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MELLOR, Julie Diane.

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**Theorising Contemporary Women's Writing: A Practice-based Study**

**Volume One**

Julie Diane Mellor

A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract.**

The novel, 'Cork Dolls', focuses on the psychological struggle between two women from different cultural backgrounds.

Rachel arrives in Sicily as an au pair for the wealthy Bruni family. Here she meets Susan, the Bruni's Filipino housekeeper. Susan has had to leave her daughter, Reetha, in the Philippines, in order to earn money abroad. Rachel, on the other hand, has recently had an abortion. Both of them have come to Italy to make a new life, yet both are forced to play a mothering role to Franco and Santino, the Bruni's children.

The resulting power conflict between Rachel and Susan is played out against the backdrop of the Bruni's failing marriage. Rachel is increasingly drawn to Santino, the youngest son. However, her attempted abduction of him forces her to see that it is impossible to replace the child she has aborted. Even Rocco, the young man who attempts to start a relationship with her, is rebuffed as she gains a new understanding of herself.

When Signor Bruni leaves the house early one morning, in search of his wife and her lover, an earthquake hits the area. The resulting confusion provides Susan with an ideal opportunity to steal the Signora's jewellery, and thus finance her return to her daughter. Meanwhile, Rachel is left alone with the children. Although her previous attempt at taking Santino has taught her that the children can never be hers, the novel ends with her having to make a final decision as to whether to take them or not.

'Cork Dolls' focuses on women's experience. It draws attention to the claustrophobic nature of the domestic setting, and how this can magnify petty aggressions. It also examines ideas about women as mothers in patriarchal society, and looks at how, by focusing on female experience, accepted ideas about women's roles might be challenged.

## Cork Dolls

I see us floating there yet, inseparable - two cork dolls.  
What keyhole have we slipped through, what door has  
shut?  
The shadows of the grasses inched round like hands of  
a clock,  
And from our opposite continents we wave and call.  
Everything has happened.

from 'The Babysitters' by Sylvia Plath <sup>i</sup>

*Calamari Ripieni Al Forno: Baked Stuffed Squid.*

750g squid  
 salt  
 4 canned anchovies, mashed  
 1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed  
 1 tablespoon dried breadcrumbs  
 1 tablespoon chopped parsley  
 1 egg, beaten  
 freshly ground black pepper  
 3 tablespoons olive oil  
 fennel leaves to garnish

Clean the squid, discarding the heads, ink sacks and backbones. Cut off the tentacles and set aside the squid. Cook the tentacles in boiling salted water for 10 minutes. Drain, chop and place in a bowl. Add the remaining ingredients, except the oil, seasoning with salt and pepper to taste.

Stuff the squid with this mixture, and sew up the opening with thread. Place the squid in an ovenproof dish and sprinkle with oil.

Bake in a moderate oven for 1 hour or until tender. Serve immediately, garnished with fennel.

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Susan's eyes are black; oval shapes where pupil and iris merge. Cut-outs like the eyes of a carnival mask, so no one knows who or what is behind them. They hold inky secrets, blue black like squid ink, that thin salt-soaked substance she removes with such distaste.

The kitchen is milky with steam. So many things cooking all at once. The steam settles on her face making her cheeks shine. Above, the ceiling creaks and bounces. The boys are upstairs, playing. Signor Bruni has gone to the airport, and the Signora ... who knows where?

Susan goes to the bottom of the stairs and shouts up at the boys to stop fighting, to have a wash and comb their hair.

'I come later. Inspect!' Her voice is shrill as a bird.

Back in the kitchen the peppers crackle and hiss, their skins splitting with the heat. The sound makes her shiver. She doesn't like gas, doesn't trust the flames, the way they pop and splutter, yet the peppers have to be done. She scorches them and peels back their charred skins, yellow juice dripping down her apron, thick and sweet as syrup.

The sweetness makes her mouth water, sets her thinking of sugary tea. Yes, much goodness in tea. But there is not time. This is what you get for being a Filipina; too much work. If she was Ingleesh, like the new girl who is due to arrive today, then it would be different. People don't ask so much of you if your skin is white. Take the last girl; Georgina. *Jor-jee-nah*. Such a long name, Susan could hardly be bothered to pronounce it, so she called her *Jeenah* instead. Surely that was enough of a name for anyone? Georgina hadn't liked it. Susan could tell by the way she twisted her long red curls around her finger, as though she was winding in her anger. All the Signora asked of Jeenah was that she speak Ingleesh to the children. Easy. But one month later she said she wanted to go home. Said she didn't like the food.

Susan stabs her fork into another pepper and holds it over the flame. Now there is a new girl. She cannot remember this one's name, although the Signora has told her twice already.

The heavy slam of the front door, the sound of boots being dumped in the hallway; the Signora. Dirty boots with dust lodged in the creases and filth stuck to the heel.

Susan scowls. Another job to do. The boots have to be polished smooth with a little piece of bone, up and down over the leather until they shine.

'*Sono io*,' the Signora shouts. 'It's only me.' Her footsteps on the stairs as she dashes up. At least there is water for her bath.

The ceiling pounds again as the boys hear their mother and race to greet her. Good. They can stay with her while Susan finishes down here. But two minutes later they come marching down, enter the kitchen to a smell of burning. Hot fat and purple smoke.

'Hungry,' says Santino, open mouthed, like a chick in the nest. Not Susan's chick though.

She curses, moving the pan off the ring, burning her finger in the process. The boys press close to the wall as she spits on her hand.

'Chocolate in fridge,' she informs them. She doesn't have time to make them a *panino*. Anyway, children prefer sweet things. Everyone knows that.

There is a fight for the cool block of chocolate. Franco elbows Santino out of the way and Santino yells.

'I trying to cook,' screams Susan, brandishing the fork. Though the mauve steamy haze she looks like a witch from their storybooks, black hair hanging in limp tails round her face. She pulls a grubby cotton scarf out of her apron pocket and winds it round her head to keep her hair back. Now she is a genie. The boys run away in fear, taking the chocolate back to their room.

Rachel stood in a scented cloud of perfume, residue of the Signora's embrace. Beyond it was a smell of burnt fish. Then she became aware of two faces peering between the dark turnings of the banister.

The children came down cautiously. Both had tight little grins on their faces, as though they were trying to stop laughing. Signora Bruni presented the eldest first, Franco. Deep brown eyes and a mischievous smile. He gave a perfect English 'hello' accompanied by a faintly embarrassed giggle.

Then the youngest, Santino. The little boy fidgeted. He had brown eyes like his brother, but softer features, and a sticky smear of chocolate round his mouth. He held out his hand at his mother's prompting, and Rachel took it, charmed by his elegance. After shaking her hand, he seemed confused. He looked up at his mother as if waiting for another prompt, but none came, so he took hold of the hem of his shorts between thumb and forefinger, and Rachel watched bemused as he performed a little curtsy. She held in her laughter, but Franco and his mother both fell about, open mouths echoing each other's sound, their harsh laughter resonating in the hallway. Santino tried to join in, but the loud insistence of his brother, showing off in Rachel's presence, prevented him. His face puckered.

Oh no. Not tears. Not five minutes after her arrival. Rachel took the hem of her skirt, and returned the compliment with a curtsy of her own, low as she dare considering the shortness of the skirt. The little boy smiled.

At that moment, Signor Bruni struggled into the hall with her cases.

'Come on *ragazzi*,' said the Signora, virtually ignoring her husband, 'we will show Rachel her room.'

Rachel followed them up the staircase, a wide sweep of worn marble with a green carpet held in place by brass rods. The boys chattered in Italian, then switched

to English, trying to get her attention. She was amazed how good their English was. Behind them came Signor Bruni, weighed down by the cases. Rachel felt acutely conscious of him following her, of him looking at her legs, bare and pale, a dab of sweat making her thighs stick together.

Her room was light, with a tall window, two large wardrobes, and a dressing table with a glass top. The boys immediately jumped on the bed and started to fight with the pillows.

'I think they will be tired later, after all this excitement. They must have a siesta this afternoon.' The Signora's English was smooth and confident. She spoke to the boys in English too, making Rachel feel slightly superfluous.

Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel saw a shadow flit across the landing. A small figure, another child perhaps? But the agency had definitely said only two children. The figure disappeared into one of the rooms.

'Susan, my housekeeper,' said the Signora, by way of explanation.

Housekeeper? thought Rachel; it sounded so grand. How different life was going to be here.

Signor Bruni stopped in the doorway and said something to his wife. He was sweating profusely, and seemed displeased about something. Rachel was convinced it was the weight of her cases. He crossed the landing and knocked on the door through which the shadow had entered. No response. He spoke in rapid Italian and the door opened a little way, a dark tea-stain of a face appearing, timid yet sharp.

'This is Susan,' he said, nodding to Rachel, attempting a formal introduction.

Susan wiped her hands down her yellow-streaked apron and came across the landing, holding out her right hand to shake. Her palm was pinkish, like new skin. 'Ingleesh?' she asked. Her tone was disparaging.

'Yes.' Rachel had never seen anyone with eyes so dark. There was hardly any white surrounding them.

'I show you all things.' Susan's forehead wrinkled up into the scarf around her head, 'but no now. Today much work.' She eyed Signor Bruni defiantly, then retreated, banging the door of her room shut.

Later in the day and things are calmer. Susan sings as she shakes the creases out of the blanket that covers her bed, folding the corners before tucking them in. Her voice is as sharp as glass. She has songs for all types of work; if she sings loud enough, the songs help do the work for her.

There is a chest of drawers in the corner of her room; it bulges with clothes and will not shut properly. She has not worn some of the clothes for years, but she never throws anything away, not ever, for who knows when they might come in useful? On top of the drawers is a wizened apple. She has been meaning to eat it for days, but she has not been in the mood for fruit, not with all this preparation for the new girl. When the Signora announced that she had taken on another Ingleesh girl, the news made Susan's stomach gripe. The doctor dismisses it as acid, but the pain is like a flame inside, burning, burning. Sometimes, if the pain comes bad, she shuts herself in her room for a day or two. Signor Bruni thinks she is lazy. He thinks all Filipinas are lazy, but what does he know? When the pain comes she cannot speak,



for fear that the fire in her throat might come out of her mouth and set the house alight.

She moves the ornaments off the shelf to dust them, but she has left her duster downstairs. It's all this confusion. Always the same when there is a new girl; everything goes wrong. She cannot be bothered to go back down to the kitchen again. All those stairs; too many stairs in this house. So she unwinds the scarf from around her head and uses it in quick flicks that send the dead mosquitoes floating down to the carpet. She treads them in with her sandals, then shakes the scarf out of the window, quick so it cracks like a whip and makes Cesare start to bark. She shouts at him to be quiet, once only, but he understands.

There is a picture of the Pope on the wall, and next to it, a cross made out of a palm leaf, tacked in place with a rusty drawing pin. The palm leaf is dry and crisp, left over from Easter. She will replace it with a fresh one next year and this one will go in the shoe box under the bed. There are eleven crosses in there already, one for each year she has lived here.

She whispers a quick prayer before the cross then genuflects. Right or left first? She can never remember. Anyhow, it is not important. What is important is that He is watching. God. He sees how hard she works, morning until night, cooking and cleaning. He listens to her prayers. Sometimes she asks him to speak to Reetha, on her behalf, to tell her that her room is ready anytime she wants to come. She is grateful to God for delivering these messages, because writing is something she finds difficult to do.

*Stuffed Frogs*

6 large edible frogs  
 1 cup finely chopped pork  
 ½ head of garlic, chopped fine  
 ¼ cup vinegar  
 1 heaped teaspoon brown sugar  
 salt and pepper to taste

Mix pork with garlic, vinegar and seasonings and stuff into body cavities of well cleaned frogs. Rub with seasonings and hang in the sun to dry (a clothesline serves well for this purpose). Fry in deep hot fat until frogs are golden brown.

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The house was on the coast, looking out over the Straits of Messina and across to the Italian mainland. Rachel listened as the sound of the sea rose over the noise of the traffic from the main road. The breeze tasted of salt, and occasionally a stronger gust carried sand from the beach, sprinkling it fine as sugar in her hair. She thought of her mother, weighing demerara on the kitchen scales yesterday. She had been making her Christmas cake, three months in advance as usual. 'I'll send you a few slices then, shall I?' The strain in her voice; Rachel knew she was still hoping she would change her mind.

*'Buongiorno!'*

Signor Bruni made her jump. He stood in front of her, his moustache quivering slightly.

'Franco and Santino are having a lie down ... asleep,' she stumbled, her cheeks colouring to the same red as the stucco. She didn't want him to think that she wasn't doing her job, not on her first day.

'Ah. *Stanno dormendo.*' His stomach pushed his shirt open in little ellipses between the buttons, like a row of lips pursing and parting in time to his breath. 'You like it here?' His English was slower and more considered than his wife's.

'Oh ... yes. Very much.' Of course it was too soon to tell.

A dog barked somewhere behind the house. Then a shout, a woman's voice. The dog fell silent.

'Do not worry. Susan is not so bad,' said Signor Bruni.

Rachel smiled weakly. He seemed to be staring, not at her face, but her hair, which was white-blonde, tied back in a ponytail so she had nothing to hide behind. She looked away.

'*Dunque*, I go now, to make for you a surprise.'

*A surprise?* She wondered what he had in mind but daredn't ask.

'Remember. Susan is to help you.' He bowed his head and turned.

She watched as he crossed the terrace, afraid that he might change his mind and come back. When he had gone she realised she had been holding her breath.

When she went upstairs to wake the boys from their siesta, she found Franco already up, crouched on the floor before two pillars of multicoloured bricks, his bottom lip curled inwards with concentration. Santino was still asleep.

'Hello.' She felt awkward, scared even. Looking after someone else's children was such a responsibility. She thought the Signora ought to have stayed around for the first day. 'What's that you're building?'

He didn't answer. He was trying to fix another brick on top, to bring the towers a little closer together, but as he snapped it into place the tower tumbled, a kaleidoscope of colours scattering over the carpet. He said something in Italian and

pulled a face. Perhaps he hadn't understood what she had said. The remaining tower teetered.

'Maybe if you make it wider at the bottom,' she suggested, speaking more slowly. 'Shall I help? It might be easier if two of us try.'

She wanted to show that she was prepared to join in, that it would be fun with her around, but before she had a chance to become involved he flung out his arm and knocked the other stack of bricks aside. 'You're stupid!' he shouted at her, kicking a stray brick with his foot. 'Why did you have to come? I don't like you. Go away.'

She was taken aback by his anger, certain that she had done nothing to deserve it. His command of English was much better than she had given him credit for too.

'I said go away!'

The noise woke Santino, who sat up on his bed and rubbed his eyes. 'Mamma?' he asked, then he saw Rachel and instantly began to cry.

Rachel felt as if she had been turned upside down, as though her legs were hooked over a trapeze and she were suspended high in the air, head down, blood rushing to her face. Why did she always have to blush? She could feel the air whistling past her ears, the give of the wires as she swung higher.

'Shut up, you baby,' Franco shouted at his brother. '*Stai zitto!*'

'No, *tu stai zitto*,' sobbed Santino, his little fingers pulling at the corner of the sheet.

She didn't know what to do. She hadn't expected problems so soon. If only the Brunis hadn't thrown her in at the deep end like this. The lie Rachel had told the agency came back to haunt her. *Yes, I've looked after my cousin's children. I've got a*

*reference here.* Except it wasn't her cousin who had provided the reference, but Carol, who had written it in their lunch hour at work.

As she thought about the way they had twisted the truth, she heard Santino call her name between sobs. 'Rachel ...Rachel.' It made her tingle inside. He was calling for her, not his mother. She moved towards him but his outline was watery and blurred, as though she were looking through his tears. The tears, however, were hers, welling unexpectedly on her lower lid. She sat down and put her arm around him, bowing her head so that neither he nor Franco could see that she was upset. He stopped crying almost immediately.

'There, that's it,' she sniffed.

Franco watched her distrustfully, biting his lip. 'Why did you have to come?'

'I didn't have to,' she said, trying to compose herself. 'I wanted to. Someone told me you were nice boys, but they must have got you mixed up with someone else.'

'Who told you?'

'A lady.'

'Who was it? Tell me.' He seemed less resentful now, hooked into the mystery.

Rachel had visited the agency twice. There were posters decorating the office; grinning children being hugged by girls with model good looks, all of them happy and carefree.

'It was a lady called Ros,' she said. 'Your Mum sent her your photos and a letter saying all sorts of nice things about you.' Franco had his head to one side. 'Ros said you were really good. Now I'll have to write and tell her she's wrong.'

'Don't do that.'

'You'd better show me how good you can be then.' When he wasn't looking she wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm. At least she hadn't actually cried. She knew her eyes would be rimmed with red though; they always were when she was upset. Dean had hated it, said it got on his nerves. If only he'd put his arm round her sometimes, like she'd done with Santino just now.

'Rachel!' Susan called from the bottom of the stairs. 'Rachel, you bring boys down here.' She sounded put out.

Maybe it's because I'm new, Rachel told herself. She's bound to be a bit off hand at first. 'Come on, Santino, lets get you dressed.' She forced herself to sound more cheerful than she felt. 'Let's go and see what she wants.'

Signor Bruni had returned, and had placed a package on the kitchen table, white paper held in place by a gold ribbon. Rachel followed the boys into the kitchen.

*'Cos'è Papa?'* said Franco, pushing his brother out of the way.

*'I dolci,'* announced Signor Bruni, opening his arms wide, building up their expectations.

'Sweet,' Susan translated for Rachel, chewing her nail as she spoke. 'Dolci ... means sweet.'

Franco was already tugging at the ribbon but it was too tightly knotted for him to undo.

'This cake is famous here in Sicilia,' said Signor Bruni, smiling. His moustache smiled too, curving upwards. 'To celebrate you, Rachel. To celebrate your arrival.'

So this was her surprise. Rachel had never celebrated anything about herself, except birthdays, and she felt quite honoured as Susan leaned over the table with a knife and cut the ribbon. Inside was a knobbly dome of cake covered with thick icing, half brown and half white.

*'La pignolata,'* exclaimed Franco.

*'La pignolata!'* repeated Santino excitedly, although he was unable to see.

Signor Bruni pulled off a chunk with his fingers. No knife. No careful cutting into slices. *'Che buono!'* He looked at Rachel and licked his lips.

Franco pulled up a chair and, following his father's lead, nipped off a piece of cake with his fingers. Santino tried to climb onto the chair too, but Franco pushed him back.

'Franco!' warned Signor Bruni, then he gestured to Rachel. 'You do not like cake?'

