few chapters it was my grandparents and parents I was interested in.

However, once it began to centre on the events of Lou’s own life, use of the third person became an obvious literary device which obscured the freshness and immediacy of the voice rather than clarifying it. It also brought up many more fundamental questions. How fictional did I want the memoir to be? Was I still going to bend the facts, have another take on events altogether, soar off into fiction? If not, what was the point of
distancing the narrator, slightly changing her voice and persona, fictionalising her, in other words?

As Judith Wright puts it so perceptively, ‘I don’t know what “fact” is, for one thing. Whoever looks at an old woman sees there what he or she has put there — not the person who thinks she looks back and judges in her turn the capacity of the observer to see her in her reality. And “reality” – that’s a word and a half, when even the table I type at and the chair I sit on have dissolved into a whirl of molecules, atoms, subatomic particles, shot through with cosmic relationships — and “I”? Better to retreat, pull into some kind of focus what one thinks one does remember, try to check it against other memories and records, do a journeyman’s job.’

As the story narrowed and deepened into a close analysis of my family it was increasingly obvious that this split narrative, with its fictionally created identity of Lou, would not produce the creative tension I had intended; rather the opposite.

The first draft of the paragraph about my parents reading my nature diary is a case in point.

‘They took a close interest though — once they called her into their bedroom and asked her about her nature diary. They explained that it was a good idea but that she had to watch her writing because it was very untidy. She went away feeling slightly crestfallen as if her little golden secret were slightly soiled. That may well have started her lifelong secretiveness about anything she wrote, an instinct about developing in her own way before revealing it to the world.’

This first version changed to:


‘I showed my parents my nature diary and they called me into their bedroom the next morning. I came in, embarrassed at the faint smell of their bodies in bed, their smiling faces looking at me, already deeply regretting that I’d showed it to them. They told me the diary was a good idea but to watch my handwriting because it was deteriorating. They meant well but from then on I was obsessive about keeping my writing to myself.’

The tone is much more immediate and seamless, with no need for difficult constructions like ‘that may well have’, and allowing the personal observation ‘embarrassed at the faint smell of their bodies in bed’.

There was also another seemingly more mundane problem which motivated me strongly: the ethical question that writing about my family always posed for me. I had made the surprising and reassuring discovery in the past that people almost never recognised aspects of themselves in my novels at all. But autobiography was another matter.

In the past I had written a number of autobiographical pieces, some of which were later included in my essay collection. None of these pieces had the emotional complications and ‘messiness’ of the story I was telling in the memoir. While they were strictly factual and honest enough in the telling, there was never any hint of family problems, nor did they go deeply into the messy, inchoate areas of private life.

*Family Love*, in comparison, was going into territory which in some ways I remained very reluctant to enter. My position has always been that my family did not choose to be related to me and that therefore I have no right to subject them to public exposure on those grounds. I take this position because I know I would hate my own
private life to be dissected by someone else, my faults and mistakes there for all to see in such a public way. I have never wanted to invade people’s privacy in this way, especially those who have the misfortune to be close to me.

I am aware that this is a an odd position to take — as we writers are described so often as monsters with chips of ice in our hearts, who ruthlessly turn everything around them into copy. In my own way I am certainly doing this in my fiction, but because of the way I go about it, people don’t seem to recognise themselves or be upset if they do.

Using a fictional mask in Family Love was one way of solving this ethical dilemma, but as the idea of the novel gradually collapsed, I had to confront this problem and think of other ways of dealing with it. The fact that my family is well known in New Zealand was also a consideration. I was well aware of the arguments about truthfulness, self-censorship and that many writers draw freely and openly on people they know, including family, but I still saw it as a problem.

There were practical solutions — for instance, I ended up writing very little about my siblings, not from any conscious attempt at self-censorship but because the structure I had set up for my memoir did not allow any in-depth analysis of my relationship with them. Nor was that my preoccupation.

In writing memoir I believe a writer has a clear duty to do justice to her subjects, expressed in a wholeness of portrayal, a sense of generosity and good faith as well as truthfulness, and this remained a consideration of mine throughout the writing of Family Love. This of course does not mean a Pollyanna approach, nor even a fair or balanced one; it’s a more complex consideration to do with good faith.
Interestingly, this is not only an ethical consideration. It is also integral, as I see it, to the quality of the writing and the work itself. It is almost impossible for characters, however unpleasant, to be one-dimensional if they are created with generosity, humour and tolerance. There is a need for emotional engagement as well as analytical distance in the creation of characters; it is this seemingly contradictory approach that makes for a satisfying sense of emotional complexity.

Writing from a sense of grievance, judgment, self-pity or revenge produces work that is interesting in a voyeuristic kind of way, in the tradition of *Mommy Dearest*, but it is the kind of autobiographical writing that of necessity remains one-dimensional and self-serving, at its worst mendacious and self-pitying.

Mary McCarthy, in her wonderful *Memoirs of A Catholic Girlhood*, turns her life with terrible foster parents into a classy denunciation of cruelty and the effect it had on her and the rest of the family, but there is no sense of revenge in the book. As a writer she has moved past that into much more interesting territory.

This conflict was particularly evident when it came to writing about my mother, a subject that turned out to be surprisingly painful. The conflict between the reckless truthfulness I wanted and my need to do her full justice by trying to see her point of view, to immerse myself in her life, was never fully resolved. The ambivalence of my feelings about her, so common in daughter/mother relationships of that era — a complex mix of loyalty, affection, compassion, resentment, gratitude, grievance and guilt — was actually intensified by the discoveries I made in the writing of the book, events I had denied or repressed over the years.
As Judith Wright writes so eloquently, “The act of creating autobiography is far more dangerous to the psyche of the autobiographer than she realised when she agreed to start the job. She knew even then that the construction of “I” is endless, a procession beginning — how far back? — before that event on the woodheap which only put the seal on the first person pronoun. Every kind of avoidance, misinterpretation, deliberate forgetfulness, dodge and evasion, aggrandising viewpoint, use of other people and of time and event to cloud the issues, was waiting below the surface of the mind and the text. They will be obvious to other people, not to herself. The persona she wears now is much at risk. Ought she to have stopped writing then?”

As well as these conflicts over the portrayals of my parents and my own identity, there was also the practical question of defamation. Well-known New Zealand writers, artists and academics were an integral part of the family story, close friends who had strongly influenced our lives. Many of them were not exactly models of rectitude — how to deal with that?

This was more a legal matter for publishers than an ethical consideration of mine but the question remained: if it was unpublishable as the honest account I wanted to write, what was the point?

And finally to let Judith Wright have the last word, “An autobiography is in any case a self-indulgence even if the writer tries to hide behind pure checkable “historical” fact and of this there can’t be much.”

Writing fiction was never so complicated.
CHAPTER FIVE

When I was three, we moved to Sandringham to be among the working class. It was a suburb in the middle of Auckland, dead flat, houses rigid on blank lawns, every growing thing chopped back, clipped, tied down, no light and shade, all signs of life tidied away, blinds permanently drawn at every window. Dick must have suddenly found himself back in the toils of his mother, his path away from her unexpectedly veering full circle. In a place like that, her habits were the norm; there would have been people like her everywhere, living their joyless lives, careful to keep every last chink of life firmly shut out.

The same questions came up — what did people do all day? Why were they so stubbornly fearful? You never saw anyone strolling along the streets, there were no cafes or bookshops, no music in the air. No one even came out into their gardens much except to twitch clothes off the line, mow the lawn to a hairsbreadth or shave back a shrub before darting back inside to safety. In some gardens there was unused outdoor furniture grouped on unshaded concrete patios as gruesome as any Arbus photograph with all its sterility. The only loud sound was the
yattering of the races on Saturday, a moronic nonsensical whine that went on all afternoon. To me it was the symbol of the gaping, never-ending boredom of life in suburbia.

Children played in gardens or back lanes, but open places were mostly out of bounds for everyone. There were too many possibilities, the ever-present risk of exposure. The real life people lived was in an ever-closing circle. Who knows what further demarcations lay inside even the tightly shut up houses where doors and windows were always closed against the great outdoors?

The English lower-middle-class aspiring tradition was in full force there, the rigidity of people determined to leave the dirt of the working class behind even if it killed them. It worked as unrelentingly as any honour system. You lived your life according to the weight of neighbours’ judgment hanging over you, sent a pregnant daughter away, concealed the madness of a relative, stifled, silenced, denied any of the stuff of life in case they should find out. In Mansfield’s story ‘How Pearl Button was Kidnapped’ the rich, sensuous community life of the Maori is contrasted with Pakeha life in New Zealand when the small girl narrating the story asks her Maori kidnappers, ‘Haven’t you got any Houses of Boxes? Don’t you all live in a row? Don’t the men go to offices? Aren’t there any nasty things?’

At the end she wants to stay in a place where ‘she had never been happy like this before’ and screams in terror ‘when she sees a crowd of little men in blue to carry her back to the Houses of Boxes.’
Sandringham was a microcosm of the fifties in New Zealand, a place where pleasure was doled out with thin-lipped disapproval, and celebrations were usually joyless. The pubs for instance were shut at six — men reeling drunkenly away from bars where minutes before they had been packed ten deep in a struggling mass on floors slippery with beer. The gloom was lit by fluorescent lights, there was little natural light from the frosted windows set high on the walls so decent passers-by were spared the wickedness of what was going on inside.

By eight o’clock the streets were bare of people, clean, everyone tidily stowed away. For years I still felt a faint stir of surprise when I saw streets crowded at midnight in some jumping city — why weren’t they all home safely tucked away in bed?

A punishing place where you paid for the sins of the flesh and any departure from the norm however slight; no wonder artists and writers, friends of the family hit the dust, drank themselves to death or became harmless eccentrics, lone voices in the wilderness. It was not for nothing that James K. Baxter wrote,

‘The man who talks to the masters of Pig Island
About the love they dread
Plaits ropes of sand…’

We were a family in full flight from its roots. That was the courage of Dick’s undertaking; not to sink into that abyss of respectability, to challenge all of the orthodoxies and take his children with him every inch of the way. All of us were following him on his path away from his mother and everything she stood for, his love/hate for women, his genuine hatred of the
supineness and hypocrisy of conventional thinking. An amazing undertaking really, the hope in it and courage in a time and place where conformity was revered and only a small minority gave off flashes of dissent before sinking back into complacency. We were taught to fight against it, we knew in our bones it was a fate worse than death.

Dick and Elsie had moved there specifically to convert people to communism, a serious misreading of the demographic. God knows if they organised anyone — it must have been hard going.

In their robust way they taught us children to despise people who predicated their whole lives so cravenly on respectability. Their worst insult was to call someone a Sandringham nong and they were quick to notice any signs of it in their children.

All part of their survival in — they had to distance themselves, not get sucked in, fish out of water as they were. It was the battle of Dick’s adolescence all over again. I found this belief frightening and compelling — that we children could sink into the morass, become Sandringham nongs, despised and alien, without even necessarily knowing it was happening. After all, identity could dissolve in seconds in our household as it was. They were not the kind of parents to reassure us that we were fine as we were, worthy of love whatever we did, so we had a shaky grasp of where we stood at the best of times. Part of me believed everything my parents said. My father’s voice was particularly powerful in the way it altered the way I looked at things, rearranged my brain cells, branded me permanently. I was afraid deep down that I could change into someone despised by him.
In unconscious salute to this I wrote a long story, which in my cheerful childish optimism I referred to as a novel called *Such is Life*. It examined my worst fear at ten years old that I too would become a Sandringham nong and be lost forever in the dead streets, my identity permanently submerged.

I was already learning to write my world. My stories cleared a path through the rocky terrain of my childish soul, made sense of my life, connected me to some kind of truthfulness I could recognise. It was deeply comforting to me, a secret world, and a serious process of redemption and recreation.

Certainly in one way I understood my parents’ disdain for the place. If I looked onto St Lukes Road — the blind shut-in houses and deserted streets — I felt the bleakness, lifelessness, the stultifying conformity of suburbia. I knew there was nothing to soften the harsh angles.

To my eyes, that street was not my territory anyway, it was a wasteland where I always had to be careful. If I stood on the front verandah of our house I could see it — past the sweep of the front drive and the three silver birches planted for us three girls on the front lawn with their delicate light-filled leaves, slender mottled trunks, lovely watery light. The long street, cars going past, forbidding houses, was bleak territory where I felt small and unprotected. Just past our house was one of the tallest trees in the neighbourhood. I used to walk under it on my way to school, enjoying the layers of shade above me, the way it spread its dappled light on the footpath. When the owner cut it down, the senselessness of his action outraged me, the
pitiiless light flooding in where there was once softness and shade, a bleeding stump where there had been so much life.

I shouted ‘tree killer!’ at him and ran for my life, being a coward to the bone, terrified of any conflict, trembling at my daring.

Another disquieting incident that happened on the street was a car doing a terrifying U-turn on us when we were squirting water at passing cars with a water pistol. He turned out to be an off-duty cop, a burly red-faced sadist who harangued us for what seemed ages. From some shameful part of me I recognised he was enjoying my fear of him, which left a nasty taste in my mouth, a sense of my own complicity.

Our house was large and rambling, two-storeyed, one of those comely wooden Auckland villas with a sweeping drive down round to the back garden. The house was about twenty feet high at the back, and to a child it seemed incredibly tall. Our back garden was overgrown, a bit spooky, a tangled wilderness, while our neighbours’ in comparison was tidy and bare of trees, with hills of lawn, a clothesline and everything clipped back.

It was not until half a lifetime later, writing this memoir, when I disentangled my own private memories of my childhood in Sandringham from those of my parents’, that I discovered another truth about the place that I’d unconsciously known all along. Even apart from the ready-made alien status already conferred on me by their unconventionality, I had always been aware from an early age that, for all my sociability, I too was an outsider, an observer,
never quite at home in the world. Yet in my lifelong search for a place to belong to, I — I discovered with astonishment — looking for another Sandringham.

The dead, genteel place my parents knew and despised was not the only one. My Sandringham was different — a blooming, buzzing, dangerous place full of drama and possibilities, but always safe and secure, a world with defined boundaries — the garden, my friends' houses, my beloved schools Edendale Primary and Balmoral Intermediate, the road, the shops. There was the overgrown quarry with the long-running murder mystery we were always on the verge of solving, which involved an old hut with mysterious pencil signs on the wall (code for where the treasure and the bodies were hidden) and the crook guarding all his hideous secrets (the poor old crippled caretaker, limping up to us, trying desparately to shoo us away).

We roamed around fearlessly. The idea that we should be taken anywhere by car was laughable. There was no TV to insinuate new needs into our heads and we had no fear of strangers. We could get as dirty as we liked — we were generously given a whole world to make for ourselves instead of our parents making it for us. It wasn’t that we weren’t cared for — it was just that it didn’t occur to any of us to be frightened of the world.

I loved our back garden most. That was my domain. It was overgrown and lushly green, full of secret corners and terracing rock walls, an old choke pen in ruins in the back where I held church services during my religious phase, a ghost vegetable garden long gone to seed. Next door there was a shady orchard, with long, wet grass growing between the lichen-draped trunks.

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We used to climb the wall — that faint sinister clinking as the rocks shifted under our feet — and sneak in to steal peaches and apples.

I was the only kid who could climb the massive old willow tree — it was always slightly scary to make that first haul up the trunk with its thickly layered rough texture of willow tree bark scraping my skin as I held on like a little monkey. But once I was wedged onto the big solid branch, I was happy — half scared, half-triumphant.

As usual it was a book that inspired me, a story about boys making a tree hut, using a rope to pull things up, eating crunchy apples and reading in comfort. It appealed to me, the way they bit into the apples and lolled about, masters of their universe. I copied them by trying to take up a book with me, but it was much too precarious and uncomfortable. After that I didn’t even try bringing up wood for the hut. I was hopelessly impractical about making anything and, anyway, I didn’t like apples much. So in the end I just perched there, my legs swinging, watching everything, high above the garden in my secret hideout lost in the leaves.

I kept a nature diary about the garden. The idea came from ‘Emily of New Moon’, one of my favourite books. Emily’s plan of watching and recording her garden growing seemed somehow exciting. I loved the way Emily wrote about the sky and water and trees like larches, which I imagined were straight and delicate like church spires. So I wrote about the pink blossom coming out on our scrawny old peach trees, the masses of colour in spring, the lawsoniana at the bottom of the garden, a tall aromatic piney tree. One whiff of the smell and forever after I am instantly transported into the velvety shadowy interior inside that tree, the
feeling of enclosure, the layers and layers of green stretching above and around us as we sat reverently in that fragrant tent. It was soft underfoot from years of pine needles, our special hiding place for huddling together, having long peaceful talks and games.

I wrote about the garden I made for fairies, the moss for them to dance on and the shells I left for them to drink out of, the way the willow lost its leaves, the swing where the dirt scuffed up as we dragged our feet, the big damp basement with its earth floor and all the workings of the house, the gurgling pipes and gauges, the muffled mysterious sound of footsteps above them, the choking smell of earth that hadn’t seen the light of day for years, scene for gatherings called the Black Cat Club. We spent days writing down rules in a notebook and made badges with a picture of a cat with a long tail. In the end it became a pretext for long, secretive, salacious conversations about sex.

When I was eight, our brother was born, an occasion for much joy among us three sisters because we had a baby to play with, and for my mother and, especially, my father because they’d finally produced a son. When my mother was in the home, as they called maternity hospitals then, we were thrilled because our father gave us sandwiches crunchy with sugar for lunch.

There was a flat underneath the house where an Indian family named the Roys lived. They were all exquisite — small dark and polite compared to our loud, large larrikin family living above them. Mrs Roy in her glowing sari, jewels at her ears and one gleaming on her nose,
was like a princess to us girls, her gentle son David our constant playmate. Going into their
place was like entering a cave with dark corners and spicy smells.

There was a sunken moss garden leading to their door, with a bank of ferns and creepers
enclosing it like a green wall, worn stone steps leading down to the garage. It was a magic
place, a secret garden within a garden. I used to sit on the steps, my head resting against the
rusty railing, gazing down at the slaters moving slowly across the pocked volcanic rocks
stacked under the daphne bush with its tiny fragrant pink flowers, the tender shoots of new
ferns in the dark earth. It was old and damp and shadowy, a perfect place for certain dreams
of mine — being a fairy, for instance, or living alone in a green cave.

I spent hours sitting in one place motionless, my skinny legs clasped in front of me, silently
watching things, listening. It’s what kids do just to make sense of the roaring world they find
themselves in — go into a trance of childishness, a prolonged meditation that has all the
radiant intensity of a trip. There I’d be, lost in that slow-motion dream, yet sharply aware of
the world around me, the dazzle of leaves and light, for instance, the hardness of the earth
under my haunches, ants crawling through blades of grass forests close to my dirt-streaked
feet. It was the casual immersion in the scruffy present that only a child understands —
squinting at the sun, nothing more pressing to do than make patterns in the dirt with one
grimy finger, absently pick at a scab on a bare knee, even occasionally mutter a few disjointed
words. Time stretching, standing still, the bountiful endlessness of it, those blessed solitary
moments of childhood, pure unselfconsciousness. The idleness of being a kid with nothing
more to do than listen to the mysterious processes of her own growing and watch the small miracles of the world with undivided attention.
In the first draft I wrote the central character Lou in the third person. I saw this as a way of allowing myself more room to move while still retaining the fresh first-hand voice of a young girl.

I saw this use of third person as useful, in that it could closely approximate the intimacy of first person while allowing some objectivity and eye-of-God distance to the authorial voice.

I had used the third person in the same way with *Nights with Grace*, a novella with a similar narrator and theme. The difference was that the story and all the characters were entirely fictional.

I began with stories from the past — chapters about the lives of my great-grandmother, grandmother, grandfather, mother and father. I had not intended to end up with so many chapters about the past, but as I wrote them, these stories sprang to life in a way that fascinated me, their contemporary relevance becoming more and more apparent. I instinctively felt that, in the telling, these stories made for a much clearer understanding of our family dynamic. I discovered astonishingly direct connections between the young woman marooned in isolated bush with a drunken husband a hundred years ago, the
agoraphobic wife in her grand, cold farmhouse, the cocky, warm-hearted young man — his mother’s favourite son — and the circumstances and personalities of our own family.

In the event, writing these stories of the past affirmed my sense of its vivid relevance to the present. Patterns of family behaviour, the ‘culture’ of the family and other extraordinary parallels emerged strongly from the bare bones of the past, and references to these long-dead people recur naturally throughout the book right to the last page. This theme of the influence of past events on the present came about naturally as the layers of the past were revealed. The insights I gained, a kind of fictional fleshing out of people I had in some cases never met, gave me a clearer knowledge of later events. The sins and virtues of the fathers not to mention those of the mothers became increasingly obvious as I went more deeply into their lives.

Even the only glimpse I had of my great-great-grandmother; writing from the bleak stone farmhouse in Ireland to her daughter to inform her she had made her bed and must lie on it, became more understandable to me. When I first heard this story, I was indignantly judgmental about her cruelty. However, the harsh logic of poverty and her knowledge of her daughter’s character made it more understandable to me, certainly less hard-hearted than I had originally seen it. In the end I came to see that it might be simply a statement of fact. Neither mother or daughter had any choice; it was as simple as that, and furthermore, the mother probably knew her daughter’s strength of character.

These portraits of the past lent themselves to fictionalising for several reasons. First of all, I was much more interested in their inner lives, the kind of people they were, than in conventional description of facts and events of history. This fascination with their personal lives involved, of necessity, a great deal of supposition and speculation. In my
attempt to enter into their lives, imagine their worlds, flesh out their motivation, I was using fictional techniques.

An interesting example of the blurring of boundaries of fact and fiction in memoir is found in Modjeska’s *Poppy*, where she quotes from her mother’s ‘diary’ and describes it as real: ‘Why else would she destroy one of her own diaries, as I assume she must have done, for when we went back to the house, there was nothing on the shelf for 1971 or the first half of 1972.’ In *Poppy* there is a strong theme of historical research and Modjeska describes in detail the way she, as a historian, goes about this research to find the real story of her mother’s life. Without reading the dedication —’for my mother who died in 1984 and never kept a diary’— it would be easy for the reader to assume these were genuine quotes from a genuine diary.

Similarly Judith Thurman in her biography of Colette notes, ‘In *Break of Day* …there is a complex tension – an interplay of dissonance and resemblance – not only between the actual and imaginary daughter, but between fiction and reality. Colette ignores or deliberately flouts the conventions of narrative: she invites real friends to mingle with her invented characters; she speaks in, but repudiates the authenticity of her first person; there is more digression and philosophy, more dreaming aloud, than there is plot…’

Even from the beginning, though, I found I had to make a very clear distinction between speculation using fictional techniques and altering the facts altogether by soaring off into fiction. Right from the beginning, in spite of my stated interest in fictionalising events and characters if need be, I found it preferable to work from the actual events; it was much more interesting to use the information I had already gleaned from research.
It also seemed more fitting. As I immersed myself in these people’s lives, it began to seem frivolous and self-indulgent, as well as pointless to reinvent them. Speculate, try to recreate, immerse myself, yes, but not deliberately fictionalise to make things more interesting. I found there was no need to. So any speculation I indulged in was firmly anchored to what I knew about them, to the known circumstances of their lives. Such passages are also always clearly designated as just that – speculation. In describing them in this way it was always in the narrator’s voice rather than in realist mode.

Giving them fictional dialogue, or making up events struck me as obviously dishonest, at least in the kind of book *Family Love* was gradually turning into. Not only was it an ethical consideration; I saw it also as a device that didn’t work on stylistic grounds for an autobiography.

When a work of art purports to be based on fact, the work can sometimes fall between two poles if the artist is not rigorous enough. The ‘reality’ has been so thinly constructed it has all the unbelievability of bad fiction and none of its richness. I think that ethical considerations and the motivation for the work are indivisible from the totality of it. The main issue, to me, is the impulse that gives life to the work in the first place: the motivation, obsession, the good faith or otherwise that has shaped it, the matrix in which it is placed. It is almost impossible to evaluate this impulse separately from the form in which it is expressed. The process of writing involves a series of choices and decisions all of which come from a rich mix of the writer’s intellect and emotion, her background, the sum total of her consciousness. It is interesting that the word ‘consciousness’ in Russian can also mean ‘conscience’, because it seems clear that all aspects of writers’ moral, spiritual and intellectual qualities will influence their work.
As Sartre wrote in *What is Literature?* ‘If literature was human and not divine, then it could be kept from being degraded to the status of entertainment only by being identified with man’s very existence, without dividing his life into various parts. Commitment, then is simply the writer’s total presence in what he has written’. 33

Once again an ethical consideration came up to stymie my hopeful attempt to combine fiction and real life in *Family Love* and I found myself in the position of having to make the choice almost straight away. Either I was writing about real people and their lives — my family — or I was writing fiction. I was well aware that fact and truth could be very subjective. What is true for a child is very different from an adult perspective and each participant in the family drama has his or her own truth. It is obviously impossible to tell the ‘whole’ truth, and a writer’s desire to do this by trying to be impartial or sparing people’s feelings may often end in silencing her. All I could do was find my own line of truth from the facts I discovered.

For instance, in my chapter about my great-grandmother, there were only a few facts available to work from. There was her marriage to a much older man, a miner and a drunkard, her arrival in New Zealand from Ireland in her early 20’s to a life of grinding poverty and isolation in a bush hut. There was her unhappiness there (the letter she wrote to her mother begging for the fare home received the reply already mentioned, that she had made your bed and must lie on it), the seven children she gave birth to, the fact that she taught herself midwifery and supported her family by this hard-won knowledge. Knowing only this sketchy outline of a life I became fascinated about the quiet heroism implicit in it and the suffering. I wanted to understand how she coped with her life and what legacy she left us, her descendants.
The hard lives such early colonial working-class women led, the fact that their contributions are ignored or treated condescendingly by ‘serious’ male histories, was a revelation I reached from immersing myself in her life, and this became an important aspect of the meaning of her story.

The sole surviving photo of her, showing an intelligent, wary, sensitive face, made me wonder about her inner life. What consolations did she have in her life? Certainly it was well known in the family that she especially loved her younger son, my grandfather.

In the writing of these portraits I was interested in the qualities I found that linked them to me and my family, the traits and interests we shared and the sense of kindredness in spite of the obvious factors that set us apart – entirely different social conditions and customs, lack of formal education and narrowness of outlook. Rebecca, for example, with her poverty-stricken upbringing in a tiny cottage in Ireland and later life in New Zealand was entirely ‘other’. It seemed impossible to find common ground with her from the standpoint of my own pampered existence. Here was a woman whose main motivation was survival, her capacity for learning only fulfilled in the practice of a self-taught profession to be used solely for the support of her family. She had no leisure, little education, there seemed to be little in her life to nourish her intelligence or spirit except for love of her children.

Writing fiction for me is partly about empathy, seeing with someone else’s eyes, being inside their skin – but I became as fascinated and enthralled by this person from real life, Rebecca and her lonely courage, her strength of character, her extraordinary achievements, as with any fictional character. There was an added dimension — my
interest in wanting to give her due, celebrate her life, as well as explore the effect of that
life on her forbears.

In another way, in spite of the immense differences between the two women, the
story of my paternal grandmother’s life was just as fascinating. First of all, I was writing
about someone I had known very well as a child. Unlike Rebecca, my paternal
grandmother Rosabel was in her own way an important part of our childhood and my
memories of her are very vivid. Secondly, she was the spoilt daughter of a well-to-do
man, cosseted and protected all her life by her father and then her husband, she never had
to work for a living. The contrast between the circumstances of the two women could not
have been more striking.

As the ‘objective’ narrator took over in the beginning to tell my paternal
grandmother’s story, I was fascinated to see that what emerged from a life I had taken for
granted as a child was in fact the stuff of magic realism. Here was a woman frozen in
time and space, in her gloomy, grand house which she almost never left, the antique
grandfather’s clock in the dark hall ticking away the years, every surface immaculate,
gleaming with polish. A woman who immersed herself in the negation of all the things
that make life meaningful to most of us — friendship, music, colour, travel, work,
pastimes of any kind. Here was a woman who did almost nothing at all in her 80 years
except live for her son and the upholding of gentility. The story of her life had the insane
grandeur of a Miss Havisham or a character from a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel. In
writing her story it was as if I were hearing it for the first time, marvelling about the
quality of such a life and why she lived it so determinedly to the end.
In this way, my fictional immersion in each of these stories brought up a series of sometimes very surprising discoveries – these people in my family with their monstrous flaws, endearing weaknesses, virtues and idiosyncrasies became real to me in a way they never had been before. It was a fascinating and heady period of writing.

These early chapters also lent themselves to the idea of conventional novel form because the main narrator, though present, was not central to the stories about these people. There was more distance.

In my discussion of the narrator in the earlier chapter I note that I needed a third narrator, an ‘objective’ outsider, and this was the narrator that was predominant. In this first draft I deliberately separated the chapters, turning the structure into a series of discrete stories, each with its own title. This structure I saw as reflecting the theme that was emerging, not a narrative so much as a series of life histories and the ideas that sprang from them. The chapters were linked by psychological factors rather than chronological events. I had the idea that I would write the entire book like that. As this theme of the interrelatedness of family and individual began to be refined in the first few chapters, the use of the third person and the narrator Lou seemed to work — Lou being part of the story rather than the central focus, as first person implies.

A series of portraits of family members, dissertations on topics as varied as sex, the New Zealand Communist Party, family dynamics both damaging and creative, my early writing life, the effects of sexism on New Zealand women, and the political and social conditions of New Zealand, as well as its haunting landscapes, seemed the best way to approach the book. At the time the structure seemed to work, as part memoir, part dissertation, part fiction.
CHAPTER SIX

I thought of myself as living in a nest. My tiny sun-porch bedroom was like an eyrie sticking out from the edge of the house, high above the garden. A view of leaves and branches, birds, the occasional car going past on St Lukes Road, wooden houses, the paddock below and across the road the neat hedges that hid my best friend Margaret’s house.

My room was a place for dreaming and thinking, I used to spend hours looking out the windows. I read and wrote my stories at the desk, and mucked around in there endlessly, rearranging my various treasures. It was a lovely room for a child. Only big enough to fit my bed, a desk and a cabinet, it was my kingdom, a retreat from the hurly burly of the household. On the windowsills I displayed certain precious objects at regular intervals— a tiny perfect teddy sitting in a miniature wooden armchair for instance. My father joked that he’d like to come in and take potshots at them like those targets at fairs.

My room was wedged into an out of the way corner of the house behind the kitchen, so visits there were slightly ceremonious.
My baby brother Mark would come to sit on the floor with me and go through our ritual of looking at each of my most secret treasures packed in cotton wool in a Black Magic chocolate box. He was suitably respectful and very sweet. I loved him, with his soft skin, sturdy cuddliness, tender blue eyes, but couldn’t resist teasing him. For some reason if I called one of his toys a ‘torn a rocker’ instead of a ‘turn a rocker’ he would become apoplectic with fury – all I had to do in the end was say ‘tor.’ to set him off. He never forgave me for it. Once, before he was walking, I lifted him onto the stove to dance on my level and to my horror the element had been left on. His pink feet were burnt. I never forgot the fright of it, his compact baby body in a blue sleeping suit and the pain in his face.

I spent weeks in bed when I was sick with asthma, waiting impatiently for the sound of my mother’s footsteps, the insufferable weight on my chest squeezing out my breath. Our kindly Jewish doctor, Dr Erlich, with his rumpled lived-in face and heavy German accent would prescribe total bed rest whenever I had an attack. In between times, he instructed me to stand at the window and breathe in deeply every morning to exercise my lungs (in those innocent pollution-free days) and avoid eggs and milk. This was as good a cure as any, though I didn’t grow out of asthma until I was in my early teens.

The boredom was acute. There was a badly printed ugly poster of something educational to do with eggs pinned above my bed that became forever connected in my mind with screaming tedium. For some reason I never thought to rip it off the wall. Part of the cure was not being allowed to drink water and I had wild dreams in which I threw glass after glass of water down my throat. One night I woke, maddened by thirst, and crept next door into the kitchen. I tried
to extract a glass from the dish rack and the whole thing exploded with a crash in the still house. My father appeared, tousled and alarmed, took the glass off me and tried to explain it was for my own good. Once my mother heard a strange rhythmic creak in the middle of the night and there I was astride a rocking horse, rocking it gently back and forth completely asleep. I was probably in search of a well.

I remember the wonderful dreamlike feeling when I was finally allowed up after being so long in bed. I had that faint, light feeling of convalescence, as if I was floating, slightly detached from everything. I danced through the house, checking on all the rooms made strange by my absence, full of the promise and possibilities of freedom.

We had our own special playroom, a pleasant long room with the sunlight coming through the leaves at the window. My parents had fixed a big blackboard on the wall for us. We mostly drew pictures of lovely ladies in high heels with long impossibly curly hair, using different colored chalks. Once my father praised one of my drawings; such a rare occurrence I drew a line around it, writing sternly underneath ‘not to be rubbed out!’ When we girls were quarrelling, the worst revenge we could think of was to rub out a favourite drawing so of course it disappeared within days.

The living room was cosy with blue walls and a yellow-painted brick fireplace, there were books and prints everywhere. It was a nice house, faintly shabby, lived-in, full of life. There were always visitors and conversations, music playing from our old gramophone, my mother’s Mozart or my father’s American blues singers Or more raucously, we children
doing our loathed piano practice, labouring away on our scales with varying degrees of tin ear and resentment.

On one side of the house, above the Matheson’s place and below ours, was a sloping piece of empty land covered in long coarse grass which we called the paddock. We took sheets of cardboard and sledged madly down the slope, landing up in the soft deep grass. Sometimes I’d go there to sulk in the shadows, hoping someone would worry that I’d gone.