'Oh ...yes.' To prove it she broke a piece off and shared it with Santino, who packed it into his mouth until his cheeks bulged. Such a lovely little boy, she thought, smiling down at him. He smiled back, a round-faced beam that moved her heart up towards her throat. Soon both boys were covered in smudges of chocolate and lemon icing.

*'Allora,'* said Signor Bruni, *'ci vediammo più tardi.'* I go to the office now.'

Franco continued to pick at the cake, chocolate icing sticking down his nails like dirt. Rachel thought about Dean, the way he used to scrub his hands with the nailbrush, freckling the sink with filthy suds, leaving dark prints on the towel. And all his mother could be bothered to say was 'Oh Dean!' It echoed in her head. *O DeanOdeanO.*

Deano. It sounded better like that, like the Italian. Made him sound more romantic.

The phone rings in the hallway. Susan waits, hoping some invisible hand will pick up the receiver, that a passing ghost will answer it. But it continues to ring, the sound made hollow by the high ceilings. She wipes her hands down her apron and makes her way along the hall, slap slap, her sandals loose on her feet, the bitter sweet tang of lemon icing still in her mouth. She snatches the phone and holds it close to her ear.

'Pronto?' .

'Ciao Susan!'

She was expecting it to be someone for the Brunis, but it is her sister, Fiorenza.

'How *are* you, Susan? Why haven't I heard from you? What have you been doing? I wish you'd keep in touch.'

Susan listens, using her little finger to pick bits of cake out of her back teeth. Fiorenza speaks to her in Italian. Only Italian now, and fluent too, not pidgin, for Fiorenza has managed to forget home, packed her memories away like oddments in a shoe box. Unlike Susan, she never seems tempted to lift the lid. Fiorenza has a life in Rome; Italian husband, two children, all together in a flat with big windows that let in much light.

'So, what's happening there?'

Susan tells her about the new girl without mentioning her name, in case Rachel is listening from the kitchen, 'so pale she looks sick.'



'You be nice to her, Susan.'

'I nice like always,' Susan insists.

There is a pause. Susan wonders why her sister has really phoned, then Fiorenza suggests, 'You could take a holiday then, now they have someone else for the boys. Why not come to Rome for a week?'

'Ooofah,' Susan sighs, expressing both fatigue and exasperation. 'I no have money for holiday.'

'You only need the train fare.'

'I no have.' Susan feels her temper flaring. At times like this she finds words difficult to manage. They get hotter and hotter, then come out, choking her, like lava.

'You're not still sending *everything* back?'

'How I not send?'

'But Sam doesn't need the money.'

'I send for her, not him.'

'Have you written to her lately?' Fiorenza has a habit of sounding like their mother used to.

'Sometimes.'

'You should write.'

'I write. I write.' Susan winds the curling phone wire round her finger, the way Georgina, the previous au pair, used to do with her hair. Yes, Rachel had better be careful. Signor Bruni likes young Ingleesh girls, especially those with long hair.

'Well, I just phoned to see how you were,' says Fiorenza.

'I fine,' repeats Susan. 'I go now. Children calling.'

Fiorenza protests, but Susan takes no notice. After all, putting the receiver down is so much easier than picking it up.

Susan likes the house best when the Brunis are at work and there is no one to tell her what to do. As she folds Signor Bruni's trousers over the hanger, small change falls out of the pocket, dull coins that he does not count because to him they are too small to bother with. She picks them up, returns one coin to the pocket, keeps the other three. Later, when she has finished making the Brunis' huge bed, which is really two beds pushed together to give the impression of one, she will take the coins to her room and put them in a tin.

The money in the tin is for the little luxuries which she does not allow herself to take directly out of her wage: coconut oil for her hair, a new pair of tights, an ice cream on her day off. She doesn't spend much because she has all she wants here. Besides, she was brought up on less. Much less.

She can remember home as though it were in the next room; concrete walls with a tin roof that sounded a symphony in the monsoon, and a man with an ox who wandered from yard to yard, delivering sacks of rice.

When she first came to work here, the Brunis paid her in cash, blue notes and red notes that she folded and placed in her pillow, between the slip and the padding. Lumps that kept her awake at night, the pillow getting higher and higher each week, until it was impossible to sleep. The Signora told her to open a bank account, so they could pay her wage into it direct, but although it was uncomfortable to sleep on, Susan liked to see the money she was earning, smell it through her dreams.

Still, the Signora is not a woman to be argued with. Now Susan has a bank account, with a statement that arrives every month. She finds reading words difficult, always has done, but numbers are easy. She checks the statements carefully, adds up

the columns with a gnawed pencil, and when she has finished she places them in one of the shoe boxes under the bed. Every six months the account is emptied and the money sent back home. This too is detailed on the statement, the balance at the bottom reverting to nought. The zeros stare at her like a row of eyes, black and perfectly round. They are a way of remembering Reetha.

'Wash the bottles while the milk is warming, then add the *biscotti*,' Signora Bruni directed Rachel the next day.

The tin containing the biscotti had a picture of a plump-cheeked baby on the front. Surely the boys were far too old for that, thought Rachel. She yawned, then put her hand over her mouth and disguised it as a cough. Ros had conveniently forgotten to tell her that she was expected to be on duty at seven. At home she could tumble out of bed at half eight and still be at work for five to nine. Maybe I've picked the wrong job, she thought, then she recalled the goodnight kiss she had given Santino last night, how liquid warmth had run down her spine.

'Screw the lids on tight, otherwise they leak.' The Signora sounded impatient, although Rachel was doing her best.

Besides, what the Signora was referring to weren't lids at all, but teats which had been snipped off at the ends to make gaping mouths, large enough to allow the biscuity mush to flow through. Rachel found the thought of the boys sucking on them repulsive.

Susan walked through the kitchen, weighed down with a heap of washing. '*Buongiorno*,' she shrugged as she passed. The washing machine was outside, under a covered terrace, and the dog started to bark as soon as she went out.

Rachel wondered what sort of dog it was. She liked dogs, liked the way they accepted you, made such a fuss if you showed them even a little affection.

'I am usually out in the mornings, Rachel,' said Signora Bruni. 'But Susan will help you. Please ask her for anything you want.'

Rachel searched for a trace of irony but failed to find it. Perhaps it was simply Susan's pidgin English that made her seem so abrupt. I ought to be more generous, she thought. After all, everyone was making an effort to speak English to her. Imagine if they didn't, if they bombarded her with Italian. Where would she be then?

'Today I will take the children their milk' continued the Signora, 'but from tomorrow you will do it. Yes?'

She left Rachel to wash the milk pan and put it back in the cupboard. It was part of a set, each one fitting neatly inside the next. Some of them had runs of gravy and burnt bits of food stuck to the sides. Behind them, right at the back, was the sheet of paper from the pignolata, neatly folded, its gold lettering shining in the dim space. Susan must have saved it, thought Rachel. Like a magpie. She heard Susan slam the door of the washing machine and closed the cupboard quickly.

Once the boys were up and dressed it was time for school. They climbed into the back of the car, Rachel in the front, and the Signora drove them at top speed towards the city, explaining the route as she went.

'When you reach Via Mazzini, look out for the statue of Neptune.' She changed down a gear to corner, 'then you know you are going the right way.'

The statue acted as a traffic island in the middle of the road. Pollution had stained the marble various shades of grey, but it was still impressive, a huge bearded man rising up through fountains of water. How different to English roundabouts, thought Rachel, with their meagre decoration of bedding plants sponsored by the council.

Off the roundabout the cars were bumper to bumper, revving and impatient.

'Watch for these lights, Rachel. You go left here.' The Signora manoeuvred the car skilfully into the next lane, but the traffic had almost come to a halt.

Rachel felt hemmed in. How would she possibly manage to drive the boys to school if it was as busy as this? A red sports car pulled level on her side. She looked at the driver's hands on the wheel, the sleeve of his suit slipped back to reveal a striped shirt cuff and an expensive watch. The man raised his eyebrows and smiled. She pretended she hadn't seen him. He leaned forward, smiled again, familiar, as if he knew her from somewhere. Carol said it would be like this, smiles from strangers, whistles as you walked down the street. Rachel tried to keep looking straight ahead but couldn't help glancing at him, and when she did he blew her a kiss which winged across, missing her by a hair's breadth, and landed wetly on the Signora's cheek.

The Signora smiled coyly. No doubt she was used to men paying her all sorts of compliments. Rachel pulled down the sun visor and checked her face in the mirror. She looked blotchy and hot. As she studied her reflection she saw Santino behind her, kneeling up on the back seat, sticking his tongue out at the man.

When they arrived outside the school, the boys kissed their mother dutifully, said *ciao* to Rachel, then ran to the gates. Franco pushed Santino out of the way to be first through, but the Signora seemed to regard this as no more than playful

exuberance. 'Franco is very competitive,' she said, as though this were a quality to be highly prized.

He seems like a bully to me, thought Rachel, frustrated at not being able to do anything about it.

'Now. Your turn to drive I think.' The Signora stepped out of the car and walked round to the passenger side, elegant and confident. Ros had explained that Signora Bruni was some sort of civil engineer. Rachel imagined her designing modern buildings, ones made of concrete and steel and tinted glass, buildings that housed companies where people fought tooth and nail to get to the top. Yes, Signora Bruni was that sort of woman. Rachel climbed over the gear stick and into the driver's seat. Everything was the wrong way round, entirely opposite to what she was used to.

'I think you are nervous,' the Signora observed, settling into the passenger seat.

Rachel gave a little laugh which was intended to show she wasn't, but only served to confirm that she was.

'It's very simple really, as long as you look out for Neptune.'

Rachel revved a little, lifted her foot slowly off the clutch, and stalled.

In the village where Susan lived the sky was green, many shades all pushing together to catch the sun, palm fronds and waxy vine leaves that crept up the trunks to strangle the trees. When the wind blew, drying frogs danced on the clotheslines and light waltzed on the porches. The memory of the light dancing causes Susan to remember her mother in the hospital, listening to the radio of the woman in the next bed. The

woman was fat and listened to sultry dance music all day, even though she appeared to be sleeping.

Fat people can do that, thinks Susan, appear to be sleeping when really they are thinking or listening. Yes, fat people are very deceptive. She is thinking particularly of Signor Bruni, of the hungry looks he has been giving Rachel, as though she is the pale lemon fondant on top of the pignolata, ready to be picked off and eaten.

All men are trouble, thinks Susan. Her mother used to say the same. It is easy to slip back to that dusty porch, to the sound of monkeys chattering the day her mother fell ill. They said it was a stroke, sudden and severe. The nurse told Susan stories of people affected both better and worse than her mother, as if this would help. But the stories only served to widen Susan's imagination, gathering so many possibilities that it became too painful to think of.

Death would have been the simplest thing. Not the pleasantest, but the simplest, for the outcome would have entailed less work. The hospital was three bus rides away, a journey that was difficult with Reetha to carry, so small and easily tired. Susan made herself believe that it would be over before the rains, before the banana leaves were ripped by the force of water. Either her mother would come home, or she would die. It didn't matter which, as long as it was before the monsoons.

Fiorenza phoned the hospital and spoke with the doctor. The nurse was impressed by the long distance call, by Fiorenza's accent, which sounded foreign in her native tongue.

'My sister works in Roma, but she only cleans people's houses,' Susan told the nurse, to keep everything in perspective.

Fiorenza has always been a great one for thinking she is something she is not.

'Keep the keys to this car,' the Signora told Rachel when they arrived back at the house. 'You can use it whenever you are free, but today you need to be at the school at twelve thirty to collect the boys.'

'You want me to fetch them on my own?' Rachel didn't have time to argue because Signora Bruni hurried to a smart Mercedes parked across the road.

'I may be late tonight,' she called. 'Make sure they do some reading in English this afternoon.'

Rachel nodded. Her neck felt stiff from being so tense behind the wheel. Still, she had done it, driven on the other side of the road. She felt quite proud of herself. The Signora pulled away quickly, stirring up the dust that had settled in the gutter. How the dirt contrasted with the gleaming polish of the Mercedes.

Rachel reached into her pocket, only to realise she had forgotten her house key. Damn. She pressed the buzzer by the gate. Nothing. She pressed again, holding it for longer this time.

'*Chi è?*' snapped Susan through the intercom.

'It's me. Rachel.'

The metal catch clicked and released. She put her hand on the gate, then paused. For some reason the house seemed to be looking down on her, telling her she wasn't welcome. She knew she was being ridiculous. Houses didn't shut you out; only people could do that.



All the windows were open and a fresh breeze blew through the hallway, fanning her face. As she passed the polished double doors that led to the dining room, Susan shouted, 'Whan minute, plees.'

Rachel looked in. The room was full of sunlight, yet there were shadows in the corners and Susan was nowhere to be seen. The voice had come from some invisible place.

'Here, I up here.'

Rachel looked up to see her standing at the top of a step ladder, unhooking one of the curtains.

'You help me.' She tugged at the hooks and stuffed them in her apron pocket one by one.

Rachel wasn't sure if she was being purposely offhand, or if it was just the way she spoke English. She decided to give her the benefit of the doubt, stood underneath the ladder, and gathered the curtain in her arms. The velvet was soft and heavy as an animal, getting heavier as each hook was removed. Susan leaned dangerously over to take out the last one, her small body stretched taut. '*Echo la!*' she exclaimed as the curtain fell with a thud over Rachel's head, wrapping her in fusty-smelling softness.

'This go to dry clean. Please, you take for Susan, and Susan iron Franco's clothes for you.'

It seemed like a fair trade off, and Susan was smiling so much that Rachel could almost believe she was trying to make friends. 'Where's the dry cleaners?'

'No far.' Susan led her to the window and pointed to the bar at the top of the street. It was marked by a sign in the shape of a steaming coffee cup moulded from plastic. 'Dry clean next door.' She started to write a note, taking her time over each

word, the letters sloping at odd angles, as though she wasn't used to holding a pen, then she produced two large carrier bags and together they pushed the curtains in until the polythene bulged. She placed the note on top and Rachel took a bag in each hand, felt the pull across the back of her shoulders as she raised them.

'Heavy?' Susan seemed pleased.

'Not really.' Rachel lied. She wasn't about to be beaten by a pair of curtains.

*Carciofi Alla Giudea: Fried Artichokes*

In the Jewish quarter of Rome, this dish of deep-fried artichokes, which look like roses, is a speciality in many of the restaurants.

4 young globe artichokes  
salt and freshly ground black pepper  
vegetable oil for shallow frying

Strip away the hard outer leaves, chokes and tips. Flatten artichokes slightly by holding them upside down by their stems and pressing them against a work surface. Sprinkle the insides with salt and pepper.

Heat enough oil in a large frying pan to cover the base of the pan, then place half the artichokes in oil, stems downwards. Fry over moderate heat for 10 minutes, then turn. Increase heat and fry for a further 10 minutes, turning frequently until golden brown and crunchy on all sides.

Drain thoroughly and keep hot while cooking the remainder. Serve immediately.

iv

Rome was such a noisy place. Susan did not feel safe there. Cars and scooters flying past, buses driving so close to the pavement they pulled you into their slipstream, screeching tyres, loud horns. Susan remembers the day she arrived from Manila; Fiorenza warned her not to carry her money in her bag because boys on scooters might whiz past and grab it. Women had been dragged into the road trying to hold on to their handbags, her sister said.

Susan had a leather bag worn to deep brown on the strap; it belonged to her mother. She knew it was old fashioned, but could not afford a new one. The flight to Italy had cost her everything. To keep her bag safe, she wore her cardigan over it. Thieves were *i ladri*, said Fiorenza, trying to teach her too many words all at once.

The bag bulged on Susan's hip and Fiorenza kept telling her that she looked suspicious. 'If you go into the department stores like that, someone will arrest you.'

It seemed she had come to a place that thrived on suspicion. Take passport control for instance, how they watched her, as though even the way she walked might be grounds for not letting her in. I have a visa, she tried to tell them, and my sister is waiting to collect me. She's married to an Italian. But there was no one on hand who spoke Filipino, and only after much deliberation did they let her through.

Susan is small, but Rome was such a strange place she tried to make herself even smaller. As she walked with her sister she watched the pavement, saw no one, pretended no one saw her. She judged people by their shoes. There were many fine pairs of shoes, soft hides and calf skins dyed such brilliant colours. It seemed there was much money in Rome. She gave herself a year. First she had to find work, then save up enough to rent a small apartment. Sam and Lin knew they were only caring for Reetha until things improved. A year, she told herself, and then her daughter would join her.

Fiorenza pointed out the sights, eagerly showing her the ruins of the ancient city, *Il foro romano*, *Il colosseo*. Susan felt nothing. This was not her language, nor her history. The only time she looked up was for the Vatican, a grey dome on the skyline, but Fiorenza's grand descriptions spoiled it. The Italian ways Fiorenza had adopted were comical, or would have been if there had been time to laugh, but there was time for very little except finding work.

Fiorenza made enquiries and an interview was arranged for the following week. There was plenty more to do and see in the meantime, said Fiorenza. But Susan did not feel safe in that city. She sat in the apartment, borrowed a hook and some yarn and began to crochet. The work started off as a tiny circle, expanding slowly, hour by

hour. Her nieces poked their heads round the door but Italian was the only language they knew, so Susan ignored them and concentrated on the yarn, pulling it through with a quick flick of the wrist, counting the wait in stitches.

When she got her first job she saw another side to the city. Near the apartment where she worked there was a cinema with airbrushed posters of topless women, full-lipped and seductive. She saw the postman go in there, twice, and when he called at the apartment with a package for the Bevilaquas, she could not look him in the eye.

Fiorenza phoned at the end of each week; Fiorenza's employers are nice people who have always allowed her to use the phone when she pleases. Susan's employers were not so nice; they were a young couple, out at work all day. They had a baby; fat and blinking. The baby was part of the job, like washing the floors and polishing the windows. Susan sidled up to it and pulled faces, trying to make it laugh. There was a part of her that wanted to hold it, feel its warm body against her own. Nothing could replace Reetha, but there was enough room in her heart to give that baby some love too. But every time she came near it, it screamed. It also screamed when she was on the phone. Fiorenza would call to ask if she was all right, looking after a baby. Susan would laugh and shake her head as though Fiorenza could see her in the receiver. Of course she was fine with someone else's child.

The truth was, there was so much to do in the apartment that Susan didn't always have time for the baby. She closed the nursery door and sang to drown its wailing. No matter how hard it cried, Susan could always sing louder, then the song took over, and the baby was entirely forgotten. Often she left it lying in its cot and went out to do the shopping. The apartment block was old, no lift. She had to haul the shopping up three flights. With the baby it was almost impossible. Besides, when it

was in the pram it stared accusingly at her, its mouth opening and closing, no sound, just bubbles of spit popping on its lips. How different from Reetha, who had been a perfect baby, gurgling with pleasure all day long.

The Bevilaquas frequently had friends to dinner. Susan was expected to cook strange things. One night it was artichokes. Tight green. Impenetrable. She had never cooked them before. Was she supposed to chop or peel? Signora Bevilaqua, who was younger than Susan, rattled off instructions in Italian. The couple thought Susan was stupid because she spoke so little. They made no allowance for the fact that she was new to their country.

'*Carciofi*,' said the woman, pointing to the artichokes.

'*Carchoffi*,' said Susan, spitting the word back at her. '*Carciofi*.'

She had to press them flat and fry them in oil. They were supposed to be served with a buttery sauce, but it looked so bland and lumpy when she made it that she sprinkled it with chilli. She listened at the door to hear their reaction, for the sound of eating is the same in any language. No need to speak Italian to understand the frequent pouring of wine to cool their mouths.

When the guests retired to the *salotto*, Susan returned to clear the table. So much waste; heart shaped leaves scattered everywhere, only the middle of the globes eaten. She picked up one of the discarded leaves and tried it, soft near the bottom, hard and thorny at the tip, tried another, dipping it in the remains of the sauce. The sensation of chilli danced on her tongue. As she chewed, Signora Bevilaqua came through to ask her to make coffee. She frowned as Susan licked her fingers. Susan smiled back, her lips glossy with butter sauce.

When everyone had gone, Susan heard the Bevilaquas talking. She heard her name but could not tell what they were saying because she didn't understand enough.

It was like living underwater. But it was important not to give up, to keep listening, otherwise she knew she would drown.

She expected bad things after that dinner party, but the Bevilaquas were so busy with their careers they hardly had time to stop. They left her notes about the cooking and the cleaning, strings of words that didn't make sense. She turned the notes over and held them up to the electric light, trying to read them backwards to see if it helped.

Fiorenza lent her a dictionary, but Susan had no time to look up the words; the baby was always blinking and crying, and the more it cried, the more she left it. She went down to the square and made the shopping last all morning, so that by the time she returned, it was usually asleep. She used to wonder why the neighbours didn't notice the noise, but they were all out at work too. Everyone was out at work, except Susan, who was trapped inside the apartment with a baby that was not hers.

On Fridays, Signor Bevilaqua paid her wage, counting the money out slowly, paying her in small notes to make it look like more. Did he think because Susan could not understand the language she could not count? One week there was no money at all. Signor Bevilaqua said the bank was closed, said he would pay Susan the following week. She understood this much at least. More guests came, the baby blinked, everything carried on as normal. But the following week he only paid her a third of what was owed. This time he said nothing about the bank being closed; he didn't appear to need to bother with excuses.

The following Monday, Signora Bevilaqua gave Susan a long list of shopping. So, there was money for shopping but not for Susan. A rigid grin set on her face. She presented it like an ultimatum but Signora Bevilaqua chose to ignore it.

Susan decided to take the baby shopping with her. She wheeled it round the market in its bright modern pram with exquisite appliqué animals on the cover, and thought about leaving it in the square. Simple. After all, the child was not hers. It would not be so difficult to leave. She walked round and round, considering, her circles becoming wider, like the crochet cover she had started and never found time to finish.

The market traders were beginning to clear away, leaving piles of rotten fruit and vegetables. She picked through them, screwing up her face, and put some in the basket under the pram to take back to the apartment.

As the soup boiled the smell became stronger, but at least the baby was smiling. Susan left the pan on the ring and went to the couple's bedroom to take her passport out of their drawer. They asked her to hand it over when she arrived, *to keep it safe*. As if she didn't know the real reason! She went to her room and collected her things, pushed the money she had managed to save down her knickers in case the boys on scooters were about. She kept the housekeeping money; they owed her more but this would have to do. She could have taken things, the bronze figurine on the cabinet, Signor Bevilaqua's cufflinks, but she didn't want what she was not entitled to.

One last look in the kitchen. The baby on its side, sound asleep. She felt something tug, deep inside, but this was not the time to become sentimental. She checked the soup, which was simmering nicely, and tiptoed out so as not to wake the child.

Rachel had to clean the boys' room while they were at school. She paused for a moment and looked out of the window, out across the water. Calabria was almost



close enough to touch, its mountains white capped, like the lemon fondant on the pignolata. Snow, even at this time of year. And below the mountains, the town of Reggio; houses and apartment blocks just tiny squares of colour. She thought about setting the camera to take a panoramic shot, three or four photos to cover the Straits from end to end, to send to her Mum.

'You whan tea?' Susan's voice startled her. 'Five minutes I make tea,' and she was gone.

*Five minutes I make tea*, Rachel mimicked, sneezing from the dust that swirled through the stale air. The room smelled of old socks and unwashed hands. It probably hadn't been cleaned since the last girl had worked here. Franco said her name was Georgina, that she had only stayed a few weeks. Rachel wondered why she had left.

As she lugged the vacuum down the stairs, the metal tube attachment came loose and clattered down, catching every step as it went, bang, bounce, bang, adding to the scars on the marble. 'Shit!'

Susan appeared at the bottom of the staircase. 'Oooffah! I think you fall!' She regarded Rachel sullenly, then stomped back into the kitchen as though it was too bad she hadn't found her dead at her feet.

Sod her and her tea, thought Rachel. But although she was loath to admit it, she really did fancy a cup. It was as though Susan had cast a spell to entice her into the kitchen.

'You whan tea when I no here, use thees things.' Susan pointed to a row of pots on an open shelf: chipped plates, crazed cups, nothing matching. 'You no use thees,' she said, emphasising the *no* as she opened a cupboard on the far wall. 'Thees for Signor

and Signora. Understan? Thees *never* for you.' She made a wide sweep of the contents with her arm: china, cut glass, everything gleaming, then took down a box covered in black leather and embossed with gold initials. The cutlery inside shone on their faces but when Rachel peered forward for a closer look, Susan snapped the box shut.

'This no for you either.' She put the box back and pulled out a chair. 'Now tea.' She stirred a pan of brown water until the leaves swirled up from the bottom, then poured it into two glasses. Rachel took a carton of milk from the fridge.

'All Ingleesh take milk,' stated Susan, as though it was a weakness.

'Yes, mostly. We make tea in a pot though.'

Susan merely shrugged, as though it was of no consequence how the English made tea, it was her way that counted.

Rachel looked at what was left in the pan; tea the colour of bonfire toffee. It reminded her of the big bonfire that the council organised on the recreation ground each year. Odd to think they would be holding it in a few weeks time and she wouldn't be there. She'd gone to it ever since she was a kid. Thinking about it made her throat feel tight, but she dismissed the idea of homesickness. No point dwelling in the past; she'd promised herself a new start, hadn't she?

'You finish clean up stair?'

'Just about. It's still a bit dusty.'

'Dust all over. This house never come clean.'

Rachel looked around her. There were bits of food on the floor and streaks of brown grease behind the hob, yet Susan always seemed busy.

'You have house in Ingran?'

'I live at home, with Mum. I was going to get my own place, with my boyfriend, but it didn't work out.'

'Boyfriend?' Susan said eagerly.

'Ex.' Rachel refused to elaborate. She thought back to the bonfire last year, her and Dean watching the flames lick and crack, the wind making the fire sway so that one side had to be cordoned off to stop people going too close. Dean had held her hand, not something he was prone to do in public. A small sign of affection, yet it had led her to imagine they were both thinking the same things, things which demanded capital letters; Love, Commitment. She'd been scared to tell him she was pregnant, but it had seemed like the right time, standing there together, watching the flames.

'You eat bread?' Susan asked.

Rachel couldn't understand her intonation; it seemed to turn every question into a statement, and every statement into a question.

'I prefer it toasted.'

'You whan toast?'

'No. I'm fine. I just meant that when I have it, bread I mean, I prefer it toasted.'

'Bread good for bones, you know that?' Susan stirred the remainder of the tea in the pan and topped up her glass, adding another large spoonful of sugar.

Rachel remembered leaning against Dean, turning her face so her mouth was next to his ear, whispering the future, not *I'm pregnant* but *I'm going to have a baby*. How certain she had been, how naive.

'D'you ever miss home Susan?'

Susan looked up from under her heavy fringe, eyes darting, as if Rachel might be addressing one of the shadows made by the washing as it swung gently on the line outside.

'Your family and friends, I mean. D'you miss them?'

'Ay ay.' Susan reached for the paper bag on the work surface which contained a flat floury loaf. 'Different for you Ingleesh. Work three month, six month. Maybe find boyfriend, then go home.' She tore off a piece of bread and dipped it into the sugary tea. 'I no go home now.'

'What about your family?'

'I only have sister. She work in Roma.'

'I'd love to go to Rome,' said Rachel dreamily.

Susan gave a little titter and sucked up some more tea. 'You stay here Rachel. Bad people in Rome. People who no understan how to live.'

Fiorenza was not pleased when Susan left the Bevilaquas, but neither was she angry. All she was concerned about was finding her another job. She spoke to the agency on Susan's behalf, agreed that it would be best to look further afield so as not to cause complications. There was a family in Turin who wanted a housekeeper, but when Susan questioned her, Fiorenza admitted that Turin was cold in winter. Susan was afraid of being surrounded by snow, white and cold and lonely, and told Fiorenza to look for something else.

The agency sent them a list of clients requiring help in the home. Fiorenza read it through, marked the promising ones with a pencil and translated them for Susan.

'This one sounds okay. Sicily. A couple require help with domestic work.'

Susan thought they sounded exactly like the Bevilaquas but waited for her sister to continue.

'General cleaning duties. Must be able to cook. Good pay and conditions. Immediate start.' Fiorenza opened out her husband's road map of Italy, showed Susan the island of Sicily, a rugged triangle of land dotted with difficult names: Trapani, Agrigento, Siracusa.

'There, Messina. That's it.'

Susan peered at the place where Fiorenza's finger rested. 'Mess-ee-na.' She tested the name, found it easy to pronounce, looked at the thin strip of water that separated the island from the mainland.

'Don't worry about that,' said Fiorenza. 'They'll have ferries. Look.' She traced her finger along a series of black dotted lines that cut through the blue shading of the sea, marking the ferry routes. 'I'll ask Giovanni tonight.'

But by the time Fiorenza's husband was home from work, she had already made three phone calls and arranged for Susan to attend an interview. 'Signora Bruni's coming to Rome on business next Tuesday. She'll see you at her hotel.'

Susan nodded, wondered how long the journey would take from Rome to Messina, wondered how she would manage to get back if the Brunis behaved like the Bevilaquas.

But the Signora seemed nice enough. Obviously wealthy, from the way she was dressed, but at least she looked at Susan when she spoke to her, rather than over her head like the Bevilaquas. The Signora read through a list of jobs, asked Susan if she thought she could manage. Susan nodded, tried to look enthusiastic although she didn't understand very much. The Signora asked if she could cook. Susan thought of the chilli she had added to the Bevilaquas' butter sauce, the soup she had made out of rotten vegetables.

'Si.' She nodded, trying to think of something else to say in Italian, but it was as if the words she had learnt had deserted her. 'Si,' she repeated again.

*Stewed Dog Philippine Style*

3kg dog meat  
 1½ cups vinegar  
 60 peppercorns, crushed  
 6 tablespoons salt  
 12 cloves garlic, crushed  
 ½ cup cooking oil  
 6 cups onion, sliced  
 3 cups tomato sauce  
 10 cups boiling water  
 6 cups red pepper, cut into strips  
 6 pieces bay leaf  
 1 teaspoon Tabasco sauce  
 1½ cups liver spread (or smooth liver pate)  
 1 whole fresh pineapple, cut 1cm thick

First kill a medium sized dog, then burn off the fur over a hot fire. Carefully remove the skin while warm and cut meat into cubes.

Marinate meat in the mixture of vinegar, peppercorn, salt and garlic for 2 hours, then fry meat in oil using a large wok over an open fire. Add onions and chopped pineapple and sauté until tender.

Pour in tomato sauce and boiling water, add green pepper, bay leaf and Tabasco. Cover and simmer over warm coals until meat is tender. Blend in liver spread and cook for an additional 5-7 minutes.

\* Lamb can be used as a substitute for dog. The taste is similar but not as pungent.

v

At night, Susan stays up late. After the china and silver and cut glass from the Brunis' supper have been put away, she sits at the kitchen table and sips tea. Tea is endless here. The Signora never questions it, just as she gives her money for food each week and hardly ever asks to see the receipts. Yes, lately the Signora has been occupied with other matters.

Back home tea was once a day; early evening, when the sun had stopped leaning on the corrugated roof and the flies had become lazy.

On the white walls of the kitchen Susan can project her own version of the past and watch it like a film.

Reetha is on the swing, the tree creaking to her movements.

'Don't go so high,' sings Susan, secretly pleased at Reetha's boldness.

Reetha is small and dark, two shades darker than Susan, but with Susan's eyes. She takes no notice, pushes higher and higher, until the swing no longer seems to hold her and the ropes bow, and Reetha's bare feet nearly touch the branch above. She must have shoes soon, thinks Susan.

But this image is not real. It comes from the photograph Sam sent years ago. Susan has never seen Reetha on a swing, for she was just a *bambina* taking her first steps when she left.

Upstairs there are voices. Susan listens as Signora Bruni shouts at her husband. She cannot make out what she is saying, not through the thick ceiling, but she can pick up on the tone which is harsh and accusatory. In part, she understands the Signora's situation. It takes the form of a red car, often waiting up the road. She knows who this car belongs to and suspects that Signor Bruni has discovered this too. That is why there are raised voices tonight.

She stirs the pan of tea, only lukewarm now. No matter. She does not believe in waste. She tips it into her glass, watches the leaves, swollen by the water, settle slowly. Beyond the back door, Cesare barks, once, twice, then falls silent. That dog, she thinks to herself. That dog.

The worst job is cooking his food. Signor Bruni insists on meat. He buys it frozen, in plastic skins like huge sausages which she stores in the freezer



compartment of the fridge, next to the chocolate coated ice cream bonbons which the Signora loves so much. Each night before Susan goes to bed, she takes a frozen sausage out and slits the plastic with a sharp knife to expose the speckled meat beneath. The surface is rough with diamond crystals of frozen fat. There is a pan specially for Cesare. She puts the block of meat into the pan where it will thaw out overnight so that in the morning there is a pink sludge ready for her to cook. The smell is always bad. She adds boiling water and turns up the heat. The smell rises with the steam and creeps wetly overhead, condensing on the ceiling and dripping like rain, then she adds rice before the cooking is complete, rice that would make a meal back home.

Cesare used to bark all morning, tormented by the smell. Susan has never liked dogs because of the strings of spit that stretch from their jaws, and the way they foul everywhere. At least cats dig holes and cover their mess with earth. When she first came to the Brunis, Cesare drove her mad. Every morning, as soon as she put the meat on to boil, he would begin his noise, more demanding than a child. After a week of his constant barking Susan fed him straight from the pan, let him scald his slaverling tongue on the pap of rice and meat. Now he approaches his food with caution, and stops barking as soon as she raises her voice.

The blame lies with Signor Bruni, who demands that Cesare must be kept in good condition for hunting. But Susan has never seen him go hunting, not once. There is a gun, a heavy antique perched on a stand in the *salotto*, yet Signor Bruni has never used it. It is almost as if it is there to act as a warning.

Rachel tried to ignore the sound of the car horn but it continued insistently, peep-peep-peep. She looked at the alarm; six o'clock. Who the hell was it at this time in the morning? She dragged herself out of bed and went to the bathroom. A lacy curtain covered the window. Behind it, the sun was breaking through the haze, ripe as a peach, while in the street below a car door slammed and a red sports car pulled away.

No point in going back to bed now, she thought, for it was light outside and she knew she wouldn't manage to sleep again. She dressed quickly, brushed her hair and closed her room door quietly behind her.

The green carpet on the staircase was like grass, a strip of England rolled over the marble just for her. She heard Susan humming as she reached the bottom. She hadn't expected anyone else to be up yet. She tried to divine Susan's mood from the tune, but the notes were scattered and impossible to define.

*'Chi è?'* Susan called. 'Is you Rachel?'

'Yes.' She was conscious of the sound of her bare feet, slip slap on the tiles as she walked down the hall.

'You early.' A thin twig poked out of the side of Susan's mouth and she chewed on it as she talked. 'You whan milk for chil'ren? Outside by gate. You go.'

She's so bad tempered, thought Rachel, contemplating telling her to get lost, but Susan seemed poised, like a cat ready to pounce.

She went back down the hall and unlocked the side door. The air was cool and tinged with damp. The morning wasn't as warm as it had looked from the window and she realised she ought to have put her shoes on. She heard her mother warning, 'You'll catch your death.' It seemed absurd to travel all this way and still have her mother's

voice cautioning her. She purposely ignored it and tiptoed along the path, trying to let only the balls of her feet make contact with the concrete.

The garden was dewy and silent. No dry crackle of insects or lizards, or solitary birds bathing in the dust. The cactus spines were gilded with silk and pearly beads and she trod carefully, not wanting to disturb the strands of silvery light which joined the plants. It seemed perfect, but she had a sense of foreboding, something to do with the quiet and the stillness of surfaces. The terrace was raised, and from one point the road fell from view, making the sea appear to lap right up to the garden. It was so convincing she felt she might step off the edge of the garden and paddle ankle deep.

She yawned. It wasn't just the early start; the Brunis had kept her awake last night, shouting at each other. She couldn't understand what was being said, but you didn't need a degree in languages to know that it was an argument. They sounded just like her Mum and Dad used to do before they split up.

Three large cartons of milk had been left at the bottom of the steps. Rachel hadn't thought that milkmen existed anywhere else in the world except England, but it seemed she was wrong. The cartons were cold and wet, and as she made her way back to the kitchen she felt the damp soak through her tee shirt.

'Eh la,' Susan exclaimed. She was sorting a pile of washing on the table. A pair of blue y-fronts lay on top.

They must belong to Signor Bruni, thought Rachel, faintly amused. There was something intimidating about that man, the way he looked at her, as though he was stripping her with his eyes, peeling back not just her clothes, but her skin. She offered to help Susan sort the washing but was shooed away.

'I do things my way. You watch. Maybe you learn.'

Rachel took an orange from a basket of fruit and sat at the table to peel it. A zesty aroma filled the kitchen.

'Better than Ingleesh orange?' asked Susan.

'Tastes the same to me,' said Rachel, although she hardly ate fruit at home.