Our house was on the corner of Cornwallis Street, a short cul de sac, an enclave of community, where there was some life on the street compared to the rest of Sandringham. With children bursting out of nearly every house it was impossible to contain us. The closeness of the houses, the fact that it was a one-way street, made things more companionable. We knew all the neighbours. They were all pleasant working class families with their own houses and gardens. In those carefree, benign days the welfare state ensured that people did not have to struggle.

One neighbour used to come home roaring drunk, and we followed him fascinated as he wove down the street. All except for Jo, who once saw him spewing over the paddock fence and for ever after became traumatised about vomit and drunkenness in one fell swoop. He was a very good-natured drunk though. Once he was carrying a big sack slung over his shoulders and replied seriously to our cheeky questions as we danced around him that it was full of lollies for us.
For a while every afternoon, Jo and I lined up at the bus for a ritual reception of two women in their early twenties, who we privately christened the two smart ladies. We were there for the privilege of holding their hands and escorting them to their house in Cornwallis Street. We deeply admired their carefully applied makeup and beehive hairdos, immaculate clothes, shoes and stockings. We couldn’t believe how clean and neat they were. The young women took this daily fan-club reception good-naturedly in their stride. I remember their soft little hands, fragrant scent, little high-pitched voices which we observed intently, absolutely fascinated.

We treated Cornwallis Street like our own big playground. After school, when we had done our household jobs and homework, we would rush off to gather there with all the other kids and play games. Kingsene, bulls-rush, rounders, hopscotch, hide and seek, marbles, whatever was the rage. Once the big boys introduced a weird, uncomfortable game in the paddock which they called typewriters. They jabbed us all over with their rough fingers and made mystifying comments about carrots and cream. We broke away and — it wasn’t at all appealing. We played all afternoon till the sun went down and our mothers called us home for tea then went home reluctantly, dirty, tired and glowing

Every Christmas Eve a group of us girls went carol singing around the street. We practised playing our recorders and singing in part harmony for weeks. On the night, we waited impatiently till it was dark enough — quite late on those balmy New Zealand summer nights. It was a ritual anchored in some deep emotion that we all shared in, the sweetness and
poignancy of the carols, our recorders piping plaintively in the darkness, our neighbours’ kindly faces as they came out to listen, leaning against the doorways, enjoying the old songs.

One Christmas I did a terrible thing as a result of one of those strange brainstorms of childhood. For some unknown reason I stole letters from all those poor neighbours — mostly cards — and hid them in some long grass under a hedge. It was some fantasy veering right off the edge, which I wasn’t even conscience-stricken about. This was doubly unusual given my overdeveloped sense of guilt about everything else. I was never found out.

My mother used to read to us every night and I loved the way she lovingly enunciated each word so warmly and clearly with a dramatic edge, conjuring up such vivid worlds as her voice spiralled around us. There was *Milly Molly Mandy* with her little friend Susan and Billy Blunt, her mother, father, grandmother and grandfather and uncle and aunt, there was *Madeleine, Scuffy the Tugboat, The Saggy Baggy Elephant*, the poems of Robert Louis Stevenson —‘How would you like to go up in a swing, up in the air so high…’— Hans Christian Anderson stories like *The Little Match girl; Lavenders Blue, ‘The Coles Funny Picture Book, Lorenzo the Singing Mouse*, the Brothers’ Grimm fairy tales. One of their stories was about a garden deep underground, winking and shining in the dark with the sombre light of the shining jewels. I always loved that image, the strange magic of garden buried far below the earth.
I loved snuggling down and listening, close to her, breathing in her particular smell of face cream and cigarettes and having the warmth of her undivided attention, all of us dreamy with the stories she spun into the air.
7 Fictional Memoir

By the time I began writing my thesis proposal I was defining *Family Love* as a ‘fictional memoir’ rather than the ‘autobiographical novel’ of my original proposal a year before. A ‘fictional memoir’ I described as ‘a memoir which looks at the interrelatedness of family and individual, past and present, and in particular, the intellectual, cultural and psychological influences which shaped my early beginnings as a writer and remained my lifelong preoccupations. Its structure reflects the themes — it is not a narrative so much as a series of life histories and the ideas that spring from them — and so the chapters are linked by psychological factors rather than chronological events. There is also a strong emphasis on the importance of place and landscape as an influence.’
By that time I had been working on the memoir for a year. In reality this
definition was not nearly as confident as it sounded. I was still hanging on to the last
remaining vestige of my original concept of writing it as a novel, a concept I was still not
ready to abandon, for sound as well as spurious reasons.

In the change of emphasis from autobiographical novel to fictional memoir lay the
reluctant acknowledgment that *Family Love* was indeed turning out to be a memoir rather
than a novel, though elements of fiction — style, the techniques used in its writing and its
scope — remained. Using the term fictional memoir was a reflection of my confusion
about the identity of the narrator (or narrators) and the kind of story I was telling. No
wonder my supervisor in his report politely described the term as ‘possibly oxymoronic’.

At this point in the writing of *Family Love* I had the sense that I was trying to hold
together the widening gap between my intentions for the book and what was actually
emerging. The term ‘fictional memoir’ was a faithful reflection of these confusions.

There are some models that come close to the type of fictional memoir I was
trying so unsuccessfully to write, though there are few writers who achieve the
triumphant fusion of fiction and autobiography I had in mind. Janet Frame’s peerless
trilogy *Angel at My Table* is an example of the possibilities of this genre. She said that
in the writing of it she was interested in the unity of experience, her total immersion in
memory without recourse to conventional research. In her own inimitable way, which is
peculiarly New Zealand in tone, she was able to reach startling truths through a sort of
unassuming obliqueness.

In my thesis proposal I made a sincere attempt to analyse the direction the book
was taking and my intentions in writing it. Much of it was accurate, but the thesis
proposal is also a good illustration of the way writing tends to have its own momentum. The best of intentions and analyses are often swept away in the flood.

In the case of *Family Love* the flood was the sheer weight of memory that engulfed me and the structures I had to create for the truthful expression of it. It was difficult enough to shape the material for the purposes of memoir, let alone a novel.

It was also proving to be as satisfying as writing a novel. By that stage, surprisingly similar processes to those I used in writing a novel were at work — in the shaping of the material, the refining of voice, the immersion into another world, the intensity of discovery and revelation.

By the time I had written the proposal I had already discarded my third-person narrator Lou, and the narrative, as a result, had begun to fall into place in a more satisfying and seamless way.

It was as if the persona of Lou had been a mask necessary for the writing of the first stages of *Family Love*, but as the story went deeper and became more about the actual events as I remembered them or discovered them in my research, this mask became extraneous to requirements. In taking off the mask, the writing became freer, more immediate and intimate, while the overall eye-of-God perspective still remained. In the first draft, when Lou goes to see the site of her great-grandparents’ house in the Coromandel Mountains, it is described rather clumsily:

‘Lou, the middle daughter, thought how astonished they’d be to know that this was to happen — that four people, three little girls and a man — their grandson and great-granddaughters would come from so far away to visit the house, now crumbled into a ghostly site, a fantail the only living creature left in the nothingness it had become…'
was such a strange feeling, a small betrayal to get back into the car, to drive away leaving it to its unmarked obscurity, never to come to life again under someone’s attentive gaze.’

The final draft has more directness and clarity:

‘I thought how astonished they’d be to know this was to happen — that four people, three little girls and a man, their grandson and great-grand daughters would come from so far away to visit the place, the house they had lived in all their lives no longer there, the fantail the only living creature left in the nothingness it had become…I felt sad, as if I’d picked up on some grown-up, unspoken grief in the air, an urgent communication from my great-grandmother as she was then; young, desperate, alone in the world. It was such a strange feeling to get back into the car, a small betrayal to drive away, leaving it to an unmarked obscurity that was never to come to life under someone’s attentive gaze again, the sad pleading of our great-grandmother’s ghost left unheard among the trees.’

There seemed to be no residual problems with discarding third person. The first person reflected the tone of the commentary, and captured the intimacy of the voice as well as its honesty. It also admitted more poetic scope, allowing for the streams of consciousness, expression of the depth and complexities of feeling, of what literary critic Peter Steele in *The Autobiographical Passion* called ‘riddle, quizzicality and quirk, the trace elements of the poetic’.35

I still wanted to retain a structure of loosely linked discrete chapters. Though this structure started off only as an idea that might be useful to try, it soon seemed to me to become a necessity. Separate chapters on each subject seemed the only way to deal with the flood of material. The themes that emerged were overwhelming.
I found myself immersed in so many aspects of our family life – sexual, political, social, intellectual— and in the lives and thinking of my parents that, at that point, I could see no other way to structure the chapters coherently. In the thesis proposal I list the chapters already written and those proposed as (in order): Max, Martha, Rosabel, Reena, Sandringham, Piha, Lou, Communism, Moving Away, Memory, Damage, Titirangi, Storms, Marriage, Sex. As it turned out, there were a few more chapters still to be written.

Problems (Part 2)

At this stage of writing ‘Family Love’ another split was emerging. On the one hand, there was my interest in the emotional and psychological life of my family and myself, my own beginnings as a writer and development as a person. On the other were the political, social and intellectual life of my literary, bohemian, left wing family and its relationship to New Zealand society at the time.

The use of discrete chapters reflected this split, not only in their titles but also in a difference in tone and style. The chapter on Communism, for instance, and that on Damage, or the one on the arrival of the Storms and the description of Piha were markedly uneven in tone. The chapter on communism dealt in a celebratory way with the richness and depth of my political upbringing, whereas the one on damage described
another aspect of our upbringing — the emotional damage inflicted by parents unable to express approval or unconditional love.

In effect they were being told by seemingly quite different narrators. One narrator retrospectively narrating a life did not allow for the rich story I wanted, which could embrace and recognise the uncertainties and ambiguities of myself and my life. On the other hand, I did not want the voices in each chapter to be so fractured and separate.

Other vestiges of the old autobiographical novel remained. For instance, I gave only some of the characters their real names. This was because of my continuing reluctance to reveal their true identities, even though by that time they were obvious. In one way, this use of pseudonyms gave me some emotional distance during the actual writing as well. While it had been easy to discard the mask of Lou for myself as narrator, it was much harder in relation to my parents. The lingering unease around the story of my parents, their marriage and my relationship with them made it more difficult for me to use their real names.

This unevenness of tone and style reflected a fragmented voice and conflicting intentions. In first thinking about a memoir my reservations were centred on exactly that concern — the tendency of the memoir as a form to remain one-dimensional, fragmented and self-indulgent.

In many memoirs there is a sense of several discordant narratives running simultaneously, reflecting conflicting aims and unconscious motivation but never expressing them clearly or satisfyingly. The writer’s voice, her secret life, the real weight of her psyche — in short; all the factors I believe are essential for literature — come through fitfully and only enough to muddy the surface.
A graphic example of this discordance is a memoir called *Letters to my Semi-Detached Son* by Helen Braid. This is the story of a wayward son by a mother who has clearly never come to terms with his behaviour, which she sees in terms of personal betrayal of her. There is such artlessness in the memoir that it reads like a long self-justifying harangue to her absent son, a list of accusations that the writer cannot relinquish, while at the same she finds it necessary to prove obsessively to herself and the world that she was always a good mother and blameless. As a crudely written example, it is still instructive; there is a one-dimensionality, little or no interesting insight into the complexities of the situation, none of the resolution that comes with time and forgiveness; only this insistent beat of self justification; her bitter, unfinished business with her son. Underlying everything and muddying the surface is the driving force behind the book, which the writer is seemingly unaware of — her resentment and anger, pain and hurt, her deep sense of failure.

This unsatisfying and unresolved fragmentation of both tone and voice is a reflection of Braid’s conflicting intentions revolving around the unsolved dilemmas of her vengeful feelings, need for self-justification and lack of introspection in dealing with them.

Her book also serves to remind us that memoirs are often born of a mix of motivations, conscious and unconscious. Most stories about families have some aspects of frustration, rage and unresolved pain. Does a writer start a memoir out of the desire for revenge, recognition, self-aggrandisement, secret fears, vanities and doubts only half-expressed or acknowledged? Or is it from the desire to chronicle a life, make sense of it,
record the past, set the record straight, pass on the wisdom of a lifetime? Is it instructive or simply a story? Or is it, as in my own case, a confusing mixture of most of these?

As I wrote in my notes, ‘What is this memoir about? My father for Christ’s sake? My development as a writer and activist? My political and intellectual consciousness? My big problem with this thing is my feeling of embarrassment at writing about myself, a sense of the self-importance of it. I always said I wasn’t going to do it. How has it happened?

‘What is all this about? A lyrical tale of innocence lost? The first installment of a life? How writers develop their craft? Family influences? It’s all of them and too much.’(commentary)

My fictional memoir was showing signs of strain right from the beginning. It was proving to be far too ambitions. Could it really be possible to incorporate the emotional and political, the literary and social in one — the complicated dynamics of my family, my beginnings as a writer, my political commitment and my own confused feelings in one coherent satisfying whole? At that stage of the fictional memoir it seemed unlikely.
Edendale Primary and Balmoral Intermediate were ordinary working class state schools where imagination and love went into teaching children, something we all sensed and valued. Edendale was a funny old stone building with its motto ‘Play the Game’ engraved boldly on the façade. We girls walked to school along St Lukes Road and down Sandringham Road, taking each other’s hands when we had to cross the road.

We were in awe of Mr Watson, the Headmaster and Mr Rosser the Deputy. When I was very small I couldn’t tell them apart because they both had great beetling dark eyebrows. To be called up to see the Headmaster was a big deal. Once I scribbled on an arithmetic book and was told to go and see Mr Watson. He was gentle and kind and surprised me by saying, ‘You come from a family who values books.’ I was heartened by the fact that he seemed to take our delinquent family seriously.

At Edendale we had a special class where kids with conditions like cerebral palsy or Downs Syndrome were taught. We children were strictly enjoined to be considerate and kind to them, and there was very little teasing or bullying at the school where, children’s natural kindness had a chance to assert itself in such a non-threatening atmosphere. I still remember Gloria and Barry and the strange way they talked. I was a little afraid of them.
One of my first teachers, Miss Reeve, was dark and buxom with gorgeous white teeth and a moustache. I sat on the mat listening to her read us stories as she stood in front of us, her heavy leather sandals at eye-level creaking gently as she moved slightly.

The most influential teacher was Mr Henderson, a chubby dishevelled man who sucked cough lollies all the time, leaving a darkish trail down one side of his rosy chin. We all liked him and called him Hendy behind his back. He had a mordant sense of humour; there was an air of writer manqué about him, something wryly disappointed and self-deprecating. He showed us two lines he’d had published in a Readers Digest competition; something about cars being joined together by the path of light from their headlights. He taught us full-bodied gutsy poems and I still have the rhythm of his voice in my head:

‘The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold.’

I used to recite that and other poems like ‘Do you Remember an Inn Miranda?’ with great drama to my parents and their friends and Grandma and Granddad, though I suspect they could hardly hide their smiles at my intensity. He read us poetry all the time, rolling the words around on his tongue in a trance of appreciation. He even taught the writing of business letters with passion and memorable grabs. ‘Now remember, children when you’re writing business letters get to the point. You don’t have to mention your aunt’s sore toe.’

He was a gifted and wonderful teacher and gave me two of my most treasured books, Sense and Sensibility with the inscription ‘thank you Judy for the lovely stories you have written
me, from your kind old teacher’, and *Lark Rise to Candleford*, ‘to Judy Scott, a book to take you through the years’.

This eccentric, kindly man was a godsend to me as a teacher and friend. I have reread both these books throughout my life, just as he prophesised, and thought of him every time I did. I played Wendy in a school production of *Peter Pan*, Margaret dashingly playing Peter. In her special trousers and bright face she called out firmly to her lost boys, ‘Put up your swords, boys, this man is mine!’ as she faced Captain Hook.

My role was a bit soppier but it seemed incredibly daring to appear in front of everyone, teachers, neighbours, the Headmaster, in my nightgown. I loved the stillness in the audience as they watched us, the feeling of communicating to them through a character I had taken on and lost myself in.

Margaret Davies and I were best friends, inseparable from kindergarten. She was a lovely girl, dark-haired, competent, steadfast, very Welsh. Her family used to go to Barrier Island each year for their holidays, the biggest event in her rather boring life. She loved all the excitement around our family, particularly my father’s games, and came on trips with us, sitting in the car joining in lustily to sing Communist songs. Her parents would have had a fit. For me, on the other hand, staying the night at her house was the epitome of luxury; soft warm beds, cosiness, nice food. Her mother Flora was a small, kind Scottish woman with dark curly hair, who bought us a chocolate crunchie before we went to bed, an unheard-of treat. I avoided her brother, an unfriendly acned teenager — and was also circumspect around her father, a short grumpy Welshman who spent a lot of his time trimming the hedge.
We played very robust games in the asphalt playground. I particularly liked witchy when I was the witch in a den and roared out every now and then to scare the kids. Once at home I went too far. Margaret and I were playing down in our garden in the dark. I was terrifying us both with a story I’d made up about a man with green teeth, who was stalking us and ready to pounce. We fled up the drive and into the house in such a panic that she ran right through the glass door. She cut her chin badly, blood was everywhere and she had to have the big gash stitched up. I felt awful and guilty. It was the first real intimation that stories could do damage.

At school we learned everything from playing recorders to basketball, and the praise the teachers showered on us at that kind and lovely school gave us the confidence to try anything. Edendale, and later Balmoral under Harry Houghton, the kind and genial teacher of my first form, taught us a lot of other things besides the curriculum; toleration of difference, appreciation of music and poetry, compassion for the underdog, confidence, a joy in learning. Ordinary public schools for working class children, they were a shining example of the success of the New Zealand educational system.

I used to like going shopping with my mother ‘up the road’ to the dairy. There was the butcher shop as well owned by beefy Mr Margan, with its trays of meat decorated with sprigs of plastic parsley laid out in his window, the big wooden chopping block with its fleshy meat
smell and its view of the green layers of the towering monkey-apple tree across the road. Once he took hold of my mother’s arms across the counter with his big red hands. I was struck by the power of his action, the urgency of it, the adult secret behind all the jokes and banter between them, the realisation they knew something I was shut out of.
CHAPTER EIGHT

That magnificent old monkey-apple tree shading the butcher’s shop lodged in my mind through a strange trick of memory. There I was in that slow motion, tranced state of childhood, staring up into its layers of shining green, deep in thought, the dry cleaners hissing and banging behind me. Years later that exact moment came back to me with all the force of a hallucination while I was writing a passage for my first novel. The writing fell into something so good and clear, with such an exhilarating rush, it was as if I had already thought it out all those years before at that moment of gazing at the tree, as a child. The experience was so vivid it was like time travel; for that second I went to live again in my childish body, think with my childish mind, experience again that intense moment. My thoughts as a child were the carriage and connection between child and adult self across the gulf of years.

Maybe I was already laying the foundations for my writing life from an early age, long before I knew what it really meant.
I learnt to trust those rare flashes, especially when I was writing. Even now when I read certain writers the flashback happens strongly and clearly.

Reading Saul Bellow, for instance, regularly elicits a flash of me standing in the middle of the Mathesons’ vegetable garden looking down at the curly leaves of lettuce in the rich brown volcanic soil. Yeats, is centred around Margaret’s garden, with its scoria rocks edging the sunken lawn, the pipes and drain at the side of the concrete path, a butterfly stuck on a pin left to die there by her brother. I must have been thinking a lot when I was at their place; maybe there was more clarity away from home, or it was just that I liked the garden with its high cool hedge, green dampness, the stone steps down from the footpath, rocky outcrops of bubbly-looking volcanic scoria.

Norman Mailer of all writers brought back a flash of the Mathesons’ house, and once when I was reading about Socrates, it was a flash of their front porch.

I don’t really understand how this happens or even why, but whatever revelations I had in those surroundings seemed to have become hard-wired, fused with the place. As if when we are children we sing the landscape, our thoughts, emotions and surroundings an indissoluble whole. Just after my eleventh birthday I wrote presciently, ‘I can’t write down much but I can think them. Maybe I’m saving all my thoughts up till I’m old enough to write a book. Who knows?’
The fact was the sense of myself as a writer, the power of writing, had been there as long as I could remember. It was my memory and identity, the language of my secret self. I have few clear memories of the time before I started to write. It was a way of looking at the world that I honed in myself as a child.

Just a few weeks afterwards I wrote, ‘After school I wrote two stories and a poem. I felt like writing. My biggest dream is to be an author’. I took a professional interest out of love for it.

‘In Katherine Mansfield’s diary she writes that she doesn’t get enough out of her stories,’ I wrote a few months later. ‘I understand completely as it has happened to me. Let me explain. If you have a good story in your head you want to write it down straightaway. (sic) Well you mightn’t feel like writing but you think; I might forget it if I don’t. So you write it down and it’s not good. You can never write it again. If anyone reads this and says it is ridiculously eggatedated (sic) they are wrong. I am genuine and honest when I say that writing is the most important thing of my life.’

‘To continue with yesterday. I didn’t quite give the idea. (a) the idea is probably very good or unusual etc. You go over the details glossing over, improving it. You get your pen and paper and immediately begin to write. All those wonderful details, the whole idea is written down but the thought the foundations of the thing that made you want to write the story is lost. So therefore you don’t get enough out of it. A writer must try and put all she has into it if it’s a good story it must be — you must make the most of it. There, I’m talking like an old and experienced writer. God! I feel strangely experienced.’
I read voraciously, wrote stories and analysed them in my diary. I was always thinking intently and secretively. Just turned eleven I wrote,

‘I haven’t been writing much these last few days because I’m a little sick of everything. In this entry I’m going to summerize — (sic) my feelings I’ve been having — whether I’m making to much of small things I want to find truly. This writing burb of mine is hard to explain — I shouldn’t worry about it now — but I do. I can’t help it I must get to the bottom of everything. I want to write or rather to improve my writing all the time. My writing is just ordinary I think but I always jot down things and then get lost in the story. I can’t help it. Maybe I’ll just keep on writing forever writing and hoping. That’s what I’ll do.’

I wrote my first ‘novel’ (ten pages, which was very long for me) when I was 10. It was about a small orphan girl, a heavily disguised ten-year-old who is adopted by her very conventional uptight uncle and aunt. It is all about my fear of losing my identity. At one point she has a dream that: ‘Mummy had come to her and put her arms around her and she had looked so pretty. She had said, ‘Don’t give in. Be your own little self’. What strange words. Nina still remembered and puzzled over them.’

The heroine discovers her aunt and uncle are religious.

‘She had heard of that before. They probably went to church every Sunday! We never went to church, thought Nina, but Mummy often says God and Jesus so she must be a bit religious.’
At the very end, Nina is seen through the eyes of some cousins.

‘Just then the door opened and young girl came in. She had permed hair and a pink nylon
dress and hideous strap shoes. They stared at her as she came towards them.

‘Hello. Are you my cousins? It’s so nice seeing you. I must hurry though because Aunt May
and Uncle Adam are waiting outside. I’m going to the church dance. You know, I have so
many late nights. Aunt May says it will ruin my health. I said, “it’s giddy youth.” She tittered
nervously.’

Once she goes out, the two drunken cousins, eyebrows raised (presumably at the hideous
strap shoes as well as the loss of her mind), toast each other and one of them says ‘such is
life’ which is the title.

These childish stories are full of relationships and problems of identity, obsessively reworking
friends, lovers, families, often with dramatically angst-ridden endings. I wrote masses of these
kinds of stories before I was 14, as well as keeping a diary. There are only a few exotic
adventure stories. Most of them were to do with a child’s observations of the people around
her.

I was trying my hand, experimenting all the time, and each story reflected whoever I was
reading. There are crude traces of the styles of Edgar Allen Poe, Dickens, Jane Austen, LM
Montgomery, Salinger, Anne Frank, among others, but slowly and surely I was developing
my own voice. Although I wrote a lot of essays and stories for school my ‘real’ writing was done in secret.

Once I showed my parents my nature diary and they called me into their bedroom the next morning. I came in embarrassed at the faint smell of their bodies in bed, their smiling faces looking at me, already deeply regretting that I’d showed it to them. They told me the diary was a good idea but to watch my handwriting because it was deteriorating. They meant well but from then on I was obsessive about keeping my writing to myself. Occasionally one of my sisters would read my diary, causing huge ructions. The worst time, but funny in retrospect, was when Jackie starting quoting passages from it to the whole family when we were travelling somewhere in the car and I couldn’t shut her up. Later on I burnt most of my 1959 and 1960 diaries. All the same, it was a good instinct to work at pieces until I was finished before showing them to anyone, and this became a lifelong habit.

I sent ‘A Good Clean Boy’, a lightly satirical story in unmistakable Salinger vein, to Landfall when I was 13, without of course discussing it with anyone.

‘Cracker Jack,’ I wrote, ‘Guess? I sent a story into Landfall a quarterly with a very high standard of literature and I received this letter,

‘Dear Miss Hall, (my nom de plume)
I enjoyed reading your story. Thank you and wonder if you have any other stories long or short that you could let me see?

65
Yours sincerely, Charles Brasch.'

I hadn’t told him my age or anything, but I’m so thrilled. I’m absolutely THRILLED!!!!!’

Then,

‘Now I’m absolutely worried STIFF!!! I’ve decided I’ll send two stories, the fishing one and a long sophisticated one! I’m trying to get inspiration, I’ve started no less than five stories in three days and they are HOPELESS. What in Heaven’s name will I bloody well do? Help me, help!!!!’

It’s probably significant that I didn’t write in my diary for months after that – it probably traumatised me for life. Years later, when my father told Charles Brasch the story, he said he would definitely have published it had he known my age.

As for many precocious young readers of the late fifties, for me ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ was a revelation about the coolness of alienation and the phoniness of the world. It was our own most secret voice, seductive and wonderful, and I devoured all Salinger’s books. I wrote a book review for school in which I recklessly tried to compare ‘Franny and Zooey’ to ‘Pride and Prejudice’.

It was the first time I’d read a writer who was familiar with people who were so like my own family. It was only many years later that I understood why John Lennon’s killer had a copy in
his pocket as he shot him, or what a poisonous anti-woman rave ‘Franny and Zooey’ is, as
Zooey slowly cuts the ground from under Franny’s foot with every word, denying her reality
and identity with that subtle male technique most women become pretty familiar with at some
time in their lives.

I wrote a series of dialogues between two characters, Carlo and Dansa, which I think was
modelled on Bernard Shaw. They took opposite positions on Free Love, Pacifism and
Religion and argued them out for pages each. It was an attempt on my part to clarify my own
ideas.

My feminism came from observation, but that was a cry from the heart as well.
I wrote essays on nuclear disarmament, capital punishment and the perils of advertising, as
well as devoting pages of my diary to political ideas and events like the American missile
crisis, when we all thought we could die in a nuclear holocaust.

My first effort at political spin doctoring for a good cause was a hilariously feeble and
patently unconvincing letter to a teenager’s advice column in a magazine. I was sure it was
subtle enough to secure the block Sunday School vote for our ban the bomb march.

‘Dear Dee,
These Easter holidays my mother wanted to send me to my Bible class camp, but I heard of
the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament march which begins in Featherston on Good Friday
and finishes in Wellington.
As I am very interested in what CND think I would like to go.

However although I could go with some adult friends of my parents Mother is still worried about what people will think. Do you think I should go?

Yours faithfully

Worried (Sharlene Hibberd)

We were all obsessed about looking respectable to persuade the masses to our cause, and were pretty unhappy about poor Owen Gager wearing a duffel coat on our first ban the bomb march down Queen Street.

The very first thing I ever published was a letter to the paper about the success of the march, though my last stern paragraph was deleted by the editor. I kept waiting for the sky to fall, thrilled and aghast at my own daring until I realised that no one had even so much as mentioned it. It was my first experience of censorship, as well as the deafening silence that often greets publication.
In the preceding chapters I have traced the way the changing form of ‘Family Love’ reflected the changes in my intentions for it and the material I was using.

It is an interesting exercise to review the gradual transformation from the original form intended for this thesis to the form that actually emerged. It is a striking illustration of the way in which material can shape the form of the work. As Andrea Dworkin describes in her fiercely perceptive poetic voice, … ‘with nonfiction which in the universe of my writing has the same cognitive complexity as fiction, in the aftermath one feels that one has chiselled a pre-existing form (which necessarily has substance attached to it) out of a big shapeless stone: it was there I found it. This is an affirmation of skill but not of invention. At best one feels like a sculptor who knows how to liberate the shape hidden in the marble or clay. Once finished the process of writing becomes opaque even to the writer. I did it, but how did I do it? Can I ever do it again? The brain becomes
normal. One can still think of course but not with the luminosity that makes intelligence so powerful a tool while writing, nor can one think outside of literal and linear time anymore.  

In the original concept outlined in the application I described *Family Love* as an autobiographical novel that had the fictional momentum and surprises of a novel … the added depth of personal and political material consciously drawn from real life and living people.’ I was also open to the idea that the facts were not essential and that I might well end up altering events to shape the story.

After a year of writing, the actuality was something a little different. For the purposes of the thesis and in the academic context in which I was working, I defined this new direction as a fictional memoir. This I saw as a memoir with many elements of fiction, that is the style, scope and techniques used in writing fiction.

The most obvious difference was that I no longer saw the need to fictionalise characters or events. In the writing of the book, it became clear that the events and people had their own intrinsic interest and that it was just as satisfying to shape them into memoir as into fiction.

The question of the narrator’s voice (or voices) was also of central importance in redefining the direction of *Family Love*. By changing it from third to first and anchoring it more securely into my own voice, fiction became memoir, a character named Lou segued into the voice of the memoirist and the intimacy of a stream of consciousness memoir became more predominant.

There is also a subtle difference between autobiography and memoir, and the use of these two terms is another reflection of the change that took place in the tone of
Family Love. To me, autobiography implies a more formal process, a catalogue of the events of a life, while memoir is more casual and impressionistic, its subject not necessarily an entire life so much as aspects of it. It is more poetic in tone and expression.

It is instructive to look at common usage of these two terms. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, autobiography is simply ‘the story of one’s own life, story so written.’ Memoir on the other hand has a much longer entry; ‘the record of events, knowledge written from special sources of information, essay on learned subject specially studied by the writer’.

The definitions in *Roget’s Thesaurus* imply an even greater difference in meaning — there is only one entry for autobiography: ‘a collection of meanings revolving around history, a record of the past, historical discipline’ while memoir has four.

There is firstly the sense of ‘aide memoire, reminder’, secondly of ‘discourse, discussion, disquisition’, thirdly ‘remembering, recollection, remembrance, reflection reconsideration reminiscence, review’ and fourthly that of autobiography.

It seemed to me that *Family Love* had to contain all of these qualities if it was to work.

In literary terms, while the words autobiography and memoir are often used interchangeably by both writers and literary theorists, the difference — it is clear that memoir has a broader sense and also a less formal one. It can be the story of one period of a life, or even of an event. There is also the sense of agenda – the disquisition, discourse aspect of the term. There is the additional sense of a memoir being a recollection rather than a series of factual events, which allows for greater leeway, a more poetic and discursive tone.
Paradoxically, while I was relinquishing the idea of an autobiographical novel, I had become more interested in a looser, less formal type of story, the narrator’s voice becoming more subjective, more freely my own, more obviously taking centre stage.

One of the elements of the structure that underwent a most noticeable change was the separation of chapters by theme and the elimination of the chapter headings. Previously, the book was a series of loosely linked essays or vignettes emphasised by the headings. This was the way the book was structured for the first draft. By concentrating on the thrust of the story itself, the chronological events became much more seamlessly linked and unified by the narrative.

‘What I’m doing is things in chunks. Maybe I take the titles off. Maybe they’re chopping it up. They sound good in theory but maybe not. Maybe in themselves they’re actually doing quite a bit of chopping up, they chop up the swell and rise of the story. They form things too prematurely. There’s a presumption there… I really think taking the titles off is an excellent idea… it was wrong and portentous and pretentious. It’s a sign I want more seamlessness… I want a sense of forward narrative and a POINT to it. What is the point? Not blame, not sadness.’

Eliminating the headings helped to redefine and unify the structure in a way that surprised me. I wanted the rich imaginative poetic truths that are an intrinsic part of good fiction to make sense of the facts of my early life and to combine these two dimensions seamlessly. Fictional memoir was my attempt, short-lived as it turned out, to do that.
CHAPTER NINE

I became very interested in religion when I was about eleven. It was more a genuine spirit of inquiry than spiritual hunger, though I was certainly dimly aware of something missing in my life. I wrote in my diary at eleven, ‘I sometimes think I need God’s help. I am not very religious but I’ve thought the matter over, it might have sense in it.’

In my efforts to find ‘the sense in it’ I read Shaw’s *Little Black Girl in Search of God*, helpfully given to me by my father, and set myself to read the Bible right through from the beginning. I trudged off to Sunday School at the big wooden Presbyterian church on St Lukes Road, clutching my latticed red bag full of religious pamphlets and homework.

Sunday School was pretty mystifying to me. We had to colour in pictures of a mild white Jesus on miserable scraps of paper that tore and smudged. One of the girls lisped when she sang,

‘Jesush lovesh me, this I know, for the Bible tellsh me so,’ and for some reason this so deeply impressed me I tried to sing exactly like her. The classes were held in a small musty room at the back of the church. The minister was a big dough-faced man who looked at me dourly
whenever I asked a question. I tried to be tactful but he seemed to me to be evading the most important things and I was anxious to have all sorts of mysteries cleared up, which he seemed reluctant to do. As usual my romantic nature obscured the reality. I’d expected us to sit around and talk about God, get to the guts of things, maybe sing a few hymns in close harmony.

A pagan form of worship was more my style. I held solo services in the abandoned chook pen at the bottom of our garden to the whispering and tittering accompaniment of all the neighbourhood kids, as well as my sisters who were all ‘spying’ on me behind the hedge. At night before I went to sleep I sang hymns and prayed. It’s a wonder my family didn’t throw a bucket of cold water over me.