'Boys in other room thees morning.' Susan finished with the washing, took a silver tray out of the cupboard and pulled her sleeve over her hand to wipe it. 'For when you take milk.'

Rachel frowned. A tray? For two bottles of milk?

Susan was nodding and Rachel detected a certain smugness in the hunch of her shoulders. She was doing this to make her feel small.

'Boys with Signor Bruni. You knock first.'

Rachel took her time over the orange, but she couldn't put it off for ever. When the milk was ready she filled the bottles, added the biscuit mix and plonked them on the tray. The bottles listed as she picked it up. She was on a tightrope, the twisted wire digging into her feet. She slid along it, tense and angry. Susan had made her carry the tray out of spite, but Rachel was angry with herself, for falling into the trap. She made herself stand tall and held her arms out to help keep the tray steady. I mustn't let her get to me, she told herself.

She made her way slowly up the stairs, waited a second outside the Brunis' bedroom door, tried to picture Signor Bruni in bed. An image of a walrus came to mind. It's not me who should be embarrassed, she thought, balancing the tray as best she could. She knocked and there was a long silence. Should she knock again? She raised her fist, then heard Signor Bruni's deep bass voice. 'Avanti.'

What little confidence she had ebbed away. The bottles looked like two breasts now, thin and sleek, with severed nipples.

'Avanti!,' came another loud boom.

She pushed the door open and went inside.

The room was shadowed in turquoise, the colour of the sea skimming through the window and falling onto the bedspread, white lace hangings flapping like gulls as the wind took advantage and blew through the room, slamming the door behind her.

Signor Bruni was sitting up in bed, the children buried beside him. His stomach was held in by a checked pyjama top, coloured lines dividing his body into squares. It was easier to think of him like that, in small pieces, rather than as a whole. The bottles chattered on the tray, feeding off the nervous energy from her hands. Where was his wife? Signor Bruni watched her closely.

'Franco, Santino,' he nudged the children but they didn't move.

The musky floral scent of the Signora's perfume hung about the room. Rachel made the scent have a shape, made herself see the Signora lying next to her husband. Safer with her there. Next to the bed was a photograph; husband and wife on the beach, tanned and laughing. The Signora was wearing a bikini with brass hoops linking the straps. Her shoulders were broad and the muscles stood out on the tops of her arms. Signor Bruni had his arm around her. He looked much slimmer then. Rachel wondered how long ago the photo had been taken.

'Franco.' Signor Bruni shook his son gently then reached towards Rachel for one of the bottles.

It was as though she were presenting him with a pair of glass breasts, naked and full of milk. She felt her face flush, tried to focus on the complicated circle of roses engraved on the centre of the tray, noticed instead the wiry hairs on the back of his hand.

Franco was half asleep, but when the rubber teat brushed his lips he hooked onto it passionately and began to guzzle, eyes closed, head back.

Santino fought with the sheets, suddenly awake and asking for his mother, first in English then Italian, 'Mummy, Mummy ... *dov'è la mamma?*'

Rachel wanted to comfort him, but Signor Bruni lay between them. What would it be like to have Santino *all* to herself, she wondered. The idea was remote yet she felt seduced by it. A child to replace the one she had lost.

*'Dov'è la mamma?'* Santino insisted.

Signor Bruni said something that sounded like *cavallo*, and turned to Rachel. 'Ask Susan for *caffè* for me.'

Why didn't he get out of bed and ask her himself? It wasn't her job to wait on him. But he looked at her as though he wanted to devour her, and she was glad to have a reason to leave the room.

Susan was watching a large pan come to the boil. The lid bumped up and down, releasing puffs of steam like smoke signals. She thrust a spoon in and gave it a vigorous stir.

'You no eat thees,' she informed Rachel.

As if! It smelled disgusting.

'Thees for Cesare.' Susan lengthened the name as she pronounced it; Ches-ar-ay.

Who was Cesare? Rachel was going to ask, but thought better of it. 'Signor Bruni asked if he could have his coffee.'

Susan reached for the coffee pot. 'You whan some too?'

'Er... if it's no trouble.'

'Trouble?' Susan was incredulous. 'All life is trouble.' She used a stool to reach for the coffee tin, stretching to the top shelf, flicking the tin towards her with her fingers, then swilled the spoon she had used to stir the contents of the pan and used it to measure out the coffee.

Rachel pretended she hadn't noticed. The thought of coffee now made her sick, an early morning, empty stomach type of sickness that resurrected memories she didn't want to relive. 'I think I'll have a glass of water instead.'

Susan shrugged.

Rachel opened the cupboard, the wrong one, the one that contained all the Brunis' fine china. The gold rims on the plates grinned in a self-satisfied way. She shut it abruptly. All she wanted was a glass, but the meaty smell of whatever was in the pan filled the room and she was overcome by a feeling of nausea.

'You whan bread?' Susan's voice was a distraction, but not enough to prevent Rachel from recalling how she had dashed to the bathroom that day, only just making it in time, and when she went back downstairs her mother had given her a look, one that she hadn't understood straight away. It was only when the same thing happened two days later, and she realised that she might be pregnant, that she understood that her mother had known before she did.

Susan dropped a star shaped wire over the gas ring and rested the coffee pot on top. Meat broth had foamed down the side of the pan and spread over the hob, making the gas even more difficult to light. She muttered under her breath, hissing like the gas itself until the flame came through on one side, burning blue, bursting through the other holes, pop, pop, to form a halo of fire. The coffee began its phlegmy rattle, creeping higher and higher until a tiny brown drip fell from the lip of the pot.

'Sugar,' Susan screeched. 'Where is sugar?'

Rachel pointed to the stainless sugar bowl on the table.

'This no for Signor Bruni. This for me and you. You go. See if sugar in there.'

She pointed in the direction of the dining room.

'Why can't you go?'

'Because you new. You do what I say or I tell Signora.'

Rachel considered her options; stand up to Susan and risk being told off by the Brunis, or admit defeat and fetch the sugar bowl.

Reluctantly she did as she was asked.



*Philippine Chicken Adobo*

The large amounts of garlic in this dish can serve to disguise the taste of meat that is beginning to deteriorate.

1kg chicken  
 1 head of garlic, coarsely chopped  
 4 tablespoons soy sauce  
 1 teaspoon ground black pepper  
 2 cups water  
 1 cup rice vinegar (or white wine vinegar)  
 2 bay leaves  
 2 tablespoon cooking oil

Put vinegar, bay leaves, pepper, soy sauce and water in a saucepan. Cover and cook slowly for about 15 minutes.

Meanwhile heat oil, peel garlic and break cloves into chunks and brown them over a medium heat. Add chicken and fry for about 5 minutes.

Add broth to frying pan and simmer, partly covered, until chicken is done (about 30 minutes).

Remove bay leaves and serve with rice.

vi

'Rachel? Rachel? I come with you,' Susan called across the landing.

Rachel was busy getting the boys ready for school. 'We're going in five minutes,' she said. Already she felt defensive, but before she had time to consider it further, she saw Franco give Santino's arm a sly pinch.

'Stop that.' She put her arm round Santino to protect him.

'I didn't do anything,' said Franco.

'Yes you did. I saw you. Now stop being naughty.' Santino felt soft and warm as she held him to her.

'You can't make me,' Franco taunted.

'No I can't,' she admitted, 'but I can leave you here on your own.'

He considered for a moment, then backed down, but she felt it was only a temporary truce.

In the car the boys were in high spirits, enjoying the fact that their hair was being ruffled by the wind through the open windows. It was going to be a hot day; October, but hotter than a summer's day in England. If only I could photograph the sunshine, thought Rachel, just that, and send it to Mum.

Susan sat in the front. 'I go to *mercato*,' she stated as Rachel changed gear. 'Market, you understand?' She removed the scarf from around her head and pushed it into her pocket. The glare of the sun made white lines across her hair, like a pool of water rippling outwards. She started to tell the children a story, in Italian.

She's doing it on purpose, thought Rachel, to shut me out.

'This good school,' said Susan when Rachel pulled up outside the gates. The front tyre hugged the pavement, making a noise that set Rachel's teeth on edge. 'This school for rich chil'ren. Signora always want best.'

Not for the first time, Rachel detected a note of jealousy in Susan's voice. She bundled the boys out of the car and tried to make sure they looked presentable. 'Have a good day and behave for the teacher. I'll see you later.'

Franco wandered off towards the school without saying goodbye, dragging his bag behind him.

'Pick it up,' Rachel called. Santino stayed beside her on the pavement. 'Go on. Off you pop.'

'I want to give you a kiss.'

'Oh. That's nice.' She bent down and he planted a sticky kiss on her cheek. She wished he didn't have to go to school, wished she could keep him with her all day.

'Santino, you be late,' shouted Susan from the car.

As they drove to the market, the streets became progressively narrower and bumpier.

'You go there.' Susan pointed up the hill, to a space between two cars parked half on the pavement.

'It's okay to park there?'

Susan shrugged. 'Where else you leave?'

She was right. The street was lined with cars on either side. Rachel wondered if traffic wardens existed in Italy, dreading having to explain a parking ticket to the Brunis.

'*Guarda che bella.*' Susan was out of the car in an instant, breathing deeply, admiring the view.

The city was spread out below them, a mass of buildings shimmering in the rising heat, the sea a blue crescent in the background. Rachel locked the car and stood gazing down. How easy it would be to become lost here. The idea was both frightening and tempting at the same time.

People were making their way up the hill, women mainly. Most were Italian, but some looked like Susan, round faces and snub features. Susan waved across the road and shouted a greeting to a woman in a blue skirt. The woman waved back but kept walking.

'She work for big family. Have much money.' Susan's lips were pursed, as though she were sucking a lemon. 'Whan day maybe I work for family with much *soldi.*'

'Soldi?' Rachel asked.

'Money. *Soldi* mean money in Italian. You no care about money?'

'I'm not really here for the money, I mean ...'

'No care about money, no care about life.' Susan reinforced her point by spitting on the pavement. The spittle glistened like a boiled sweet.

The air was thick with unfamiliar smells: sardines, sharp olives, capers preserved in salt. One stall displayed blood oranges cut in two, dripping red juice onto the pavement. Rachel's stomach groaned with hunger. All she'd had this morning was a drink of tea. No one seemed to bother much with breakfast here. Even Signor Bruni with his ample stomach only had a thimbleful of coffee to start the day.

'Thees place always busy,' said Susan, grabbing Rachel's arm as they wound through the shoppers. Clothes hung from hangers, brought alive by the quick gusts of hot autumn wind. Susan's smallness made it easy for her to thread in and out, but Rachel felt too tall to fit through the gaps. People were looking at her, at her white blond hair and pink skin newly touched by the sun.

'Here,' said Susan, pointing to a stall piled high with tins. The little cardboard signs with the prices meant nothing to Rachel, except that they all seemed to have too many noughts. Susan spoke to the stall holder, and began to choose what she wanted, her eyes twinkling as she filled her carrier.

'Please Rachel. You take.' She passed her the carrier bag full of tins then started to choose some more.

'*Ciao bella*,' said the man behind the stall. Rachel tried to move away but there were so many people there wasn't anywhere to move to. 'I laave England,' the man said, licking his lips. How did he know she was English, she thought indignantly.

'*Quanto costa?*' interrupted Susan.

*'Veinte mila, Signora.'* The man spoke without taking his eyes off Rachel.

Susan counted the money quickly and he tucked it into a bulging money belt, rubbing his hand across it and watching Rachel to see her reaction.

'Ooofah! All men same,' snapped Susan, glaring at him and pulling Rachel's arm.

It is like a cock fight, this crush in the market. Susan remembers the sweat and blood, the flash of spurs. Men shouting, urging the birds on to victory or death, depending how their bets were placed. Their cries were more vicious than the fight itself, but they did not frighten her, for she has no feelings on the subject one way or another. Cocks are dirty birds with oily feathers, sharpened beaks, and eyes that pierce the night like lighted cigarettes. It annoyed her to see their owners treat them with such respect though, feeding them up at the expense of their children, training them when they should have been working, or looking for work.

The hut where the fights took place was near the basketball court. Normally the court was full of young boys in baseball caps and vests, deftly bouncing the ball between and around the opposition. But when there was a fight the court was deserted, and the boys slouched in the doorway of the hut, passing cigarettes to one another, pretending they were men. The sight of blood and feathers did not disturb them. It was entertainment, so judgement was not expected.

When Susan was a child, her mother collapsed on the porch in a pool of water, water that seemed to have come from inside her. It was early evening and the coconut palms were sighing after a long day. Susan wanted to stay and watch whatever it was that was happening to her mother, but Fiorenza, being the oldest, took responsibility, and made Susan run to the village for the doctor.

The ground was good for running, not too soft. Little puffs of red dust kicked up behind her as her feet hit the earth, and somewhere a monkey chattered to itself, apprehensive as darkness approached. The village was ringed by the smell of chicken and coconut rice, and in the twilight Susan was confused and could not remember which house Doctor Reyes lived in. She called for him but no one answered. The silence was so concentrated it hurt her ears. Where were the men who normally lounged on the porches sipping Tanduay rum, the old ones who chewed tobacco and spat across the street?

A woman appeared, sleepy and smiling, pointed towards the basketball court, which was flat and empty as a desert.

'Better to wait until they're done, little one.'

Suddenly there was shouting, voices building into a collective frenzy. Susan followed the sound to the hut behind the court, smelled the beer and hair oil, heard the bad language that came out after dark.

'Doctor Reyes, Doctor Reyes?'

The men hissed at her as she pushed through. Near the centre there was the anguished flap of wings and the scent of blood. Susan felt the men crushing her, her face pushed against someone's groin, then a man grabbed her, lifted her high and she was looking at the doctor, his top lip darkened by the merest hint of a moustache. She told him what she could of her mother's illness, saw him nod as he made sense of the symptoms. He did not appear too concerned. Indeed, he set her down on the wooden bench and made her wait until the fights were over.

Looking back, Susan knows that even if he had come straight away, the doctor could not have changed things. The child that would have been a brother was dead in the womb. Bad fortune this, for everyone knows that a son brings money.

Rachel rested the bags on the floor while Susan rifled through some hangers, pulling two flowery sun dresses off the rail.

'What you think?'

'Not bad,' said Rachel, thinking that on Susan's thin body they would make her look like a little girl.

'Yes, thees good.' Susan held the money in her hand and teased the trader with it. There seemed to be some disagreement about the price. The man began to get angry but Susan persisted, waving the money yet refusing to part with it, her hand passing hypnotically back and forth until in the end the man gave in. Susan's smile lifted her face, making her cheeks puff up and her eyes glimmer in triumph.

'You see, Rachel,' she said as they moved away, 'when he say no, I no listen. That way I always win.'

When they returned to the car, Rachel dumped the bags on the back seat, her arms aching from carrying them for so long. Susan climbed in the front, put the dresses to one side, and pulled the bags of shopping forward onto her lap, wrapping her arms round them as though they were children.

'I can open the boot if you want.'

'I fine like this. You go up there. I need rest before I go back to house.'

*But you've hardly carried anything, thought Rachel.*

Round the corner and the city seemed to climb higher and higher. Rachel had imagined the school run was all there was to see, but now she found the streets wound unpredictably in every direction.

'Thees old town,' said Susan as they drove up the hill. Down there,' she pointed to the city below, 'all new because made flat by *terremoto*.'

'Terremoto? What does that mean?'

'Earth move and everything fall.'

'An earthquake?'

'Si, earthquake.'

Rachel gripped the steering wheel. 'Do they happen often?'

'Maybe ...' said Susan enigmatically, adjusting the bags of shopping on her lap. 'Signora tell me one time she fall out of bed when terremoto come, but this long time ago, before she married.'

Plaster statues, set in alcoves in the walls, seemed to watch from every corner. Some were illuminated from behind by dim bulbs, while others had bunches of dying flowers laid at their feet. Susan genuflected and muttered under her breath, her whispered reverence playing on Rachel's nerves. Earthquakes, she thought, imagining herself trapped under a collapsed building, dark and airless, not knowing if she would be rescued or left to die.

'Thees it!' declared Susan, pointing as though she had seen a vision.

Rachel braked hard and both Susan and the shopping fell forward, tins of chick peas and cannellini beans rolling under the seat.

'Ooofah!' Susan gathered the tins and threw them back in the bags. 'Where you learn to drive?'

Rachel bit her lip, unable to think of an answer that would put her in her place.

When Rachel had parked, Susan clambered out of the car and stooped to check her face in the wing mirror. She licked her hand and smoothed her fringe, then



patted the back of her neck with a tissue, dropping it to the ground when she had finished with it. It blew down the road like a flower head, plucked then discarded.

In the bar there was a glass case containing biscuits in the shape of crescent moons, soft sponges soaked in rum syrup, fruits made from almond paste and painted with food colouring. Susan chewed on her nail, unable to decide.

Rachel noticed the barman. He was what her friend Carol would describe as 'tall, dark and handsome', a cliché, but true. His hair was shoulder length, brushed back off his face to accentuate his cheekbones, and his eyes were brown as chestnuts. He swooped with a pair of silver tongs, placing a number of little biscuits on a plate.

'I choose for you,' Susan informed her without giving her time to answer. 'You whan tea or caffè?'

'Coffee. Per favore,' Rachel ventured.

'*Con latte?*' asked the barman, winking.

She could feel her face reddening. She hadn't a clue what he had asked. She concentrated on the cracks in the linoleum, wishing the ground would open up and save her from the embarrassment of trying out words she wasn't sure of.

'He ask if you whan milk,' Susan translated, scratching in the bottom of her purse, rattling the change. 'Scusa Rachel, I no money.'

But Rachel had seen money in her purse when she paid for the dresses. She took a note out of her own purse, not quite sure of its value. Susan's hair had fallen forward so Rachel couldn't see her expression. She imagined she was smiling, pleased with herself for having made Rachel pay. It's not worth arguing over, she told herself. The Brunis probably don't pay her much anyway.

The barman poured hot milk into a glass and marbled it with coffee, then spooned a little milk froth on top and pushed it towards her as though it was a work of

art. She noticed he wore a gold band on his wedding finger. Typical. Good looking blokes were always spoken for.

'Shall we sit over there?' she suggested.

'Cost money to sit,' Susan said flatly.

So they remained standing, the barman trying to catch Rachel's eye.

'You like?' asked Susan, munching a biscuit, a pale dusting of icing sugar sticking to her top lip.

Did she mean the barman, or the biscuits? Rachel took a round one with a circle of jam in the centre which shone through like hot glass. 'Mmm.'

'*Senta*. Everyone feel same when leave home.'