In the end the tedium of the church services, the babyish lessons, the repetition in the Bible — I hadn’t got very far and became bogged down in the begats — holding services on my own and being laughed at all began to pall. There was no nourishment in it and the church teaching seemed thin and sanctimonious. There was a fake air of jollity, a kind of goody-good heartiness that made me ill at ease. It gave me a lifelong aversion to belonging to any group of people who were too desperate to have me join. Besides, the pleasures of martyrdom were never really to my taste.

The breakthrough came from my aunt, the old blue-eyed pagan with her rumpled face and loving heart. She taught me that the most powerful spiritual force in the world was love. The simplicity of the idea made instant sense, as you could see how it worked with your own eyes,
feel it in your heart. To me it had all the mystery, power and truthfulness that the Sunday School teaching so noticeably lacked.

She was a living embodiment of it in her unpretentious way. My singing aunt. She sang once in a changing shed on the beach at Piha, a chilly dank concrete-floored shack in a grove of pohutukawas just above the sand. The women and their kids were dressing with their backs to each other, not talking, shamed. The only sound was of clothes being unbuttoned and unzipped, wet cold togs, unpleasantly gritty, dropping on the floor. It was a crowd of silent women getting an unpleasant business over as quickly as possible, a metaphor for the way many New Zealanders lived their lives in those times. Us kids, shivering and skinny, dried ourselves on our scraps of towel.

In that silent room, my aunt with her funny knobbly self, fresh from a surfy swim and full of the joys of life, sang to herself quite loudly as she undressed, not worrying about her old body showing, blissfully oblivious to the furtive almost frightened looks. Was she mad? It might have been the song she sang to us regularly.

‘I won’t holler down the rain barrel,
I won’t climb your apple tree
I don’t want to play in your yard
If you won’t be good to me’
These were New Zealand’s palaces of shame — pubs with small frosted windows in front so you couldn’t see what was going on inside, changing rooms where the naked body was only to be exposed as fleetingly as possible. Oh the shame, to sing out loud in a place like that! To be happy in a public place! I loved her furtively.

Even her handwriting was large and singing. She wrote in my autograph book. ‘Love many, trust a few, learn to paddle your own canoe’

and

‘Turn your face to the sun and the shadows will fall behind.’

She and her unconventional ideas, her loving kindness, were meat and drink to me all my life.
10 Analysis of process in Chapter 13

The description of these processes in the writing of ‘Family Love’ has so far been rather generalised. It is interesting to look more closely at one particular chapter. I’ve chosen Chapter 13, because it presented all the problems, pitfalls, joys and complications typical of the memoir as a whole. This chapter is about my burgeoning sexuality as a young girl, relationships between men and women in general and the marriages typical of the time.

One of the extraordinary aspects of writing *Family Love* was the way it disturbed many of my lifetime assumptions about myself and my family, and this chapter is no exception.

For instance, I was surprised to find how inhibited I felt writing about my own sexuality. It had never been a problem for me to write about sex in fiction; in fact it was a subject I enjoyed. But in writing about myself, it quickly became clear to me that my early sexual feelings were disturbing to me as a young girl. In writing about them there was a real sense of exposure, as if I had unwittingly stumbled on rather painful memories, uncovered a tender subject. From the outset, as with all the aspects of my life in *Family Love*, I wanted to describe these feelings as truthfully as possible, however embarrassing
I found them. What I discovered, however, was that to clarify these feelings, I had to do some processing of my own memories of long-ago events first.

It was only during the curious process of writing a memoir that I became aware, for the first time in my life, of how ashamed I had been of my sexuality and my body as a child and young girl. It was an astonishing revelation because I had been brought up with the belief that our family was remarkably open and liberal in their approach to sex. There is no doubt that this was true in many respects, but there were obviously other deeper forces at work which I had never been fully conscious of before.

It wasn’t strictly a psychotherapeutic approach, but I went through a rather similar process in the writing of this chapter, whereby I uncovered (or recovered) the events that seemed to have contributed to this shame and embarrassment. There is no doubt that my father’s affair had a deep effect on me — something I had always known — but once again I discovered something that challenged or at least altered this: that the feelings of shame and unease were there long before La Rue appeared in our lives.

What the writing of *Family Love* and in particular this chapter did, was to shift the building blocks of my memory and beliefs around, in most cases onto a more solid base. The necessary immersion in my own life brought me face to face with the feelings I had as a young girl, a kind of reliving which I had to deal with and process before I could write about them truthfully. This was true of many of the assumptions I started out with, and as a result many of my long-held beliefs were challenged.

The attempted rape which I had ‘forgotten’, the various advances by older men during my adolescence, my sense of unworthiness and secrecy about my body, which may have come from my hospital days, a feeling of obscure guilt and ambivalence about
my father’s sexuality, all came to me during this time with varying degrees of unease. I also remembered that my mother had told me of an incident that worried her, though she never found out the cause. When I was quite small I suddenly ran out of a room where I had been with a family friend and I was crying loudly and very distressed. She said she never knew exactly what happened but she hinted to me that she suspected some kind of sexual incident. This is an event I simply have no memory of at all, but apart from finding the man in question extremely repulsive, I don’t think it had any lasting effect. I also became aware that, for whatever reasons, these fears and this shame are no longer a problem in my adult life; hence my ease in writing about sex in my fiction.

It was in this spirit that I had to write frankly about what turned out to be very difficult thing to do – the feelings of shame I had as a young girl and some of the reasons for this shame.

There was clearly a social and cultural dimension to this, which I became very aware of during the writing of *Family Love* and, in particular, this chapter. Most young girls I knew at that time went through quite similar experiences to me, with very little sense of their own sexual entitlement and rights. There was no strong feminist tradition to confirm our feelings or give us the perspective to evaluate what was happening to us.

For instance, I have a very strong memory of physically fighting off men’s advances on a pretty regular basis as a young girl — it did not occur to me at the time that they had no right to push themselves on me, and often, like my friends, I was almost apologetic about refusing them! One particular episode is an encapsulation of these experiences — a memory of lying on my bed at my flat when I was about 17 and a flabby, drunken man much older than me, a friend of the family’s, lurching in the door to
throw himself on top of me. I can still remember seeing his flabby white flesh
glimmering in the half dark and smelling his beery breath. I think it was Germaine Greer
who described the fuck that women had just to get rid of someone, a situation I
understand, though I always managed to escape by some means or other without actually
having to resort to this. It is in this context that uneasy and unpleasant feelings about sex
seem more understandable.

The marriages women made at that time too were manifestly unequal, and often
suffocating for their own intellectual and creative development. The story of my parents’
marrige is quite typical. A recent book, Between the Lines, a study of well-known
artistic couples in New Zealand, casts a spotlight on the culture of this time and confirms
the injustice which I only sensed as an adolescent. It is also interesting because nearly of
all the nine couples studied were friends, acquaintances or known to my parents.

Six of the nine wives had given up their vocations and often considerable talents
to support their husbands. Most of them did all the domestic chores and worked as well to
help supplement the family finances. Most of the husbands repaid this devotion by having
affairs — ‘the casual acceptance of men’s entitlement to various partners seemed to have
worked best for men and did not have a parallel for women, some of whom accepted
reluctantly’, as the editor said in a masterly understatement. Or as Gill Hanley said of
her husband Pat ‘he always had the odd affair, mostly they weren’t very important. It
wasn’t my favourite thing but I coped with it.’

In a particularly poignant account about Anne Mc Cahon, wife of the famous
painter Colin: ‘there wasn’t enough room in the Mc Cahon’s relationship for two painters.
Anne, worn down by domestic demands, stepped aside believing her art should be
sacrificed… What might Anne have achieved if she had not had to live in the shadow of Colin McCahon? At one point she was described as the “best artist of her generation.”\textsuperscript{41}

After a lifetime of supporting him financially, emotionally, and in his work (her advice was very important to his work), when he died she found he had bequeathed most of his paintings to the Auckland Art Gallery, leaving her in financial straits. She was forced to contest the will so as to live in comparative financial security. She said she felt as though her husband ‘ had reached out from the grave and slapped her’.\textsuperscript{42}

It was a time, in other words, when the needs, feelings and rights of women were often still disregarded to a remarkable degree, and explains why many women of that era are such committed feminists now. We are grateful for the liberation feminism brought to our lives and thinking, the confirmation of our worth as human beings and affirmation that our feelings of injustice were not based on fantasy.

In the end, in spite of all this, facing these fears of the past and ‘naming’ them through the writing of \textit{Family Love} gave me a sense of release, and allowed me to look at that time with humour and lightness as well. I found I also enjoyed celebrating the dreamy young girl in her sexual haze, the pleasurable, humorous, poignant and exciting aspects of my sexual coming of age. My fears about my body, the fact that all my friends seemed to have breasts and pubic hair before me, are amusing and touching to look back on now, the certainty that no man would want to marry me rather poignant. Waiting outside Evan Dayshes’ house was a lovely vivid memory which I uncovered in the writing, my funny prudishness, secret ardour and longing, the drunken party and my first intoxicating feelings of sexual power became as real and nostalgic to me as the darker, more frightening events.
Many male writers in their memoirs seem to me to be much more open and frank about their early sexual fantasies and exploits, as in Neruda’s *Memoirs*. A common story I’ve read about a few times is of their determination to do something about their skinny bodies, the writing away for muscle-building devices, the hopeless lust for the most golden girl in school, and their early, clumsy, sometimes ludicrous but often successful methods of seduction. There is a glorying in these details and a humour which seems to come from self-confidence. In a very amusing stand-up comedy routine, Ben Elton describes what would happen if men had periods — how they’d be boasting about the size of their clots and having competitions about who had the most copious flow! In this comedy routine he is catching the same spirit that is evident in these memoirs by many male writers — an ebullience and acceptance of sexuality which is rarely ashamed, never apologetic.

I found Catherine Miller’s memoir particularly interesting and unusual for this reason – she writes about her sexuality in a very straightforward way without shame or excuse. She’s not interested in proving herself, rather she’s genuinely interested in all the aspects of her own sexuality and remarkably open about them.

This chapter then is a microcosm of the processes I went through to write the memoir as a whole. Research based on my diary, my reading of memoirs and in this case the book *Between the Lines* enabled me to take a fresh look at my past and at ways to write about it. These processes forced me to realise that I had to be able to discard old assumptions and be more open to fresh interpretations if I was to write my story with the truthfulness and authenticity I wanted.
My acceptance of my parents’ authority was vast, unconscious and complete when I was very young. To me, they were as majestic and immutable as stars, their distance and authority beyond question. In the long ago landscape of childhood there is always room to move, children forgive without even knowing they’re doing it and love with all their hearts without reserve or guile. My father loved playing with us kids; he was wildly entertaining. Unlike other kids’ fathers he was quite happy to use rude words, he had a string of appalling jokes which struck us as killingly funny. He called Shakespeare Wiggle Dagger and told us how the slow shop girl called Vakia was told, ‘check oh so slow Vakia’. There were the usual kids’ poo jokes — ‘milk, milk, lemonade, round the corner chocolate made’— and when our old Zephyr Six passed another one the time was always tin to tin.

He threw himself wholeheartedly into the mad contests he invented; he had a sly rapport with the neighbourhood kids, who hung on his every word and followed him around agog for the next instalment. He was like a boy himself, competitive, imaginative, throwing himself into the fantasy of the game without worrying about dignity.

He invented a wonderfully dangerous game called rolling the barrel, which the kids, delighted and scared, lined up to play. The barrel stood there in the garden — a big oil drum. We took
turns standing on it, walking it with our feet, rolling it fast or slow till we fell off. I found it
terrifying to try and to jump on without wobbling, the metal grooves cold under my bare feet,
the rattle inside as it started to roll, the feeling that any minute I could lose my balance, fall
off and land on my back with a sickening thump. The trick was to roll it slowly, keeping my
body straight and trying not to look down at the ground as it moved along underneath like
something live under my feet. There was something scary about competing in front of
everyone, watching the ground falling away with every step you took.

Another game he jokingly invented was aptly called killer quoits — the object was to aim
directly for your opponents’ teeth and hurl it with all your force but of course no one really
did. His own physical fearlessness was catching. I used to shin up the inside of doors like a
little monkey, my sisters and I walked on our hands all around the schoolyard and became the
champions of Edendale Primary School, climbed steep cliffs in the bush, hung off branches.
He wore old shorts with his balls hanging out, his hair long and unkempt, he was often
barefoot, his antics made us all laugh till we ached. Once he threw me onto the immaculately
trimmed hedge of a neighbour and left me there to struggle out of it while he beat a hasty
retreat as our neighbour burst out of his mock Spanish villa shouting angrily. I think it was
some sort of protest at the irritating whine of his sacred weekly hedge-cutting ritual.

He bought a goat called Heidi with a butting hard body and yellow devil eyes, and trained her
to walk the thin wooden fence rail next door. She trotted along as easily as if she were on a
path, doing a perfect three-point turn, graceful in her disdainful way. She ate the neighbours’
washing and butted at the children playfully with her hard head, looking at them slyly, a wisp
of grass hanging from her neat lips, the very soul of innocence. The Angora rabbit Bluey was another untamed eccentric. Jackie took him up to the shops tucked up in a pram. He was covered snugly in a blanket, his ears resting contentedly on the pillow, he was like a strange hairy baby.

Our father always took delight in our childish eccentricities. How could you not love a father like that? I saw the world in his terms — captivated by his voice and face as he interpreted the world to us, opening it out to us as a place full of excitement and dangerous possibilities. Mine was the intense physical awareness a small child has of the parent she loves and fears slightly, the way he filled the horizon — his rather nasal voice, jumbled teeth, woody smell, his skinny strong body wired up with a tense coiled energy, which I knew instinctively was unpredictable. For instance, whenever he wore his pair of white canvas espadrilles, I knew with the strange unassailable logic of the serious observer that he would go into a rage.

There was something faintly disturbing and intimidating about the masculine power he emanated as the only male in the family (till my baby brother was born), its undisputed head — his hard hairy legs, authority, the anarchic intensity, the sense that he was being propelled by some unstoppable force.

There he was in the printery in the basement, a room carved out of the rock and earth. How big was that basement? It seemed to go on forever. The printing press stood on the stained concrete floor, a massive conglomeration of heavy wheels and valves. Blackened and greasy with leaking oil it was probably already obsolete. It was taller than my father; it filled the
room. The noisy clatter of it was awe-inspiring. I sat at the top of the stairs in the shadows to watch, I loved the strangeness of it. He only had to pull a switch and the whole great clanking thing started up with a deafening rumble, as he stood at one end stripped to the waist, oil-streaked, skinny, dwarfed by the machine, his white face intent as he fed in the paper. My father never gave me a glance, he was in a trance of concentration. He had to watch the machine all the time. Every now and then it ground to a shuddering halt and he’d have to run down the side of it, calling it a ‘cunthooks’, pulling out the scrunched up blackened piece of paper, throwing it impatiently away and running back to start it up again. The rhythmic clank of it resumed within minutes, spilling paper gracefully onto the clean pile on the slab at the other end.

The basement was full of shadows and dark corners, rough earth walls draped with cobwebs, pools of grease on the floor — it was a strange savage cavern lurking under the comfortable rooms of our ordinary life only a few feet above.

The family sat around the kitchen table doing the collating by hand. We stacked the pages, inserted the middle ones and folded the finished newspaper three ways, ready for delivery from our bikes the next day. I put the freshly folded, print smelling papers into a plastic red bag which I hooked onto my front handlebars. I always enjoyed doing it. It was a serious grown-up job but we made lots of jokes, played word games and even had the occasional sweet, a rare treat to make the time pass. We were paid a halfpenny a copy. It was very pleasant with the smell of fresh ink and newsprint, the pages whisking through our skilful hands, the cracking sound as our father knocked up the finished piles and stacked them.
everywhere on the chairs and floor. He printed them on yellow paper to save cost and for some reason the colour embarrassed me. It seemed to me somehow shameful and symptomatic of the cockeyed way our family did things. Yellow instead of just the ordinary white of every other newspaper.

He’d probably set the printery up for a much more serious political purpose than printing a local throwaway, but then he had to be prepared to turn his hand to anything with a wife, three daughters and a new baby boy to support. In fact it became very profitable, and at the height of it, he ran a small empire of four local newspapers. As Jo said in her usual snappy way, the fact that he was using slave labour helped.
11 Four Memoirs

I have chosen four memoirs to examine in closer detail in light of my own intentions — memoirs I have already mentioned briefly in Chapter 1 as inspirations for ‘Family Love.’ They are Pablo Neruda’s *Memoirs*, Judith Wright’s *Half a Lifetime* and Colette’s *Sido* and *My Mother’s House*.

In analysing the structure, tone and voice of these works, I can examine more clearly the kind of parameters I was trying to explore in *Family Love* and the techniques available for expressing them.

I have chosen these four, firstly because they are all described as memoirs by the writers themselves as well as by critics and, secondly, because they are by writers whose body of work I am familiar with and greatly admire.

When I first read these memoirs years ago, they helped to give me a more profound insight into each writer’s work and the childhood influences brought to bear on it. They also satisfied my curiosity about their lives and what was important to them. Since rereading them for the purpose of my thesis, they have also proved invaluable for
analysing the technical virtuosity displayed by each of them which are the key to their memoirs.

There are other similarities: all three writers of their works use first person in their own inimitable voices to tell their stories. All three of these writers share a lifelong connection with and love for the landscape in which they spent their childhood, a connection which is essential to their writing and spiritual core.

Only the landscapes are different: the lush flowering French countryside, the dry Australian bush and the wild, cold, isolated jungles of Chile could not be more alien to each other and yet are lovingly and vividly described by the writers, who make it clear that these are the landscapes of their heart’s desire and an essential part of their writing. One of the most lyrical descriptions of this link to the landscape of childhood comes from Wright’s most famous poem, ‘South of my Days’

‘South of my days’ circle, part of my blood’s country,

Rises that tableland, high delicate outline

Of bony slopes wincing under the winter’.49

Neruda writes in his ‘Memoirs’,

‘Along endless beaches or thicketed hills, a communion was started between my spirit — that is, my poetry — and the loneliest land in the world. This was many years ago, but that communion, that revelation, that pact with the wilderness, is still part of my life.’50

Neruda and Wright have used their memoirs for discursive reasons as well as personal. Central to both these poets’ work and lives is their passion for social justice.

Joan Williams wrote of Wright in the Guardian obituary:
‘Through her poems, steeped in passionate love of her country and its people, she became the voice and conscience of the nation.’\textsuperscript{51}

In an introduction to the Penguin edition of Neruda’s selected poems Jean Franco writes, ‘Just as we cannot separate Dante and Milton from their theology, or Hugo and Whitman from the idea of progress and democracy so we cannot take Neruda’s poetry without his vision of unalienated people or justice and quality on earth.’\textsuperscript{52}

A passionate sense of justice pervades his memoirs, as it does Wright’s. Both these poets were political activists, whose work is imbued with their passion for social justice and their memoirs are a reflection of this.

Colette, on the other hand, does not refer to politics at all, in these memoirs at least, and in her own words wrote her memoir out of love for one person, her mother Sido. Her advice to a young writer was, ‘Look for a long time at what pleases you and longer still at what pains you.’\textsuperscript{53} In her lyrical memoirs there is no doubt that she is ‘looking for a long time at what pleases’ her – her magical childhood and her mother. She writes, ‘Sido and my childhood were both, and because of each other, happy at the centre of that imaginary star whose eight points bear the names of the cardinal and collateral points of the compass.’\textsuperscript{54}

\textit{My Mother’s House} and \textit{Sido}, published together in 1953 in commemoration of Colette’s 80\textsuperscript{th} birthday, were in fact written seven years apart. As Colette says, ‘looking back on those years, it does not seem to me that I found them long. This was because by continually laying aside and taking up again the various short pieces which went to make up My \textit{Mother’s House} and \textit{Sido} I always remained in touch with the personage of my mother. It haunts me still. The reasons for this prevailing presence are not far to seek; any
writer whose existence is a long drawn out one turns in the end towards his past either to revile or rejoice in it."\(^{55}\)

Structured in short impressionistic pieces, written in her intensely lyrical and sensuous style, Colette’s memoirs are subjective; almost entirely unconcerned with facts, events or even chronology. She makes it clear that her childhood memories revolve around one subject — her beloved mother.

Although there are vivid vignettes of life in a provincial French village, thumbnail sketches of neighbours and the life of the village, Colette returns constantly to this theme, the loving evocation of her mother. The woman who is centre and purveyor of a magical universe to her spellbound child, who is ‘swept by shadow and sunshine, bowed by bodily torments, resigned, unpredictable and generous, rich in children, flowers and animals like a fruitful domain’.\(^{56}\)

It is through the description of the mother and daughter’s shared passion for the tastes, smells, flavours and textures of the French countryside that Colette can convey most powerfully, in her own words, ‘the presence of her who instead of receding far from me through the gates of death has revealed herself more vividly to me as I grow older’.\(^{57}\)

It is this passionate outpouring of unconditional love couched in such lyrical language that I find most compelling in Colette’s memoirs. Such passionate non-sexual love is rarely expressed by Australian or New Zealand writers, and almost never in such open and generous terms. It is Colette’s genius to be able to express such ardent feelings without a trace of mawkishness. This she does by interweaving many voices into a seamless narrative — the child, the young woman and the old, all of them celebrating Sido; Colette’s clear writerly eye observing the precise delineation of love and describing
them with unsentimental accuracy. Colette is a writer drunk with memories, revelling in the sensuous memories of her childhood, the abundant love she received and gave as a child. Colette first began writing semi-autobiographical pieces at the very beginning of her career and many of her novels continued to be closely interwoven with her own eventful life. She had some rich material to draw from, and she was able to mythologise these events in a fictional way that was enduringly satisfying.

In direct contrast the tone in Wright’s *Half a Lifetime* is clear, crisp and factual. She details the story of her forebears arriving in Australia in the 1840’s to take up the land that did not belong to them, the joys and triumphs of the family from that time to her own birth. She describes her own rather lonely childhood, her mother dying when she was 11, her life as a young adult during the war and finally her meeting with Jack, the love of her life, and the birth of their beloved daughter, Meredith.

In less experienced hands the rather dry tone if this memoir and lack of sensational event could be one-dimensional and lifeless.

It is her deeply felt connection with the landscape and the Aboriginal people, her qualities of modesty and truthfulness, her passion for justice and sharp intellect, her extraordinary gift for language — all the qualities in short which make her, (I believe) the greatest Australian poet of the 20th Century, that also inform this memoir. There is the same clarity, luminous language and sense of uncompromising truthfulness that is found in her poetry.

In my last conversation with Judith before her death I said her memoir reminded me of *Lark Rise to Candleford* and she was obviously pleased. We had talked about this
book in an earlier ‘conversation’ (written notes because of her profound deafness) as we both admired its radiant simplicity.

Her voice throughout her memoir is measured, slightly ironic, always truthful. She writes, ‘The person who wrote the early part of this autobiography is clearly not the person who lived it. Even apart from the fact that childhood is not a time for seeing oneself or one’s surroundings with knowledge of either oneself or the world that shapes you, to look back from a long distance is to know too much and too little, to reinterpret, in the light of all those years, a time that then you had to accept willy-nilly, having no outside reference point for criticism. Will a second version add anything useful to that impossible job of autobiography?’

‘No, nor a third or a fourth…. Those early memories could have been written in a dozen different ways, even then, while now the multitude has expanded in all directions.’

Wright’s memoirs, like Colette’s, are about love, though in a much more restrained, ‘English’ sort of way. She writes about meeting her soul mate in Jack McKinney, the twenty years of perfect happiness they shared, their intellectual, philosophical and spiritual closeness. It is typical of her modesty that she devotes many more chapters to expounding Jack’s ideas, as summarised in his book ‘The Structure of Modern Thought’, than to her own work and her growing reputation as an important Australian poet.

Pablo Neruda’s Memoirs is a sustained poetic commentary, evocatively and richly written. Of the well-known political dimension of his work, he himself said, ‘I have never thought of my life as divided between poetry and politics.’ His book charts an
extremely eventful life. Not only was Neruda a Nobel Prize winning poet but he was also an active politician, serving as Chilean Consul for eighteen years, culminating in the offer of the conditional candidacy for the President of the Republic of Chile in 1969. He only withdrew in favour of Allende, whom he ardently supported. Later, during the Allende government he served as Chilean Ambassador to Paris.

The memoir manages to incorporate the massive volume of the facts of his life without sacrificing the quality of writing, or the measured, tolerant, humorous tone of the stories he tells. It is an extraordinary achievement — the memoir can be read for Neruda’s knowledge of South American politics, art and history alone; his life experience, intellect and poetic sensibility imbuing the facts with his passion and generous spirit.

The memoir ranges over the past and present seamlessly and there is a strong sense of a vivid, direct, truthful narrative.

‘In these memoirs or recollections there are gaps here and there, sometimes they are also forgetful, because life is like that. Intervals of dreaming help us to stand up under days of work. Many of the things I remember have blurred as I recalled them, they have crumbled to dust, like irreparably shattered glass… What the memoir writer remembers is not the same thing the poet remembers. He may have lived less, but he photographed much more, and he re-creates for us with special attention to detail. The poet gives us a gallery full of ghosts shaken by the fire and darkness of his time.

‘Perhaps I didn’t live just in my self, perhaps I lived the lives of others.’

It is his description of the landscapes of his childhood as also essential to his imagination and future life as a poet which is particularly illuminating to me. Of the extraordinary
Chilean forest he grew up near he writes,’ I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world…’62

It is almost impossible for me to source the direct influence these memoirs had on Family Love. I would not be able, for instance, to point to examples of style, structure, voice or language which are replicated or even similar. It might be more accurate to use the word inspiration rather than influence here. In reading and rereading the work of each of these writers many times, immersing myself in everything they’ve written, a process occurs which I experience as a kind of literary osmosis. In my absorption of all the possibilities, parameters and richness of their work I become very familiar, both aesthetically and intellectually, with the way they have defined new territories in literature and widened the horizons of what is possible, and the craft with which they have achieved this.

This complete immersion in other writers’ work is the way I learn (as I suspect many writers do.) A complete knowledge of their work, read and studied over many years with pleasure, affection and admiration, does not necessarily lead to direct influence on style or language, in my experience anyway. It lies more in complex and abstract notions to do with a new appreciation of a writer’s way of being, motivation and sources of creativity. For instance, in my immersion in Colette’s work it is her courage and truthfulness in finding her own voice that inspires and influences me as a writer and in my writing of Family Love.

In other words, it is through the example of writers like Colette, Wright and Neruda that I am inspired and freed to write in my own voice and my own style. Colette’s passionate, lyrical language and her sensuality, Neruda’s bountiful spirit, and Wright’s
profound truthfulness are all inspirational because they are such rare and marvellous qualities, but in the end, for me, the literary legacy such geniuses leave is about the possibilities they open up, the fresh horizons they provide in their achievement of a remarkable authenticity of voice and vision, the courage and truthfulness in expressing it.
I see it still as vividly as when it happened, the strip of sunlight on the warm brown floorboards, a sense of the light-filled room with its floor to ceiling windows beyond. It was the emotion of it, the warmth and security, the aesthetic pleasure of the sun on the warm wood. That was my first memory, entirely pleasurable. Me in a cocoon of sun and comfort and beauty. I was probably only two.

The strange thing is that most of the rest of my early childhood remains a memory blank, the tide of memory loss going right up to eight years old and even then, afterwards, only lit up in flashes. A sharp-eyed family friend Chip Bailey noticed a limp when I first started to toddle, the diagnosis of a congenitally dislocated hip was made and plaster put on both legs to drive the hip back into the socket. Long uncomfortable years of treatment followed which never really healed the rupture. The three years of going in and out of hospital are a blank, only occasional flashes of desolation that still come back with the sound of birds cheeping in the early evening when everything is still. The plaster stayed on until I was four, though the age was never confirmed — there is a photo of me looking down admiringly at my first pair of shoes. I look about four with my dark fringe, waisted dress, delighted smile, my front teeth protruding from the years of thumb sucking.
It is possible that the impulse in me to write my first stories was the same one that started my memory working. It wasn’t that writing was a transcription of conventional memory, in the same way as people have memories based on photographs; more that something woke in me at an early age and cleared the blankness. Writing, in Rilke’s memorable phrase was the axe that broke the frozen sea. Before that, as a baby and then as a child of a two or three years old, I had no way of expressing myself by learning to crawl, walk and run in that intense physical interaction with the world children have. It wasn’t until I found a pen and exercise book and began my lifetime love affair with writing that I came to life.

All that time as a small child I was immobile, trapped inside the plaster cast which, in the early stages, held my legs out at right angles with a bar to keep them apart. I had books when I was older, but can’t imagine what I did with myself for all that time, especially in a hospital ward. Those were the days when visits were kept to a strict minimum of an hour a day, so children would not be upset. Once, because of an epidemic, no one could come at all for six weeks. I learnt to enjoy the world by going inside myself, doing other things in my head.

‘Home again home again jiggedy jog,’ I used to sing according to my mother — and there’s certainly the vaguest memory flash, like a dream, of the smell of damp clay as the car drew up into the narrow space of our dug-out garage at Johnsonville, the feeling of intense happiness at arriving home.
All childhoods have a cloud of some sort over them and that was mine, my early childhood experiences exacerbated by the emotional disturbances of the family, a certain lovelessness, lack of affirmation and security that we all experienced as children.

I was the second daughter, small, intense dark, the runt of the litter as my country Uncle Chris put it bluntly, and the family was a jungle I had to crash through before I could reach permanent safety. Our childhood, emotionally speaking, was a constant state of being on guard, taking nothing for granted, reading the signs carefully.

I was wary with my parents, fond of them, aware from an early age of their courage, style and energy, flawed love, but I had to learn for my own safety not to trust them. The kind of flaring helpless love I felt later in my life for my husband, daughters and friends was unknown to me then. Love in my family was meagrely parcelled out, full of traps and the potential for serious hurt, betrayal. Love was not a sinking into happiness but a striving never-ending sweat to make yourself deserving of it. I already knew as a young child that I was on my own in that respect. I learnt very early about vulnerability — sitting on my father’s knee and kissing him one day, it was enough for me to catch his look of humorous distaste and I jumped off, deeply humiliated, vowing in myself never to do it again. I was called ‘sloppy’ and ‘gushy’ in a family where there was very little hugging and kissing, none of that restfulness of people sweetly at ease with giving and receiving love as their due.

I had to work out a lot of things for myself, as small children do when faced with pain and loss, senseless events.
It was the line that made me anxious. I used to worry about it, lying in bed at night thinking in the dark. It was the line, the zone of judgment my father drew between himself and other people. He was judge, jury and executioner; he could cast anyone on the other side of the line without compunction and for the most enigmatic of reasons.

When you were on the same side of the line with him, life was rosy and certain, the bright sun of his approval shining on you. But it was the random and mysterious nature of the line, the reasons he drew it, the terrible feeling of your basic unworthiness if you found yourself on the wrong side of it, that was so unsettling. It was a deadly game he played, the line he drew between us and them. People were ok or they weren’t, though I could never guess who would make the grade or why.

His criterion for the abrupt and crushing withdrawal of his approval was nothing to do with money or class, or even morality or talent — it was basically for a slippery ever-changing combination of intellect and style that none of us children ever quite grasped.

Sometimes, dreadfully, he was capable of pitting daughter against daughter, and later son against son, friend against friend, himself against the world and most disconcertingly, past against present selves. One day you were fine, a person of merit going about your business, the next you were nothing, contemptible in fact. And you very rarely knew what exactly it was you had done to fall from grace. When the line shifted and I was cast into outer darkness,
I felt his disapproval, the outright disdain as viscerally as if the sun had moved behind a cloud, everything becoming still and grey, drained of life.

He played favourites to the point where we were terminally confused — we were in and out of favour at such a dizzying rate. It wasn’t only we children — his friends, wife, lovers were judged with the same severity and coruscating disparagement, for the same capricious reasons. No one was safe. His approval and disapproval were boisterous and all-encompassing — he was like an emperor dispensing favours — so that when he approved the sun shone and everything was fine, but when he didn’t there was, as my mother used to say, hell to pay.

There is a photo of me as a child, watching a gecko on the kowhai tree in our Piha garden that he praised so strongly (for reasons that are still mysterious to me) that fifty years later it still carries that faint whiff of his rare and warming praise. Approval was so thin on the ground it was as valuable as oxygen – we children fought for it because we knew it had to last.

He could hold some nameless grudge against us for days, the contempt in his voice our only clue to his sudden displeasure. This contempt was so harsh it swept through the house like an arctic wind – we all went on to spend a our life trying to avoid it, to stay three steps ahead of its icy blast.
It always hit when you least expected it. Dancing in the kitchen, sliding round the floor, full of myself as children are, imagining I was a fairy in my new ballet shoes, I was shaken to overhear him say to my mother in an unmistakably vicious tone as if he hated me, ‘That girl’s never had any taste.’

The style thing, the line he drew, however ridiculous, was his only guarantee against being swallowed alive by his hick upbringing, being like his mother. So his children, as extensions of himself, could not be immune from those cold judgments of his.

Everyone has those moments in childhood, brutal, when your soul is cut to the quick, leaving a permanent faint scar. For no apparent reasons a few words savagely hit home when millions of others come and go unnoticed, pass through the sunny corridors of the past, leaving no trace. There’s no point in blame. The words can’t be unsaid except by love. The child who overhears, and has her worst fears about herself confirmed has to comfort herself over a lifetime, and the father, king of his domain, hard-wired to his own rigid agenda, is who he is, a force of nature. It is part of growing up, inevitable as rain, nothing in the scheme of things in a world where millions of children are starved and ill treated on a daily basis. You just have to set to work to reclaim your rosy childhood self later in life, when you are not so vulnerable.