Rachel was about to say she hadn't been thinking about home, but in a way it was always in the back of her mind.

'Feel like something big left behind.' Susan pressed her hand to her heart and closed her eyes. Her lashes were black and silky as insects' legs. 'Feel like empty in here.' Her hand stayed on her heart.

Rachel understood exactly what she meant, that sense of emptiness. It was dark and endless and inside it was the unnamed child that had been taken from her before it was properly formed. How eager she had been to leave that experience behind, in England, but now she realised she couldn't just ditch it; it was part of what made her Rachel and not someone else.

'I like it here,' she said, refusing to dwell on what was missing. 'It's new, that's all. Hard to get used to, especially when you don't speak the language.'

'You need Italian boy. Then you learn.' Susan giggled like a schoolgirl but the lines at the corners of her eyes showed her age.

Rachel let the milky coffee slide over her tongue. 'Did you learn English at school?' she asked. Anything to get off the subject of boyfriends.

'American lady teach us. Give class all American names; Diane, Vera, Susan. I like mine so I tell my mother, you no longer call me Zosima please. My name Susan now.' She blew across the top of her tea.

'But Zosima's a nice name.'

'Easier to get job if you have Ingleesh name. I keep Susan and forget Zosima. She dead. I real Susan now, no one else. Same for my sister. She call herself Fiorenza and marry Italian.'

'Is she the one who lives in Rome?'

Susan nodded.

'Could you teach me some Italian. Just a bit, to help me get by?'

Susan took another biscuit and nibbled round the edge. Rachel sensed her backing away.

'I brought a book with me but I can't pronounce the words very well.'

'I work all day. You no see?' She looked towards the barman who was emptying the used coffee grinds out of the machine. 'He nice boy for you.'

Rachel felt herself blush.

'Oooo. Look your face,' Susan laughed.

Rachel smiled tightly.

'No worry. You meet plenty men here. I meet Don Pipo. He take me to restaurant and tell me he have no wife. I say no to him. I finish with all that thing. But you young, you find nice boy, for sure.'

'I'm not looking for a boyfriend.'

'Ingleesh girl always look for boyfriend.' Susan smiled. 'I learn you Italian words if I time, but I much work for now. Cook, clean, iron.' She held out her hands as if to show that time were a thing she could not hold on to.

Rachel sipped her coffee. The taste took her back to her holiday in Spain last year. Their only holiday together, lazing on the beach, Dean in the sun all day, Rachel under the shade of an umbrella, reading a book. Everything had seemed so easy, so relaxed. The sex came easy too, every part of her body feeling that luxurious stretch, aided by the sneaky joints procured by Dean from the boy whose mother cleaned the apartment. Making love in a daze. Each minute lingering an hour. So deep. So close, until they became so stoned they forgot to be careful. Or rather, they thought it didn't matter, so soon after her period, in a veil of blue smoke.

Blue smoke and orange fire. It was fire that brought Susan here. She remembers standing in the yard, in her nightdress, pink flowers becoming flecked with soot as the flames moved, darting and unpredictable. All the neighbours outside, men with buckets making useless attempts to quench the fire's thirst, the women chattering like coloured birds.

The older women tried to talk the fire down, soothing it as though it was a fractious child. The child, yes. Where was Reetha, they asked. One of the women pointed at Susan. Everyone turned. Susan knew what they were thinking. That there was purpose in this fire, that she had left her child inside, the flames searing Reetha's skin, crisp like a roast piglet.

The weight of their gaze made the corrugated roof of the house collapse and the flames waft up in a visible breeze, forming the shape of disaster in the night sky.

Susan watched the skeleton of her mother's chair on the porch, the impish flames claiming it as their own. She cried out, angry at the fire, but it was hungry and would not stop.

Lin appeared beside her and asked, 'Come on, where's Reetha?' Lin's skin was lighter than Susan's, and the flames tanned her face, giving her the colour of peanut butter, like an American college girl. Susan pretended not to hear. Lin was her neighbour, but normally they did not speak. There was nothing for them to talk about; everything had been said two years earlier.

Lin repeated her question and Susan shrugged, wondering why she was so anxious. Perhaps it was guilt. Yes, Susan could see fire was a woman's crime; flames slow and insidious as poison. But who was to say there had been a crime? She did not think Lin had the courage for bad deeds. Besides, Susan could not remember if she had extinguished the oil lamp hanging from a hook at the back of the house. Better not to search for fault, in case the blame lay closer than she cared to admit.

The men were putting down their buckets. There was nothing to do. The burning wood creaked and cracked, concrete split like ice. Somewhere in the centre of the fire a hairspray can exploded like a firecracker. The house was dead. Maybe it had grown tired of living. Susan understood that feeling entirely, the constant struggle simply to exist.

Lin said something then took hold of her arm, gripped it hard and shook. Her mouth was working frantically, asking so many questions, yet Susan was concentrating on the flames, the way they seemed to open up and offer possibilities of freedom.

'Where is Reetha?' shrieked Lin. 'What have you done with Reetha?'

Susan could not keep pace with what she was saying. The flames shimmered and dazzled and made her squint. At the same time there was a ticklish movement between her legs, beneath her nightdress which reached to the ground and hid everything.

'Sam, Sam.' Lin was shouting, screaming for her husband, but her voice was so faint Susan hardly heard her. She felt separate, not just from Lin but from the village, and its people. She observed the flames making their escape, up through the leathery leaves of the banana trees, and imagined she could leap high and clear in the same way, leaving behind the circumstances that tied her down.

Sam was making his way towards them. He was a fat man who owned the bar, selling San Miguel to the men as they frittered their days away playing cards, and offering fizzy orange drinks to the children. He made good money which Lin spent on clothes and shoes and make-up. Maybe it was he who started the fire, him and Lin together. But Sam would not have risked harming Reetha, would he?

Sam looked at Susan with frightened eyes. It seemed strange to see fear in a man's face. Susan smiled, knowing that he was thinking the same as his wife; perhaps they thought the worst because it has always been difficult to think the best where Susan is concerned. Yes, they thought Susan had left Reetha in the house. Saved herself and let her child die. Susan smiled wider, stronger. What did he know? This fat man who sweated beer? She took hold of her nightdress with either hand, gathered the material slowly, slowly. The printed flowers climbed upwards, revealing four brown feet. One pair was wide spread, with callused toes and nails flecked with chipped red polish. The other pair was much smaller, pinkish brown, scuffed with dirt and soot. The feet of a child. A child hiding between Susan's legs.

Lin was on her knees, holding out her hands like a beggar. How she wanted to have Reetha all to herself, insisting she and Sam had more to offer. But there are some things which money cannot buy.

*Parmesan*

During the long maturing process, usually after the first year, the cheese is coated with a mixture of earth and oil which acts as a protective coating. The cheesemaker constantly taps this coating to ascertain the quality of the cheese inside, knowing from the sound of his hammer whether the cheese is ripe.

vii

Rachel had seen Susan sneaking in and out of what appeared to be the spare room, had glimpsed a single bed with a pink cover, and a mirror on the wall. There were no ornaments or pictures, just the mirror, reflecting nothing. It seemed odd that Franco and Santino shared a room, while this one stood empty.

Susan was downstairs now, clattering about, the whole house echoing with her dissatisfaction. Knowing she was busy gave Rachel an irresistible urge to look in the room. The boys were at school. She missed Santino, wondered what he was doing. She didn't miss Franco in the same way; he could be quite a handful, always misbehaving and answering her back.

She walked on tip toe across the landing, as if at any moment the floor might give way beneath her and drop her right into Susan's lap, but when she tried the door she found it locked. She bent down to look through the key hole but all she could see was darkness.

Defeated, she went back to the boys' room, to finish tidying up. There was always lots of tidying to do, mainly because Franco refused to put his things away when he had finished with them. The boys' beds were placed head to head, separated



by a pair of bookcases which were piled high with English story books. It was as if the Signora expected the words to seep down through the shelves during the night and settle in her son's heads. Some were Ladybird books with thin spines; Rachel had read them herself as a child. Pictures so detailed they pulled you in, made you forget who and where you were. Signora Bruni ordered the books from a shop in Rome. Yesterday she had shown Rachel a list of titles, asked her if there was anything she needed.

'It's a bit too soon,' Rachel had said, not having the courage to say that there were more than enough books already.

She shook Santino's pillow and pulled back the twisted sheets. A wet stain stuck the bottom sheet to the mattress, and when she removed the sheets she found his wet pyjama bottoms stuffed between the bed and the wall. Had he changed himself? Surely the Signora wouldn't have pushed the wet clothes behind the bed like that?

In complete contrast, Franco's bed had hardly a crease or a fold out of place, as though he hadn't moved all night. Rachel gazed at the blank whiteness, traced her name with her finger, to remind herself that she was here, that she really did exist. Being away from home made that existence so fragile. She kept telling herself not to think about Dean, about what had happened, but she couldn't help it. She was desperate to fill that space inside herself, to make herself whole again.

It was hard work dragging Santino's mattress to the window to dry it out, and it made her late for collecting them from school. Lessons were six mornings a week, half eight until half twelve, a tough routine for children. She found the car keys and dashed downstairs. Susan was laying the clean velvet curtains out on the dining table, inserting the hooks.

'You help me with thees?'

'I've got to go to the school.'

*'Più tardi?'*

'Sorry?'

*'Più tardi.* Later. You help later?'

'Piu tardi,' Rachel repeated.

Susan laughed at her pronunciation. It was an odd sort of laughter, mocking, yet undercut with fatigue.

When Rachel is gone, Susan fiddles with the top button on her collar and retrieves the key she keeps on a string round her neck. The string is tangled with the chain of her mother's locket, as if it is reluctant to come out today. She tugs it free. The metal key is the same temperature as her body; through years of waiting it has become part of her.

Every few days she follows this ritual, goes upstairs, unlocks the door, opens the window and airs the room. She prefers to do it when the house is empty, when there is no one to see. She heard Rachel earlier, treading softly across the landing, trying the door and finding it locked. So stupid these Ingleesh. Georgina was just the same, sneaking around, thinking herself so smart, and other girls before her too, all here to look after the children and make sure they learn good Ingleesh. But Susan knows this house like she knows herself, the sighs and groans, the gentle whisper of the floorboards as someone moves from one room to another.

The room is at the back of the house and receives little sun. Now summer has given way to autumn and the air is damp at night. It makes the room smell like unwashed skin. White mould grows in flower patterns on the bed, black mould in the

cracks where the windowsill joins the wall. Signora Bruni would be angry if she saw the state of it, but lately she has not been interested in the house. She tells Susan to keep the room well aired, but Susan does not like to leave it open for long, for the room reminds her that time has passed and nothing has changed.

The air is still and cool as a church. She opens the window and pushes the shutters back to let the light in. Dust rises like incense. A flash of sunlight. Susan remembers the flames dancing. Georgina's hair reminded her of those flames, coppery curls that flicked up in the breeze. Yes, it was hard to work with her in the house. Better that she left, although it was not Susan who made her leave, despite what Signora Bruni thinks. Indeed, the Signora would do well to keep a closer eye on her husband, otherwise she will never find an Ingleesh girl who is prepared to stay.

Sunlight patterns the carpet, dances wildly with the movement of the trees. Who would have believed a fire could cause so much destruction, for the loss of the house caused the death of her mother also. The nurse called it shock, implying a sudden seizure, but Susan knows that that this is not how life leaves the body. She has seen it in sick dogs at the roadside. Flies land, testing the senses, then muscles stiffen slowly, until movement ceases, yet the eyes remain open and pleading. In the stillness of this room, Susan almost imagines she can hear her mother's last breath, a sigh combining relief with disappointment.

She wipes over the mirror with a tatty duster. There are nail marks in the wall where she has moved it up, year after year, gauging Reetha's height, anticipating her arrival. The mirror has a picture of a girl perched on a spotted toadstool. She wears a bonnet and a sun dress. Over the years Reetha and the little girl have merged in Susan's mind until now she finds it hard to separate the two. She gazes at the mirror, sees her own face almost by surprise. There are lines where once her skin was

smooth, and creases are beginning to form around her lips. Susan has never considered herself old, but compared to Rachel her face is showing signs of hardship. After all, age is not the years you are, but the things that have happened to you. She breathes on the mirror and polishes it briskly, trying to erase her reflection altogether.

She has to keep reminding herself that Reetha is not a child. Next week she will be thirteen years old. How has her daughter arrived at this age so quickly? It seems impossible that the years have passed by so fast. Still, too late to mourn them once they have gone. Later she will wrap the dresses she bought from the market, make them up into a bulky parcel. In his last letter, Sam wrote that Reetha liked to wear jeans and tee shirts, things with slogans written on them like young people wear in America. The letter infuriated Susan; Reetha prefers dresses patterned with flowers. If she didn't, why would she write to say thank you?

Susan knows what Reetha likes to wear, better than Sam and Lin ever can. She knows because she is Reetha's mother. Simple as that.

Rachel drove slowly, still a little unsure of the way, waiting for the statue of Neptune to appear in the middle of the road. The boys lounged in the back, exhausted from a morning of lessons. She kept glancing at them in the rear view mirror, Santino with his head tipped forward, nodding whenever her foot touched the brake. What it would be like if he was hers? She knew that was a dangerous way to think, but there was no harm in imagining, was there?

The October sun skimmed the roofs of the buildings, bleaching the colour from the streets. Everything looked clean, the pavements, the shops, the people, everything glowing with warmth. There was a cafe with tables outside and brightly

coloured umbrellas. She didn't remember seeing it before. She felt a flicker of panic. Where was Neptune? Her grip tightened on the wheel as she searched desperately for something familiar.

What she hoped to see was the statue, but what she caught sight of was Signora Bruni, sitting outside the cafe, legs crossed at the ankle, sipping something dark from a glass, iced coffee perhaps. The traffic was moving slowly, giving Rachel long enough to see that the Signora was not alone. She sat with a man, close and intimate. The man leaned forward and gently kissed the side of the Signora's face. Rachel thought she recognised him but couldn't think where she had seen him before, and now she had to concentrate on the road, on the traffic edging forwards. The boys were quiet, wilted like cut flowers. In that moment she felt fiercely protective of them, wanted to gather them in her arms and hug them both tight, tight enough to prevent them from understanding the things which took place in the world of grown-ups.

At odd times, such as when she is swilling little black hairs from the sink in the Brunis' bathroom, or using the brush to remove brown streaks from their toilet, Susan thinks about Sam. All men have dirty habits, she is convinced. Sam used to leave pubic hairs stuck to the soap, spatter pee everywhere but in the bowl. This does not mean there was no feeling. It was not love, Susan is under no illusions, but there was a gentleness about him, the way he slid his hands round her waist, picked her up and carried her to bed, his stomach swaying from too much beer.

It began with the things he shouted when he saw her sweeping the porch, the cane roof providing just enough shade for her to do so in the afternoon. She swept to

coincide with the time he went home for lunch. 'Black-eyed Suzie,' he called her, like the old song. She was alone; her mother asleep in the back room, Fiorenza gone two years, working abroad. There was nothing to do in the village except watch the man with the ox drag sacks of rice from yard to yard, delivering them at his own speed. Either that or watch the sky change from pink to gold.

Sam made good money. That was what separated him from other men. But also what set him apart was the fact that he was married. For Susan, the knowledge that Sam had a wife heightened every touch, every whisper. Sex with him was a mixture of secrecy and daring, of dreading yet wanting to be found out. Sam liked to talk, about himself, about Lin and her inability to have children. He spoke close to Susan's ear. No need; her mother was a heavy sleeper, snoring like a man as the afternoon wore on, her dreams infused with rum. Up close, Sam's voice was sad, like the sound of the sea in a shell. Susan did not understand why he and his wife should mourn over children they had never had.

Perhaps now she understands, but not then.

When Lin found out about her husband's affair, Susan was almost pleased. She had had enough of listening to the sea, of sweat that tasted like beer. Besides, all Sam's talk about them going away together, to Manila, was just that; talk. He didn't have enough courage to leave the village.

'Take him home. He's no good to me,' Susan laughed from the porch as Lin's shouts drew the attention of the rice seller. Susan was sure her mother was awake but saw no point in holding back. Lin screamed, not at Susan but at the sky, and tore at her own hair until Sam bounded down the wooden steps to take a tight hold of her.

Susan put her hands on her hips and shook her head. 'Don't blame me, Lin,' she shouted. 'He came looking.'

Lin turned pale beneath her honey coloured skin. No need for Sam to restrain her as her lids fluttered and her legs slid from under her. Faking, Susan thought to herself.

One of Lin's shoes came off as Sam helped her home. It remained in the street all afternoon, the heel pointing to Susan's porch like an accusing finger. At dusk, Susan saw Sam coming back for it. Determined not to be beaten she went outside and started sweeping, to prove she didn't care. She didn't know then that something was lodged inside her, like a seed. Or perhaps a thorn, depending who the father really was.

*Diti di apostoli* - Apostle's fingers.

¾ tablespoon fresh ricotta  
 ¼ cup sugar  
 ¼ cup cocoa powder  
 ¼ cup amaretto  
 zest of 2 oranges  
 4 egg whites  
 ½ tablespoon olive oil  
 ½ cup powdered sugar

In a mixing bowl stir together ricotta, sugar, cocoa, amaretto and orange zest. Beat egg whites until foamy and just form light peaks.

In a non-stick pan heat olive oil. Pour 2 tablespoons of egg whites into a pan and swirl as if making a crepe. Cook for 1 minute on first side, turn and cook 20 seconds more. Continue until mixture is used up.

Place 1 tablespoon ricotta mixture in the centre of each crepe, roll and sprinkle with icing sugar or cocoa.

viii

Franco was in Rachel's room, sitting at the window, drawing pictures of the tangle of thin trees which grew up the banking behind the house. Higher up, and out of view, was another house which overlooked the Brunis'.

'Georgina took me up there to play in the garden once,' said Franco.

'Do other children live up there?'

'No.' He avoided looking at her. 'Georgina didn't like it here so she went home.'

'Yes, Susan told me.' Rachel stared out of the window at a cluster of bright red poppies that grew in an opening between the trees, taking advantage of a patch of light. 'Why didn't she want to stay?'



Franco held his hands wide, an action he had obviously picked up from his father. 'Bo.'

Rachel was about to tell him that 'bo' was a very rude way to answer, but her attention was diverted as Santino wandered into the room. He made little fists with his hands and screwed them into his face.

'Still tired?' The long siesta didn't seem to have done much good. 'I know. Why don't we go out?' Maybe some fresh air would do the trick.

'To the park?' asked Franco.