The father who conveys on a daily basis that there is some quality in you so irredeemable that you can never deserve unconditional love is the monkey on your back that you have to learn to shake off. It takes a kind of grisly patience and cunning, years of stumbling about, before you can do it.
After all, so many families are about damage and wounds, weasel words, secret cruelty. It may even be a law of nature, the way to adulthood, to burn off all the sickness of the past and concentrate on other things, as my parents did with their own mothers and fathers. Maybe that’s what maturity is; throwing off the voices and belittling views of your parents and making a whole set of your own for yourself. Damage of course can only go so far as both a concept and an excuse.

Our father’s devastating combination of charisma, charm, wit, coldness, unpredictable love and contempt, his withholding on a daily basis, was too powerful to easily dismiss. For me it locked into place in that shadowy arena where a child’s fears crouch — the belief that I couldn’t exist without approval from others. I developed an all-consuming need for it — in the first place from my father and then from the world. At ten I wrote in my diary, “A teacher told Daddy what an infectious smile I had. First compliment!” And chances are it probably was.

It was a curse that meant I could never be quite sure whether my achievements would suddenly crumble, my unworthiness become depressingly indisputable, my very identity dematerialise. Panic could set in at a glance, a certain coldness of tone, and suddenly I’d be filled with dread, a creepy sense of myself thinning out, vapourising, dropping away into nothingness.
In one of the few wholly autobiographical passages from a novel (in this case Faith Singer) I wrote, ‘I’d always lived my life knowing that the careful world I shored up and rebuilt nearly every day could shiver to pieces at a touch, a word, a change of light. It happened when I least expected, walking along I felt a splinter moving deep under my skin. An abyss opened up in front of my feet, I couldn’t see any end to the darkness below and then I was falling soundlessly into nothingness, everything familiar including the bedrock of my own self blown apart. For most of my life, because I never discussed it with anyone, I assumed this was how everyone lived, and through a mixture of native wit and willpower learned ways of getting through the day, my watchful damaged self ever ready to reinvent itself at any given moment. I was slow to realise that most people started their day with a sunny knowledge of who they were and continuous comprehension of their own history.’

It was a peculiarly womanly curse, because the trigger to this state was always some wound to shaky self-esteem. It meant I had to spend years appeasing people I didn’t even like very much, searching for blanket approval from anyone I came across, however limited or cruel. I did what it took – appeasement, charm laid on thick, obsessive reading of body language and expression, laid on thick, endless niceness. It was an extreme belief in the power of others over me. My self-esteem was based on their opinion of me. It was like rushing around shoring up the crumbling ramparts of a sandcastle as the tide came inexorably in. It sent me down some pretty bleak paths before I learnt; it was decades of frantic performance before I knew, really knew that I was wearing myself to a frazzle for nothing.
It was, in emotional terms, a typical upbringing for those times, firmly in the English tradition of child rearing so beloved of New Zealanders then. A diet of constant criticism, withholding of praise and affirmation, an aversion to physical tenderness, to expressing feelings or love. It was motivated by the fear that children would get ‘above’ themselves, as well as by some kind of ongoing weird adult resentment of children’s natural joy. There was a deeper subconscious fear too — that feelings were not only dangerous but a sign of weakness, too open an expression of them somehow faintly contemptible.

After all, both Dick and Elsie came from families where love was not easily expressed. Their rather loveless childhoods probably had little of the emotional richness young children need if they are to develop a generosity of spirit in later life.

This mean streak that went back through both families. They brought their children up hard, this silent army of working people — farmers, miners, builders struggling to survive in a tough land. Most of them preferred obedience to affection from their children, they had neither the time nor the inclination for luxuries like higher education or tenderness, the middle-class tradition of careful nurturing of their children’s individual talents and dreams. Elsie and Dick were both thrown onto their imaginative life — Elsie with her stone, Dick with the silent neighbour, but still they carried their damage with them when they made a family of their own.

It could almost be called a family curse on both sides down through the draglines of generations; children not liking their parents very much, parents not built for love.
It was exhausting, the ins and outs of it, who was to blame or not, where the cruelties bit down, where the damage was done and who did it. How can you assess damage?
At this point it is useful to enlarge on the earlier observation I made about my writing process in Chapter Two; that is, that for me literary definitions and theory are essentially a construct after the event.

For the purposes of the analysis required for the thesis, the terms autobiographical novel and fictional memoir were the closest approximations to what was on the page at the time, the result of the series of creative decisions I continued to make as I wrote. These definitions did not signify the adoption of a theoretical position nor did they fully represent what I was trying to do in Family Love. It was difficult and probably counterproductive for me, in short, to conceive of the memoir in terms of a literary theory or genre while I was actually writing it.

A striking example of this is seen in my first novel. I never considered it as a thriller during the writing of it and even afterwards, though in retrospect I could see that there were certainly thriller elements. It was, however, marketed as a thriller and received critical attention as such in the countries where it was published. It was recently described as a classic feminist thriller in Germany by critic Simone Meier in a
This kind of situation occurs in my work because in struggling towards the final form of a novel, literary theory and formal definition of genre seem to be largely irrelevant to my own process.

It is the imperative of motivation, intention, impulse, inspiration and obsession that is important for me in writing. It is the placing of the words on the page, the actual writing where poetic form finds its own meaning that guides me. During my years as a writer I have found the technique that best helps me in this process.

Given this, one of the reasons I chose autobiography for the purposes of this thesis was that I thought that the continuing formal analysis and critical evaluation necessary in an academic context would be more productive for me if I was writing non-fiction rather than fiction.

‘Here I am, even my most private processes laid bare to scrutiny, it’s like a huge floodlight trained on me…presumably it’s a bit of a Heisenberg principle. Never mind I’ll go with it. It might unleash all sorts of – though part of me is longing to get back into my little hole and write away. I’m slightly apprehensive about, but I think as long as I remain truthful it will be good.’

The choice of an autobiographical rather than a fictional subject for my thesis made the analytical and supervisory nature of the thesis much more useful for me.

Though the main reason for attempting a genre I had never tried before was a personal one to do with the need to break into new territory, writing *Family Love* in an academic framework allowed me to experiment with autobiographical form and, to some degree, prescribed how I set about it.
Up until then I was used to writing fiction in absolute isolation. I prefer to write without external evaluation until such time as I feel the tension has been set up, the parameters of the work are in place, the actual creative process is largely over. This is why the commentary is important as my only reference. My work practice has shown that in order to keep the creative tension at its height it is necessary for me to keep the process strictly private. Writing fiction for me is such a highly-strung suggestible state that it is particularly vulnerable to being deadened and dampened by some kinds of analysis. Whether this is true is another story — like any slightly superstitious belief it is hard to prove cause and effect, or in this case, to determine the boundary between what is necessary and what is simply idiosyncrasy.

In conversations with other writers, however, I have discovered a shared anxiety about the source of creativity, which like a spring can dry up permanently for any number of mysterious reasons beyond the writer’s control.

It is this precariousness, the random nature of cause and effect in a writer’s life, that makes many writers, including me, superstitious about what gives them inspiration and what destroys it. Writing often seems to be an engaging combination of faith, experience and propitiation of the gods. Whether a special talisman, process or way of thinking really does enable a writer to write is probably not the point, it is really her faith in it that works, her half-sceptical belief that it does. These superstitions/work practices are a kind of offering to the mysterious nature of creativity and the ever-present fear of the spring drying up, an offering I am personally quite happy to make.

Obviously I also have my own rigorous if idiosyncratic analysis of the process — the commentary provides that — as well as the criticism, comment and formal analysis.
that comes with the editing further down the line. Once I have finished the creative
process to my satisfaction, my work is given to writers and other friends whose opinions I
respect and on whom I can rely for honest appraisal. This is the beginning of a long
process of formal editing which does not end until publication.

For me, the actual creative process, random, chaotic and inexplicable as it is,
includes continuous editing as I write, which results in numerous drafts. This type of
editing is not as objective as the evaluation and analysis necessary when the book is in its
final form.

In writing the thesis I had to change these working habits for the first time. Even
the fact that I consciously chose the subject — my life until I was seventeen and the real
life characters of my family — was a departure from my usual practice. In the past,
characters, themes and the plot emerged from a complex series of decisions and images. I
had never before chosen them specifically beforehand. Some commentators have made
the point that a novel as thesis is in some ways a contradiction in terms; that pinning
down the creative process in an academic context can only be partially useful or indeed
accurate. Certainly for me, anyway, it is a different language and point of view.

The academic discipline of abstract logical analysis is vital for the analysis of a
finished literary work, and in fact is sadly missing in much contemporary literary
criticism, but in my experience, it is not as useful for the actual creative process, or at
least for mine.

In my discussions with my supervisor, it became clear that though each analysis I
made of Family Love was perfectly sincere and well thought out at the time, the flood of
creative process continued to wash these various theoretical constructions away as fast as I built them.

It was very interesting to observe this process as it has occurred over the last three years. Working in an academic context allowed me to fully document and understand these transitions and the reasons for them in a way which was unprecedented in my working experience. In the process of attempting to marry the academic and creative processes in this way for my thesis, stimulating ideas and concepts have arisen. I discovered, for instance, that this kind of continual external analysis was not nearly as inhibiting as I first feared, and in fact was often stimulating, sometimes inspiring and always challenging.

My own personal way of working confirmed, however, that theoretical models for my work, and literary theory in general cannot help me to find the final form or in any other way clarify the creative process while I am in the middle of it. For instance, I have never begun on the preliminaries of a book with a particular literary theory in mind. The motivation and parameters for my work come from other sources.

The Leavisite academic tradition I was taught in is probably influential in this regard. Like many other students of the sixties, the discipline I was studying — English — was taught in a strikingly different way from what is now happening in contemporary academic studies. The very language framing the course is rarely in used now — a Masters degree in English literature. We studied literature with very little awareness of questions concerning social context of gender, race and class, or of what actually constituted literature and how such a definition could be arrived at. We wrote essays...
based almost entirely on the text — assessments and analyses of writers drawn from little outside their work.

However, while the emphasis was still on the works of ‘dead white men’, the growth of feminism with the establishment of Women’s Studies in universities, as well as the rise of Maori nationalism at the time, meant that I also read widely in other areas, and was familiar with the alternative literary voices that were emerging in New Zealand and other countries. The limits of such a degree though — with the study of white male writers so firmly in the ascendant — were overcome for me by my own personal reading habits. These were established at an early age by my involvement and interest in feminist and socialist politics.

I also found that the habits I learnt in reading for my Masters in English were very useful for me as a writer. Close study of a particular book, an analysis both intellectual and celebratory of the beauty (another word not now often used in relation to literary style) of the language and its sensual pleasures and the textual achievements of the writers is the approach I prefer. I read not only for pleasure but also because reading is my primary source of research (not so much a search for information, as the entry into other worlds that a book affords me), technical solutions and to find out what is possible.

When I begin each of my novels, a book (or several) tends to come naturally to mind as being most useful to me, a benchmark to aspire to, a work that illustrates the parameters I’m imagining. These books are usually ones I know well and have read more than once; they serve as inspiration, as examples of pinnacles of the craft, unreachable triumphs that help me to stay perfectionist. This is, of course, not about plagiarism but about having them as models at the back of my mind. It is rather like the Victorian
concept that it was useful for artists to constantly be in contact with the best examples of
literature or art as example and inspiration.

In the writing of this exegesis another revelation about academic context emerged.
I discovered that what I was struggling to express in my commentary and in the writing
itself actually already had a well thought out, neat, theoretical framework.

The whole concept of the series of narrators is one graphic example. In my
reading for the exegesis, I was able to finally put names to all the problems, ideas and
concepts that I was struggling with in my own idiosyncratic way, and more often than not
the analyses I read after the event were much more to the point, insightful, logical and
elloquent than mine.

Operating in this theoretical framework from the beginning would not have been
helpful for me though; in fact it may well have been inhibiting. For me the struggle for
form, lies in the creative process itself. Knowing the names and the logical underpinnings
of what I was doing was not relevant to working it through the reality myself.
CHAPTER TWELVE

My grandfather had a particularly hard upbringing in the Coromandel bush with a harsh father, yet he was a man who retained a kind of innocence and joy in life.

Dick’s grandmother as a young bride from Ireland was brought to a wilderness on the other side of the world by a much older husband, left alone for weeks in a bush hut, her kitchen a damp clay bank of ferns behind the house. He was a gold miner, an adventurer, hard drinker, a man’s man.

Dick took us girls there once so that we could see where we came from. We drove for hours on a rough road that seemed to wind forever up the mountain. When he finally stopped the car nothing was there except a desolate landscape stretching to the horizon, the wind blowing across the silent ridges.

Once we entered the depths of the bush, though, we could see signs of an old clearing, a few rotting planks half-hidden in the undergrowth. It was as if we’d uncovered some forlorn secret. We stood in silence in the sunless, dreary spot, not knowing what to say. A fantail flitting back and forth above our heads in the gloom seemed to be trying to communicate something to us.
There was nothing left of the people who had lived there all those years; their humble history, the sufferings and pleasures of family life dissolved into thin air, leaving no trace except for that melancholy feeling hovering in the somber afternoon light.

‘What’s so unbelievable,’ he said, tight-lipped, as we stood looking around uneasily, ‘was that if they’d chosen a place just here, they would have had sun and a view and it would have been reasonably liveable. Only a few feet away. Why did they choose this site? A life spent in darkness and dankness out of sheer lack of imagination. All that suffering and depression made worse for nothing.’

‘It wouldn’t have been her. He would have chosen it, not her. It was the olden days,’ Jo said, being able as part of her nature to spell out little unpleasant truths to our father when he needed them.

‘OK,’ he said grudgingly, his eyes on the ground, still brooding. ‘You know he made my father go down that gully every day to bring up fresh drinking water for him from the stream. It took hours. He was only a kid and it was muddy and steep. He would climb back up, careful not to spill a drop and the old goat’d snatch it from him and throw it on the ground. Not good enough for him apparently. He’d have to go all the way down again.’

That was all we knew about our great-grandfather, that he was a domestic tyrant, certainly a drunkard, probably a buffoon, known in the town as Whisky John. His heritage — the piles of empty whisky bottles under the shack and a family fondness for secret drinking.
I thought how astonished they’d be to know this was to happen — that four people, three girls and a man, their grandson and great-granddaughters would come from so far away to visit the place, the house they had lived in all their lives no longer there, the fantail the only living creature left in the nothingness it had become. I felt sad, as if I’d picked up on some grown-up, unspoken grief in the air, an urgent communication from my great-grandmother as she was then; young, desperate, alone in the world.

It was such a strange feeling to get back into the car, a small betrayal to drive away, leaving it to an unmarked obscurity that was never to come to life under someone’s attentive gaze again, the sad pleading of our great-grandmother’s ghost left unheard among the trees.

I knew from my father’s stories that she had written to her mother,

‘Please save me. I’ve made a mistake, I hate it here. I want to come home.’

After many months of waiting, the letter arrived from home,

‘You have made your bed and you must lie on it.’

I thought about this a lot and tried to picture her. Where did she read that grim advice? Walking back up the lonely road through the dark trees? Was she pregnant by that time, or even with a baby on her back already, knowing that the last bridge was burnt and she was stuck forever in a godforsaken land at the end of the world, her fate in the hands of a drunkard whom she no longer loved?
She would have wept as she read the letter, screwing it up to hide it from her husband, then trying to smooth it out again when she realised it was the last vestige of home remaining to her. The poverty of the stone cottage she had left in Ireland was richness compared to her new life.

Walking along, struggling to recover from the blow, knowing it was useless to complain, she knew she had to go back and spend her days in the hut surrounded by alien bush, with its heaped-up undergrowth, skeletons of ferns lying under the trees.

I thought about what happened to that young girl with the letter in her hand, standing on the road weeping, how the letter changed her life. It was a glimpse of that moment in a life which defines everything to come; to have to make the choice between a lifelong habit of despair, or something braver; the struggle to make a meaningful existence out of nothing, mulishness in the face of impossible odds.

There is no way to find out what she really felt or thought or dreamed about, this young woman, her inner life a mystery in the long unchronicled years of poverty, lovelessness, hard work and babies that were to be her life. There are only the bare facts – her exile from home in the lonely hut on the side of a mountain, the letter from her mother, her youthfulness, loveless marriage, her husband’s character.
It is hard to know whether her down-to-earth practicality hid a tender, sensitive side that found expression in her love for her children, for instance, and if so, whether she longed for more.

Rebecca must have thought herself in love to come so far with a man she barely knew. She was an inexperienced Irish country girl from a poor family: he was a dashing older man, with the lure of travel to far-off exotic lands, escape from poverty, to entice her.

She bore eight children in that place, my grandfather being the youngest and her favourite. It was an unimaginably hard life — an outside fire for her stove, carrying up water from the gully, the money eaten up by booze, no love, a baby always crying somewhere through the decades of her life. Almost as impossible to imagine is that, in the midst of all this, out of the hard lessons of her own confinements, she taught herself the profession of midwifery and supported her family on it.

In the only photo remaining she is alert and wary, handsome in a weary way. It is a thoroughbred face, sorrowful, highly strung, alive with an acute intelligence. She looks as if she took peoples’ measure without much effort, shrewdly. She has a level gaze, full of hidden depths, a defensive vulnerability.

There is nothing unusual about a working woman’s heroism going unnoticed and unsung by her family, let alone male historians. Early pioneer history is essentially about brave men hacking down bush, gouging out gold and minerals, and fighting wars with the local
inhabitants. Women’s work, genuinely essential in comparison, is still a secondary consideration in the great machine of nation-building mythology, even taking into consideration the stories of the doughty little woman holding the fort in the bush until father comes home and takes over.

For instance, any mother knows the kind of relentless physical courage you need for childbirth — the pain and panic and intensity of it even in the best conditions. A young woman giving birth alone in the bush even once, with nothing much else except her own wits to save her, is an awesome feat to anyone who knows anything about it. The successful rearing of all those children in a place like that, the teaching herself a profession at the same time as living with an alcoholic and often absent husband — all of this calls for a semi-permanent state of hyped-up courage, cool nerve, a working understanding of serious life and death concerns.

In those times, people who found themselves on the other side of the world were often traumatised by the sheer extremity of their disconnection, though they would not have recognised the word. It took a generation or two before they could forget the strangeness of the landscape around them, their lack of place in it.

You only had to look at those grim photographs of early pioneers trussed up in their ridiculous straitjacket clothes, the dank landscapes with muddy clearings engulfed by bush, small human figures standing by helplessly, to see their dissociation. Because of their desperate voyage into the unknown, they missed out on the most basic of human requirements
— the comforts of tradition, the kind of instinctive local knowledge necessary for ease in
daily living and, above all, the state of spiritual contentment that comes from belonging to the
land and people around you.

They had to laboriously rebuild all these connections themselves, recreate a real life, a family,
traditions of their own. This they did in their own bungling, human way — with stupidity,
generosity, murderousness, hope, ignorance and fear, and also with glorious flaring acts of
bravery and grace.

Look at Rebecca, so cautious and weary in the photo, posing in her ugly dress, her big
working hands awkward on her knees. There are glimpses of her that remain — the young girl
cut off from her past in one blow, giving birth alone and tending to her babies as they
appeared one by one in that bleak place; and the grown woman, confident, walking through
the night along bush roads, working at her profession. I could see her taking over in the stuffy
bedrooms where confinements took place, the women sweating and screaming in labour;
concentrating intently on her ancient task, with only the lamplight to see by, her own skill to
rely on. I could sense her love for her children, especially the youngest, her bright-eyed
smiling son, Ruth in tears amid the alien corn. Did she learn to love her new land?

Perhaps she did, on one of those warm, soft New Zealand summer days when everything is
startlingly alive, the deep layers of green glittering in the pure light, the sea incandescent blue,
birds calling and the air heavy with the fresh scent of whiteywood and sweet damp
undergrowth. Did she ever stand out on a hillside somewhere bathing in the tremulous,
primeval beauty of the New Zealand bush, feel the fetters of the past drop away, take a deep
breath in honour of her new life?

And as for love, did she ever know any other kind than the love of her children? No one really
knows about the secret sexual life of working-class pioneer women, all those mothers and
grandmothers, once young girls with soft skin and speaking glances, whose dreams of love
were soon to be crushed in a world of unending domestic toil. I imagined in my romantic way
that at some time in her life, Rebecca loved and was beloved by a man as honourable as her,
and they spent at least one night together, passionate enough to remember for the rest of their
days.

This much seems true though: that whatever fate dealt her, Rebecca even as a young woman
was interested in the most fundamental questions of existence and tried to stand by her hard-
won knowledge — how to snatch hope back from the depths of despair, for instance, and how
to preserve and cherish the lives she was entrusted with. Sensitive, vulnerable, complex,
absurdly young, she went out on her own to meet a bitter fate, stood her ground, came
through shining.

Her youngest son had his own demons to confront. He craved respectability as a way of
escaping his deprived — he was a bit of a boaster, a man about town, suggestible. But at heart
he was a kind and honourable man; he knuckled down after the war and married his
sweetheart. Did his mother dance at his wedding to Rosabel, and see him happy and well off,
pulling himself up by his bootstraps as he’d learnt from her example? Or was she too common
for her daughter in law? What would the two woman have to say to each other, with nothing to share but their man? The old warrior working class Irishwoman and the proud privileged girl brought up in Edwardian comfort, protected and scornful, who never worked a day in her life? Rebecca was not the submissive type, so she would have fought every inch of the way to keep her son; then again they might have liked each other as such opposites often do. Dick the elder made a good job of the farm for his little fella as he called Rosabel, enough for them to buy a flash car and retire to Auckland to a huge house stuffed with antiques, the past well and truly buried under his wife’s lifelong regime. I wonder if he helped his mother in her old age, once she went to live in Auckland beside her children. It is comforting to think that he cared for her tenderly, giving her the treats and luxury she never had, making up for the hardships of her life.
In the writing of *Family Love* the series of revelations about myself and my family were quite remarkable and unique in my experience as a writer.

Many of the unexamined assumptions I had held all my life were called into question. I have described in detail in one chapter the new perspective I had on my early sexual feelings.

It was my parents’ representation of events in my childhood that I was still accepting without question and had incorporated into my worldview. It was quite difficult for me to accept that I was not as independent in my thinking as I believed. For instance, I was astonished to discover the affection I had for Sandringham and my childhood there. I had accepted my parents’ view that it was a narrow, dull little place that we couldn’t wait to leave. In the rediscovery and reimmersion in my life necessitated by my concentrated attention in writing the memoir, I found something quite different. On the contrary, for me as a child, it was a secure, safe as well as incredibly interesting time of my life, and in some ways it was the community I subconsciously searched for all my adult life.

It also became much clearer to me that Titirangi with its bush and sea, its bohemian community and new friends, though memorable and a place I had much affection for, had a much darker side for us. I learned in a much more final way, during
the writing of the memoir that going there blew the family so violently apart that we never came together again.

A personally compelling discovery for me was to become aware of the seriousness with which I set about becoming a writer from such an early age. My diary even at the age of eleven is devoted to my thoughts about writing — craft, the books I was reading, my dreams about being a writer and the progress or otherwise of the stories I was writing. It was as if I was preparing myself quite consciously to be a writer from a very young age. I found this aspect of my childhood self endearing and poignant, the consistency reassuring. It seems extraordinary to me that I was still just as absorbed and entranced by writing and reading forty-six years ago and that I continue to write for the same reasons, to make sense of the world and for sheer love of it.

These discoveries and others like them prove to me that the process of writing as I have outlined it in this thesis was a very productive one for me. I had assumed when I began that I would not only be rehashing the given story of our family, describing predictable events and characters, but also that I would know the ending. It turned out that no one I wrote about in the memoir was predictable, least of all myself, and that I only knew the ending when I was writing the last chapter.
I have very few visceral memories of my mother, neither pleasure nor pain, especially if I compare them to the memories of Nan, which carried such an electric charge. I didn’t remember her in that same vivid physical way, that kind of aching love memory. It feels unfair — my mother had loved and cared for us in her own way, even if she was sometimes undemonstrative and critical. I want to be fair to my mother’s memory, despising that bitter vengeful untruthful reconstruction of parents’ lives that happens with aggrieved children, but there it is, I just can’t summon up many warm memories. There were flashes of the hot kitchen in Sandringham with the late afternoon sun blazing in on our dinner table, stress and conflict, my mother’s irritation hanging in the air.

During the daily domestic round of family life there was always a sense of grudge from her about the toil involved, making meals, the mess, with a lot of complaining and joylessness. The carping voice in my head came from her — nagging me to rest, stay home, go home, not get above myself.
My mother saying, ‘What do you want me to do about it?’ captured the tone, when at sixteen I told her excitedly I’d finished a novel.

I carry the live imprint, the real memory of my mother in my own genes — that grudging no-saying thing that choked off life. It was something I had to learn to throw off for my own happiness. Neither of them meant to be unloving; they certainly loved us in their own way. They provided the necessary spiritual and intellectual ballast of a childhood given that my father was into control and power, my mother always listening to other voices, never fully there. She probably never in her life learnt the joy of being in the present, enjoying what she had, acknowledging with that deep sense of joy that the moment is all there is. There always seemed to be some cause for complaint, anxiety, worry, resentment, self-pity.

In a story written when I was in my thirties which I never published, a story in the form of a letter to my mother, I wrote;

‘Nothing is simple with you, just an ordinary conversation is fraught with so many extreme dangers that risking that change in tone, that reaction is like walking in a minefield. Your life, your family, they’ve all gone sour on you. I keep thinking of a harsh desert wind – nothing green or growing where it blows. You see self-pity is our family forte. We’re so good at it – we’ve developed it into a fine art. Not just crass stuff. This is the real intellectual variety, hosts of words, guilt-dealing, the twisted brave smile. Oh the thrill we can get out of a secret purse of the lips as someone asks the impossible and we can sacrifice something resentfully. Some women have actually got a permanent line there, around their mouths after a lifetime of
these dark secret satisfactions… Your voice sometimes becomes liquid with self-pity — all
the things you’ve done for us, the life of service, which is somehow our fault. But we’ve
danced to that lugubrious tune all of us in our separate shiny ways, all our lives. Poor old
Mum we said, eyes averted. Your voice alone triggers this blind process, I lower mine, I
comfort, I agree, I placate. But even that’s not nearly enough. I swear Lexy if I ripped out my
heart and gave it to you on a plate still bleeding and pulsing it wouldn’t be enough.’

My mother’s social self was quite different — she was warm, caring, wise and irreverent so
people loved her. She had a host of loyal loving women friends. It wasn’t phony. It was part
of her — maybe the vivacious woman she used to be, still alive and kicking — but I didn’t
experience that side of her enough to remember it.

Memory is imperfect and can be unforgiving, with its eager embrace of certain stereotypes to
remember people by, and the refusal to abandon them, irrespective of their reality. It is as if
you don’t want to be bothered by annoying details that destroy the picture you are so attached
to. It is an aesthetic sense of form more than anything.

Someone asks, ‘Do you remember when such and such happened?’ and you’re stopped short
by the truth of it, absolutely flabbergasted by the sudden destruction of the carefully
assembled picture you’ve built up.
Memories gradually unfold and take shape, reach their full significance, sometimes many years after the event. You think, ‘Oh that was love, that was dislike, that was the meaning of that phrase. That’s who I was.

My knowledge of my childish relationship with my mother in those first years comes mostly from detective work rather than lived emotional memories. In the end I saw it was useless to go over old events that were based almost entirely on reconstruction. My mother’s guilt dealing, my innate lack of trust in her, lay so heavy on my heart for so long that I could never think clearly about her.

All the same I ended ‘Letter to Lexy’ with:

‘Because ah yes I love you as well, your grey-haired vulnerability pierces my heart sharp as a knife. I see you talking on — your eyes beseeching over the torrent of words. I see glimpses of the spunky lady you could be if only things were different. You, Lexy, must have sung to me, a rebellious little girl who wouldn’t sleep, a thousand times. A thousand times when you were aching to rest, after a long tiring day with small children, and no help or love. But that didn’t matter Lexy, you sang to me and whispered that you loved me, now go to sleep you said. I know it. I would watch the stars outside the window, warm in my bed. Your presence a soft cloud all around me in the dark, my whole life and anchor and safety there in your voice and the creaking of the bed where you sat beside me. How many times did you wash me and feed and dress me and love me? I speak softly and comfortingly on the phone, I watch and wait wondering why you both conspired to ruin my life, I think of you as you are sometimes.
Your sweet old blue eyes sparkling love, your cardigan, and smell of cigarettes. You have ancient wrinkled tired old hands with a sad worn wedding ring. Then Lexy, truly I want to hug you, try just to start again. But I’m sucked dry Lexy, you’ve sucked me dry.’

The unattractively self-righteous school of therapy which counsels endless entitlement if you’ve had a difficult childhood, that condones self-pity and constant anger at parents’ mistakes, makes it too easy to blame your parents and never forgive them for their ‘crimes’, giving you permission to tread water for the rest of your life.

In the end, whatever hellsbroth your childhood was — and mine certainly wasn’t that — once you’ve grasped the essentials, done the counselling necessary, been a little sorry for yourself then you’re on your own. You have to get on with it. Being sorry for yourself forever sows a bitter harvest, the harvest my mother reaped. Self-pity, blame and resentment are a hot cancerous brew. If you can let go, learn to love yourself a little, forgive yourself and others, live in the present, you might be ok. It was surprisingly simple in the end for me to take that into my serious working depths.

My brother Mark wryly called it an Albanian childhood and that captures the sense of grudge and narrowness in our emotional life as children, the lack of sensuality or emotional security, the toughness of it.

My upbringing made me prickly, sensitive to criticism, unable to bear it if someone didn’t like me, tiresomely wanting everyone’s approval, stewing in a mixture of shyness and
arrogance, veering crazily between poles of secret vanity and intense self-dislike — in other words, a writer.

In any case, it wasn’t just my parents’ emotional coldness. There were long hospital nights, the loneliness of waking in the dark, weighed down by the heavy plaster, crying hopelessly for my mother. Was it a memory, a dream or imaginative reconstruction — but did an exhausted nurse tell me off, striking a permanent state of fear in my heart? Did I believe she might leave me to die unless I appeased her, the brisk footsteps in the night my only safety, her sharp voice — ‘What are you crying for?’ — my only deliverance?

It could well have happened though it’s only my adult construct, an acknowledgement of the bargains an embattled child makes with herself to survive. It meant that there has always been a core to me unreachable by anyone, the private safe place I hugged to myself to get through the hospital routine.

The fact is that somewhere very early in childhood I had become frightened of annihilation, the fear of being snuffed out callously by someone stronger, of my gifts being trampled on, my innermost self gutted, leaving me soulless and without will. I suspected that it had something to do with my experience in hospital, though have no proof of this at all.

It wasn’t until many decades later, when I read Winnicott that I felt for the first time that the state I had experienced so regularly (and written about) all my life was finally described accurately. He called it ‘unthinkable anxieties’ and described the feeling as ‘falling forever’.
It evokes the horror of being dropped, of ceasing to exist. What was most interesting to me was his idea of the fear of a breakdown that *has already been experienced and yet not remembered*, not because the experience was repressed, but because the cognitive or linguistic tools were not there to frame it. He also said that the fear had to be experienced again before it could go away.

It was an affirmation of my intuition that the time I spent in hospital during those lost and muffled years is the engine that has driven me since then. As well, though, even as a child I learnt unexpectedly from somewhere — maybe the blood of my great-grandmother rolling in my veins — to trust to fate and the kindness of strangers, and to make the most of situations I had no control over.

In some strange way, my early struggles to get through life, my parents’ pretty unrelenting withholding of approval, the absence of the kind of all-encompassing unconditional love I only experienced later as an adult — all of this gave me an edge, set me writing and thinking from a precociously early age, simply to cope with the tightrope act family life required of me.

In the high-powered competition amongst us children for our portions of love I had to learn to draw on my own resources, keep my nerve. I was given the polish of sophistication beyond my years, an intellectual and emotional head start that allowed me to find my path sooner than later, even if I was only stumbling along it.
Hospital and family life taught me useful habits of introspection and self-reliance, a wildly imaginative inner life. I learnt to keep my troubles to myself. It forced me to teach myself the basics of emotional hygiene: self affirmation, truthfulness at least in private to counter the denial around me, the importance of friends for love when your family gives you grief, the importance of love full stop.

It forced me to tap into my own strength and peasant vigour, an enjoyment in life that stood me in good stead. I learnt to value all the things that helped me — friends, the beauty of landscape, books, kindness from people, the idea that compassion for others allowed me to look beyond my own small world and troubles.

Most importantly, I discovered my lifetime’s joy. It was as if this unknowable centre in me, this clot of sensations, emotions, ideas and events of my childhood, which I was always trying to make sense of, worked like a black hole in reverse, fuelling writing energy for the rest of my life. Writing almost literally kept me together, stitched up all the frayed and forlorn edges. At its most basic it gave me affirmation of my existence, and along with that authenticity, approval, a secret life. It was my reality safe from the world I lived in where I had to turn myself inside out for acceptance. Writing was a mirror held up to my true self irrespective of what was happening around me. It tapped into a sense of powerfulness and truth inside me. The steady heartbeat of this secret self, the writing self kept me honest, reminded me of who I really was. It cut through the crap, made sense of the senseless and the banal, and made me happy.
My real life began with writing. On the one hand, I was the child with the pathologically fragile sense of identity, hunting down approval, determined to fit in as the all-popular leader of the gang, an academic whiz; and on the other I was the quiet observer analysing every aspect of my life on a daily basis, secret, sardonic, the rock-bottom self who kept a steady eye on everyone around me and was already using words to dig myself out of the family grave.
An autobiographical novel was always a rather tricky proposition. For a start, it was dealing with a theme I was returning to, having already written about that particular event in two separate long fictionalised pieces when I was sixteen and later in my earlier twenties. Both these pieces were distanced by a fictional structure; in the first instance by the use of a traditional eye of God narrator, in the second by the plot device of a narrator who is in a psychiatric hospital obsessively going over in her mind the events that caused her breakdown.