'No, not today.' The Signora had shown her the way to the park, but it was back towards the city and she couldn't face driving again; the way the Italian's skimmed bumpers and leaned on their horns, almost as though they were telling her to go home. 'How about the beach?' she offered, by way of a compromise.

'The beach,' repeated Santino, instantly awake, jumping up and down on the spot. 'I like the beach.'

'Go and fetch your shoes then.' He ran off, stumbling in his haste to get his things. 'What about you Franco? Are you going to get ready too?'

He tore off his crayoned picture and dropped it carelessly on the carpet. It was mainly blue and black tree trunks, with hints of orange for the leaves, and a splash of red where the poppies were. It made it look as though the wood was on fire. Rachel bent to pick it up.

'Don't look!' He snatched it back, crumpling the paper. 'It's not for you.'

'Fine. I'll draw my own.' She looked at the pad of blank paper on the dressing table which served as a reminder that she hadn't written to either Carol or her mother yet.

'I don't like you,' Franco said.

'Oh thanks. Come to think of it, I don't like you much either.' She was surprised at how hurt she felt. Rejection was hard to endure, especially from a child. She wasn't even sure what had sparked his temper. He said something in Italian which she didn't quite catch. She felt certain he had sworn at her.

'You little ...' She stopped herself. Coming down to his level wasn't the way. She had to prove she was in control. 'You'd better watch your step. I'm bigger than you, don't forget.'

He glared at her defiantly, goading her. '*Cretina*.'

She wanted to smack him. Words built up inside her, words she had flung at Dean when they had argued, but she couldn't say those to a child, even one she didn't particularly like. 'Supercaller... fragilistic,' she said, exasperated at the lack of words on offer. She took some satisfaction from his look of confusion. His English might be good, but there was plenty he didn't know. She smiled curtly. 'Yes, I can say nasty things as well.' He pushed his bottom lip outward. 'Now just behave yourself or I'll tell your Mum.'

Santino came back with his shoes and clambered onto her bed. She directed all her attention to helping him, purposely leaving Franco out. Santino's calves felt plump and soft as fruit, like plums ready to be picked. She squeezed them lightly, the touch of her hand bringing a smile to his face. He looked up at her and giggled.

'You'd better hurry up if you're coming with us,' she said to Franco. As he trudged off to his room to collect his coat, she heard him repeating, 'supercaller ... fragilistic,' under his breath.

The road was busy and the sound of the traffic almost cut out the sound of the sea. There were little drifts of sand at the kerb side, and when the sea breeze blew it

gritted their faces. Beyond the road, the landscape of the beach looked grey and dead, as though a storm was approaching, but even though the sun was behind the clouds, it was warm and sultry. Rachel held the boys' hands tightly as they crossed the road, putting extra pressure on Franco's hand.

'You're hurting,' he complained.

She didn't answer.

The beach was damp and smooth and good to walk on, absorbing their footfalls, holding their tracks. She took off her shoes and felt the sand push up against the soles of her feet, a cool wet layer separating each toe. She walked close to the water's edge, her imprints welling behind her.

She was supposed to be teaching the boys English. The Signora had stressed that was what she was paid to do; improve their language. But she was still annoyed by Franco's outburst. I ought to tell the Signora before he gets out of hand, she thought. But that would be admitting that she couldn't deal with him. She listened to the calming swish and rush of the waves and told herself not to take it to heart. Franco and Santino were chattering to each other in a mixture of English and Italian, at ease with either language, seemingly unconcerned by Rachel's quietness.

'Can we go on the rocks Rachel?' Franco asked. It appeared he had decided to like her again.

'No. I want you where I can keep an eye on you.' She knew she was being unfair.

'Please Rachel, please.'

'Well ... all right then, but watch your shoes. Don't scrape them or else you'll be in trouble.'

Both boys wore navy blue lace-ups with plain rounded toes. Not ideal for playing, but the Signora didn't approve of trainers.

Franco ran ahead, kicking pebbles. She knew she would have to clean his shoes when they got back. As she watched him she realised she resented his privilege, the fact that he would probably always have someone to clean his shoes for him.

'Look Rachel,' shouted Santino, pointing out across the Straits. A small boat with a single high mast was charcoaled onto the horizon. It had no sail, but at the very top of the mast was a speck of a man, swaying with the sea.

'He's looking for *pesce spada*,' shouted Franco. He stretched his arms, trying to describe the fish, but couldn't find the word. 'A fish with a nose like this.' He stuck his arm out and chased Santino, 'hiyar, hiyar,' chopping with his outstretched arm.

'A sword?' guessed Rachel. 'Oh, a sword fish.'

'Sword fish,' repeated Santino, ducking out of Franco's way and running in the other direction, along the beach, wet clumps of sand kicking up from his heels.

Rachel watched the waves smack the prow of the boat, imagined the force of her hand against Franco's bare leg. Yes, when he had called her 'cretina' she would have liked to have smacked him hard, left her mark on him.

'What's this called then?' asked Franco, disturbing her thoughts. He was holding up a loose length of slimy green.

'Seaweed.'

'I know that, but what kind.'

'Oh, I don't know. There's some called bladderwrack, but that's not it. It's just seaweed.'

'Okay. *Guarda* Santino. I've got some seaweed.' He twirled the tattered ribbon above his head.

Santino climbed between the rocks, knees scraping, ankles grazing, a frown of concentration on his face as he picked his way.

'Look at this,' he shouted, holding up a prize of his own; a small clear plastic object, its point glinting smugly.

'No!' Rachel broke into a run. She heard her feet hitting the wet sand, smack, smack, felt flecks of water stinging the backs of her legs. 'Put it down.'

Santino was petrified. Franco too stood frozen, his arm still high in the air, the seaweed hanging behind him like a green wig.

The syringe was matted with salt and dirt. Rachel stopped herself from snatching and pulled it from him as carefully as she could. His fingers remained curled, trembling slightly.

'Did you touch it here?' she asked, pointing to the needle, so fine it was almost invisible except for the way the steel winked when it caught the light. He shook his head but didn't speak. She could see he was close to tears. 'It's all right. It's not your fault,' she petted. 'I wasn't shouting at you.'

But she *had* shouted, and now he was scared of her. Franco clambered towards them.

'You mustn't ever pick these up,' she said, 'either of you. They're very dangerous. Do you understand?'

'Is it for drugs?' asked Franco.

She was taken aback. What did he know about drugs? Here on the beach, with the gentle shush of the waves in the background, his question seemed out of place. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Anyway, it's best not to touch.'

She found a bottle wedged between the rocks, empty except for a swill of seawater in the bottom, worked it free and dropped the syringe inside. The needle struck a despondent note on the glass.

The rest of the walk was less enthusiastic. Santino stuck close to Rachel's side, and Franco kept his hands in his pockets, firm against the temptation of picking anything up. Rachel was disappointed in herself. She should have been watching the boys more closely. What if the Signora found out about the syringe?

'Better be getting back now, you two.'

Franco turned, obedient for once.

'Don't tell your Mum what Santino found,' she said to him.

He nodded and looked at his brother, as though Santino couldn't be trusted. Rachel stopped and knelt down, aware that it was unfair to frighten him further, yet unable to think of another way to protect herself. Santino's hand was warm and faintly sweaty.

'You mustn't tell Mummy, okay, or she'll be very, very angry. You know that don't you?' His cheeks had paled, leaving two little pink tinges where the colour had been. What would it have been like to have a child like this? The thought came from nowhere, pushed everything else aside. She wished she hadn't had to frighten him in order to obtain his silence. 'Sorry,' she whispered, conscious that she wasn't speaking to him, but to an image of a child she carried in her head, one that hadn't had chance to be born.

'Come on you two,' she said when they were back at the house. 'First some tea, then upstairs for a story.' They ran down the hall, both eager to be first into the kitchen.

Franco knocked the door open, bursting in on Susan who was doing the ironing. Rachel followed, greeting Susan but gaining an almost inaudible response. The boys began to run round, Franco chasing his brother until he lapped him, Santino trying to catch up.

'You stop it!' Susan shouted as the ironing board rocked. Franco laughed and carried on chasing.

'Franco, sit down,' said Rachel, 'you too Santino,' but they were excited now and neither of them took any notice. Round and round, sudden changes of direction, pulling out chairs to slow each other down, shrieks and giggles as the table rocked and the pile of ironing leaned precariously. Rachel put her hand out to steady it but as she did so, Franco ran into her and tripped, grabbed the leg of the ironing board and sent the whole thing clattering to the floor.

Susan let out a screech, like a bird trapped down a chimney. '*Vieni quoui. Dai, subito.*'

Franco cowered.

*Die?* wondered Rachel. What on earth did she mean? But she hardly had time to consider as Susan grabbed Franco's hand and pressed the iron purposefully to his finger. So quick that Rachel could hardly believe what was happening. Franco's cry came right up from his stomach, a yell that made her heart stop. Santino started to wail, but Susan was shouting above it all, '*cat-ee-vo, cat-ee-vo!*'. She put the iron down and smacked Franco as hard as she could on the behind, once, twice, her breath coming huff huff as her hand made contact with him.

Rachel wanted to stop her but it was as if an invisible wall surrounded her, preventing her from interfering. 'Susan, for God's sake,' she said, eventually finding her voice.

At the mention of God, Susan let go, panting. 'Thees two bad boys.' She held her own hand as though it hurt.

Franco went straight to Rachel, crying and shaking convulsively. Santino was too frightened to move.

'Shhh.' Rachel said, unsure of what Susan might do next, but Susan simply pursed her lips, and bent to pick up the ironing board. 'Look what you've done to his finger,' Rachel said accusingly.

Santino pushed up against her leg. She had her arms around both of them now, almost suffocating them with the completeness of her hold, at the same time staring at Susan in disbelief. There was a faint smell of burning, sickly sweet. Was it flesh, or the mark on the table where she had put the hot iron down? Rachel could feel the blood pounding in her chest.

'My finger,' stammered Franco.

'I know.'

Susan was glowering at all three of them but Rachel took no notice. She tried to appear efficient, picking Franco up and sitting him on the drainer. His legs dangled, his socks withered round his ankles. She set the cold tap running and held his finger under it, watching the water trickle over the burn mark. His face was glossed with tears.

'My finger, my finger hurts,' he stuttered.

'Try to be brave,' but her words started him crying even harder.

Susan took a crumpled blouse out of her basket and spread it out over the board, then picked up the iron and spat on the plate. It bubbled fiercely. She looked across at Franco. 'Susan not your friend,' she stated, and set to work on the blouse, pulling the collar tight as she worked.



'Let's go upstairs and find some magic cream,' Rachel said, hoping her face cream might do the trick. She turned the tap off and patted his finger dry with the tea towel. It didn't look too bad. Only the very tip had come into contact with the iron. She drew his hand to her lips and kissed it. 'Better?'

Franco nodded.

As she led the children out of the kitchen, Susan began to sing.

Signor Bruni lined the pincers of the nut cracker carefully and grimaced as he pressed down. He examined the broken nut in his cupped hand and dropped the stray pieces of shell into an ashtray, oblivious to Rachel until she knocked on the open door.

'Ah, bella! Ow are you?' He munched on the walnut halves.

'Fine thanks.' *Bella?* She wasn't sure how to start, but the Signora still wasn't back, and she felt she had to tell someone about what had happened earlier.

He cracked another nut and offered it to her. She hesitated. It's only a nut she told herself, taking it and thanking him.

'Franco and Santino ... they are good?'

'Well, that was what I came to say.' But there was the problem of words, of language again. She would have to simplify events if he was to understand, for his English was not as good as his wife's, but if she did that, she wouldn't be telling the truth. After all, if Franco had done as he was told, Susan wouldn't have lost her temper. She remembered how she had felt earlier, on the beach, how much she disliked him when he wouldn't behave himself.

'Franco won't do as he's told,' she started, *so Susan burnt his finger*. No. She couldn't say that. 'Perhaps if you had a word with him. Or if your wife could speak to

him?' She thought of the Signora outside the cafe, the man kissing her cheek. 'I mean ...' Her words trailed off.

'Our jobs are *importante* Rachel. We are busy. That is why we have you.'

'Santino does ask for his mum quite a lot,' she ventured, 'especially when he's tired.'

'There is new build come to this city, Rachel. My wife is designing a bridge, between here and Calabria. A very important project. Sometimes children have to wait.'

What a terrible thing to say. She felt a rush of anger. Did he know that the Signora didn't spend all her time at work, that she found time to relax outside cafes, with other men. Or was she reading too much into that? After all, everyone kissed each other here.

'To be honest, I've been finding Franco very difficult. He never takes any notice of me.'

Signor Bruni laughed out loud.

The way he dismissed her was infuriating. 'Actually, he can be very rude, and he bullies Santino.'

'I think all boys do this, no?' He took a step forward.

'I don't think being a boy should excuse him.'

Without warning, he reached forward and touched her nipple, squeezed it as though he were assessing it, and before she had a chance to say anything, he had his arms around her waist, pulling her tight, trying to kiss her. She felt his moustache cover her top lip, his tongue press between her lips and touch hers. She tried to shout, but his tongue was there to silence her, a fat slug in her mouth.

She brought her hand up and slapped him as hard as she could, caught the side of his ear with the flat of her palm. To her surprise he released her. There were bits of chewed walnut in her mouth. She wanted to spit them out at him. 'You ... you ...' She couldn't describe how she felt. Hot, cold, angry, sick, disgusted. Her mind surged like the sea, back and forth, foaming with rage. 'I'm here to look after the boys, not to provide you with entertainment.'

'Elizabetta and I are not happy,' he said softly, as though that excused him. 'Rachel, I am sorry ... a mistake. Believe me.'

*Funny sort of mistake*, said a voice in her head.

'You will not say anything to my wife?'

Her stomach churned. 'I have to go and check that the boys are in bed. I promised them a story.' She backed away.

'I know you are good for Franco and Santino,' he said apologetically.

What could she say? The most obvious solution was to leave, but how would it look if she went home after just a few days? Besides, she wanted to prove she could do it, make a new start, put the past behind her. 'You'd better not try that again, Signor Bruni, or it won't be your wife that I tell. I'll report you to the police'.

*Fiore de Zucca Fritti: Fried Courgette Flowers*

Courgette flowers can be found on both the male and female plants. The only way to tell the gender is to look at the pod. Flowers with a bulge near the stem are female and will produce the long green courgette. Therefore, pick the males; their job is done.

2 eggs  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
2 teaspoons water  
pinch of salt  
3 tablespoons flour  
12 courgette flowers  
oil for frying

Beat the eggs in a bowl. Add the oil, water, and salt. Mix well then slowly add the flour. Mix until it forms a smooth paste (prepare the batter ahead of time so it can rest).

Carefully clean the fragile blossoms. Remove the yellow stamens and the green leaves near the stem. Clip the stem, gently wash the flowers, and lay on a paper towel to dry.

Heat the oil in a frying pan, dip the flowers into the batter one at a time, and fry gently.

When cooked, remove the flowers and place on a paper towel to absorb excess oil. Eat immediately. Sprinkle with lemon juice if you wish.

ix

When the post arrives the next day Susan does not recognise the writing straight away, although the postmark and stamp are familiar enough. She uses a vegetable knife to slice the letter open, the blue paper tearing easily.

The letter is from Reetha. How her writing has grown! Susan pulls the rag from around her head, straightens her hair and removes her apron, to make herself respectable for reading. She doesn't want to read it here, in this kitchen which smells

of damp clothes and pecorino cheese. The letter demands concentration, privacy. She flits upstairs, the letter in her hand as light as a blown leaf.

The paper is so thin that the writing shows plainly on the other side, clear, yet indecipherable because it runs the wrong way. Susan remembers being entertained as a child by a man who could write backwards. The only way to read what he wrote was to hold it to a mirror. To Susan and Fiorenza, he was a magician. Now he is simply a memory, without face or name. Perhaps he was her father, perhaps not; there were many men for her mother at that time.

Reetha's writing stretches confidently across the page, using long words that lead to mixed feelings. Reetha is growing up, and growing away. Soon, the only thing that will link them will be words that extend beyond Susan's comprehension. It is hard to reconcile Reetha's age with the way Susan remembers her, small and soft and playful. Of course, she has photographs, taken at school and sent by Sam; flat empty images of a girl in a white blouse and grey pleated skirt against a background of solid blue. Blue like this writing paper which is so thin she can see her fingers through it. Those stiff poses and forced grins tell her nothing about her daughter. How does it feel to hold her? How does her hair smell when she stands close?

Susan starts at the beginning now, reading slowly, concentrating on each word, mouthing them to herself. This is her own language, the sound of home, so distant in time and space that the words sound foreign to her. Reetha's letters tend to say the same things, but in different ways; she is well, enjoying school, she is top of the class in English. Look. And the letter switches to English, blue ink over blue paper, flowing easy as water. American television, thinks Susan. This is what makes English so easy nowadays. And although she is proud that Reetha is top of the class,

she feels uneasy. The carefree dip of the y's and g's, the round contentment of the a's and o's.

Susan looks again at where the letter changes to English. Why? What is her daughter trying to hide? She skims it as fast as she can, spots the word 'bicycle', reads the words surrounding it. It is a sentence that hurts; Sam has bought Reetha a bicycle, racing style with ten gears, although she is not allowed to ride it until her birthday.

Anger burns red, makes Susan's temples ache. Why has he bought her such a thing? How can he afford it? Has he used the money that she has sent? That money is supposed to be for school, for books and uniforms and extra lessons. Yes, Sam and Lin are buying presents with Susan's money, to buy Reetha's love. She screws the letter up into a tiny ball and flings it at the wall, but the paper is so light it will not travel. They are bribing Reetha. She must write back straight away. There is a room here, ready and waiting as always, a bed with a soft mattress and a pink coverlet, and a picture mirror on the wall.

Susan has a writing set which the Signora bought her one Christmas. Expensive paper, the colour of whipped cream, and a pen with a sharp nib that is difficult to use. She scratches the date: day/month/year. Funny how numbers come easier than words. She looks at the cross on the wall, hoping for inspiration, for God is better with words than she is. After all, He has more time.

Her thoughts become crowded; the sweet red onions that need to go in with the stew, that dress of the Signora's that needs stitching at the hem. It is impossible to think when you have so much work. She puts the top back on the pen. The two halves fit snugly together. Yes, money makes everything fit.

The lounge was normally out of bounds to the children, but Franco insisted on seeing his mother before going to school. The Signora sat in a leather armchair, next to the telephone. Rachel hadn't realised there was a phone extension in here. The Signora looked uncomfortable at the intrusion, as though she were about to make a private call, or expecting to receive one. The leather armchair creaked when she moved.