These literary devices were an attempt by me as a young writer to make sense of painful events by distancing them in a fictional way. At that time in my writing life I did not have the expertise, desire or experience to write them as straight autobiography, though they were real events that deeply troubled me and influenced my life.

In one sense I was unconsciously using these two pieces as models for *Family Love* and even, at one point, thought of using them explicitly in excerpts. I still wanted to retreat into fiction as a means of making sense of these events in my life.

As Jill Kerr Conway puts it, ‘the autobiographer writes a narrative where subject and object are intermingled –where knower and the known are part of the same consciousness.’

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14 In Summary
One compelling reason for me to write is to attempt to write myself clear, try and piece together my identity, make sense of the world. In my angst-ridden teens and early twenties this attempt had an urgency about it, as I had to sort out the residue of a complicated childhood and the way it was impinging on my adult life and relationships.

Katherine Mansfield, whose work influenced me from childhood, writes: ‘one tries to go deep — to speak to the secret self we all have’.65 Hermione Lee interprets this statement eloquently as ‘the disclosure of a private alternative imaginative vision in some ways alien to the “normal” socialised world but as Mansfield implies made recognisable and authentic’.66

Fiction has always been the best way for me to disclose this ‘private imaginary vision’ and I believe that, for me, it is the form best suited for this kind of quixotic search.

However, in tracing the trajectory of the experience of writing *Family Love*, what emerges most clearly is that, despite of my best intentions, the story I ended up telling was more truthfully and vividly told by facts than by fiction, by myself than by a fictional narrator, it was best written in a confessional mode involving sometimes painful honesty, rather than in a more objective and distant way.

In plunging directly into a personal voice like this, a voice which had previously only emerged in unread diaries and commentaries, I was going perilously close to the ‘secret self’ which Mansfield talks about, without fiction to distance and protect me. Writing a memoir as a doctorate was therefore a double exposure for me, first because of the personal disclosure, of myself and my family, and secondly because I was breaking
another of my rules – that is I was discussing, analysing and examining the process of the writing in a formal way before I had finished.

I have a strong and probably superstitious belief that these processes are best left to themselves, but in the event I believe in many ways elements of Family Love (in particular the structure), were improved because of the advice of my supervisor. As often happens in writing, the conscious intentions I started out with and my underlying motivation for writing the memoir were in fact widely divergent. I did not know my real intention in writing Family Love until I finished it; it was only in the mysterious alchemy of writing itself that my true preoccupation was revealed. I wasn’t even aware that so deep was their impact on my life I still needed to write myself clear of these events from over forty years ago.

These unexpected insights were one of the pleasures of the absorbing, often painful and difficult undertaking of writing the memoir. This sense of discovering something satisfyingly truthful is generally a sign (in my experience, anyway) that I have reached beneath the surface of the story. In the case of this memoir I had found a sea of emotions – the joy, baffled love, hurt, pain and pleasure of childhood.

As I wrote in my notes, ‘the point is I think I may be coming to a bit of a consensus about where this is going. I can sense rhythms coming up a bit… I think I’m coming to a gentler place – more rise and fall. Less spelling out…already I detect a kind of loosening, a forgiving happening, a natural instinct to turn it into a story, humour… That’s the most interesting thing — I am writing myself clear. I am now much closer to certain conclusions, closure, a philosophical attitude instead of self-pity and blame.’
Each book for me is a new experience of the pleasant and unsettling confusion of writing, the necessary engagement with every aspect of the writer’s life and mind, including the workings of the subconscious. As Andrea Dworkin says of the process, ‘each cognitive capacity — intellect, imagination, intuition, emotion even cunning — is used to the absolute utmost, a kind of strip-mining of one’s mental faculties’, and *Family Love* was no exception.

As in all writing, the final work has to stand by itself, irrespective of how it was arrived at. No matter how enjoyable (or otherwise), it was to get there. The success or failure of the memoir is impossible for me to evaluate, except by my own highly subjective criteria, but at the least I know it was a book that was deeply satisfying to write.
And all the time there was Piha, wonderful, free flying, fresh Piha with its knotty cliffs, black sand, wild beach, the great haunches of Lion Rock rising out of the surf — the blessed place where our family members could forget all our angst.

We used to hurtle along the rough road out to the West Coast in our shabby Bradford van, loaded to the gunnels with cartons of food, flagons of wine, children and bedding. We girls were born — we were sorry for the stones being flung out from the wheels, the toitoi crushed by cars, the trees being choked by the dust.

In the back seat, jouncing with the bumps, I tried to concentrate on not being car-sick, mostly without success, gulping in air from the open window, staring fixedly at the trees as we dipped and turned giddily past, counting off each mile to our arrival. And what a sensuous rush to the heart it was when we did. The first thrilling glimpse of blue ahead through the
leaves, lumbering around the last few interminable corners and then emerging from the bush and zigzagging down the bare hillside, with the panorama of the beach in front of us, Lion Rock, the surfy sea stretching forever into the horizon! We never tired of the thrill of it — the unchanging rituals of our arrival in paradise — the first child to see the sea, the pohutukawa growing on the rock, toitoi massing beside the road with their fluffy white plumage, the hit of fresh air, the plunge down towards the sea.

‘Smell it, kids,’ Elsie would urge, sounding very Danish. ‘Inhale it! Good fresh air for your lungs.’

We children swam every day. We walked down Rayner Road, then plunged into the steep track that looped and turned through the bush with its rich tasty smell of whiteywood and damp down the hill to the sea, the beaten earth of the path soft under our bare feet.

We were bodysurfing before we knew the name, coming in on a wave in a huge rush, or being dumped and churned over and over, spluttering, swallowing water to shore. We knew to stay between the flags; anyone who didn’t was despicable in our eyes. Out by Lion Rock there was a strong rip and people who swam close to the rocks or fished there were in danger — there were quite a few drownings at Piha. We knew from experience that if you didn’t panic and allowed yourself to be carried along you’d end up coughing and half-drowned but safe on the sand.
After our wild buffeting swim, we threw ourselves on our stomachs, teeth chattering, shovelling the hot velvety drifts of black sand up to our chests to warm ourselves. Further around the beach the lagoon provided a gentler swim, with its faintly decaying leaf smell, the damp sand at the edge of the dunes perfect for mucking around with sandcastles and digging tunnels to China. I once nearly drowned there, falling into endless choking greenness, trying to struggle up towards the dim light in slow motion. My father leapt in heroically, fully dressed, pound notes floating out of his pockets, to save me. None of us children ever forgot the weirdly majestic sight of the pound notes floating on the water. The Gap could only be reached at low tide, a clear deep rock pool with kelp waving languorously in its depths and surf thundering out beyond the line of rocks. I was fascinated by the Blowhole. Gazing down I was sucked into the echoing chasm with its dark sunless water whistling eerily far below, knowing it was certain death to go closer, wondering what it would be like to jump, whether you could climb back up the vertical dripping rocks.

One never-to-be-forgotten day the waves were so high that even at low tide they had washed over into the Gap pool and spread a sea of thick brownish bobbing foam which covered the rocks and sand in soft piles. We smeared our pagan little bodies with it, and threw ourselves into this heavenly softness — it was like swimming in clouds.

I nearly drowned again in one of those rock pools at the Gap. I had the same sensation of endless suffocating weight, intense greenness. But this time I was at the age to appreciate the muscular young surfie who waded in to rescue me. I felt deeply embarrassed about my skinny
little body when he deposited me, a shivering, drowned rat in front of a group of gaping people who seemed remote, dreamlike, as I stared up at them from the sand.

None of these experiences made me afraid of the water — for us swimming was a sacrament. Every summer I noted each swim solemnly in my diary, superstitious about missing a day. The Glen Esk Valley was another special place for us — once you entered the bush there you were in another older world, with massive tree ferns primal in the shadows, their fronds scrolled like delicate fretwork, tenderly perfect.

From the depths of the trees we’d hear the sound of the stream splashing and murmuring over boulders between ferny banks, collecting suddenly in shady pools deep enough for swimming, the icy water thrilling as a benediction. The path became steeper and rockier, the dull clamour of the water louder in your ears, and then suddenly you came out into the magic clearing of the Falls, beautiful as a dream, its three tiers of mist and roar suspended, frozen music, between the sky and the clear pool below. All around the bush and birdsong, the stillness of the valley, a feeling of exaltation. We sometimes bathed and washed our hair in the pool, naked nymphs in the cold water, playing around our mother and swimming over to tread water, greatly daring, then lingering for a few minutes under the punishing weight of the waterfall itself, its roar deafening us. We could glimpse the cavern behind with its tiny ferns trembling ceaselessly beneath the torrent and wash of the water, its shadows and secret depths in the watery tumult.

Playing by myself in the stream, I saw a small translucent white hand glimmering in the water. It was so shockingly like a drowned child’s, I turned the rock over, my heart thumping
with fear. It was a dead possum bleached white by the water. We played Pooh sticks from the wooden bridge, imagining Eeyore (our favourite character) swirling along grumpily underneath. It was like playing in a fairy bower, as soft and green and unworldly, as bountiful.

Our bach was tiny and musty with uncomfortable chairs, everything plain and unadorned, surrounded by bush on three sides, with tree ferns and manukau growing up close to every window. It was a garage, its size and shape like a small chapel, pretty well unchanged except for the tiny sleeping annex tacked on to one side. The rainwater tank was outside at the back — Dick sometimes had to fish out the sodden corpses of rats and possums, there was a sprinkling of manuka like tea leaves floating on the surface of the water.

The toilet was a long-drop dunny in the bush. You walked along a soft, leaf-strewn path and there it was, the door permanently propped open, immovable, cobweb-covered, the walls rough creosoted planks. You could sit and gaze straight out into the heart of the trees, the wooden seat warm and smooth on your bum, hear the tiny muffled plop as your poo disappeared down into the darkness and hit the earth floor, the daddy-long-legs spiders scuttling up into the walls at the sound.

Inside there were beds everywhere, crammed into the annex and against the walls in the main room. There was a fireplace at one end, and a kitchen corner where open shelves stored plates and saucepans, salt and pepper, matches, candles, the Primus and the Tilley lamp. The table was the heart of the place at night, where everyone gathered to eat Piha stew of rich fatty
toughish meat, potato, carrot and peas, and to wash up afterwards in water heated on the Primus and poured into the cracked enamel bowl. Once the meal things were cleared, the dish water thrown outside to water the trees and the Tilley lamp lit, we played cards, Monopoly, Scrabble and Newmarket around the table with our usual convivial competitiveness, the adults drinking wine, the fire crackling. It was lit even on warmish nights, its long shadows dancing on the rafters above us.

We gloriéd in the elemental roughness of the place — we had no need for electricity or a bathroom or bourgeois conveniences. We had our own beach culture, which was to do with pride in roughing it. We despised the dinky baches down the road with their orderly English gardens and damaged remnants of bush, with names like Dun Roamin, the clutter of plastic furniture and umbrellas our neighbours lugged down to sit around solemnly on the beach. Sometimes in wintertime we would prowl the empty baches, looking through the windows marvelling, shocked at the luxury inside. Ours was a calling — the purity of the New Zealand bach was sacrosanct — and even electricity was an affront. Dick would regularly rip down the curtains that Elsie put up across the shelf where the firewood was stored. In a continuing metaphor for their relationship he wanted to see the knotty, weta-strewn trunks of manuka in all their glory, whereas she wanted a little respite. How Elsie managed with four children, feral husband, endless streams of visitors and guests in that tiny place, was always an undertow between them, starting with the process of packing the car.

He hated preparations and fuss so it was always fraught. His idea was that they should just throw in the kids, a flagon of wine, bread and cheese and hit the road; and there, thwarting
him, was Elsie with her cartons packed full of useful things, handles sticking out and jabbing us in the back, tea towels, mozzie stuff, a tin of Rawleigh’s ‘man and beast’ ointment for cuts and burns, the big pot of Piha stew with its meaty smell, her anxiously calculating expression. Dick pulled things out as fast as she put them in, raging, ‘What do we need this pan for? Trivia!’

We children did a lot of the housework — there are quite delicious menus in my diary when, as an eleven-year-old I made breakfasts for the family — though Elsie never succeeded in training Dick. He had it worked out satisfactorily in his own mind that housework was a bourgeois triviality, essentially beneath his notice. His being asked to do it was a terrible example of Elsie’s uptightedness, or worse, a sign of her gradual transformation into his mother. He would never have actually come out and said it was women’s work but that’s what he and most men of that time, believed.

The thing was, though, that we all loved our Piha bach dearly, each in our way. If perfect happiness were possible, however fleeting, there it was, Dick leaping wildly around the lawn, his glasses flying off, playing killer quoits, my mother relaxed for once, a glass of wine in her hand, laughing and kind, the great gatherings of friends and family — on the beach, the lawn, the verandah — always sunlit with wine and picnics and children and laughter. Camping at Paraha Gorge (we called it Our Beach), sleeping under the stars with the smell of wood smoke and the creek gurgling beside us. The ecstasy of swimming in wild places, fresh and untainted, lagoon, rock-pool, sea, freshwater stream, the water pure on your skin, the feel of clean sand underfoot, lupins rattling as you walked quietly through the dunes. It was a place
at the rim of the world where the horizon seemed to stretch forever, winds coming fresh from
the Antarctic, the rigidity of suburban life was simply blown away in minutes.

I loved the bach best at night — the sound of the surf booming comfortably far away, the
Tilley lamp hissing, my parents’ occasional soft remarks, the whisper of turning pages, a
circle of light on their bent attentive faces as they read in bed. Outside the night was alive
with creatures and the murmuring bush, rats and possums scampering on the tin roof, the
possum making its hoarse hissing grunt, an electric presence frightening and thrilling at the
same time. I lay awake listening to the mysterious wildness of the owl calling ‘morepork’ into
the layers of darkness, its forlorn cry filling me with a pleasurable desolation as if I could
dimly sense some ancient sorrow not yet mine to understand. Falling asleep with the untamed
darkness so close, but safe, tucked in by my mother in my narrow musty bed, dreaming of the
sea. It was like a medieval hut with its smoky fire, the warm breathing bodies of the sleeping
family, firelight flickering on the walls – and all around the rustling of the bush and the wild
sea calling.

At Piha I was on my own in the midst of the hurley burley — it was as if I were operating my
own secret life in the midst of it all. I was never lonely but some of my best moments were
solitary — the sensual pleasures of swimming, walking and sitting in the bush. My family and
our endless stream of visitors were all part of it but only dimly, as if I was concentrating on
something else. It wasn’t a physically comfortable place and the family was rarely peaceful,
though we had a lot of fun together — in such crowded conditions I went into a strategic
withdrawal. It must have been the most used two rooms in the country; as well as our family
of six, friends and relatives from the country came to stay and pitched tents on the lawn, all
crowding into the bach for tea and games at night.

I spent a lot of time in the bush, taking a childish pleasure in believing that it went on forever.
So I always felt disappointed when my roamings ended up on a road somewhere, or
someone’s garden. It felt sad that the bush was tamer and more circumscribed by civilisation
than the unfathomable wilderness of my imagination.

Sitting very still in the bush I absorbed everything; the ravishing smells of leaves and fresh
earth, the tuis cracking their heart-breaking notes, the mysterious, rustling, sibilant life of the
trees around me, I felt like a silent witness, holding my breath in a trance of receptivity. It was
like being recharged by some force in the trees and earth and sky, a force I could only become
aware of through this peaceful stillness, a kind of rapt attention.

Sitting on the earth floor of the bush hut we girls made — a ramshackle affair of damp,
heaped up manuka leaves denoting walls and doors, a ruined cast-iron stove we used as the
centrepiece, the delicate undergrowth, brooding silence over everything — had an intense
significance for me. It was a compelling feeling of becoming part of my natural surroundings;
if I sat long enough maybe leaves would drift down to rest in my hair, a fantail alight on my
shoulder, night fall. It was a sense of acute aliveness, the release of my imaginative powers
through the landscape, my silent immersion in it.
Even as a child I was caught up in the air of drama in the household, my parents’ certainty that an apocalyptic event was waiting to engulf us all at any moment. I came upon them once leaning impatiently over the radio as if the information were being beamed especially for them, straining to catch each word of the crackling urgent voice of the BBC announcer as he reported the Suez crisis. I went on my way, feeling reassured that they would have it all in hand soon.

In Sandringham in those early years, they were engaged in the kind of enterprise that touched me right from the beginning, set my imagination working, fell into place permanently in some deep part of me. For a start, it was based on such reasonable assumptions, such hopefulness, such an ancient, universal vision of peace and plenty for all, that even a child could understand it.

Dick and Elsie were concerned with the oppressed of the world, the needlessness of their suffering; they believed it was a moral imperative to aid their inevitable uprising. They would have dismissed a spiritual dimension, but it was there all the same, the dimension also
underlying the teachings of every major religion and central to most of them. To try and right wrongs and alleviate the sufferings of others was, as they saw it, a simple obligation as fundamental and unremarkable as breathing. It was the idea that the true meaning of our lives is found somewhere in between awareness of others and compassion, for without that we are sailing rudderless in a dark sea.

They were not to know in their innocence that communism, like the churches they despised, would wash away this hopeful truth in a tide of blood. They were concerned about the poor, the lowly, the powerless, anonymous lives broken on the wheel of capitalism. Workers slaving for nothing so that a few men could become rich beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, feral children abandoned to prostitution and sweatshops, condemned to die unloved and unsung on city streets, generations of people despised and damaged because of the colour of their skin, women bought and sold at birth, toiling meaninglessly for property they’d never own.

It was an understanding of the power of these forgotten people as well as their suffering, the anonymous armies of the poor striking such fear into the hearts of the establishment and intruding into their dreams. It was the power of people who have nothing to lose.

For the first time, there was a systematic analysis of the causes of poverty, the way the machine worked, realpolitik, the self-evident truth that behind the rosy face of capitalism beat a rogue heart, forces that would stop at nothing to keep the profits rolling in, never voluntarily surrendering their power or money. It was in the very nature of things, inevitable as the night
the day that they would make capital of the people who worked for them, squeeze them dry, if
given half a chance.

Marxism proved that poverty was not a burden we had to bear to get to heaven, but a
necessary cog in a well-oiled machine and an inevitable by product of it. Stop the machine,
reassemble it, get it working fairly and the very sources of injustice would be eliminated
forever.

What a rush to the head! The idea that you could change all that misery and suffering, bring a
new world into being where people had enough food, shelter and education, hope for their
children, the possibility of love.

How could anyone not be enraptured by the possibility, the sheer reasonableness of such a
gentle vision? There was nothing new in this yearning for the lion to sit down with the lamb,
for humans to build a New Jerusalem and take their rightful place in paradise. What was new
was the possibility of it happening here and now on earth, at last within our grasp, instead of
in some wishy-washy hereafter.

There were huge burdens to carry, layers of foulness embedded in the system to clean up
wherever you looked, a Sisyphean task, but my parents set to work on it with a will. History
was on their side.
And what a history. My father made sure we knew all the stories — people who struggled for justice against all odds, brought down bloody tyrannies and spoke the truth when words were dangerous. He was a wonderful storyteller and teacher; ironic, slyly humorous, passionate.

The poor starving Russians marching to the Winter Palace — they were such beautiful words I imagined a magical ice-castle with snow swirling and gleaming domes — to ask for bread and the Tsar’s men shooting them dead as they stood unarmed in the snow. It was an act I found impossible to credit. Why didn’t he just give them the bread? He had jewels and castles, huge riches. Surely he wouldn’t have missed a few loaves? I imagined the white-coated waiters hurrying out with trays, the kind of crusty Russian-type delicious looking bread I knew from pictures in *The Family of Man*. I saw the hungry people smiling, eating at long last as they stood there in the snow, filling their empty bellies.

He taught us a game when we were very small, no doubt for his own tongue-in-cheek amusement. If we managed to climb up onto the arms of our armchair we were a woman anarchist whose name I forget, but if we reached the back of it we were Rosa Luxemburg.

‘I can’t believe you used such crude brain-washing techniques,’ Jo said to him when she was older. ‘No wonder we’re so neurotic.’

There were political books everywhere in our house, musty-smelling, closely printed, serious; most of them extremely hard going. One Howard Fast book about a cop beating a black man with a rubber hose made me sob so loudly it brought my father into my room. In a rare moment of tender censorship he took the book gently from me.
‘You shouldn’t be reading that stuff till you’re older.’

I was relieved; the door that opened into such horror had been firmly closed again, and I didn’t have to think of it.

They used to subscribe to a magazine called *China Reconstructs* and I found the bland smiling pinkish faces of workers cavorting through the fields and factories very boring though I could never admit to it.

If there was an equivalent to a Bible in our household it was *The Family of Man*, which I pored over so many times the words and images fused forever in my mind. Steichen’s kind face behind his twinkling American glasses, the hungry eyes of the woman gnawing at a rough scrap of bread in her fingers, a Jamaican father’s face swollen with love as he cradled his son in the curve of his muscular black arm — each picture was in itself a little world, a story which I stared at, endlessly fascinated. I saw that it could reveal the perplexing secrets of the adult world if I puzzled over it long enough. Instinctively I trusted its truthfulness, the sober love with which it was put together, its calm assumption of the triumph of good. The glistening body of a new-born with its startlingly carnal cord still attached, the drunken woman with big soft breasts, shameful patches of sweat under her upraised arms, high on some mysterious disturbing force which made her eyes half close and gave her that smiling dreamy look of surrender. I only half recognised it as something to do with sex, it made me embarrassed and titillated at the same time.
The captions were as powerful as the pictures. *The Family of Man* was the book which first showed me the real power of words to stir people to action — William Blake, Shakespeare, Thomas Paine, the Bible, Plato, Anne Frank, George Sand, the Bhagavad-Gita, which inspired me to read more. They were a taste of an ordered world of poetic eloquence.

‘The little ones leaped, and shouted, and laugh’d
And all the hills echoed…’

‘But such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks, and all it wants, is the liberty of appearing.’

‘For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face…’

‘I still believe people are really good at heart.’

‘I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves,’

‘Humanity is outraged in me and with me. We must not dissimulate nor try to forget this indignation which is one of the most passionate forms of love.’

‘Who is on my side? Who?’

‘The mind is restless, turbulent, strong and unyielding… as difficult to subdue as the wind.’

‘Oh wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful wonderful! and yet again wonderful ‘

‘Music and rhythm find their way into the secret places of the soul’

It was there in all its unsentimentality, the life of adults; men and women toiling and grieving and laughing, the quarrels and exuberance of love, the beauty of the unknown and the comfort of the known.
And then there was the music in our household — wonderful raw music belting out all through our childhood. My mother provided a plaintive, delicate counterpart with her beloved Mozart and Schubert.

Dick’s records were boozy, rough, dark male voices mostly — Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee. There were white spirituals sung by Arkansas ferals with voices as nasal and piercing as saws — ‘and love came trickling down’— or American union songs —‘which side are you on? Which side are you on?’ or ‘solidarity forever’. There was Woody Guthrie singing about the Chicago boss setting a fire during a striking workers’ picnic — ‘the children that died were 73’. There were tough as guts blues songs sung by American blacks, New Zealand and Australian folk songs about gold rushes and the bush, some of which he collected himself in trips with Rona Bailey.

The orotund operatic anthem, ‘Arise ye starvelings from your slumber, arise ye prisoners of want’, carried some dim preverbal memory in me of deep emotion and togetherness.

There was a sweet aching power in music like that; triumph over adversity, lament, exhortation, those scratchy voices singing from the heart, telling the stories of ordinary people with that unmistakable hit of passionate truthfulness.

The fact was, Dick had a singing instinct for the true and beautiful, though he himself was not necessarily a truthful man. He was always open to genuine originality, passion, talent, truthfulness. Because of this strong intellectual curiosity he made a series of discoveries long
before they became mainstream — writers like Ronald Hugh Morrieson, singers like Bob Dylan or Woody Guthrie, painters like Tony Fomison, concepts of national culture, Maori determinism and social justice. Thanks to him we had full-blooded heroes and heroines to admire, instead of the thin nourishment of the usual tame movie stars, sportspeople, military leaders, cartoon characters of western pop culture.

There were the French resistance fighters in World War Two, the Taranaki Maori led by Te Whiti O Rongomai, who practised mass passive resistance before Gandhi, pulling out the survey pegs of the colonisers and going to jail in their hundreds; workers who downed tools and went wageless to demand a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work, suffragettes who gave their lives to set women free, musicians, writers and artists whose work threatened the status quo.

He told us how Paul Robeson was travelling in Germany before the wars. Two Nazi thugs were about to beat him up as he stepped on a train. He stood there, that gigantic man and faced them down, so that they muttered and fell back like the cowards they were. Stories like that, with their underlying assumption of a heroic response, were my daily fare as a child. They were told to us so often and with such casual intimacy I felt as if I knew them all well – they seemed like old friends who just hadn’t been able to visit for a while.

It was their courage my father admired their refusal to accept injustice, the way they stood up to bullies and thugs to protect the weak, their moral grandeur. They were unafraid of flouting convention, a quality I secretly knew for a fact I lacked. I was far too sycophantic, I wanted
people to like me too much. As for my ability to withstand torture, I knew in my heart that I would crumble in seconds and betray all my comrades. But at least the flow of my father’s regard for them, rare as it was, could bathe me, however incidentally, in its warmth.

It was his interest as a historian and teacher of his children to pay tribute to unsung heroes and heroines whose acts of courage or altruism stood out. If history is written by the oppressors, his mission was to shake the balance out by telling the stories which illustrated the possibility of rationality, moral sense, a kind of tenderness in the management of human affairs.

His most impressive subject as a historian was Te Whiti O Rongomai, Maori prophet and leader, visionary, a man of great subtlety, eloquence and moral sense. There is a photo of Dick, little more than a boy, standing on Te Whiti’s marae with the awed, disbelieving look of someone who has just stumbled into history heaven.

Maori elders, like the Reverend Paahi Moke, Mira Ngaia Te Pohau Erihana and Hinerauwha Tamaiparea, had guarded the flame for years, but the once thriving marae was almost deserted when Dick arrived — this skinny young Marxist with his horn-rimmed glasses —looking uncannily like Woody Allen. He used to tell us stories about Te Whiti, rolling out the syllables of his name in a way I knew signalled a person who could do no wrong. It made me feel embarrassed. What kind of name was that and why was my father so gaga?

Not for the first or last time I felt obscure shame about the unrelenting differentness of my family and a compulsion to somehow hide it from the normal world, smooth things over between us and them.
Dick’s Ask *That Mountain*, which was an expansion of the earlier book *Parihaka Story*, was voted as one of the ten most influential books published in New Zealand.

Like all far-flung colonies, New Zealand’s early history was dominated by a raggle-taggle band of adventurers, half-baked scoundrels, racists, a few decent administrators, all men. Even though the establishment tried — with statues and street names everywhere — to commemorate them, it was pretty uphill work to turn them into heroes.

Te Whiti, so lovingly chronicled in Dick’s book, burst in on these decaying vaults like a flood of sunlight. Here was a real hero, inspirational, an intellectual, a fearless political leader with the common touch, a true revolutionary and man of moral weight who stood up for his people and went to gaol for them.

He fired the imagination of the nation by demonstrating its best qualities — modesty, decency, a kind of resourceful derring-do. His actions affirmed not only the possibility of their existence but also their admirableness. His life inspired a flood of books, paintings, an opera, music and poetry, as the power of his story gradually took permanent hold in the culture of New Zealand.

The sketch of a grave, rather handsome man — he refused to be photographed throughout his life — took on the weight of a cultural icon. Dick’s book, written in his usual passionately ironic style was the catalyst for Te Whiti’s emergence as a legendary historical figure.
Chances are, that, in the march of official history, with its vanguard of male establishment figures, Te Whiti, like many ‘folk’ heroes, would have been permanently pushed aside from mainstream culture, subject of only an occasional footnote, remembered by the Maori elders, his singing qualities and value to all New Zealanders lost forever. Certainly the list of inaccurate and even mendacious statements about Te Whiti and my father’s book, made by well-known New Zealand historians and included in later editions of Parihaka Story makes for sobering reading.

These were serious cultural influences for a child, this heady explosion of politics, art, the real world, blasting through the deadlands of the fifties. How could you not be marked by them forever, the sounds of certain words, phrases, music, pictures, a particular type of old comrade whose wrinkled face showed so clearly the marks of suffering and hope, armies of people walking through the snowy wastes of Russia singing? How could you not believe in the possibilities of courage, altruism, and truthfulness when you saw proof of them all around you from when you were small?

This was a gift from my parents I always understood and embraced. I made it my own with all the secret fierceness of my nature and never let it go.
By 1953 the Revolution was a bitter pill for my parents. The Auckland branch of the Communist Party pretty well Stalinist to a man, and had ostracised them for some supposed political crime (probably not toeing the party line), the organisation was run on increasingly authoritarian lines and long before the Hungarian uprising they’d had enough.

I was aware of comings and goings, urgent consultations. There was a shorthand language I knew in my very bones before I understood what the words meant. For instance I realised that The Party was not an ordinary party with birthday cakes, but a mysterious, important rather sinister entity. People were sell-outs or solid, there was something called The Peoples’ Voice or PV for short, there were union meetings, and people called scabs. Most prized of all to me some people were described as ‘good’ by my father — his ultimate accolade about someone.

‘Is that man good?’ I’d ask hopefully, knowing that it was unlikely.
There were heated exchanges. Once in a childish way, I tried to make amends when my father had a shouting match with a comrade and friend of the family during a chance encounter on the beach. He finally stalked off and on an impulse I darted back under the forests of legs to thank her for her Christmas presents, which were always ravishingly exotic — colourful, stylish toys from China which smelt like foreign places. At the moment of seeing the woman’s surprised, hostile face I knew I’d blundered. To the woman sitting on the sand looking up at me, my mother and father were sellouts and renegades, beyond the pale, and as their daughter I had become as irrelevant. I could see from her eyes that all her old affection was cancelled out as if it had never been. This chilling revelation, my powerlessness in an adult world where such connections could be broken in a second by forces I didn’t understand, sent me scurrying back, deeply embarrassed, to fall in behind my father again, hoping he hadn’t noticed my defection.

A Christmas function we went to had the same ring of strangeness, a sense of threat in the air, as if day-to-day reality had slipped imperceptibly sideways, pushing everything slightly askew.

A leafless peach tree standing in a bucket in the middle of a bare hall, the way people milled joylessly, talking in undertones and drinking from paper cups, offended my sense of what was proper for Christmas. I knew I was expected to act like a child but my heart wasn’t in it. I ran and slid on the floor like the other kids, self-consciously, aware of the undercurrents in the room, feeling that it was all wrong and somehow sad without knowing why. All the same, there were pink paper flowers wreathed clumsily into the bare branches of the tree, a shock of
softness and colour. My mother had gone to the trouble of making them, a busy communist housewife still hopeful and brave enough to spend time making something uselessly beautiful in that gaunt room. They glowed in the hall but even her gallant attempt couldn’t disguise the bleakness.

In fact that grisly function was being held at the time when Elsie and Dick were on the verge of leaving. Hungary was breaking over their heads, the brutality of the invasion too casual and practised to be glossed over. Party members were already cementing themselves into the grim bunkers of a totalitarianism so extreme it led to the New Zealand Communist Party becoming the only ally of Albania.

Dick described the Auckland members as being of two types: the ones who’d let you have a drink of water on your way to the gulag and the ones who wouldn’t, a typically stylish illustration of the totalitarian mind. I imagined us sitting in an ordinary train like the Auckland to Wellington express, very thirsty, and the people we knew looking in on us through the windows, shaking their heads when we asked for water.

We children seemed to absorb this complicated information and develop emotional ties to all the abstractions and theories. My father’s teachings were so real to me that I not only understood why my parents were communists but also why it took them a while to face the reality of the Soviet regime. It took me years to admit to myself that Koestler, Orwell and Solzhenitsin were neither sellouts nor traitors but, ironically, the kind of writers my father taught me to admire, heroes who told the truth (at least about Russia). There was a brief
moment, a snap and there it was — a chunk of teaching dislodged in my mind and fell away 
forever. The central theme of one of my favourite novels, Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Mandarins*, 
was still a dilemma I understood and sympathised with in my teens — whether to 
publish the news of Stalin’s death camps and thereby play into the hands of the capitalist 
press, or, chillingly, not to. The characters in the novel were people I recognised, their 
aspirations, hopes and fears familiar. It was strange that all this was absorbed so completely 
when I hardly knew the words, these harsh arguments finding their way into my psyche. I 
understood them emotionally, even if I couldn’t articulate them — the slow swelling tragedy 
of the betrayal of all my parents stood for.

First of all it was assumed the stories were lies because the capitalist press would do anything 
to denigrate the triumphs of communism, a seemingly reasonable assumption. People who 
spoke out were in the pay of their masters, sellouts, and puppets. But things became trickier 
once the noise from Russia itself became louder from alternative sources, people they trusted. 
They still believed it was wrong to publish these disquieting stories, as it would give the 
powers of evil more ammunition against what were probably only rare and temporary 
measures. And sometimes force was necessary against powerful and ruthless adversary’s bent 
on destroying the revolution. It was petit-bourgeois to worry about the human rights of a few 
snivelling reactionaries who were standing in the way of the happiness and well-being of the 
world’s people, their glorious new future. You had to break eggs to make an omelette; the 
prize of freedom, justice, equality was so tantalisingly close that you couldn’t afford to make 
a wrong move and see it all crashing down before your eyes.
There was pride and shame mixed in with this denial, complete disbelief that ideals could be so cynically perverted, that they could all have been hoodwinked for so long.