'Look Mamma,' Franco was determined to show her the scab on his finger from yesterday's incident.

'Never mind *tesoro*. It will get better, I am sure.' The Signora stood up and brushed her skirt of invisible creases. She turned to Rachel. 'Is everything all right?' Then, without waiting for an answer, 'I must hurry. I have an appointment.'

Franco went quiet. He had obviously expected more.

Santino tugged his mother's skirt. 'Susan did it,' he said, pointing at Franco's finger.

But the Signora wasn't listening. '*Si si*, Susan will make it better.'

Santino looked from his mother to Rachel and back again. Rachel hated herself for not helping him, for becoming part of the conspiracy, but what could she do? After Signor Bruni's advances yesterday, she wasn't sure who to turn to.

'Don't be late for school, ragazzi,' said Signora Bruni.

She's so busy with her job she hasn't got time for them, thought Rachel. I'm more of a mother to them than she is. The thought made her stomach lurch, as though she was in a lift, descending swiftly. I could be their mother, she told herself.

'*Ciao ragazzi*.'

'*Ciao mamma*,' the boys chimed together.

Once the Signora had gone, Rachel had a good look around the room. The walls were decorated with a mixture of old portraits and garish modern prints. The contrast was stark, as though the pictures were competing for space. Rachel associated the more traditional paintings with Signor Bruni, the more experimental ones with his wife. There was a chess board too. She was less sure who that belonged to. Possibly the Signora, for she could imagine her sitting there, working out her problems on the black and white squares.

'Pahm, pahm,' shouted Franco, his voice suddenly filling the room.

Rachel turned and froze. Franco was wielding a shotgun, pointing it right at her, his face wrinkled with concentration. Her heart felt huge in her chest, taking up all the space so she could hardly breathe. 'Put that down,' she managed to say, aware that her voice was trembling.

'No. I'm going to shoot you.' He was having trouble with the gun because it was taller than he was, but his struggle to hold it only frightened her more. It might go off by accident.

'Put that down ... or I'll ...' She could feel herself shaking, fear and anger in equal parts. It can't be loaded, she told herself. It can't be. 'Franco, if you don't put that down I'll give you such a smack ...'

At the same time she heard Santino, '*sta scherzando* Rachel.'

'She doesn't understand you, stupid.' Franco turned the gun on his brother. 'Speak English or I'll shoot you.'

'No!' Rachel shouted. 'Santino, come here.' She opened her arms to him, wanting to hold him, to protect him.

But Santino merely ran forwards and reached for the barrel of the gun, pulling it towards him. 'I want a go. It's my turn. Rachel, tell him.'



'It's no one's turn.' Seeing Santino grab for the gun jolted her. Of course it wasn't loaded. Franco was just trying to frighten her. 'Put it down Franco, before there's an accident.' She was pleased she sounded more assertive.

Franco stood there, deciding whether to obey her or not.

'Come on. Do as you're told. I haven't got time for this.' She wanted to smack him, felt her fingers twitch in anticipation. He pulled a face at her. 'If the wind changes you'll stay like that.'

'I don't care.'

'Neither do I. I know lots of ways to deal with naughty boys so don't push your luck. Now put that gun back where you found it and don't touch it again. It's not a toy.'

'It belongs to Papa. He's going to take me hunting when I'm older and I'm going to shoot lions and tigers and wild pigs.'

Rachel could feel herself sweating in awkward places. What were the Brunis thinking of, leaving a gun where a child could reach it? The longer she worked here, the less she liked them. Thankfully, Franco replaced the gun on its stand.

'Now don't touch it again. Don't even go near it.'

'You're always bossing me around Rachel.'

That he saw her in this light saddened her, yet how else could she keep a check on him?

Fortunately Susan wasn't in the kitchen. Rachel was pleased. 'Be good for a few minutes you two, while I get my clothes out of the washer.'

Susan guarded the machine jealously, and Rachel found it best to sneak her things in and out when she wasn't about. But she would have to hurry or she would be

late taking the boys to school. As she went onto the terrace the dog began to bark. Penned up like that, pawing at the fence, he looked quite fierce. She ignored him and opened the door of the machine. A palm cross was stuck to it, like the ones they used to give out at school for Easter. Odd. Susan must have put it there. Rachel pulled the washing out, dropped it into a plastic basket and carried it back into the kitchen.

'I can see your pants!' laughed Franco.

'Don't be rude,' she warned, looking at the tangle of tee shirts and underwear. Everything had turned a vague shade of pink. Something must have run. Hell. She wasn't used to this; it was always her mum who did her washing at home. She experienced a peculiar feeling of not belonging, of not quite fitting in anywhere. All the things that attached her to England had been severed, without new connections being made. I could just float out to sea and never be seen again, she thought, looking in despair at the washing.

'I'm hungry,' Santino complained.

'Me too,' said Franco.

'But it's nearly time for school.' Still, the way Santino looked at her, his eyes pleading, she couldn't refuse.

She put the basket down, struck a match and lit the grill. The gas jets rippled as she slid some slices of bread under to toast. Franco picked up the bread knife and began stabbing it into the chopping board. If he cuts himself it's his own fault, she thought. It might teach him a lesson.

When the toast was ready she sliced a banana over it and sprinkled sugar on top, like her mother used to do if ever she wasn't feeling very well. The smell was warm and homely. She wished the warmth would stay with her, realised how lonely life was when your family and friends were far away. She decided to ask the Signora

if she could phone home this evening, to say hello to her mum, to hear a familiar voice.

'Why don't we eat this in my room as a treat?' No doubt Susan would be back any minute, and Rachel preferred to keep out of her way.

The boys were delighted. She gave Franco the plate to carry, while she took the basket of washing. She hoped that by giving him something to do he might behave himself.

'I like this,' said Santino happily, edging a little closer to her when she sat down beside him on the bed. Did he mean banana on toast, or sitting next to her? She cuddled him anyway.

'You're so scrummy I could eat you,' she teased.

Franco pulled the crust off his toast, crumbs falling on the bedspread. He brushed them onto the carpet.

'Franco, I hoovered up in here yesterday.'

'Susan will clean them up. It's her job. Mamma had to give her a job because in Susan's country they eat dogs.'

'I don't think so,' said Rachel.

'And cats,' he added, 'Mamma told me.'

Santino's eyes were wide with fright.

'What Mummy probably meant was that Susan comes from a place where they don't have much money.' As she said it, she realised how little she knew about Susan, about her life in the Philippines. No doubt she hadn't had an easy time of it. But I've had problems too, thought Rachel, and I don't deal with them by burning children's fingers.

To believe in God is to believe in the devil, therefore it is always necessary to be on guard. The washing machine stands outside the back door of the kitchen, on the covered terrace. Even so, the salty air has managed to reach the metal, and in places brown streaks have appeared like rusty tears. In church, such tears would be deemed a miracle.

When Susan first arrived, the washing machine was her friend. It did much for her, swirling the laundry to a white froth, pounding it like the sea. But lately it has become temperamental, pretending it has finished then staring up again without warning, leaving oily marks on the sheets, ripping the sleeve of Signor Bruni's best shirt. There is also a noise, gruff and grinding. The Signora heard it the other day, told Susan to let Signor Bruni know it was time to buy a new one. Expenses like that always come out of Signor Bruni's account. But Susan believes the noise to be the sound of evil, and to rid a house of evil is not an easy task. If the washing machine is removed the devil will simply skip away into a corner and find another place to occupy. No, a new machine is not the answer.

There are white towels in at the moment, turning and churning, the faint grumble of the drum sounding as it begins to spin. Susan has taped one of her Easter palms to the round porthole to afford herself some protection, yet when she comes to remove the load, there is a pinkish tinge to everything. She removes the towels one by one, reciting the Lord's Prayer. Each one is streaked with the faintest trace of blood, a sure sign that the devil is at work. As she removes the last one she spies something red clinging to the drum. She pokes warily, for it is wet and soft as the rags she uses to soak her monthly bleeding. She pulls it out and shakes it into shape. A pair of red

knickers! The Signora does not possess underwear as cheap and showy as this. Susan washes all the Signora's underwear by hand and knows each piece intimately. That leaves only one person; Rachel.

After school, Rachel racked her brains thinking of something different for the boys to do. They were tired of stories and reading every afternoon, and after finding the syringe, the beach no longer seemed a safe option. What about potato prints? She'd seen a bag of potatoes in the kitchen.

'Wait here, you two. I won't be long.'

'I won't be long,' mimicked Franco.

Rachel looked down at him. 'You're treading a very fine line, you know.' But he didn't seem the least bit concerned.

Susan was on her hands and knees, washing the floor.

'Okay if I take a few of these?' Rachel started to rummage in the potato bag. Most of them had gone spongy and soft.

'Why you whan potato?' Susan asked suspiciously, rocking back on her heels.

'I'm going to cut them up and make shapes, then the boys can dip them in paint and ...' She stopped, her eyes fixed on Susan's hands, on the cloth she was using to wash the floor. Her best knickers, the ones Dean had bought her for Valentine's Day. Susan plunged her hands into the bucket, wrung out the knickers and continued to use them to wipe around the table legs.

'You bloody cow,' Rachel snapped. There, it was out, the tension that had been mounting up for days. 'Where did you get those?'

Susan carried on scrubbing as though she was deaf.

'You've been in my room, haven't you?' Rachel could feel the blood thumping at her temples, as though a blood vessel were about to burst. 'You must think I'm stupid.'

An amused little buzz of laughter escaped from Susan's lips, like the hum of a bee.

'Fine. Have a good laugh. But I'm not going to let this go. I'm going to tell Signora Bruni.'

'I tell Signora too,' Susan rounded. 'All towels no good. They expensive, Signora buy them in Londra. You make much work for me.' Susan swept her arm in an arc across the floor, flicking water on Rachel's feet.

Rachel hadn't the faintest idea what she was referring to. Towels? What had they to do with her? It was impossible to argue against something that didn't make sense. 'I'm sick of this. You've been awkward ever since I arrived. Well, you won't get rid of me without a fight.' She stalked out of the kitchen, swearing under her breath.

The knickers are grubby and torn, fit for nothing now. Susan squeezes out the excess water and throws them in the bin. Red is a dangerous colour. Rachel is one of those girls who pretends innocence. Yes, Susan is beginning to understand her better now.

There has been a succession of Ingleesh girls through this house, none of them staying very long. Georgina used to cry at night in her room. Susan would stand at the other side of the door, listening, gathering strength from her sadness, for when the Ingleesh girls leave, Susan is in charge once more; of the house, and the children. It is extra work, but easier because things are done her way. The children are left to their

own devices, and happier for it. They bump their heads and graze their knees and live off chocolate sandwiches. As long as they are not under her feet she does not mind.

She thinks about Rachel, flaunting herself in her red underwear. All Ingleesh girls come to Sicily looking for love. It is easy for them to find a boy, with their pale skins and bright hair. Rachel is different though; on the outside she is plain and quiet, yet she wears red knickers underneath. It is as though she has two sides, a respectable face for the Brunis, and another that so far she has kept to herself. But nothing stays secret for long in this house, a fact that Susan prides herself on.

It was evening, but Susan was still on Rachel's mind, so much so that she found it difficult to concentrate on the book she was reading to Franco. It was about a little boy who lived on an island, who wanted to find out what lay across the water. He asked the islanders to help him make a bridge, but no one would.

'Why not?' said Franco.

'People don't always help. Especially if they can't see anything in it for themselves.' Rachel wished he would lie down and go to sleep. It was late and she hadn't had a break all day.

'... so he worked alone, night and day, while the people laughed, saying the next island was exactly the same as this one, and what was the point of trying to cross the water? There was nothing new to discover. But the boy persevered, building out into the sea on wooden stilts until one day he met another little boy, also building a bridge, coming from the opposite direction.' She was reading faster now, wanting to get to the end as quickly as possible. 'So they joined in the middle and the bridge was

completed. And when the villagers at either side asked again, "what's the point?" the boys laughed and laughed, because they had become the best of friends.'

The story seemed to have taken hold in Franco's imagination. He took the book from her lap and began to study the pictures, trying to work out how the bridge was made. Maybe he wanted to be an engineer like his mother. More likely, this was a sign that he was missing her.

'Don't be too late,' she said, tucking him in. He had gone back to the beginning of the story and was trying to read it for himself. She was constantly amazed how the boys picked up new words.

Santino had wriggled down into the sheets and was already asleep. She smoothed back his hair and kissed him goodnight. As she did so she experienced a hollow feeling, like hunger, except it was something that food wouldn't satisfy. She knew it was foolish to start thinking of someone else's child as her own, that it would only lead to sadness, but she couldn't help herself. She wanted to hold him, to love him. What would it be like to have him all to herself. I could wrap him up in a blanket and pop him in the car and no one would notice until tomorrow, she thought. We could be miles away by then. I couldn't take Franco, though, he'd be far too much trouble. Just Santino.

She was surprised to find Signor Bruni waiting for her on the landing; she'd assumed he would be downstairs by this time, having his evening meal.

'*Tutt'a posto?*' He didn't seem in the least embarrassed at having forced his attentions on her the other evening. 'All okay?'



'Fine. Santino's asleep and Franco's reading.' It occurred to her that he wasn't actually asking about the boys, but about her. She could smell alcohol, and his lips had the purplish tint of red wine.

'The car driving goes well?' he asked. 'You are finding your way through Messina?'

'Sort of.' He was looking at her as though he could see through her clothes. She edged towards her room, eager to get away.

'Do you have a boyfriend in England, Rachel?'

'That's none of your business. I thought you weren't going to pester me again.'

He smiled, his moustache quivering. 'You know, Sicilian men are the best lovers.'

'God.' She wished Carol was here. She would have told him where to get off. 'If you say one more thing like that to me I really will tell your wife.' He didn't seem bothered in the slightest. 'I could report you to the agency, you know.'

'But they are in England, and you are here.' He came towards her, leering, but she dodged into her room and slammed the door, leaning back on it as hard as she could. She expected the door handle to rattle and turn, but it didn't. Still, she wedged herself there until she heard his footsteps on the stairs, thud thump, like sacks of flour.

The door had a key hole, but no key. She would have to ask the Signora for one. Indeed, she felt within her rights to demand one after what had taken place. But Susan was the housekeeper, which meant she would be in charge of the keys. Rachel felt trapped. She looked around the room. Why had Susan taken her underwear? Everything looked as it had done but she convinced herself that things had been moved; the basket of washing was an inch to the right, her magazine was at a different angle on the bed.

She knelt down and peaked through the lock. She could just see onto the landing. There was no line of white light coming from under Susan's door, an indicator that she was downstairs, preparing to serve dinner.

An acidic determination coursed through her, spurring her on as she tiptoed across the landing. If she can go in my room, I can go in hers. The floorboards creaked beneath her no matter how carefully she trod, as if the house was determined to give her away. She looked over her shoulder, just to make sure there was no one coming, then tried Susan's door.

Locked. A blunt feeling of failure came over her, coupled with a sense of unfairness. If Susan could have a room with a lock, why couldn't she?

She went back to her room and flopped down on the bed. If she had been at home she'd have gone out for a takeaway, a Chinese, or a curry, drunk a cheap bottle of wine to herself, woken up the next day with the taste of spices sour on her tongue. When she was with Dean they'd go to the pub, then walk down to 'The Spice Palace'. Warm air blew from the fans at the back of the restaurant, filling the whole street with the smell of coriander and chilli. Dean always needed a pee, because of the beer. He'd go down the snicket between the butchers' and the chemist. All the lads did it. People had sex there too.

Rachel was struck by the horrible irony of people having intercourse between a butcher's shop and a chemist's. She remembered the anaesthetist's face half hidden by his paper mask, only his eyes showing, like a photo-fit, how he had asked her to count backwards from ten, the lights on the ceiling becoming liquid by the time she reached six. *When I wake up it'll all be over*, she remembered thinking, but of course she had been wrong, because waking up was only the beginning.

Initially it was the bleeding that distressed her most. She never knew blood could have so many colours and textures: brown and sticky, red and runny, clots of black. It seemed to go on for ages, until she became convinced it would never stop. And then, when it did stop, she was left with a feeling of emptiness, something that returned from time to time, triggered by the most unexpected things; the sound of fireworks or the smell of engine oil. Sometimes she wasn't sure who she hated most, Dean for forcing her to have the abortion, or herself for allowing him to.

The Signora is late. Susan does not wear a watch, but she sees the minutes tick by on the clock in the kitchen, hears Signor Bruni pacing up and down the hallway. She turns the heat right down. Supper is crepes in béchamel. There were to be courgette flowers for starters, but they shrivelled in the heat of the kitchen and had to be thrown away. The oven has a glass door, splattered with fat. She bends down to check once more; the béchamel sauce has skinned over and turned brown. Any longer and it will burn.

Signor Bruni enters the kitchen, sniffing the air in the same way as Cesare when he catches a scent. 'I thought I asked for *ceci*'?

'Signora telephone,' replies Susan. 'Say for me to cook crepes.'

Susan can see that Signor Bruni is furious about the change in menu, but he holds his anger in. It puffs him up like a balloon, until the buttons on his shirt look as though they will pop.

'I will eat alone,' he says, and marches off to the dining room.

Susan hums as she takes the glass dish out of the oven. The crepes are in tight little rolls, smothered in creamy sauce. Apart from the courgette flowers, the cooking

has gone well today. She grates a little parmesan on top and places the dish on a tray. The sauce is still bubbling, pliff ploff, little bursts of air finding their way to the surface.

As she carries the dish down the hall, the front door opens.

The Signora's smile hints at secret love. 'Ciao Susan,' she says, breathless. She flings her jacket over the hook and hurries upstairs to change.

'Elizabetta?' Signor Bruni calls from the dining room.

The Signora does not hear, or rather, she does not answer.

Susan pauses with the dish, then takes the longest possible time to reach the dining room. There are two bulbs missing in the reproduction chandelier, so the light has a greyish quality where it should be gold. She places the dish in the centre of the table. Signor Bruni made a start on the wine earlier in the evening. Now the bottle is empty and he has opened another. Red wine is no good on an empty stomach, thinks Susan. She stands to attention at the side of the room and waits.

The Signora appears in a dress of bright orange silk which drapes softly over her shoulders and makes her look like one of the flowers that bloom overnight, without warning, from the cactus plants in the garden. The brightness is so daring that Susan is shocked. She serves the crepes, carefully lifting two onto each plate, spooning the sauce liberally until Signor Bruni holds up his hand and signals for her to stop. She goes back to the kitchen and returns with a side dish of green beans. The beans are hard and watery, not as successful as the main dish, but no one expects her to get everything right. The Signora serves herself, heaps the vegetables on her plate. A big appetite, thinks Susan, wondering what has made her so hungry.