And still the drum kept beating louder, until one by one they fell silent before the awful truth — which was that the regime they had worked for so joyfully, with so much faith, had been lying and murderous almost from the beginning, its leader a blood-thirsty psychopath who sent millions to their death without turning a hair.

How did my parents feel? They’d never been to Russia but by then the facts of the Stalinist death camps, the execution of dissidents, the suffering of the Russian people had been slowly percolating through to them. Was the story they were told so compelling that it was impossible to let go, or did the truth dawn on them little by little, as unpleasant truths sometimes do?

It’s hard to know what they did with the thought that even though it was in all innocence and for the best of motives, that they had lent their support for a decade to imprisonment and torture, the death by starvation and execution of millions of their fellow beings. That was their dark night of the soul, they had to take responsibility for it and come to terms with it.

In the microcosm of their dilemma in far away innocent New Zealand lay one of the truths of the 20th Century, that in the end, though the ideals of Nazism and Communism were worlds apart, they had a similar outcome — blood and death, the ranting of power-crazed leaders, the slaughter of millions, the death of the soul.
I never knew what they did with that in the privacy of their own emotions, as it wasn’t in the family tradition to talk honestly about the deep and secret matters of the heart. Dick once said he didn’t believe that making a mistake like that qualified him to be an expert anti-Communist as many ex-communists became.

They didn’t ricochet into the wildernesses of fundamentalist religion, idiot right wingery or a life of serious money-grubbing as many ex-communists did. They stayed on keel, chastened and wiser, less dogmatic perhaps, but still alive with that airy political grace of theirs, the compassion and hopefulness that had always fuelled them.

So there it was, in a far away New Zealand household, a pretty gamey brew for nourishment: the moral and spiritual dimensions of compassion, for instance, and the responsibility for righting wrongs. The robust Marxism which gave my political thinking such a sturdy rational basis, the power of art to move and excite and inspire, and finally, a painfully intimate knowledge of the way ideology, perverted by power-seeking and lies, was helped along its dark death-dealing path by the little crimes of omission, ignorance and denial.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

And so the family moved to Titirangi, which in Maori means fringe of heaven. We settled on a ridge overlooking the bush and sea. There was a ravishingly sweet smell in the air, we saw the grey-blue of the Manukau Harbour from all the windows. The new house my parents designed faced the breath-taking view, that primal view that became so familiar and beloved to me, with its quiet, dense ranks of kauri and punga, and beyond in the distance like a dream, the glimpse of shining water. Still trees and the glimpse of harbour — it was a mysterious, ethereal glimpse that struck right to my heart.

They made a courtyard garden with papyrus growing in a goldfish pond beside the window, planted wisteria along the eaves, built a wooden deck above the bush, cut steps down the side of the hill into the trees below.

We came from Sandringham, wide-eyed innocents, straight into Paradise.
Dick, for one, took to our new life as if he’d been born to it. Startling new worlds were opening up, the rigid mentality of New Zealand in the fifties cracking open at last. My parents had left the Orwellian absurdities of the New Zealand Communist Party and Sandringham gentility in one fell swoop to dive headfirst into an upper middle class, fast-track, decadent, bohemian world. It was as if someone had applied a match to a paddock of burnt grass and whoompf! The moderating boundaries of suburban life, bringing up young children, all the safe nose-to-the-grindstone routine suddenly went up in flames.

So there we were, our family perched above the wild blue harbour, bush through the windows, tuis calling, a soft country road leading to our door. An admirable family in many ways, full of drama and hidden sorrow, alive with music and the presence of young people. Think of the dark dead houses of our parents’ childhoods — this one was full of sky and bush and sea and light through endless windows, white walls glowing with paintings, polished wooden floors covered with bright rugs. There were hardly any doors to hide secrets behind, only rooms leading onto the green garden and the singing bush beyond, one triumphant space flowing free, spilling out onto the deck, nudging against the windows and the heavenly view. It was a simple brick and wood house tucked into the landscape, stylishly rough, large windows on the seaward side and a long right-of-way drive which they planted with thick bamboo on one side, skirting a century-old house crumbling into the garden behind us. It was everything they wanted after their own pinched-in childhood homes. Three sharp teenage daughters, a blonde sturdy son, a constant flow of visitors, conversations, books, music, a burgeoning career for Dick as a historian and writers, painters, rakish academics wherever he looked. Elsie took an innocent pride in being the keeper of the family flame, our
endless cool giving us membership in a small group of uber-families dotted around New Zealand, people like the Melsors; avant-garde houses full of precocious kids and cool parents, bohemian, left wing, artists and writers. My mother used to quote the neighbours’ comments about the three beautiful Scott girls at any opportunity. There she was in her perfect house with her witty original husband, her children, their friends, her relish for holding open house and welcoming strangers, running the same kind of household as the one she lived in when she was a young woman with her brothers and sisters.

They’d made the pilgrimage, paid their dues, travelled down the long road to another class, another world.

Those early years in Titirangi when I was twelve, thirteen and fourteen were so full of promise — a trembling new world — that they gave me a sense of limitless possibilities. It was sophisticated for me in a way that nothing ever was again. Certain films like *Interiors* and *The Ice Storm* brought back that nervy, early 60s intellectual sensibility and at the time films like *Through a Glass Darkly, Shadows, 400 Blows, 81/2, Ballad of a Soldier, Five White Nights* had a huge impact on me. Salinger was the writer who epitomised the era, coldly elegant, brilliant, neurotic, women hating, deeply seductive.

I was thirteen going on thirty, apprehensive but fascinated, meeting the kind of people I had never known existed, roaming the Titirangi bush, going to coffee bars and parties, listening to conversations that enthralled me. It was a world of innocence and extreme cynicism, of wit, of being on your mettle intellectually, and — among the adults I knew — of sexual adventuring,
heavy drinking, an unselfconscious women-hating which I registered but had no words for. It was a masculinist brittle intellectualism that was heady and exciting. There was a kind of crackling promise in the air which I have never experienced since.

It remained a reference point for me, that neurotic, electric American-influenced early sixties intellectual culture, all brains and brilliance and anguish, at a time in America when there was still irony in the air and ghosts of the left-wing heroes of the 30’s still held sway.

Underneath the virtuoso displays, sex was circling all the time. Men were openly top dogs and the older wives nearly all unhappy, guarded, watchful as their husbands circled around each young woman coming new on the scene, their tongues out, tails wagging, not trying to hide it because it was still their prerogative. People didn’t do drugs then; it was booze. Everyone drank a lot. The promise of sex was always in the air, fuelled by booze and boredom, but somehow more guiltily erotic than present-day, more matter-of-fact arrangements. I saw women with their pale complexions, flat fringes, black eye-makeup, slowly dying of attrition, boredom, drinking themselves into a stupor, swamped by self-dislike, personality disorder craziness, the undermining male attitude they received on a regular basis without the logic of feminism to help them. One woman sat on our sofa beside me and told me in an anguished voice that her menstrual blood was leaking all over the floor and the sofa. I had a sudden cold little feeling that that was what madness was when I realised it was only in her mind, a fear shared by every woman that her bleeding is uncontrollable.

I read Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Agee, Fast, as well as New Zealand writers like Mulgan, Frame, Mansfield and Morrieson. Every week I read one modern novel from the library and one classic, working my way through the joys of Zola, Hugo, and Eliot and the first of many
rereadings of Austen and Dickens. The Russian classics came later, as did all those weird macho kings of the early 60s like Miller, Mailer and Rechy with their louche, outrageous charm and misogyny. At that suggestible age every book was a discovery and serious obligation. Once I chose one I felt duty bound to finish it however much it dragged. I walked up the leafy Rangiwai Crescent to the library, which was hushed and lovely with views of the sea and bush from every window, and even that walk up our soft country road was a joy in itself.

I took out the plain, severe copies of the classics with their delicate typeface, tissue-thin pages, musty smell and the worlds within. Reading, like writing, was always there, a parallel private universe, a constant. As soon as I learned to read, I began my lifelong habit of reading continuously and at great speed, ravenous as a junkie, never tiring of it. It was essential both as an escape and an engagement with the world. It was also a continuous exposure to all the technical possibilities and parameters of style, giving me an understanding of what I could do as a writer, the sure knowledge that almost anything was possible. Above all, in a similar process to writing, I loved the creation of another world in my head and the feeling of sinking into it, lost and absorbed.

Folk music was the coolest music of the early sixties but it burst into flame with Bob Dylan. His freaky, savvy genius, devastating combination of serious poetry, blues and blistering polemics sent us reeling. Dick was given a tape of his by American friends when he was probably still Bob Zimmerman — *Please See that my Grave is Kept Clean* — and played it loudly all night, drunkenly exclaiming over and over,
‘This is the Second Coming!’

It was too. All the other folk singers we loved — Peter Paul and Mary, The Kingston Trio, Joan Baez, even the gorgeous Odetta — faded into insignificance besides his angry languorous drawl, and so did their innocence.

The houses of my parents’ friends were coldish, plain and modern with angular furniture, huge exposed beams everywhere, masses of books, abstract paintings, picture windows. We used to do a lot of babysitting. In one house the windows were so huge that during a storm they began billowing in and out; we sat there petrified in case the whole extravagant magnificence of the place with its massive, fashionable roof beams would simply crash down on our heads. We always had a good look at peoples’ bookcases in our snoopings around their houses and with this friend’s collection we noticed that he had many repeat copies in his acres of shelves — as if he’d lost track of what he had, or was maybe buying in bulk, as my father suggested wickedly.

Another babysitting job was seriously awful — a single mother with three children engaged me to look after the children when they came home from school and cook their dinner for them before she arrived from work three or four hours later. I loved the children and we were very affectionate with one another but the situation was beyond my capabilities. Their family album had all the photos of their father cut out or scribbled over and there was a wild, sad, forlorn disorder in the house. I knew I wasn’t coping when, one day, two of the kids directed
the hose full-stream into the window, flooding out the kitchen, until I managed to wrestle it off them.

The Shadbolts lived down our road in a house overlooking the sea, Gill, large and square-built, cheerfully country, with her jutty face, asthma and a baby always on her hip, her notoriously slapdash housekeeping; Maurice solid, strong-chinned, every inch the writer with his big muscular legs, his pipe, the way he looked at women. When he first came to our house I was so completely awed that he was a real writer, I wanted to touch him; later when he held hands with me in the car coming home from a party, I became a little less reverential if not downright sceptical.

There were the Strewes in their Garden-of-Eden house on Scenic Drive with papyrus and banana palms, the first I'd ever seen: Odo with his insinuating aggressive sexuality and rumpled angry face, Jocelyn quiet and brown-haired with their four beautiful blonde children. Ted Smythe, who was tall, sad-eyed, bearded, looking exactly like Jesus, I always thought, his paintings big slabs of colour on the walls of his small bush house. Brian Bell terrified the life out of us girls with his craziness, his jittery, ever present, overwhelmingly unattractive lust. He made a horrendous soup out of everything edible in our cupboards one drunken night, then left it sitting there in a saucepan the next morning. Once he walked round our house tapping at each window jauntily, peering in, calling out to us, while we girls and Elsie, all squashed up in the bedroom wardrobe, waited him out, trying to stifle our giggles. He wrote ‘bum’ in silver paint on the Strewes’ garage doors so that it lit up in the car headlights — he was a crazy Palmerston North boy with mad eyes, who could never sit still, sly and obsessive
but in a weird way gallant in his despair. The Droeschers, who were very civilised old European, Rosalind big and dark-haired, her father Werner a burly, bearded, kind man. Colin McCahon and his wife went on their endless walks around the Titirangi roads, he slim and boyish with a haunted sensitive face, the bad teeth and gentle feyness of an Irish poet.

Our next door neighbours were the elegant and beloved Lusks, Barbara and John, living serenely in a posh house with their three daughters, a haven of normality for us. We used to baby-sit for them, sitting in the leather armchairs reading John’s horrendous medical dictionaries until we were nearly sick with the gore. Horrified and fascinated, we had to take occasional sips of the brandy from their store in the cupboard but not enough for them to notice.

We made close friends with the Forlong girls, Helen and Debbie, tall, beautiful, witty girls from the burbs, daughters of Elizabeth who was an old friend of my parents. Debbie and I went on a biking trip up North to Russell and the Bay of Islands during a school holiday, staying at strangers’ places, living off the sweet oranges we bought from stalls on the side of the road. We had all sorts of adventures, including being bailed up in a phone box by a football team and freewheeling on our bikes for hours through the green countryside roads, free as birds. We stayed at one place, with a woman who had a rasping nicotine-y voice and Lolita beside the spare bed. She told me very sharply, ‘Stop apologising and stop thanking me, you don’t have to go through life doing that.’ I only remember because I wish I’d taken her advice.
Helen and Debbie spent a lot of time with us at Piha and Titirangi and I stayed at their house. We all loved books, music, clothes, boys, politics and in the end we became as close as sisters, and have remained so ever since.

My best school friend was Susan Monigatti, a striking girl with a freckled face and wild black eyes. Both of us were angst-ridden, bored with school, and under our scornful world-weary exterior, deeply naïve. On our long bus trips to Auckland Girls’ Grammar we were so bored we played a vicious scratching game. We had to try and get in the first lightning-fast scratch on the other’s arm. She would sit there, blank-eyed, a blazer draped all over her with only one long, sharp fingernail poking out from beneath, ready to strike. We both ended up with bleeding scratches all over our arms, gothic little girls that we were. At school some of the teachers were so insufferably tedious that we invented games to wile away the day. One woman who took us for interminable double periods of English, loved the sound of her own voice and raved on and on as we sat there transfixed with boredom. She was very tall with huge breasts and a great, flat, smashed-looking pinkish face smeared with pancake makeup. We decided that all of us would look fixedly at her left breast right through class — friends in other classes were to do the same — until we fondly hoped she would run screaming from the room. Nothing happened. She was in such full flood she never noticed. I liked our proper history teacher Mrs Goodfellow, with her dark shining hair and vulnerable mouth. She took us seriously and her lessons were intellectually stimulating. She was a very defensive secretive, beautiful somehow damaged woman who fascinated me.
Susan and I took a whole bottle of beer and some of her mother’s cigarettes into the bush and pretended to be rollickingly drunk. I was disappointed that nothing extraordinary happened, except that I felt sick as a dog and headachy.

Even in summer the bush below our house smelt damp and rich with the black crumbling earth and manuka fallen like tea leaves in black drifts under the trees. There was stillness, with the trunks of the quiet dense groves of kauri soaring up in a funereal calm of soft undergrowth and the smell of wet earth.

Sitting in ‘my’ bush was a different experience each time, a private joy which could sometimes turn into feelings of delicious panic, a sense that the trees might not be what they seemed; that a spirit hovered there and I, as an alien being in that quiet green inanimate world was the obvious target.

Acres of shining mudflats when the tide was out, blue-gray harbour and red clay cliffs, rutted rocky roads winding through sunlit trees, all became part of my life. The smell of wet leaves sea salts heavy in the air, dust in summer, and the sharpness of the senses. Soaked in the rain, walking barefoot on the stones, stumbling through the undergrowth to find the source of a small muddy stream, scratched and sunburst, I had a feeling of oneness, of belonging, an unselfconscious acceptance of this landscape as part of myself.

Once, when I was standing at the local shopping center I gazed over the paling fence to catch a faint glimpse of the mudflats far below. The heat, irritation and noise of the shops suddenly
dwindled, became an irrelevant background to the peacefulness of that brief heavenly
glimpse, the comforting knowledge of my connection with it.

Years later I stood there with my husband and girls.

‘They’ve pulled the house down,’ I told them sadly. ‘There’s the bamboo, there’s our lovely
neighbours’ house. There’s the sea and the ridge.’

It was ok though, my own girls ran down the road, laughing, long-legged as colts beautiful in
the sunlight.

‘We used to keep ducks in the garden,’ I said. I saw them vividly, huge, drenched, ungainly
birds that used to stand on their ducklings with their great brute feet and sometimes end up
grinding them into the mud with their weight and killing them, their faces inscrutable except
for a faint look of unease.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There were our new companions, Jo’s and mine. We met Nicholas and Julian almost as soon as we arrived in Titirangi. Their uncle was Wolfgang Rosenberg, he of the panama hat in Eastbourne. Nicholas and Julian were a revelation, unlike any other boys we’d met. They wore corduroy pants and desert boots and had longish hair; they talked about books and music and politics and took our opinions seriously; they had the same kind of weird parents. They became our inseparable companions, we spent all our time together at our house or at Piha. Nick was very tall, gangly, red-haired and freckled with a dry sense of humour and a lovely helpless laugh, Julian smooth, dark and handsome. Both were very intelligent. They rode big muddy bicycles and wore cut-off jeans, leather-patched shorts and oily parkas. They spoke with English accents and, unlike many New Zealanders I knew showed their love for each other openly. They ate home-made yoghurt which we’d never tasted before and they smelt of the bush and the oil they used for their bikes.

When they first came to our house Jo said crushingly, ‘Is that what you do all day, ride around on your bikes?’

They were big and masculine and kind and I loved them. We shared a precocious cynicism, hiding the wildly fluctuating swings of insecurity and secret ambition behind a carefully
cultivated veneer of black humour and sophistication. We had subconsciously absorbed the expectations from our parents that we would all excel at some creative, political or academic endeavour. It was really only a matter of which.

Would we be painters or actors or writers or philosophers? A philosophy lecturer was the height of cool for instance. Could we change the world? If so, how? We believed anything was possible — our only problem was in the choosing. Money was seen for what it was — a necessary means to get by but a boring and incomprehensible goal in itself. We had much more interesting fish to fry.

Only middle-class children could have acted with so much aplomb and all the leisure in the world, as though they would never have to earn their living. For to all of us poised on the brink, life was full of potential and there was no fear in our facing of it. We were encapsulated in a world of bush and sea, of university to come after we got school out of the way and then a misty but ‘right’ future, preferably with each other. Like old men blinking in the sun on park benches we were quite content to spend the day with each other in no particular way. In that first year, there was none of that polite malice you find in many friendships, but an old-world courtesy and mutual deference.

In that first year together, we rarely left the district. We took interminable walks, for some reason often in the rain with the wind fresh and biting on our cold faces, the orange-y scarlet clay of our district streaking the sodden bush roads and in gashes along the dripping banks, us trudging along doggedly, sometimes remaining silent for miles. The ritual was to go round the
beach when the tide was out and the sand freshly washed by the sea and rain. Trees growing right to the edge of the water, flaky sandstone rocks like shiny chocolate with pools of seawater reflecting the blue-gray sky, a strong salty smell, seagulls wheeling and crying above the red clay cliffs. Then we would go off back up the road, talking earnestly, and picking flowers from the wayside as we made our way home.

All four parents taught us in different ways to use our powers of judgment on books, paintings, music, to be open to new ideas and to appreciate the old, but it was Dick who influenced our thinking most with his effortlessly stimulating conversation and terrifying mockery of everyone. He was in for the long haul, disliking obviousness, the easy criticism of New Zealand society that was so available to anyone with half a brain, so his analysis was always original and subtle. We recognised that he loved New Zealand and saw precisely where its beauty and power lay, long before that kind of knowledge became common currency. That was his gift to us. He opened our eyes, kept our critical faculties at the ready, so that we did not waste our time on trivia and easy pickings. Tear down all you like but learn appreciation, see the unexpected and embrace it, discipline yourself for subtleties, learn to celebrate wholeheartedly when it’s called for. So he taught us to love the landscape and culture, both Maori and Pakeha, of New Zealand long before it became fashionable to do so.

Nick and Julian had long conversations with him, sitting around the fire in winter, outside in the garden or at the Piha bach. There was a storm of wit and male badinage; they were all strutting their stuff so there was a lot of impressing going on, with mockery and gales of laughter.
Dick loved talking to young people provided they were intelligent and witty. Once he’d put them through the intellectual ropes and was satisfied that they had shaped up they became one of us and he never condescended to them. He particularly liked a quick lethal sense of humour. Cool was everything in our household, a mixture of style and looks and attitude, with character coming a very poor second as a consideration. The postmortems on visitors once they’d gone could be pretty vicious and always made me nervous. I already knew with a sinking heart that all their shortcomings could just as easily apply to me. We were taught to savage anyone who didn’t come up to scratch and I suppose no one did, including we children. I used to worry about whether people ‘belonged’ or not. It was a kind of game we played as a family – the clothes people wore, their politics, the way they spoke. There were words for it of course; there were so many words for everything in our family, but judgment was swift and unforgiving. People were ok, or they were not and the worst of it was that I could never work out why. All of us were under Dick’s spell, the worst and the best of him, the damage and the stimulation – lack of acceptance, charm, intellect the sheer power of his personality and all of us knew that chilling moment of his contempt.

The boys’ father was a Jewish university lecturer in town planning, a socialist refugee from Nazi Germany, always under the shadow of his famous, brilliant older brother, Wolfgang. He was sad-eyed and reproachfully lustful, with thick lips and puffy hands. He was a Bellovian character, highly intelligent, fumbling, earnest and good hearted with a sexual itch that made him ruthless in his relentless and embarrassing sexual quests. He drove a sports car and wore leather patches on his jacket, but his large domelike head and grave eyes betrayed him — he
was an intellectual, not a sporty man about town. As a father his attitude to the boys was a combination of love, concern and an apparently inexhaustible need to undermine them and lament their inadequacies. It was common knowledge that he had a mistress, a small dark-eyed gentle woman whom he later married.

The boys’ mother, his first wife, was a tall spare grey Englishwoman. She was like a nun living sternly in their house overlooking Wood Bay. She had a pared-back ascetic face, pale shiny English complexion, she wore sandals and woollen dresses and always seemed deeply unhappy and resentful, as well she might. She disapproved of us, especially when the beautiful Jo was seen driving around Titirangi roads on her Vespa, wearing only a small bikini, her blonde hair flying in the wind. We were nervous around her and felt ill at ease in their house, lovely as it was with its wooden interior and serene views of the sea.

The four of us saw French and Italian movies together at the Lido. I wrote in my diary at fourteen, ‘I went to *L’Annee Derniere at Marienbad* dressed very decoletley (sic) in a pair of shorts, bras, stockings well covered with a respectable coat and I had the overpowering desire to take my coat off very calmly in front of the bescented, bejewelled mob. However I didn’t.’

I think it was Nicholas who dared me to do it. We went to fashionable coffee bars like the Quintet and places like the Maori Community Centre in Freemans Bay, with its raucous bands and breath of another world. We joined the Titirangi Drama Club under the gracious tutelage of Noeline Rogers. The rehearsals were held in the Rangiwai Hall, a brown creosoted building tucked in the bush below School Road, with verandahs jutting over the trees where
we sat to go over our lines together. We did a dramatic play about Cyprus, Jules and Jo as the romantic lead, and Julian had to say to her passionately, ‘Ask yourself, Thalia!’ but kept getting the name wrong.

I felt at home with secular Jewish culture, thanks to them. It was something I recognised: the value they placed on art, music and political activism, their own personal qualities of gentleness and intelligence. Their mother was a Quaker and we went to the plain hall in Mt Eden a couple of times to sit with the adults while they meditated and waited for someone to be inspired to speak, which felt very natural. The Quakers supported us when I suggested the idea of starting a youth branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, allowing us to use the hall for painting our banners and meetings. As an embarrassed group of adolescents we had our first ban-the-bomb march down Queen Street. A red-faced portly man, apoplectic with rage, followed us all the way down shouting hysterically that we needed a bath, a bit rich given that we were dressed in our best in a pathetic attempt to show our respectability. One woman told me years later that Titirangi YCND was the worst political organisation she’d ever belonged to – it was so frivolous and all we did was flirt.

By that time Jo and Julian had fallen in love and made an amazing couple, she beautiful with her wicked wit, a Brigitte Bardot look-alike with masses of unruly blonde hair, huge blue eyes, perfect skin. They were together for ages before I realised with a shock that they were having sex. I felt inadequate, so boyish and impractical beside her beauty and womanliness.
In fact we were all probably quite needy, early adolescents coping with our fathers’ wayward sex lives, mothers’ relentless unhappiness, our divided loyalties, our own burgeoning sexuality. Though we were deeply comfortable with each other in other ways, Nick would never wear shorts in front of us because he was so ashamed of his white freckly body. When we went for a swim he would keep pace with us at the very edge of the sand, firmly fully dressed. I would never show my legs either because I was deeply embarrassed about their thinness and, as a result, they didn’t see the light of day for years. We were as tormented, sophisticated and awkwardly urban as any Salinger teenager.

It was a friendship that brought us all a lot of pleasure, especially in the first year. For a while our happy world was mirrored by our parents’ friendship, before all the complications of sex, falling in love, our tumultuous lives, complicated things between us.

One walk was the quintessence of that ethereal, mysterious year of early adolescence. We went further afield that day, up towards Oratia, along a winding road of bush and farmland. It was an autumn afternoon, the orchardists’ bonfires were burning all along the road, the smell of wood smoke and fresh-cut pinewood lingering in the chill air as we passed. The leaves were turning golden in the smoky blue haze. We picked flowers and gathered pine cones for the fire in the stillness of the long afternoon, talking intensely together about our dreams and hopes, our burgeoning lives.
It’s hard to know quite how it happened, that seductive family blowing in and out of our lives like a hurricane, leaving us to mop up and wonder what hit us for years afterwards. The Storms had the neurotic brilliance of Salinger’s Glass family, the same urban smarts, sophistication and eerie dysfunction. Beautiful, hip, fresh from America, they were seriously irresistible in the boring downtown Auckland of the early 60’s. No wonder my parents fell for them, their friendship taking off into giddy intimacy within weeks.

He was a Professor of Psychology at Auckland University but there was nothing of the academic about him. He reminded me of Humphrey Bogart with his pitted skin and sensual mouth. He had that cynical, tender take on the world, the whiff of Americano street tough.
She was dark-haired, creamy, very young, very sexy, with a voice and laugh that could lift the hair on any man’s neck.

The Department of Psychology probably didn’t know what hit them either. Academics and writers all fell for her; her electric presence swirled up a great testosterone storm in that quiet establishment in Princes Street. The bored wives — and in those days most women were wives and bored — in turn fell for Tom, as did we girls of course.

It was a glorious time.

I wrote in my diary ‘I really like the Storms!’

There was an intense friendship right from the beginning between Tom and Dick, an instant amused recognition of shared understanding, common ground, similar dry wit. Their conversations were so fast, so highly referential and witty that it was like watching a brilliant display of fireworks, each shower eclipsing the last. It was the pleasure they took in intellectual pursuits, the excitement of ideas, that was so infectious. They appreciated each other in that beaming competitive way men do when they meet their intellectual match. Tom was the one person I knew who could outwit Dick, picking up the meaning of his most elliptical observations before he finished his sentence, eliciting great shouts of laughter as they parried and thrust and drank together long into the night.
Those crackling drunken nights full of eloquence and laughter and drinking — I’ve never heard conversations like that again when music, literature, politics, art were a seamlessly shared electric language.

If you dared to join in, your brain had to be in top gear, revving, you had to work all the time or you’d be mercilessly cut down. Money, personal relationships, sport were never mentioned; it was music, paintings, books, politics, science, philosophy; ideas of all kinds that were dissected, discarded, focussed on intently. These conversations were like gladiatorial combat, showcasing the seamless wit of their friendly, deadly skirmishes. Mostly I watched and listened, but once I was moved to argue with Tom that animals could feel and think, giving as example our lordly and mysterious cat Mickey. Those were the days of the worst Watsonian excesses and I was no match for his politely incredulous rebuttal. He explained that animals were just a collection point of synapses clicking away under stimulus and in the end I had to agree, even though privately I never believed it. He was a professor after all and a man who, without knowing it, I found very sexy.

He was just naturally cool. I knew that he was a real man who would never be interested in a little girl like me — he was way out of my league. The way he spoke and moved and laughed and smoked — everything he did was somehow compelling. I didn’t even know what it was, except that I wanted it.

When you entered the fray with them it was like being on a high wire, dangerous, you had to keep your head, never falter for a minute, pirouetting up there in the scarlet shadows of the
circus tent, performing for your life. It was gloriously heady though when it turned deadly I knew I could go for a spectacular fall.

The two families went on trips together. Dick wanted to show them the National Park on the Desert Road, the three snowy volcanoes sprawling in the middle of a vast lunar landscape. The plan was to stay in Waihohonu Hut, a rough trampers’ hut on the lower slopes of Mount Ruapehu, which you could only reach by a track from the road. Nguarahoe is active, still occasionally sending great plumes of smoke and ash into the air. It was one of Dick’s unforgettable dangerous expeditions.

We walked for five miles up the stony foothills on a blue day with the clear vistas of snow and rocks and scree stretching forever, the thrill of mountain air, snow in the distance, unfamiliar delicate russet alpine plants beside our path. That night we slept in the thick-planked bunks of the hut with no mattresses, the wind howling through the cracks, the fire flickering all night, the other trampers snoring and farting in the tiny space.

We began the serious climb very early next morning in the bitter cold. It’s hard to know what the Storms thought of it as first. After all, we were used to the raging discomforts and epiphanies of trips with Dick.

The Storms, their small daughter Polly and me only got as far as the higher scree slopes before we decided to turn back; the Rosenbergs, Stormy, Dick and Jo pressed on to reach the
summit. The dreamy blueness of the day before had vanished into rain and heavy mist. In the freezing cold we lost our way and walked in circles for an hour and a half.

‘I shall never forget how scared I was in that cold wilderness,’ I wrote in my diary with many dramatic underlinings, ‘it was so desolate, so I persuaded them to follow our footprints back and at last we found the hut.’

Back at the hut we were relieved to see that the trampers of the night before had all gone – no doubt because they knew about the bad weather setting in. We lit a fire, made dinner and waited anxiously. The rest of the family finally arrived after nightfall frozen blue with that triumphant glowing look people always have after surviving one of Dick’s insane trips.

It began to snow and we all went outside to stand in the luminescent dusk, the snow falling softly around us, bitter cold, as beautiful as anything I’d ever seen as it settled silently on rocks, the ground, on each tiny leaf.

The next night, once down the mountain, on the way back to Auckland in the car we passed a thermal pool which had closed up for the night. We climbed the fence and lay in the warm velvety water in pitch darkness, lapped in the drowsy heat, wisps of steam spiralling up from the surface. It was one of those moments, incandescent, the stars above us in the stillness of the country night, the mysterious bush shadows all around the pool. I could see everyone’s eyes shining in the dark as we talked and laughed softly, hear the ripple of the inky water with each languid movement.
‘It was,’ I wrote, ‘pure heaven’.

No one could do trips like my father. With their risky mix of adventure, extravagant discomfort, physical danger, illegality and fun, they had all the pleasures of real journeys into the unknown. You were expected to be courageous, stoical and reckless but in return there were serious rewards: a memorable experience, the joys of pushing yourself to the limit and coming out the other side, filthy, exhausted, battered, gloriously triumphant.

No ordinary holiday with its safe predictability, comfort, motels, warm beds, sensible food, was ever quite the same for me. We kids climbed incredibly steep cliffs — I can still see a miniscule ledge of grass above me that I knew would be too fragile for my weight, below me the ground was a long way off — tramped miles over rough beautiful country and camped in wild places miles from anywhere. We stole artifacts from derelict houses, making getaways in the car with our loot at the back, Dick reassuring us that if we didn’t rescue them they’d only rot.

Once, in a totally derelict house in Grafton, as Dick and I walked cautiously through the cobwebby darkness, a whining shriek, unmistakably human, stopped us in our tracks. So awful was the sound I immediately imagined it was some old woman sitting there in the dark, terrified, her mind finally snapped by our arrival. It turned out to be an ancient phonograph, the needle still on a 78 record set off by the vibrations of our footsteps.
On our trips we lived on bread and cheese and, in Dick’s case, lashings of red cask wine. We sat around camp fires in the vast darkness and slept on the ground under the stars. It was one of the many interesting things he taught us — that the best travelling comes from simplicity, using your imagination and knowledge to appreciate the landscape. You could only achieve that by travelling light.

And here was the miracle: the Storms, urban sophisticates as they were, knew what he was doing and they played his game better than anyone he’d met. The trip to the mountains was a test they passed with flying colours, they never put a foot wrong. No wonder they were people he accepted unconditionally, their perfection heralded by him to all of us. Here were people who could do no wrong. Endless examples of their style and cool abounded. No wonder it was all so heady. We’d never seen Dick give so much approval.

For me there was also Stormy their son, who was my age, the munchkin, as Elsie called him. Stormy was the boy who introduced us all in the first place.

Nicholas and Julian had been talking a lot about an American boy they thought was the Mr Cool before they finally brought him home to us. They produced him as if he was a rocket they’d just lit and were standing back from for the bang.

He was shortish, dark, very pale, quite handsome in a troubled way, a gypsy boy. He walked around the living room on tiptoe with a mocking tight smile as we watched him expectantly. He had picked up a nail and was squinting at it intently. He muttered something and we all
waited. None of us could hear what he said but I had a feeling it was something profound, that he was miles out on a mystic limb of his own. He was instantly irresistible with his drawling American purr, a kind of boy genius who was always wincing away from life, appalled by his parents, looking up at the sky as he muttered sarcastic comments which we suspected were incredibly brilliant but often couldn’t understand. He was a walking, talking Holden Caulfield and I immediately found him fascinating. We recognised each other straight away and became close friends. His sarcastic, bright, urban American wit was just as seductive and congenial to me as the boys’ Jewish culture: another gateway opening up to another world. Stormy’s wide precocious reading matched my own, though I could never understand his fascination for CP Snow. His joltingly fast intellect was exhilarating and we gloried in each other’s company. He was one of the few people I knew who really spoke my own most private language, even more so than Julian and Nicholas. We had the same obsessions, preoccupations and fears, the same bookishness.

I always felt sad for him and somehow guilty — he seemed so unhappy stuck at Kelston Boys High, where most of the boys were sport-obsessed jocks and probably thought he was a freak. He was offside with his family too, though he reserved his greatest disdain for his mother who kept trying to appease him, looking after him anxiously, out of her depth, as he went off into his own world after making some cruel remark.

The Rosenbergs, Jo and I, with our humble admiration, must have been a lifeline to him though he would never have admitted anything like that. He was very prickly, with an IQ off the scale and no outlet for his freaky genius.
Stormy and I were both innocents about sex. Repelled by our parents’ rampaging sexuality we had the same reaction to it — fear, scorn, feelings of inadequacy. It was a relief to me that, unlike any other boy who came visiting us, Stormy showed no interest in Jo, so I felt secure with him. We were like comrades, pals, our friendship a strangely pure safe world, a cone of silence.

There was something fraught about us under all the bravado and precocity. We were two fragile kids after all, although our friendship was played out against the gathering storm of our parents’ drama and eventually engulfed by it.
I knew all about sex, the reproductive cycle and how you made babies, but never thought to
connect it with my own feelings. All I knew when I was very young was that I wanted
something, a longing expressed in a sort of diffuse haze, which sometimes turned into a real
ache. I felt as if I were standing outside looking in on a mysterious pleasure I didn’t
understand and might never be allowed to experience. The first real dawning of it was as a
child when I stumbled on two lovers at Piha. They were lying together in the dunes kissing,
half-naked and I was spellbound. He was a bodgie, pale, urban, dark-haired, decadent in black
jeans, with muscular arms; she had milky white skin and a crucifix dangling in the smooth
cleft of her breasts. I don’t know who I was most attracted to — it was what they were doing
with such urgency and concentration that made my heart race. It was a glimpse into a secret
world I feared I’d never enter, a taste of longing that I believed no one else felt.
One glance was enough to fix them in my memory forever, the white skin, her breasts, the
silver crucifix, his sleepy eyed, fierce urgency, mouth swollen with desire. She was the
embodiment of the world of secret feminine power I thought I’d never possess, given my
skinny boyish body and ‘unfeminine’ proclivities. To be able to inspire such intensity in a
beautiful boy with my own body, by this mysterious expertise, was almost too unbearably exciting to contemplate.

Maybe that dark-haired pale boy forever became associated in my mind with sexiness, because all my life I was attracted to fuck-you types like that with their erotic mix of gutsy delinquent masculinity, a solid body, humorous, tender face, dark hair. In that mysterious carnal nymphet state I was all dreams and fantasies and fears which I kept to myself, believing no one else could have such depraved thoughts.

In primary school I liked a boy called Evan Daysh, tall and solid for his age, cheerfully, casually masculine. Margaret and I found out where he lived, made the long trek through unfamiliar streets and stood outside his house in an agony of excitement and embarrassment. There was no way we would have let him know we were there. He was singing ‘Blow the man down,’ at the top of his voice; we could hear him roaring out the words raucously and joyfully through the open window. It seemed to me to be a sign of love — in the mysterious way these things happen, standing on the street listening to him sing remained forever in my mind as a memorably erotic moment.

At Piha I saw a woman visitor who was wearing tight slacks, cross her legs, begin to slide her hand between her thighs caressingly, moving it back and forth. I watched her, riveted, and tried it out myself in the privacy of my bush hut. It felt wonderful letting my hand rest there but I guiltily withdrew it in case one of my sisters came up the track and caught me. Anyway, it felt too wicked to continue.
It was rock and roll that most expressed all the confused longings, the delicious blur of excitement, apprehensiveness, sex. Listening to the Top Twenty hit parade made me thrill with recognition.

In *Faith Singer* I wrote in another autobiographical piece,

‘We girls would sit lined up in front of the radio so close I could feel every vibration through the thin varnished wood. I knew all the songs by heart, every breath, the way they unfolded. The teenage voices singing of death and love and longing were a benediction of affirmation.

‘“That’s me, yes, that’s me,’ I thought ‘Or will be, maybe.’

‘It was a magical opening into the great thrumming world outside that I craved to be part of. It stirred sharp longings and I began to touch all the forbidden hidden crevices and swellings of my body that I’d somehow gained the impression from somewhere were to be ignored. It was like unwrapping a present I’d had in the cupboard for years – even the act of sliding my hand between my legs seemed deliciously shameful and perverse.’

The songs were such a potent mix of love and sexiness, those vigorous guys thumping on the skiffle boards and guitars, their lusty voices pledging undying love. It was their directness, unselfconscious vulnerability that I loved. It was pure emotion, pure sex. I felt as if they were singing directly to me. I thirstily soaked up the tide of feeling in their songs.
'Build your love on a strong foundation and happiness will follow you,’ sang Lloyd Price, or, ‘They say I’m robbing the cradle little darling because I’ve fallen in love with you’ or ‘Darling you can count on me till the sun dries up the sea, until then I’ll always be devoted to you.’

We loved the Everly Brothers, that honey soft duo with their anguished wail and tight harmonies. We three sisters put in a request for ‘Bird Dog’— thrilled when the name we gave ourselves — The three Jays — was called out over the radio.

‘He’s a rebel,’ sung by the Crystals was about the kind of guy I was most interested in, all flash and sexiness.

But I didn’t know exactly what it really meant, for all that. I felt the tentative stirrings of power over men — they all seemed so grown up, yet they were so incredibly intense about girls, even young ones like me. What absorbed me most was imagining what these men did. What happened when you were alone with them? The predator man with his beery grown-up voice singing to all of us teeny-boppers, calling us little darlings so seductively, when no one had ever called me that before. What did he really mean?

There was something secretly pleasurable to me about the thought of submitting to that rough power of theirs, of doing what they wanted, the thrill of sinking under the dark wave of whatever it was happened next.
There’s a certain dangerous age when very young girls try out their sexuality on the nearest male with no real understanding of what they’re doing. Some men mistake the seeming sophistication, knowingness and flirtatiousness for real (or pretend to) and then justify themselves by saying they are asking for it. In fact like most of my friends of that age I was a quivering mass of ignorance, fear and delight: a child, clueless, with no more sense of what I was doing than a blundering puppy trying out the world. It was a state that any adult without his own secret agenda could understand and respect, but then I had to learn, as we all did in those stern pre-feminist days, that some men had no scruples at all, and I had to look after myself because no one else would.

In my teens there was a lot of sly stroking and feeling up from adult men, boozy holding of hands, close hugging, one attempted rape by a deranged young man in his twenties, another by an older man, which I simply fended off without even discussing it with anyone.

In my diary at fifteen I wrote, ‘Have been trying to sleep but I can’t, I’m scared to death. I went out with him but decided I didn’t like him. He is too self centred, sex obsessed, sick in a bad way. He came round on Sunday with a friend and more or less forced Jo and I to go to the beach for a walk. He kept trying to carry me off and I was trying to hide my fear. Then we had a screaming match – I have never had such an argument with a boy in my life. He kept manhandling me, pushing me, yelling at me like Dad. I was really frightened and so furious that at one point I screamed like a fishwife. He said that he still liked me I still appealled to him, I had liked him why the change? He was so genuinely tied up with himself that he just
couldn’t understand it. I said idiotic things — I always do when I’m angry or sad — and probably made the situation worse. He was beside himself — I probably hurt his pride by rejecting him. His face looked so awful. He talked in a horrible soft voice.

‘Anyway I’m still frightened. He was desperate and I realise how sick he was, like a madman trying to reason, revealing this extraordinary egotism,

‘I’m a better person than you, I only want to help you.’ In a desperately logical voice. I just couldn’t bear it. As soon as I turned the light off I started getting nightmares and terrifying visions of what might happen. So I just couldn’t sleep.’

Women were fair game, the whole idea of harassment was simply not discussed. You just had to fight men off without hurting their feelings, which I did right throughout my teens. I have an unpleasant impression of a succession of flabby, heavy, deeply unattractive male bodies, the tiredness of pushing them away, their relentlessness.

But the sensual pleasures of early adolescence were everywhere. It could be delicious walking down leafy School Road in the warm afternoons after school with such a feeling of physical well being and joy in the world. I always said goodbye to my best friend Susan at the French Bay turnoff by the Toby Jug restaurant, and, left to myself for the last stretch of road, luxuriously meandered home, thinking about the day, the warmth of the sun on my back, the breath of bush and sea everywhere, even the scratchy feeling of my tunic bearable.
Normally I hated my uniform — as an aspiring beatnik, it was torture to wear such daggy clothes in public: Chrissie Amphlett was still unknown to me. We had to wear lace-up shoes, black stockings with lumpy suspenders, a dark blue worsted tunic and white blouse, and an awful Panama hat, the woolly kind in winter. I always ripped it off the minute I got home. On the very last day of high school, Susan and I stood in the middle of School Road and ritually ripped our hats and stockings to shreds in a delicious farewell.

I loved walking up our right-of-way drive past the tall bamboo on one side, the Larkins’ old house on the other, to our own house. My father would be writing at the kitchen table, papers scattered on every surface covered with his scrawly handwriting, beside him, my mother’s solid black Barlock typewriter with its cover on, ready for action. I had something to eat, did my homework, helped my mother in the house, talked to friends on the phone and visitors. I read on my bed, in our strange pokey bedrooms, which we called our horse stalls. There were no doors and the walls only went halfway to the ceiling so that we could throw apples cores over the gap at each other while we were lying in bed.

I would go down into the bush to sit for a while and dream, escaping somewhere to read or write in my diary. They were ordinary peaceful days of growing up. I wrote in my diary at 15, ‘Walking along the road — chilly, sunny — terrific boy with white smile and nice clothes flashes past on a motor scooter, we smile at each other, he turns and comes back and I feel so light hearted I wave and he waves back with another friendly grin. Fat old Maori wahines gossip in the doorways, small-thumb-in-the-mouth-below-dark-staring eyes children cling to
their skirts. They are obese in a comforting placid motherly way and as I pass they smile and again I feel happy. Everything seems to have a special significance, as if I had taken a drug and each object had sharpened and become more distinct. I notice small things like a can on its side oozing bloodlike tomato sauce, a small Indian boy squatting-pulling and pushing an empty wheelchair endlessly off and on the gutter making little absorbed brmming noises as he does so.”

I was also waiting for my breasts to grow and hair to appear on my body. It was taking so long I was beginning to worry it wasn’t ever going to happen. Sometimes when I woke in the morning and looked down to see an infinitesimal bump in the blankets I would hope against hope that they had grown in the night. Nor did I have any hairs anywhere, unlike Jo and my mother, or the girls I saw changing for swimming. They were so confident and comfortable in themselves with their lucky precious breasts and secret hair.

When I was first fitted for my uniform for Auckland Girls Grammar at 13, the relentlessly insensitive Scotswoman, with her claggy false teeth, nearly had me in tears. She kept saying over and over how small I was, how she’d never find anything to fit me and in all the years she’d worked there, she’d never seen someone so small at my age. She confirmed my worst secret fear, that I was a physical freak, doomed to a kind of unacknowledged dwarfish childhood for the rest of my life. I felt like a little girl, despairing that I’d ever become a woman. And who would want to marry me?
I used to watch how other girls walked around so nonchalantly in shorts with their brown legs, not even knowing what they had, entitled in a way I thought I never would be — my Nordic sisters and cousins with their golden rounded bodies.

I drifted around in that trancey state of a very young girl, incredibly secretive. Photos of the time showed a very thin, brown-haired girl with a thoughtful soft childish face. I dreamed of boys and had fantasies to do with kissing and being stroked but never about fucking. That was something I shied away from. I sensed instinctively that I was nowhere near ready for something that would be so powerful, I feared the great rush of it would wash away what little sense of self I’d managed to construct. Once I had sex, boys would have me under their control. I saw my parents’ marriage and others like it, the fate of the wives, and didn’t want to give way to that submissive quality I sensed in myself. None of this was thought out: it was just a powerful feeling.

I had a lot of trouble becoming a woman — it didn’t come easily at all. It was hard for me to work it out, how to be. My childish body and adult mind, my father’s in-your-face sexuality, the belief I had for years that I would never be able to be a real woman, attain that magic state of womanhood, have men look at me in that lost lustful way. I was the runt of the family, my nickname was Skinny, how could I ever change? I felt a fraud, as if somehow marked out, that I didn’t deserve the same physical blossoming as the other girls. I never had a sense of entitlement about anything, even about becoming a woman, it all had to be worked for.

All the same, confusingly, the promise of sex was extremely alluring. I wanted it in a vague undefined way, guessing the pleasure and power of it. When I found out friends and my sister
Jo were having sex I was quite thrown. It seemed too powerful and magical and mysterious in my mind to just go ahead and do it.

My friends and I discussed it endlessly at school lunchtimes. We had a private leafy pozzy among the trees where we sat eating our sandwiches, talking and laughing about sex in what we fondly imagined as a terribly sophisticated manner. But one day, when smooth, rounded, smiling Betty with her pretty plump olive-complexioned face, suddenly said she’d done IT we were aghast. When we asked in hushed voices how many times, it was the airy nonchalance with which she counted them off on her fingers with their pink nails — one, two, three then gracefully gave up that flabbergasted us! She couldn’t count them! It was unconceivable to us. One of our number had finally climbed the mountain, and didn’t know how many times. And didn’t seem to care! When we asked her what it was like she smiled and said something bland like ‘It was nice.’ Nice? We expected volcanoes and drama at the very least. But she sat there placidly eating her lunch, the same girl, seemingly unchanged by the cataclysm she’d been through.

It was all very well playing the cool cynical sophisticate, but when it came to the crunch we were babes in the woods.

Boys and sex were a mystery to me in spite of my friendship with Nicholas, Julian and Stormy, or even maybe because of that. Our high school was eccentrically Victorian, which added to my confusions. We were not allowed to talk to boys on the street while in school uniforms, even if they were our brothers. (‘Because, girls, people seeing you in the street
talking to a boy don’t know he’s your brother.’) When sanitary towels blocked up the school plumbing the Headmistress referred to them in a flustered sort of way as ‘certain articles’. One senior teacher always told her sixth formers, in a set speech that was presumably her idea of sex education, ‘When you lose your virginity, girls, you lose half of your soul.’

My parents were rung up by the Headmistress who was very worried about my sister Jackie. They went to see her. She told them, ‘We found a diary. Your daughter has been seeing a whole lot of boys. We’re not sure how far she’s gone with them either. We also found a whole lot of letters she wrote to them.’

My parents asked who they were, in great surprise, knowing Jackie did not appear to be into boyfriends yet. She had moved her bedroom into the garage and stayed in there a lot with her girlfriends and her pet rooster Cheery Chick, who used to attack visitors viciously, sidling sideways at them and then letting rip, often drawing blood. Once, when the music got too loud, Jackie appeared at the living room door, threw a hairbrush at the assembled guests and disappeared again. Boys at that stage in her life were not high in her priorities. Later, when she blossomed into an extraordinary beauty, a Russian princess with her intellect and originality, they flocked around her.

‘Well,’ the headmistress said, looking at her notes, ‘I’m sorry to have to tell you this but there’s four of them. George, Paul, John and someone called Ringo.’
I used to hide in the toilets to avoid gym and the maniacal old gym teacher once banged on the door, trying to peer underneath it, shouting, ‘I know you’re in there! I know you’re there! Come out!’

There was nothing she could do, as I’d already taken the precaution of standing up on the toilet seat, staying silent as a statue till she went away muttering to herself. She used to lift up our tunics to check we were wearing the regulation bloomers, horrible bulky navy-blue things with uncomfortably tight elastic. We used to tuck the legs up tightly or simply dispense with them altogether and wear ordinary knickers. It felt as if we were wearing nappies, with the suspenders pinching our skin for added discomfort.

In spite of the occasional weirdness of the school we were given the chance of a very good education without too much interruption from the complications of having boys around. There was one memorable incident that proved to the teachers, at least, what could happen once hormones were let loose. The entire school crowded to every available window, for a while completely out of control, when a handsome longhaired gardener, Don Gifford, took off his shirt to dig the garden on a hot summer’s day. A thousand schoolgirl hearts beat as one before the teachers herded us back to our seats.

There were other strong admonitions which we girls absorbed from the ether — boys didn’t respect you if you went the ‘whole way’, you had to wait for boys to ring, you had to look nice all the time or you couldn’t expect male attention.
This meant in my case, a whitish lipstick that was fashionable then, powder on my nose, blue
eye shadow and eyebrow pencil. I tried back brushing my hair to no avail, it just flopped
about. So I had it in an urchin cut, I wore delicate little suede boots which were my pride and
joy. I always dressed in brown — to my mind the only cool colour.

Underneath a diary entry where the first passage is heavily crossed out, but which I think was
talking about my fear of being a lesbian I wrote, ‘Well the four lines above are mute evidence
of the ascendancy of what people think of me over Truth. At the moment I am very worried
about being sterile as my period has not come for over 2 months, I look exactly like a boy
now, long thin legs, cropped hair, unfeminine hands and feet hardly any breasts to speak of.
Ye Gods it is very pitiful.’

Finally, one day in gym, a bossy brown-haired girl called Margaret (another Margaret, not my
best friend) came bustling up to congratulate me when she saw the shadow of the bra under
my white blouse. She said, heartily, ‘You’re the last girl in the class to get a bra!’

I knew it was the smallest size that was humanly possible to wear, something like 32 AA but I
kept that to myself.

My first kiss was not even memorable. His name was Herman, he was a much older beatnik
and the only feeling I had about it was that I crossed ‘first kiss’ off my list. OK I’ve done that,
been kissed by a boy. One of my earliest admirers was Gary, a good-looking wild Maori boy
who was a friend of Nicholas and Julian’s. I liked him a lot, his nasal voice and wicked sense
of humour, a wildness about him. He had a crush on me but I couldn’t cope, he kissed me so passionately I was frightened. His breath smelt of garlic and he was so urgent and overpowering I felt overwhelmed. He shocked me to the core once by telling me with his wicked grin that he and a friend had gone up One Tree Hill with two girls and fucked the arses off them. I pretended to be worldly about it but was secretly horrified about the harshness of the words, the image they conjured up.

I went out for a while with Chris who was good-looking and gentle but I didn’t trust him either. He was a professional ladies’ man and had things going with nearly all my friends, not to mention a crush on Jo. I hadn’t learnt to say what I felt, or even know what it was. Anyway, I believed cool was all, so I was never real with boys once sex came into the picture. All my defences came up and I became mistrustful; or ‘frigid’, as Chris’s father Odo labelled me one day when I was at the ripe old age of fourteen, a label beloved by men at the time when you didn’t come across.

I was a leader among the girls, passed School Certificate with high marks and had the distinction of being called the most eccentric girl in the school by Mrs Davidson, our amusing Latin teacher. But as for the whole thing of flirting, having sex, confidence with boys I was a long way behind. I didn’t even allow myself to feel sexy.

Even years later Sam Hunt was to write in his poem about me,

‘two years out of practice
writing cool Platonic songs about
a girl too innocent to seize
the hot rod of a V8 lout.’

In the last two years before I left home though, things began to change. At 15 and 16, men began to show interest in me. I loved it in a slightly apprehensive way and became fascinated by the whole process of flirting, though at that age there was no real lasting emotional or sexual connection. I was incredibly fickle and my diary is full of a procession of men and boys I describe gushingly as swoony, only to drop them a week later with the same intensity of emotion, though this time of distaste.

The longest relationship I had at that time was with Paul — a tall blonde Lithuanian who I thought was incredibly cool because he rode a 1000 cc Norton and wore high leather boots. We ‘did the ton’ on the road to Piha until my father found out and banned the practice. He asked me to marry him but I was already tiring of him. We finally consummated our relationship years later after it was all over. It was a one-night stand in a London bed-sitting room and police came to the door about a burglary, just as we were smoking hash inside — Paul swallowed the whole lot just in case and had to ride home on his bike out of his mind. Finally when it came, years later, slow developer that I was, sex was a glorious revelation and has never been any trouble since, so maybe it was only a self-preservation thing, temporary adaptation to circumstances.

In those fraught times at home, when things were going seriously sour between my parents, sex seemed to me to be a potentially destructive force. Almost all the adult men I knew were
unfaithful to their wives and, far from being furtive about it, proselytised the virtues of 
liberation, though I noticed they didn’t seem quite so keen on extending this privilege to their 
wives. Adult men were a minefield that we had to tiptoe around, having learnt to my cost 
what could be triggered if I said or did the ‘wrong’ thing. Scorn poured on me for timidity, 
‘frigidity’ and ‘prudery’ for instance or a patronising dismissal gave me an uneasy sense not 
only of their aggressive sexual interest and entitlement to it, but also my inadequacy.

At home I was increasingly out of my depth. There was a charge, for instance, between Jo and 
Tom. I saw Tom touch her foot with his under the table once, though it never went any further 
than that. Jo knew about such things because she was a real woman, I was a child trying to 
show off with him, but not knowing the business at all. As for my father and La Rue, Tom’s 
wife, that was so dangerous I didn’t even want to look at it, though in my heart I knew.

That was what had been in the air all along in those long nights of drunken arguments and 
jousting, the intimate friendship: the sweetness of sex. All of us were intoxicated with it, even 
me. Only Elsie was out of the loop, not knowing, or not wanting to know what had hit her.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was always too easy to blame their marriage for all the sorrows of Elsie’s life. It’s true that he wore her down, undermined her confidence, treated her as many men treated their wives in that mean-minded time. Imagine living for twenty years with such coruscating contempt like ground glass worked into the most tender parts! Elsie was an intelligent woman, full of fire, with flashes of earthy humour, an interest in the world and a strong sense of justice, she never deserved that contempt. Nor did any other woman in those mean times.

Every bad marriage has its special cruelties. He turned her into his mother with his constant undermining and lack of tenderness, his infidelities. She responded with self-pity, guilt-dealing and passive hostility, and so gave away her power instead of flicking him off quickly, as most women do now once they see the writing on the wall.
She had her nervy, highly-strung French Huguenot Danish heritage, her own mother as a role model, the power of withholding to bind her family close to her, her preference for the risky pleasures of martyrdom. But chances are that nothing would have saved her whatever she did. In the end she coped by inventing another world where she was very important, had weight and gravitas, was a self-sacrificing saint, the fantasies of a woman damaged by being so spectacularly unloved by her husband.

She only began to recover her real self just before she died.

We learnt that we could never make up for the sorrows in her life, try as we might. Whatever we did, we knew it would fall short and somehow become our fault. All the same, as children we knew instinctively that she had been damaged by the marriage and that we had to make more allowances for her than for our father. There was something more vulnerable in her. We saw for ourselves what kind of marriage it was, especially in the last years, how much peaceful the house was when he was away. We saw our mother’s tears, our father’s affair, the cold contempt in his voice when he spoke to her.

They were in their own ways, deeply bound up with us, glacially proud of us, very involved in our life education, but something in them made it impossible for them to heal the emotional wounds they inflicted on us and each other, or even admit to their existence.

It’s not as if we didn’t talk about it. There was never any lack of talking in our family. There were long, tortuous in-depth conversations about the past, family relationships, why someone
said something, but in the end they never led anywhere; they were smokescreen, colour-blind people talking about colour. Analysis, the manic patchwork of words, exquisite, ornamental and final justifications of one’s position and subtle denigrations of everyone else’s, was our idea of talking things over. Oliver Sacks writes about the man with no memory in *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, who spun his airy castles of self in the air to hide the nothingness he faced, castles built by a torrent of meaningless words which dissolved as fast as they were built.

There was rarely any of the catharsis that is brought about by facing painful truths, so we could not receive redemption for the terrible sins that we didn’t know we were committing. Women of that time lacked a feminist context for evaluating men’s actions; they didn’t have the calm confidence to tell their husbands to clean up their act or fuck off. Like Elsie they hung in there, bowed down with self pity, self-dislike, the lines on their mouths deepening with restraint, resentment and meaningless patience. For what? Men with careering egos who had lost all feeling for their old wives and were more than ready to find another, younger mate. Long-term devotion did not mean much in those circumstances.

What a role, and Elsie played it almost till she died, to all intents and purposes a widow rather than a divorcee. With the debris of her marriage firmly in place around her, she let no fresh air blow into her emotional life. After all, her husband was a powerful man and cowed stronger people than her; she had the added handicap of loving him in her own way, being mother to his four children.
It was burnt into me — the way women can gradually, imperceptibly, give up their lives for absolutely nothing, make a meaningless sacrifice. Elsie, for one, gambled on the consolations of martyrdom and self-pity, a gamble she lost. Happiness evaded her for all those years until the very last, when something cleared in her heart and she was able to throw off the grand burden of martyrdom and enjoy her life.

Here he was immersed in his heady new world, a man in the prime of his life, his burgeoning career, glamorous house and children, younger women making a play for him, all the sex and glitz and intoxicating freedom of a new era dawning. It was a world he’d been ready for from the day he was born. He was proud of showing off his daughters at parties, but Elsie, poor Elsie, was another story. He made it clear to all of us that he was trapped by her; saddled with an older unattractive woman whom he didn’t love.

Why he stayed with her so long is another mystery — his attachment to his children and family life, the comfort and satisfactions of a household where he was king, all that. Underneath, though, it was probably the same old curse working away, an eerie replay of his relationship with his mother, its ambivalence, cruelty, dependence, the same drive to escape her but only at the last minute and then never completely. He always had a kind of respect and affection for his wife, but underneath there was a seething mass of resentment.

There were plenty of marriages around Auckland in the early sixties built on the same model, bohemian dynasties headed by male painters, writers, academics, where wives had all the domestic responsibilities and no power, doomed and talented, worn out before their time by
the ironclad roles of helpmeet, domestic, mother, muse and sucker that were imposed on them. It was how men saw women then, even though a new wind was starting to blow.

Women did not occupy the same space in a marriage — robust and full square, like emperors in expectation of automatic respect — as men did. They were often seen in terms of male fantasy, either marvellous sensual objects of beauty, hag mothers, amusing friends, domestic angels or nagging wives, but never just as people in their own right. There was always a weird kind of patronising assumption that they could never be quite as important or significant in the world.

One would-be writer, a casual acquaintance, spent years thinking about his masterpiece while his wife worked in a shop to support them, brought up their sons and cleaned the house in her spare time. He was a red-haired man, short-legged with a long trunk and whispy voice. In the end, he produced nothing except a short story or two and a few reviews written in a tone of weary superiority. He ran away with a younger woman, tired of the bourgeois life and his wife’s lack of understanding. He talked about himself and his work seriously, wryly as if the burden of his greatness was too heavy a thing to be borne by one man. A dumb sense of suffering hung in the air of their household, the wife tight-lipped, walking around in a trance of exhaustion and unexpressed resentment.

Kerouac wrote in his soaring classic *On the Road*, one of my favourite novels at the time,

‘Out on the dawn streets, Dean said, “Now you see man, there’s a real woman for you. Never a harsh word, never a complaint, or modified; her old man can come in any hour of the night
with anybody and have talks in the kitchen and drink the beer and leave any old time. This is a man, that’s his castle.”

That was our understanding of what it was to be a woman, that kind of gentle, persuasive, bohemian putting down of women.

Nearer to home and more crudely, with perhaps more openly honest contempt, James K Baxter wrote:

‘Sam Hunt, Sam Hunt, Sam Hunt, Sam Hunt
The housewife with her oyster cunt
Has pissed upon what might have been
Lively, original and green…
The Pill, the Rags, the Summer Sale
Put Venus and her tribes in jail
Till every fuck’s a coffin-nail.’

There was something in my father’s makeup that accepted it too, the need for a woman to be aglow with the comeliness of peace, to give way gracefully, submissively, her life for her man.

I saw with his eyes the beautiful, giggly, slightly submissive La Rue, who never made a fuss and hung on men’s words, and my mother’s strong, lined face, un-makeup, her kvetching and bitterness, her refusal to play the game.
We were brought up with this message; it was bred in our bones, even Elsie herself sometimes subscribed to it in her motherly advice to us. It took a while and a few life-changing books for me to see that it was a message for slaves. We had somehow so internalised all its moral overtones that it seemed somehow ugly and graceless and unfeminine not to give way to a man’s wishes. It took time and energy to see that for what it was.

Elsie was no longer in the first flush of youth and she was married to a man who cared greatly about appearance. What’s more, she didn’t care about how she looked. She was the mother figure, her sexual aura dimming.

In another, kinder society she could have been celebrated for the innocent matriarch role she wanted to play — proud mother of four children, ruler of the household, sexless dispenser of down to earth wisdom, beloved and admired older woman. Instead she was being forced to compete with a young woman who knew all the sexual ropes.

I had read all of Mansfield’s short stories at least twice over by that time and ‘Marriage a la Mode’ struck home to me — the wife’s groovy new friends making fun of the husband’s innocent love, the implication that he deserved mockery because of his cheerful unhipness, his wife’s betrayal of him.
I’d seen the way some of my father’s new friends looked at my mother, a woman plainly older than her husband and not nearly as amusing. I showed one woman around our house and she was brought up short by the sight of my parents’ double bed.

‘So this is the scene of the action,’ she said, surprised and displeased. Even as an innocent, I registered her dismissive disbelief, and that some kind of betrayal of my mother on my father’s part had happened so that I felt uncomfortable and resentful.

So there it was, the vicious cycle — the more she was undermined, the more graceless and insecure she became, the less chance she had with him. The nervy, sharp world we were living in was toxic for older women. Once early mothering and sexual attractiveness had waned, women had a definite use-by date for love. Things were loaded almost entirely in the man’s favour. It was up to the woman, who usually had no career to fall back on, to fight for her place, stay attractive, or be humiliated in a process as absolute as it is for aging Hollywood actresses.

I absorbed this and grieved for her but there seemed to be nothing I could do. We came across my mother weeping in the bedroom one day, stood there in horror, appalled to see her tears. She hardly ever cried, our matter-of-fact countrywoman mother, usually so practical and bustling and confident. There she was in the pretty sunny bedroom with its wooden chest of drawers, the French doors opening out into the garden, my mother lying on the bed, a white candlewick bedspread, her face drawn, the tears rolling down her face. She was suddenly old, her eyes sleep-smeared, skin wrinkled.
We girls were torn with pity for her, we did not know what to do except bring her cups of tea, cluster around her, sit silently beside her bed. That was Elsie’s nadir, lying there on the bed that day, exhausted and near breakdown. Her beloved sister Nan was dying, her husband was in love with a younger woman. Yet with my cruel 14-year-old gaze I could see clearly that she was no longer attractive, that she was almost old. Her grief would not save her in Dick’s eyes. The deal was, even if men didn’t put it into words, that once a woman lost her attractiveness she lost rights to love. She had to work hard to construct another identity to have any meaning or weight in their eyes.

I knew in my heart that my father did not love my mother. That in itself was a strange and shameful fact that I carried around and kept secret. It even seemed that my mother did not deserve this love. That was the message I subconsciously received.

Around our shining sunny house, with all the comings and goings, our teenage lives, the boys, sex shimmering in the air, our father, younger by the minute as he became more and more immersed in a whole new social world, it was clear that Elsie did not make the grade. She had forfeited her right to his love and regard. Elsie did not do makeup or hair things, though once she made amateurish efforts to make herself up with slightly lairish blue eye-shadow smeared on her tired eyelids. What was going on in her poor head as she saw her husband moving away from her at the speed of light? In that blondewood, sunny bedroom with the view of the pretty courtyard garden, the hills, the bush, the glimpse of sea — in there, in one of the drawers, she found bills for the presents he’d bought for his beloved, places they had stayed
together in Paris. She found them there when she was emptying out his pockets — or was she searching for something, some clue? She probably knew. How could she not when we girls knew everything? When Dick had, in fact been confiding in Jo for weeks about his affair?

Lying there on the bed, weeping, she probably knew that it was only a matter of time before her husband was lost to her for good and there was nothing she could do, nothing at all.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Was it on one of those drunken nights with the men jousting in front of her that La Rue and Dick came to a silent understanding? She never contributed much in conversations, she had presence enough as she sat nursing her wine in front of the fire, smiling and curvy, her eyes dreamy in the firelight. Or was it on that night in the hot pool at Matamata? Did they really fall in love? I had no way of knowing, I was such a raw little chick. For all my precocity, I had no understanding of my parents’ sexuality.

The two men were such a physical contrast, handsome Tom with his creased face and easy, sexy laugh, Dick skinny and sharp-looking with his severe blue eyes, mouthful of crooked teeth. It was his subversive wit and intellect, his sense of humour, the way he had of drawling when he spoke that attracted women. His broken nose was flattened, his nails cut back to the quick (he did it with a razor blade) but none of that seemed to matter. He had a disarming way of laughing at himself, making jokes at his own expense, which was irresistible.

On those nights when the buzz of repressed sex was in the air did Tom know Dick was after his wife? Was he jealous? It turned out that it was the dying fall of their marriage anyway. None of us knew at the time but he had fallen in love with a student of his, whom he later
married and lived with happily ever after. He was, in truth, a peaceful man who fell thankfully into domestic tranquillity after the drama of his marriage to La Rue and that last year of sexual high jinks in Auckland. Not so my father, who had a lifetime of sexual energy to make up for. Dick was in for the long haul; he’d only just begun. He’d discovered sex and never let it go after that. Like most men of his generation in the manic macho bohemian culture of the fifties, his deeply ambivalent attitude to women meant that in the end he couldn’t take them quite seriously, even though he could say some of my best friends were women. But women loved him all the same, and in any relationship, he easily achieved dominance. The combination of his mordant wit, interest in people, kindness, occasional flashes of teeth-jolting coldness and withholding made him very attractive, gave him great personal power.

Things no longer made sense to me, my critical exacting father adoring a woman whom he would normally dismiss as not very bright, the pain the two of them were causing all of us and their seeming indifference to it. Events became disjointed, things fell apart, there was a feeling of imminent threat in the air, my mother crying, my father raging. We had over-reached ourselves tilting at windmills, our happy days together were over.

There we were, the glamorous bohemian family, all that spirit and style slowly unravelling as we children watched helplessly. Neither Dick nor Elsie could help themselves, or even seem to want to. Their old responses were too hard-wired for change. Once the cracks appeared it was only a matter of time before the family fell apart forever and nothing was ever the same again.
I made my own discovery about them painfully. It was at a party at our house. In the firelit room people were dancing to loud music, wandering around and talking with that anarchic sense of drunken aimlessness after a long night. I walked into the kitchen and saw Dick and La Rue kissing passionately. I turned and fled back into the sitting room. I had had no real inkling up until then and there they were, my father and Stormy’s mother. That wild hungry kissing, my father so serious and intent, turned my stomach. I didn’t know what to do with the picture I had in my mind. It was everything in one hit — my own unstirred sexuality, the fact that it was my father, that I’d never seen anything like that before in a household where physical loving was minimal.

I felt instinctively that my beloved father no longer cared for us as much as he had, only for her. The fact that they would go to bed together and have sex hit me with dread. A disruptive force had suddenly stilled the laughter in the room for me. I thought wildly about what would happen to us, as I saw that with each kiss my father was being drawn further away from us. I had a knot of disgust, grief and jealousy in my stomach. My father had suddenly become an uncaring stranger.

Seeing our distress, a neighbour of ours came across to sit with Jo and me. He was someone I’d never taken very seriously, he was an ad executive, his wife Naomi a close friend of Elsie’s. Kevin’s nicely enunciated vowels, his eyes glistening behind his horn-rimmed glasses, the familiarity of him suddenly weirdly distorted into strangeness, became part of the panic I was feeling. For instead of the comfort I wanted, quite out of the blue he laughed at me and told me scornfully not to be silly, that it was natural for grown ups to do that, to stop
behaving like a child. He implied that my emotions were out of line. He had a high smooth forehead, very even teeth, and talked in a slow way as if he were very pleased with himself. Each of these details was hateful to me as I sat there, humiliated and distressed. It was my first act of real cowardice, the beginning of a habit of mine to give my power away. Instead of sticking up for myself, trusting my own feelings, seeing him for what he was, I took it all to heart. Unsure, ashamed, stammering in confusion, I agreed with him, even apologised. I knew this straight away, that I had chosen falseness and compliance: I could feel the split in myself, the self-dislike for my cowardice.

It was a gruesome moment. Pushing down my feelings like that felt like cramming a corpse into a suitcase; legs and arms sticking out in all directions from under the lid in spite of my best efforts. I wonder if he ever gave another thought to that distraught girl with tears in her eyes at the party? He was apparently a kind man. Who can judge how our slightest actions reverberate over the years? How was he to know how lasting the trauma of the moment would be?

With a more confident child it would have been water off a duck’s back but it confirmed my worst fears, that I was a coward and false, that there was something peculiar and out of control about my feelings. I was not likeable and the only way left for me to attain love and credibility was by hiding my real self. I saw the hostility and venom in him and it froze me. I had yet to learn that people often have another agenda, which is nothing to do with the people they are belittling, so I took it all on myself.
This was a low point in my life, sitting in front of the fire with Jo, the two of us taking that silly man so seriously, seeing my beloved father about to desert us, his betrayal of my mother and us, my friendship with Stormy, all the old certainties up in smoke. At that dramatic age, all I could see was my entire life going down the plughole.

It was mainly the fact that I saw myself as such a coward, Miss Wimp, letting myself down by acquiescing to Kevin, covering up my feelings by the phony worldliness I certainly didn’t feel, that annoyed and upset me. I should have told Kevin to get fucked and my father how upset I was.

Who knows how it would have affected anything, but at least it would have established the painful habit of truthfulness. As it was it took me years to learn the value of staying congruent, and I wasted a lot of time along the way. Being cool and approved of were more important than simply saying what I really felt. The only time I was truthful was when I was writing.

As usual the writing of it helped me clear it up, come to terms with it. I wrote and rewrote the story in my second novel when I was sixteen and then again in a short story, ‘Fathers and Daughters’, when I was eighteen. The narrator of the story was in a psychiatric hospital looking back at the precipitating factors of her breakdown, an extreme metaphor which most closely approximated the sense of dislocation I had over the breakup of our family. ‘My world then was an innocent, gentle one bounded by the bush, the sea, my home and school,’ I wrote. ‘I moved inside them like a dream. It was a beloved unity of which I was
unquestionably part. I simply was and this simplicity radiated from my being and permeated everything I saw and touched and felt. I loved and trusted people with no thought, there could be no falseness for I hadn’t learnt all those defences which cripple and bind and destroy giving.

‘Now in such different circumstances it is painful and difficult to probe into this breathtaking past and begin to see that serene person turned into the me who sits gazing out the window too anxious even to notice that there are birds in the sky and that rain clouds are massing on the horizon by the flats. Perhaps in my present greyness I tend to idealise that past world, perhaps I have too peremptorily denied any continuity with between how I was and how I am but this is how I feel. I know for sure that the crystalline world I inhabited shattered at the first impact of forces outside my self… now in my self-woven, numbing cocoon I can feel nothing except the glimmering of those stones that hurt my feet so long ago, or that milky, silk-like feeling of sea across my sunburnt skin in that first shuddering moment of total immersion. That is why I must retrace my steps to that moment, that other world, for I know as a mere child I had instinctively known how to live a sane and creative life, to return through all of the windings of line since to the child, the self-that-was to that luminous unafraid being is my hope’

As for my father, my faith in him was deeply shaken from that night onwards, I no longer trusted in his love for us. I had to face facts, deal with certain revelations, admit to myself that he was operating in areas I no longer understood at all and couldn’t admire. I knew for sure, from then on, that nothing would be the same.
Sandringham, for all the narrow ugliness they complained about, had contained them both, Dick’s restlessness and philandering, Elsie’s discontent. They had made their own world, the rituals and parameters of family life were preserved. It was still solidly working class under the respectable veneer, so the community was not quite destroyed by gentility. Elsie immersing herself in the children, the neighbours, helping at school, the small pleasures of domestic life, Dick building up his newspaper empire. For all their scornful attitude to Sandringham, they were both happy though they probably weren’t really fully aware of it. It was likely he had the odd affair but it didn’t impinge on our lives, nor Elsie’s for that matter. Adults’ lives are a mystery to children at the best of times. You only realise this years and years afterwards when the facts come trickling in. Puzzling events and the adult reasons given for them, the long ago landscape of childhood suddenly become clear. The godlike figures of parents, their strange ways, become all too human, and the events of a child’s life that they engineered are seen for what they are — the arbitrary results of the peccadilloes, weakness, and self-obsession of ordinary adults. As a child, one’s life is in the hands of these omniscient beings and parents tend to explain events for their own benefit, ascribing reason and self-justifying explanations for the chaos of life. Children believe their parents know what they’re doing, especially when that is what they are taught.

One of the big bombshells of being a teenager is the realisation that parents are flawed, that they are not what they say they are. Worse still, in spite of professions to the contrary, they are not necessarily doing what is best for their children at all — for many, most of the time, they are simply following their own desires and expecting their children to fall in with them.
Being a teenager is raging against the knowledge of human nature, and rage I did. In a letter to my father a year later, at fourteen, I quoted my diary to him to try and explain my feelings.

‘I wonder if I have some guilt complex about Dad because I failed him etc. Before he went away I couldn’t bear to speak to him or see him even, perhaps this revulsion was turned at myself in reality because I was ashamed of loving Dad. Now that sounds muddled but I’ll try to clarify it.

‘When he loved La Rue my feelings were of faint disgust but quite a lot of tolerance was mixed up in this. In the end I may have been jealous I don’t know but I felt hatred, nausea etc at Dick’s action and then the knowledge that I loved him added to my repugnance. I felt ashamed of my love and as the saying goes — hatred is a perverted form of love — I behaved very badly to him to show that I no longer admired him which was true and also perhaps to ‘teach him a lesson’. I think this was a fairly normal reaction to the rejection and sordid scenes we children had to participate in. As mother always says this shell of rudeness, hatred etc was a defense mechanism and it was so well acted that I succeeded in convincing not only to friends and family but myself that I loathed, hated and detested my father. Of course my respect for him has considerably diminished since the affair and more important, my trust, but I will love him, even if he is the biggest louse in Christendom.’

In his memoirs forty years later he described this letter as ‘vitriolic’.
What I really sensed was that, for all the angry scenes raging around our household — my mother weeping and shouting, Dick jumping into the car and roaring off, his long conversations with Jo about what he was to do, Dick was really in control, possibly even enjoying some of it. He decided the family style, after all, with that fierce energy about keeping us to the line he’d drawn for us. He was the sort of man who always found a good place for himself, chose well, used his intelligence to construct a successful life. His shrewdness about people, talent and financial acumen all stood him in good stead and he was not the type to express remorse even if he felt it. He never seemed to lose control.

He and La Rue were soul mates in their frank evaluation of priorities. Both went on to fresh pastures, she to marry a wealthy older lawyer, he to Naomi, Kevin’s wife. Life, after all, is full of little ironies.

One of the first casualties was my friendship with Stormy, a fragile flower squashed flat by the harsh wind that had begun to blow. We never had enough real closeness to weather the storm. I had known about his feelings for me but kept him at a distance. We were obscurely angry with each other and guilty. Our parents’ lives had muddied everything up between us. The last time I saw him we were walking home together after performing in a school play. We were on a dark country road with the scents of the night bush, our feet scrunching on the stones, an owl calling above our heads somewhere.

Stormy walked with his shoulders hunched, head down, not looking at me. I could just glimpse his pale profile turned downward, very still. We were both full of unshed tears,
unspoken love, frustration. We came to the fork where he had to turn off. He slowed imperceptibly and looked at me briefly. I could hear his breathing.

I said, ‘Shall I come and walk with you a while?’

‘No,’ he said.

Both of us were sad and inarticulate, our hearts full. As I turned to go, our shoulders brushed awkwardly and then he was gone, trudging off down the road without looking back. He was making the sad trip back to America with his mother and sister the next day, and we knew we would never see each other again. I felt a moment of desolation, guilty about keeping him at arm’s length for so long and then making my move so late and so clumsily. I felt bad about myself and him, seeing his eyes glistening, knowing he was just as sad, and that neither of us could say a truthful word to each other.

A year later Julian wrote to me from boarding school, ‘Stormy was frustrated that he has loved you for such a long time and wished that you had showed your feelings so that when you only became really nice to him towards the end, he out of some misguided instinct didn’t respond.’

It was the first inkling I had that, in matters of love, playing games and not telling the truth can lead to wrenching sadness, regret about missed opportunities, the burden of knowing you could have changed things by a little more generosity and honesty.
The Storms had departed as dramatically as they arrived, returning suddenly and separately to America, their marriage over. Dick returned from his Europe trip with presents and amazing stories. We met him at the airport.

I wrote, ‘Dad came, small in his suit, much younger without his glasses…I feel relieved as I immediately slipped into a natural easy-going relationship with him, I think it is going to be quite fun.’

It seemed as if the whole thing with LaRue had blown over, my parents had come to some understanding, life was going to go on as it had before. A couple of weeks later I wrote, ‘Then Jo came and she told me that mum and dad had just been putting on a show for our benefit, they have been bored with each other etc no sex life all that. I have never felt so lost and disillusioned than at that moment — my carefully constructed picture of domestic bliss fell apart and I felt like crying and crying. Mother, dry eyed and defiant has got through ¾ glass of NEAT whisky when I got home and Jo is still up there talking with her. I couldn’t bear it any longer.’
My next entry two days later was a long description of a trip to Waiheke Jo and I made to visit the three tanned Tarzans, Julian, Gary and Chris who were camping at Cactus Bay, so life outside the family was kicking in, outwardly anyway. I was still writing all the time. ‘I want to be completely honest with myself which is hard to achieve and if I write things which are acceptable and diaryish in my diary I would be lying to myself — which is stooping very low. I wouldn’t get any satisfaction or self fulfillment from writing any more.’

‘Between the Idea and the reality, between the motion and the end falls the shadow’ That’s what frustrates me: I want to put something — an idea down. It’s really crystal clear, I want it to be true but there is always something that changes the meaning slightly so very rarely do I write something I consider to be clear.’

A year later I wrote, ‘I just wonder what on earth would happen to me if I didn’t have the ability to write — I would burst with everything bottled up inside me. Also a big part of writing anything when I really mean it and take trouble over it is the reading over and I read it 3 or 4 times especially in my diary. I’m still uneasy about my writing. I would like to find someone to read it, as this despite the initial difficulty would be the only solution to my uncertainty about its quality.’

A few weeks before I left school at sixteen I went to a memorable party at the Strewes’. ‘For the first time in my life I got screamingly drunk, I was just flirting with everyone I was so drunk… everything was a dream…Oh I had a fantastic time! I said the most appalling things.’
I gave my phone number out indiscriminately, so our phone rang hot for days afterwards, then I ended up in clinches in the bathroom with both married and single men, which I only vaguely remembered.

‘Actually I’m full of remorse because Mum and Jo are furious and I caused a fight between Con and Don because Con thought I was too young for Don (the naked-chested gardener). I went home in Morrie’s arms he was very sweet, but not too paternal actually… Honestly I think getting drunk has been such a strange experience for me that I can’t get over it, had a hideous hangover. All the people at the party were completely unreal — I don’t remember any of the men kissing me. The only other one I liked beside Don was Morrie…The others were like devils esp Ted, the drunken History student, even Chris. I am becoming a full adult, it will be another 2 or 3 years but I have left all the childhood in me that I ever will leave and most of the adolescence…’

I have almost no sense of my parents’ life, their marriage, in that period. I was growing up and away suddenly, it was no longer such a necessity for me to read their every move, try and work out which way I had to jump on a daily basis. I was gradually lifting my gaze from the perplexities of their marriage to wider, less threatening horizons. It was a memory blank so complete that I assumed they separated almost straight away after this.

Reading my old diaries I am astonished to find that they stayed together after that for another five years. It seems inconceivable. Five more years. It is impossible to imagine what they said
to each other when they were alone. Elsie must have held on somehow. After all, she was in her mid-forties by then with three teenage daughters, a young son, no career to speak of, so how could she leave? They would have both told themselves they stayed together because of us.

But there it was. We had burst the bonds of Sandringham, escaped to the bush and paradise, only to leave again a few years later, the family broken up, each of us going our own separate ways, wounded and bleeding, reeling from those years. Only Mark was left.

They’d already plumbed the depths with each other. Where do you go after that? Who to feel sorry for, Elsie who still loved her husband and wanted him with her, or Dick who couldn’t leave? Did they have an understanding as Dick spent more and more time with his new friends? Knowing my mother, I doubt it. It was love for him that was binding her, so turning a blind eye to other women would have been impossible for her.

I had many battles with my father during this time and had taken to calling him little Hitler in my diary — once he hit me and I hit him back. My mother told me our arguments were disrupting the household and it would be a good idea for me to go away for a while. In my acidic and probably unfair remarks in my dairy I wrote furiously that she was so anxious to appease him that she let him have his way over everything and ‘she would be prepared to sacrifice me without a thought’.

There was more than a hint of teenage drama queen stuff in all this, but the fact was from then on, for whatever reason, I was genuinely unhappy at home. As I wrote in my diary,
'Our family is so explosive, we’re all such a group of raving individualist egotists, we tear at each other continually, almost obsessively, determined never to praise one another unless by the act of praising we ourselves feel good and virtuous. One can never relax or BE QUIETLY ACCEPTED for one’s worth. I think this stems from insecurity we rave at others for faults about which we are secretly ashamed of or worried about in ourselves. We’re obsessed by this idea of ‘taking down a peg’ because we’re so bloody neurotic that we feel obscurely that if one attacks first, then one is immune from the faults one attacks in others. I don’t know, but for a long time I’ve been feeling obscurely that it’s a rotten set-up…’

We were all going to Nelson for a holiday and it was decided that I would stay on once the family went back home. A holiday in Nelson with the DuFresne clan seemed like a dream come true. I was going to work in the orchards and in my uncle’s vineyard to earn money for university, and stay with Elsie’s favourite brother Viggo and my aunt Robyn at Ruby Bay in their house beside the sea. My cousin Christine, blonde and attractive with a quiet practical intelligence became my friend. Viggo was a tall, stringy, blue-eyed Dane with a spiky shock of white hair, a cigarette-husky voice, in shorts and work-boots winter or summer, his legs brown and wiry from a life of working outside. He was a passionate communist and atheist, read widely and listened to Mozart in the evenings after his long day’s work in the vineyard. Robyn had been a beauty in her time, and she still had traces of it remaining on her nut-brown face, like a doll left outside in the rain. She rolled her own cigarettes and coped with her huge household of four children and innumerable visitors on with an acidic turn of phrase and a quiet kindliness. Once when we were singing a Beatles chorus lustily in the kitchen ‘I want you I want you, I ne-e-e-d you!’ she enquired tiredly of us
‘Why are there no songs with I owe you, I owe you?’

We were nonplussed, but only for a minute.

Christine and I had a rampaging teenage time going to wild dances for the army of itinerant fruit pickers had descended on Nelson for the season. The dances were held in huge, ill-lit packing sheds in the Motueka orchards, the boxes of apples stacked against the wall and the booze flowing like water. We swam at Tahuna beach, picked apples together and slept in a tent pitched in the garden, at night the waves washed and knocked on the pebbly beach in front of the house.

The vineyard was across the road from the house, rows of peaceful vines under a hill, smooth white river boulders tumbling along beside the vines to keep weeds down. They were beautiful to sit on as I made my way dreamily along the row, delving into the green depths of the vine with my secateurs, a big floppy hat shielding me from the sun. Every detail of that job is still vivid. I had to clear the vine leaves away from the ripening grapes to allow the full rays of the sun to turn them from dusky to red, to get ‘the colour’. I also snipped off the secondary bunches that were trying to grow in their shadow, tiny clusters of tight green baby grapes destined never to ripen, because as Viggo explained, the main bunch needed all the nourishment. It was a heavenly job, alone among the vines, the sun on my back, the leaves falling in soft green showers as I worked. There was an old shed at the back against the hill, where Viggo made the wine. It was shadowy, stacked with dusty wooden barrels and redolent
with dust and grapes. We went across to the house for morning tea, warm and sleepy from the sun and physical labour. I drank it thirstily sitting in the sun, joking with my uncle and aunt.

One night we had a family party on the beach, lighting a grand bonfire on the stones. Viggo threw an old bed frame onto the flames and then madly, magically, drunkenly, leapt onto it with a flourish of sparks, jumping off and walking barelegged through the fire, laughing his lovely wobbly laugh as he came out the other side. His knobbly knees were singed by the flames and it’s hard to say whether he remembered much the next morning, but we teenagers thought he was wonderful.

I met a handsome young Irishman, Simon, at a drunken party. I came out of the toilet and there he was waiting for me in the hall. He said, ‘I had to get drunk to do this, I’ve been noticing you for ages,’ which thrilled me. He was an apprentice to the master potter Harry Davis.

Blonde and gentle, shy and whimsical, he was the sweetest boy. We kissed in a moony orchard, danced cheek to cheek at the wild fruit pickers’ parties. He danced an Irish jig down Motueka Street in the dawn. He had a soft, sweet face, curly hair, an irresistible Irish accent. He was so open and beguiling; there was no agenda to him. His warm heart and loving nature were like balm to me. I revelled in his uncomplicated affection and found in myself an immense capacity for love once I trusted someone. For a few weeks we loved each other madly, cuddling and laughing like two kids. It was one of those scorching teenage romances and I cried many tears over leaving him when I reluctantly left Nelson to go home. I noted in
my diary that my mother advised me to marry him, because I’d never find another love like that.

But in that fickle way of teenagers, by the time I got to Wellington I was already writing about a special understanding I felt with one of the Melsor boys. Once in Auckland, I was soon enmeshed in my first year at university, intoxicated with my new studies and boys everywhere, and I never saw Simon again. Christine and he had a more serious affair after I left, though eventually he went back to Ireland, married his childhood sweetheart and became an accomplished potter. He was such a generous-hearted boy — it was my first experience of the simplicity of loving and being loved without traps or games, without rejection.

My fears were realised when I got home. There were no kisses, I noted sourly in my diary, or even much interest in my return. Elsie explained to me that my sisters were jealous of my holiday, but my parents were both preoccupied as well. There were too many battles raging for anyone to give me attention, the usual arguments between them, which my absence seemed to have done nothing to prevent. I felt it all keenly, the closeness between my mother and Jo, which I had always felt shut out of and my lack of a relationship with Jackie,

‘Only Mark,’ I wrote sentimentally, ‘beautiful little golden-haired Mark was pleased to see me.’

Then and there I resolved to leave home as soon as possible, knowing instinctively that I would never be happy there again.
In my first year at Auckland University I worked very hard. After only four years at High School I did four subjects instead of the usual three — History of New Zealand, English, Psychology and Education. I loved English especially and read the set texts voraciously. For my essays, I didn’t realise you could insert long chunks of quotes from critics to plump them out and give them that necessary weight. Instead I battled on with my own evaluations of everything, which was probably very good training, though it left almost no time for my own writing.

I remember little about History of New Zealand except that Keith Sinclair, presumably not knowing I was in the lecture room, mocked my father’s book *Parihaka Story* describing it as the only history of Te Whiti with a Marxist interpretation and raising an easy ripple of laughter from the students and a surge of fury in my heart.

In Psychology 1 we worked in laboratories where rats in cages were trained to press levers for food, and we had to make observations about the rate at which they received their grains of wheat, in that cold Watsonian world of positive and negative reinforcement. To my delight, I had an anarchist rat who flatly refused to play the game. Normal, quite plump looking, she gave the distinct impression that she’d rather starve than demean herself by pressing the lever. Eventually, baffled, they had to take her away and introduce a compliant new rat, but it was a mysterious affirmation of my belief that animals have a kind of inner life that is not necessarily measurable by such crude techniques.
At the lab I met the beautiful Sue, who looked exactly like a Rossetti painting with her small, pale, heart-shaped face and masses of crinkly brown hair. She played the flute, was fey and amusing, came from a rather eccentric Remuera family. I admired her flamboyant clothes, warmth and originality, and we became great friends. Sue and I had a crush (among many others) on a dark-haired student we called Christopher Robin, the boy who was to become my first husband. Another friend I made from the lab was Vernon, tall, dark, thin, languidly handsome in a Mick Jagger sort of way. He had a rather decadent air about him which appealed to me. He smoked marijuana and collected Victoriana in his Grafton Street flat long before either was fashionable; he was a kind and intelligent man.

There were many others but it wasn’t until the next year, when I moved into a shared house on Constitutional Hill with the energetic and witty Sam Pillsbury that my social life became extremely interesting. In those times, mixed shared houses were rare and still daring, especially for a virgin like me, and one of his teases was to stand up in the lecture hall of English 2 and say something loudly about the great breakfast we’d just had together at home. Another time when he had a cold, I offered to go and buy him something from the chemist. He said that Gynomin was good. When the disapproving chemist gave it to me in a shop full of people, I saw it was the contraceptive we called ‘fizzy fucks’. Horrified, I pushed it back across the counter and stammered, ‘I need it for a sore throat!’

There were only 3,000 students in that pretty university with its mock Tudor buildings and green quadrangle and it had a sense of energy and excitement then that the corporatised, institutionalised monsters of today lack. There was political unrest in the air, new ideas and
the hippy movement was about to take over with its exuberant optimism, courage and creativity.

When we heard that Holyoake was about to send troops to a bloody war waged by America in an unknown country called Vietnam, our network of young ban-the-bombers decided to hold a week-long public fast in protest. We were thrilled that one of the lecturers, Roger Oppenheim, came to an organising meeting, but when he started vigorously demonstrating ways of protecting yourself against a baton attack by cops, he probably scared off half of the students. There he was, crouching, hiding his head, ducking, while we all looked on in horror, with awful visions of ourselves and our friends being carted off, bleeding and paraplegic.

‘I am going on the fast tomorrow,’ I wrote. ‘I am tremendously keyed up and nervous about it — it’s going to be painfully embarrassing and very uncomfortable.’

The next morning about ten of us filed sheepishly into a courtyard, set up a big board with our statement and sat there feeling like complete idiots.

‘For 90 hours from Monday morning to Thursday afternoon I have been sitting outside a tremendous Auckland palace of commerce with 10 other people and sleeping in a tremendous echoing arcade with nothing to eat except water and fruit juice. Sometimes it was terrible, sitting there scruffy and the pain in my belly, good honest citizens going past with faces averted in expressions of distaste.
‘Other times I could have laughed and cried for joy. We’ve had people discussing in front of our banner till 3am in the morning, the courtyard with the fountain has been completely full of arguing, gesticulating people, 10 or 12 people standing completely absorbed in the statement prepared on a large banner, women and men coming up with books, rugs, cans of fruit juice, flowers, kisses, shaking of hands, we’ve had 30 telegrams, we’ve had two little rockers, one who comes and talks to me every night after work, Con has come to give me fruit juice every day. We’ve had kind policemen, and caretakers, ministers and trade unionists and old men and a young girl fasting at home for 3 days, a boy fasting at work, we’ve had thousands of reporters, photographers, TV men radio men, we’ve had an ambulance, we’ve had women in furs embracing us and Rockers screaming abuse, we’ve sat in the rain and I’ve been so hungry that when I’ve stood up suddenly I feel so dizzy I have to sit down again, my belly has been aching, my mouth feeling awful, some people say I’m courageous, others that I’m a complete nut.

‘I’m writing in the dawn and it’s raining and I’m thinking about them getting up and getting out of the arcade, sweeping it, carrying everything painfully downstairs, then sitting waiting passively in the cold morning feeling bruised, forlorn, cold and go hungry watching the day start, gather momentum till the climax when crowds swarm up to us at lunchtime and the argument starts.’

A newspaper article describing our spokesman as the witty, ‘pipe-sucking Julian Rosenberg delighted us and forever after we teased him mercilessly, never referring to him by any other name. A few weeks after the fast, one of the later arrivals to our protest, a young fresh-faced
boy who joined in enthusiastically — to the point where he had sex with one of our girl friends — was seen about town in his cop uniform. It must have been one of the cushiest undercover jobs he’d ever had.

The fast didn’t stop Holyoake from sending his troops, but in Auckland anyway it ushered in the Vietnam protests with a bang as thousands of young people decided to make it their business to stop this unjust war. All over the western world, one of the most creative and influential periods in modern history was picking up steam and we all wanted to be part of it.
On that spring day I was sitting on the verandah outside our bedrooms. For once the whole family was out and in the blessed rare solitude I sat in the sun, the wood rough and splintery under my bare brown thighs, my diary on my lap. The calm sea was glinting in front of me, the air heavy with the scent of wisteria and faint dampish sweetness of whiteywood — the richness of my world buzzing and humming around me.

In the blissed-out pleasure of the moment I had a sudden overwhelming revelation. I wrote ‘I am me’ in my diary in a spirit of defiance, celebration, surprise; words that filled me with happiness. It was as if on that soft spring afternoon I had discovered a magic formula tapping directly into a truth that had escaped me up until then — that I was who I was whatever anyone said; not only that but it wasn’t a bad thing to be. The possibility of my own power stirred inside me.
Those were my first stumbling steps towards health, an adolescent dreaming in the sun on that sweet afternoon. In the simplicity and self-evident truth of the words I found comfort and affirmation. It was a sort of mantra, calming in a literary sort of way, a mantra which I used ever after to comfort myself whenever things got vicious, a revolutionary idea in the family dynamics.

In a nutshell it held my greatest hope, that the ‘me’ of ‘I am me’— probably a quite kindly and optimistic self — was in fact solidly grounded in reality. In that optimistic moment I started on the lifelong path towards self-acceptance which we all embark on. For me it was a struggle to keep hold of the idea that I was a person with ordinary flaws, nothing too unspeakable, certainly nothing to be frightened of.

In the sometimes painful transition from girl to woman, innocence goes and in its place comes steady knowledge. At some point in nearly everyone’s life there is this moment of cruelty when the securities and sureties, the innocence of childhood begins to unravel — the broken child in each of us. I had learnt that I was not the centre of the universe; far from it — that adults could be destructive and cruel and selfish for no apparent reason and that there was in fact no one to save me except for myself.

I wrote at the time, ‘to be alone with no one understanding me is terrifying and depressing. I crave affection and approval…it’s almost an obsessional need to be accepted, approved, admired, loved etc and mostly this need is not fulfilled…’
I’ve learnt a few things over the years since then — among them the necessity of living a truthful life. There’s nothing particularly mysterious about this: it is to do with earning a living by my own hands, being myself with people I know and love, staying kind, being needed, living tenderly in the present with the hard-won wisdom of a lifetime my only ballast. I earned the luxury of not having to lie, not having to meet other people’s damaging expectations all the time, of living richly without boredom or despair.

Fortunately for me I have a subversive voice in my head which keeps me on the straight and narrow. It states blunt, pertinent observations to me very shortly and sharply. It’s my most sceptical and truthful voice, entirely my own. It seems to come from some part of me unaffected by the outside world. I always listen to it, sometimes shamefacedly, sometimes amused, but always with recognition. It is not necessarily the whole story but there is always an irreducible grain of hard truth in it. The voice is like acid stripping down the layers of crap that accrue as I move through the world: white lies and other falsities, terrible patience, self-indulgence, secret contempt. I try to stay truthful but sometimes my sardonic side gets buried in the daily avalanche, so I welcome that flat uncompromising voice when it comes, as my conscience and rough guide. And who knows, it may be a direct link to my great-great-grandmother when she wrote to her daughter with her hard folk wisdom, ‘You have made your bed and you must lie on it.’ This statement over the years has become more understandable to me; I have come to see that it might be simply a statement of fact rather than a curse. The hard truth of poverty meant that neither mother nor daughter had any choice; it was as simple as that, and furthermore, the mother probably knew her daughter’s strength of character.
For all my troubles, my parents gave me a memorably rich childhood and all the love they were capable of and for that I will always owe them. They finally separated when Dick moved in with Naomi and both went on to live happier lives. My mother never looked at another man and never really forgave Dick. She lived in a gracious old house in Herne Bay with a leafy garden, surrounded by friends, children and grandchildren.

In the last few years of her life we became closer and easier in each other’s company. She said to me on the phone once, her own voice loving and soft,

‘You know, I never realised what a lovely voice you have.’

It was a moment I treasure as a deep expression of affection, and as a friend pointed out, it might have meant that she was listening to me at last.

She died suddenly and peacefully at 76 in an Auckland hospital in Jo’s arms. At her request, the family scattered her ashes over one of the deep pools high up in the Glen Esk valley. As we stood around the edge of the dappled pool, a fantail appeared, flew down around our heads, alighted on a branch close to us.

One of my most treasured possessions is a crayon drawing she made of a bunch of purple flowers which I have had framed. I see her spirit in it, the urge in her to create something beautiful, and whenever I look at it I feel softened and loving towards her.
My father and Naomi had a son, sweet Bede, my half-brother. Dick went on to become a successful and prolific historian, prosperous, winning awards and the Order of New Zealand, and had many girlfriends until at 74 he met and married Sue, the love of his life.

My brothers and sisters married, lived creative, interesting lives and had children of their own, settling in Auckland. Once I went to Australia with my husband Danny, I saw them only fleetingly.

We all of us still carry our childhood in our hearts and memories and imagination: the sweep of the sea, the smell of bush, our father’s razor sharp wit, narcissism, his affection and contempt, our mother’s grief, brisk love and common sense, the beloved family pets, our politics, the thin streets of our first home. We hold it in our anxious faces, wrinkled hands clenched absentmindedly, our witty uneasy conversations, the rare hugs we give each other, stiff from lack of practice. When we are together, sparks fly; there is a lot of jocularity but it’s only the feeble shadow of our old jousting days. We don’t trust one another, the damage is done. Maybe we wish we could be closer, even if only because of the family myths. We are all mythmakers in our own way. The glorious myths of our childhood, fed on them we prospered, we went on to make shining lives for ourselves, but never quite shook off the toxic self-doubt and wild exhilaration that were our mixed inheritance.

When all’s said and done, though, it was the voyage around our father that was our life’s work. Each of us had to try and circumnavigate him, find our own positions; either to shelter precariously in the lee of the rock, let ourselves wash safely to the beach or strike out for the
open sea. Whatever we chose — and we all chose different positions at different — open confrontation, quiet deceitful insurgency, passive hostility, a kind of guarded love and friendship, admiration, respect, it was all the same to him. He stayed immovable, unchanging, formidable, his love and contempt never faltering.

I was preparing to leave home for good at seventeen. During the punch–drunk insanity of my first-year final exams, as I sat exhausted through the night, a year’s work to catch up and eight papers to sit, drinking cup after cup of black coffee to fuel me, I picked up my copy of *Lark Rise to Candleford* for respite.

For the first time, I noticed that my teacher, Mr Henderson, had jotted a page number in pencil under his signature. It was the strangest sensation; as if I were hearing him speak to me again, his kind voice coming back through the years with a message from the grave. It was the last page.

‘She was never to see any of these (landscapes) again, but she was to carry a mental picture of them, to be recalled at will, through the changing scenes of a lifetime. As she went on her way, gossamer threads, spun from bush to bush, barricaded her pathway, and as she broke through one after another of these fairy barricades she thought, ‘They’re trying to bind and keep me.’ But the threads which were to bind her to her native country were more enduring than gossamer. They were spun of love and kinship and cherished memories.’
I wasn’t to know it then, but it was true — that magic time, the landscape of my childhood was to be a golden centre there in my memory, glowing and warming through all the years that followed.
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