The air is thick and clogging as the béchamel itself. Susan remembers back home, the way the clouds promised rain for days then suddenly cracked when least

expected, releasing a violence of water. Rain that swelled the rivers and washed whole towns away, or buried them under mud. Signor Bruni is like the gathering storm; he has been growing angry with his wife for some time. Perhaps he has only managed to hold off for so long because he too has other interests, women who keep him late at the office, who put the phone down when anyone but he answers.

*Dinuguan: Philippine Blood Stew*

500g pork, diced  
 2 tablespoons oil  
 2 cloves garlic, minced  
 1 onion, diced  
 250g pork liver, diced  
 ½ cup vinegar  
 2 tablespoons patis (fish sauce)  
 1 teaspoon salt  
 1½ cups broth  
 1 cup frozen pig's blood  
 2 teaspoons sugar  
 3 hot peppers  
 ¼ teaspoon oregano

Cover pork with water and simmer for 30 minutes.  
 Remove from broth and dice. Save 1½ cups of broth.  
 In stainless steel or porcelain saucepan heat oil and  
 sauté garlic and onions for a few minutes. Add pork,  
 liver, patis and salt. Sauté for 5 minutes more.  
 Add vinegar and bring to the boil without stirring.  
 Lower heat and simmer uncovered until most of the  
 liquid has evaporated.  
 Add broth. Simmer for 10 minutes. Stir in blood and  
 sugar, and cook until thick, stirring occasionally to  
 avoid curdling.  
 Add peppers and oregano and cook 5 minutes more.  
 Serve hot.

x

The next day the boys fell asleep straight after lunch. No wonder they're tired,  
 thought Rachel, considering all that noise last night. Signor and Signora Bruni, their  
 voices sounding through the house again, first from the dining room, later the  
 bedroom. Strings of words which Rachel did not understand, although the tone of  
 anger and resentment translated itself quite easily. She thought of the man she had  
 seen with the Signora outside the cafe. Then she remembered the first school run, the

way the slow-moving traffic had built up around them, and how the driver of the red sports car had blown her a kiss. Suddenly it dawned on her! It was him. The pieces slotted together like one of Santino's wooden puzzles. How could she have ever imagined that kiss to be meant for her, when it was obviously meant for the Signora. And the car beeping its horn down in the street the other morning, red and sleek and low. It must have been him, waiting. Maybe that was what had prompted Signor Bruni to make a pass at her, to get his own back on his wife.

They're not fit to call themselves parents, she thought, sure that the boys must have been disturbed by last night's argument. She remembered the effect her own parents' divorce had on her, how she used to fake illness so she could stop at home, weeks of watching telly and playing solitary games of Ludo, dividing herself into four players to make it more exciting. Then her teacher had called and had a long chat with her mother, and the next day she was back in class, feeling more unhappy than ever because during her absence her best friend had found a new playmate.

I've got to protect Santino from all that, she said to herself. If only she could take him away somewhere safe.

She looked out of her window, at the cluster of poppies brightening the banking, noticed a path ribboning in and out of the trees. It ended at a gate in the wall at the top of the slope. Odd that she hadn't noticed it before. Was that where Georgina had taken the boys to play? Behind the wall was a large house, not visible from here, but Rachel had seen it from the beach, a house like a castle, with turrets and jagged-toothed walls, and windows that winked at the sea. All that was missing were flags and pennants, and maybe a prince. She smiled. Carol would have gone looking, knocked on the door and asked if the prince was at home. Rachel missed her friend, missed having a laugh at work, going out for a drink afterwards. Carol would talk

about her ex, how useless he was, turning him into a hilarious caricature of all the things a woman didn't want in a man. It always made her laugh, even though she knew this was Carol's way of getting her own back on him for leaving. Poor Carol. Five years of marriage with no results; it seemed perverse that Rachel had got pregnant by accident.

She touched her reflection on the window, an image dappled by specs of tree sap stuck to the outside, spots of guilt that only she could see. If only she had been able to have the baby, things would have been so different. She was overwhelmed by a sense of longing, a desire to replace what was lost.

The floor sighed, the faint sound of wood under pressure just outside her door. Susan? Or maybe one of the boys. But they'd only just gone to sleep. Something scratched at the wood. Signor Bruni? Her throat was blocked by fear, round and red as the poppies dancing on the banking.

Quickly she took the chair and pushed it under the door handle, wedging it so he couldn't get in, prepared to scream if she had to. But wasn't Signor Bruni at the office? By now the scratching had stopped. She moved the chair and cautiously opened the door. Flat to the carpet, head cocked slightly to one side, was the dog. A silver drip of saliva stretched from the corner of his mouth and his tail beat the carpet with a thump. Out of the pen he looked quite tame. Rachel bent down to stroke him and he rolled over, revealing a pink belly pebbled with brown.

'You gave me such a fright. I don't think you should be up here, should you?' She checked the landing for Susan.

The dog righted himself with a quick flip, his tail slapping nervously. She went to the top of the stairs, clicked her fingers and made little petting noises. 'Come on. Down we go.' He padded downstairs beside her, head down, muscles sagging. He



looked old, his coat sad and dusty, except for his ears which were like two scraps of velvet.

'I think you should be outside,' she said at the bottom, pointing down the hall to the door which was half open. She listened to the tiny click of his overgrown nails on the mosaic tiles. As he lopped out and down the steps, Susan appeared at the door. She was carrying two water containers, the weight of them making her arms seem thinner than ever.

'Ooofah!' She dumped them on the floor and straightened, pressing her hand to the small of her back. 'Why he in here?' She pulled the rag off her head, wiped her face with it, then slung it over her shoulder.

Rachel said nothing. She couldn't look at Susan without picturing her stealing her underwear. Why her knickers of all things?

'Rachel, thees very heavy,' Susan complained, gesturing for her to help.

Rachel knew that to refuse to help would lead to an argument, so despite having vowed to stay out of her way, she gripped the water canisters. The water splashed and frolicked inside, leaking a little around the lid.

'You take to kitchen.' Susan went back outside and by the time Rachel had made it to the kitchen, Susan was right behind her with two more canisters. 'Grazie. You good for sending Cesare out of house,' she conceded.

'Chesaray?' said Rachel, copying Susan's pronunciation.

'Signor Bruni's dog. He old, sometime make pee pee in house. House no place for dog. You whan tea?' She lugged one of the canisters onto the draining board and poured some water into a pan. It came out in choking gulps. There was a predictable hollow pop as she lit the gas, then she turned it up to a fierce blue which seared the

side of the pan. Rachel was confused as to why Susan hadn't used the water from the tap. Was there a problem?

'Franco's finger how is?'

The casual way Susan asked threw Rachel off balance, and for a moment she couldn't think of a suitable reply. 'There's a blister,' she said plainly.

'Franco can be very bad boy. I know. I watch him from baby.' Susan frowned. 'You see how much work I do?' She hunched her shoulders again then let them sag. 'I buy this.' She opened the cutlery drawer and brought out a small plastic sports car, brilliant red. 'You think he like?'

Rachel studied the toy. What was Susan up to?

'And this for Santino.' She took out another car, this one racing green with silver spoked wheels.

'I think I like the green one best,' said Rachel, wondering how the Signora would react when she saw them.

Susan looked at her with a fixed smile. 'Oh? I thinking red your favourite colour.'

'What d'you mean by that?' Rachel couldn't believe Susan's nerve. She was seized by the desire to put her hands round her neck and throttle her.

'Towels no good. You make me much work, like all Ingleesh girls who come here.'

'Look, I don't know what you're driving at. You stole my best knickers and cleaned the floor with them.' Every muscle in Rachel's body was tense, wanting to hit out. 'I came here to look after the children. Why can't you leave me alone to get on with it?'

Susan thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. 'You whan tea?'

'Unbelievable! Why don't you apologise? You know you're in the wrong.'

Susan spooned some tea into the boiling water and hummed to herself.

'I've never met anyone so bloody awkward.' Rachel tried to slow her breathing by counting. Carol said it was good for relaxation. But how could she relax when Susan had the upper hand?

Susan took a sheet of paper out of the kitchen cupboard which Rachel recognised as the wrapping from the pignolata. She tore it in two, then crunched it round the cans, her sharp teeth nipping off lengths of tape to secure it.

'I forget to tell you, Rachel. Water sometime problem here.' She stood up and demonstrated by turning on the tap. It coughed, and a dribble of brown came out. 'You want toilet, take bucket. I go for more water soon. Signora need bath when she come home from office.'

That's if she's at the office, thought Rachel, picturing her sitting outside a cafe somewhere, flirting with her lover.

Susan slips off her sandals before she attempts to fill the containers. The pavement is cool, a sign that the hottest days have ended and autumn is truly here. The tap is set into the wall for passers-by to drink from. When she presses it, the water sprays in all directions, wetting her blouse and skirt. The water is easier to catch as the pressure fades, but soon it runs to a trickle, and the tap has to be pressed again.

Don Pipo arrives with two bottles, blaming the *comune* for this, 'continuous lack of the most essential service'. Susan bows her head, pretends to be thinking about something else. She finds his way of talking too complicated.

*'L'aqua,'* he stresses. 'Do you think this happens in the North?'

It is impossible to ignore him for long. She shakes her head. Don Pipo is a short man, almost as short as Susan herself, but rounder, fuller, like a melon. Susan has never liked short men; always so insistent, as though they have something to prove. He begins to tell her about some relatives of his who moved to Milan thirty years ago and have never been without water. 'Never! Not once!'

Susan has seen Milano on the news, a city so full of traffic that nothing moves, a thick grey fog descending in winter, suffocating the inhabitants. She could never live there. She steps aside and allows Don Pipo to fill his bottles. They are small. He does not need much water because he lives alone, something he is always keen to stress to her. Let him fill them quickly, then he will leave her in peace. The front of her skirt is wet, clinging to her thighs, showing the outline of her legs. She tries to pull it away but it sticks to her skin.

Since Sam there has been no one. After Reetha's birth she felt exhausted at having so much responsibility. But Reetha was a good baby, small and warm and permanently content. Easier to love than any man. Susan imagined her sex healing, sealing over. Now she thinks of it permanently closed. To open it to another man would be to open herself to trouble.

Yes, it is true what her mother used to say; all men are trouble.

'All yours,' says Don Pipo, holding his hand on the tap while she places the other container underneath.

She is sure he is looking at her thighs, which are as slim as when she was fifteen. The wet skirt draws the warmth from her body. She shivers.

'I'll be going then.' He seems to be waiting for something.

*'Arrivederchi,'* she says, curtly.

His thick fingers continue to press the tap. It takes him a full minute to let go.

On the way back she puts the containers down for a moment and looks up at the front of the house. The plaster is cracked and flaking, decay accentuated by a small earth tremor last year, and a greenish growth seems to have attached itself to the guttering. Money needs to be spent, but both Signor and Signora Bruni are too concerned with other things. This house could collapse around them and they would not notice.

Susan has known for some time that they are not happy together, but who is she to judge? The Signora with her lover, Signor Bruni with his numerous affairs. Right or wrong is God's business; best not to interfere. The problem for Susan is work. The argument between the Brunis last night was serious, the worst yet. What happens if they separate and divorce? Where will she go then? Not with Signor Bruni, that is for sure. He says if she practised for twenty years she would never make decent coffee.

It would be best to stay with the Signora, for as a woman she understands about Reetha. A man can never know the bond that comes from the pain of flesh leaving flesh. Not that Susan is looking for pity. No; pity does not feed and clothe. What she wants is the certainty of a room for her daughter, ready for whenever she should decide to come.

She picks up the water containers and trudges up the steps. All these years of work, all the money she has sent back home. What for? So Sam can buy Reetha a bicycle? No. Something must be done.

'What's this?' asked Santino, docile from his afternoon nap.

'A present from Susan, I expect,' said Franco, apparently not surprised to find a gift at the foot of the bed. He tore the paper off and examined the car. 'What's yours?' he asked his brother.

Santino was having trouble with the tape. He held it out for Rachel to help him, but Franco snatched the toy away, ripped the paper off and held the cars together to compare them. 'I'm having this one.' He clutched the green car spitefully.

Rachel braced herself for an argument but Santino was quite happy with the exchange.

'Don't forget to say thank-you,' Rachel reminded them, although it went against the grain.

'But she burnt my finger,' complained Franco.

'Well, this is her way of saying sorry.'

Franco took no notice and started to run his car across the carpet, banging it into the wall.

'Don't do that. You'll break it.'

'I don't care.' He carried on playing, taking no notice.

Santino was still cradling his toy, as though it was too precious to put down. 'We'll play with the cars later, shall we,' Rachel said to him. 'I thought you might like to go to the park.' She knew Franco was listening. 'We could take your bike.' Santino was nodding in agreement.

'What about me?' asked Franco.

'It depends whether you're going to do as you're told.'

'I will, I promise I will,' he said, giving the car one final shove which sent it crashing into the base of the wardrobe.

The park was not what Rachel had expected. No grass at all, no lovely stretches of lawn like there were in England, but a series of concrete walkways instead, bordered by rhododendron bushes. The paths interlocked and doubled back on each other, like being in a maze. Franco pedalled ahead, almost out of sight.

'Don't go too far!' she shouted, but only Santino stayed close. Her voice sounded big on the concrete, bouncing in all directions. People turned to look. She felt self-conscious, so obviously foreign.

'*Scusa Signorina. Ha una fiamme?*' The boy appeared out of nowhere. He was young, maybe thirteen, curly hair, big brown eyes. His face was dirty and there was a waxy rhododendron leaf in his hair.

Rachel shook her head, not understanding a word. The Brunis had warned her to be careful of gypsies, and to her, this boy looked like a gypsy. She had seen them at traffic lights, washing windcreens, sending their ragged children to beg money from the drivers. The Signora had advised her to keep some coins on the dashboard in case they became insistent.

The boy pushed a flattened packet of cigarettes towards her.

'No. I don't smoke.' Franco had gone far ahead, but Santino was next to her on his bike, pushing it along with his feet rather than trying to peddle.

The boy picked up on her English and tried it for himself. 'I don't smoke.' He laughed and said something about the *bambino*.

*Bambino*. Child. She had heard Susan say it. Perhaps he thought Santino was hers. Maybe she should say yes. It would be easy to pretend she was his mother. The boy was grinning at her, an unlit cigarette loose at his lips, dipping up and down as his mouth moved.

'Franco,' she shouted again, but he was out of sight, just a flicker of polished chrome through the bushes. What if she needed to shout for help. What was 'help' in Italian?

'I want to see the ducks Rachel,' said Santino.

The boy looked surprised to hear him speak English.

'Where are they?' Rachel asked, pretending the boy wasn't there, that she wasn't scared. Maybe she should offer him money, but if she took her purse out he might grab it. The Signora had warned her about that too, but in a casual way, as though the possibility of it was too remote to worry about.

Santino clambered off his bike and pointed ahead. He started to push, and the boy took hold of the handlebars to help him.

'Don't do that.' Rachel pushed him out of the way, took hold of the bike herself.

'You English or Italiano?' the boy questioned Santino.

Hearing the boy speak in English made Rachel's heart pound. Santino simply shrugged, as though he didn't know.

'Your husband is Italian?' said the boy, gaining confidence. He was addressing Rachel now.

She quickened her pace, Santino running to keep up. The walkway was widening. There seemed to be more light. She saw a whirl of spokes in the distance, a white shirt and navy shorts. 'Franco!' She took hold of Santino's hand to make sure he wasn't snatched away, held the bike with her other hand although she wanted to drop it and run.

'Give me a kiss,' said the boy, no longer smiling. His cigarette twitched from the flat line of his lips.



Santino struggled at the end of her arm like a puppet. 'I want to see the ducks.'

'Yes, we're going to see them,' she said, pulling him along.

'You want fucky?' the boy demanded.

The bike twisted and the stabiliser nicked her calf. She felt a thin line of blood down the back of her leg, but kept going. The boy stopped following but she didn't slow down. She heard him shout after her, 'You want fucky?'

Santino turned back and pulled out his tongue.

'Don't do that,' she said, almost dragging him. 'Don't even look at him.'

She followed the line of the path, the bike catching her leg, Santino's feet skimming the concrete as she held his arm tightly. 'Franco,' she called, 'Franco.' She heard the steely ring of the bicycle bell, and there he was, pedalling fast, bare knees pushing up and down, pale brown like scrubbed potatoes. He was heading straight towards them, open mouthed, eyes wide with a combination of anxiety and exhilaration.

'Slow down!' she shouted.

He seemed to have forgotten where the brakes were and put his feet down instead. She heard the tearing sound of leather as his toes touched the concrete, saw the front wheel bump against the edge of the path. The bike bucked, pitching him up into the air and depositing him in the bushes. She felt Santino's fingers squirm for release and he broke free, running over to his brother who lay on the gritty soil. Franco shuddered in an effort not to cry.

Rachel looked round to see if the boy was still about, but he seemed to have gone. She went over to Franco. 'Are you hurt?'

He nodded but didn't speak.

'Oh, look at your shoes.' What would the Signora say? The scuff marks were deep.

Santino was more concerned about the bike. '*Guarda*, Rachel,' he said, pointing to the chain hanging limp.

It occurred to her that Franco might have broken something, but when she knelt down to see, he turned away, got to his feet, and began to kick peevishly at the earth.

'Stop that. You'll make your shoes even worse. Come on. Help me pick up your bike.'

He carried on scrubbing the ground with his feet while Rachel pulled at the chain and tried to put it back in place. The teeth of the cog nipped her thumb. 'Franco! I shan't tell you again.' She felt the colour burning in her cheeks and an uncomfortable squeeze in the pit of her stomach. Why was she losing her temper? Was it really Franco who was making her angry, or that horrible boy. *You want fucky?* She picked up the broken bike and dragged it back to the path, making Franco wheel Santino's for him.

When they reached the car she hoisted the bikes into the boot and looked around again for the gypsy boy. He was nowhere to be seen. Santino's round face was staring up at her hopefully, making her feel guilty. Of course, none of this was his fault. She felt obliged to try and end the afternoon on a good note.

'Do you want to see the ducks then?'

Santino danced with excitement. 'Si si. *Andiamo* Franco.'

Franco didn't look quite so enthusiastic. Ducks were for babies, Rachel guessed. 'You'll have to show me the way, Franco,' she said, giving him some

responsibility. Reluctantly he took her hand, his grazed knuckles tacky against her palm. 'We'll put a plaster on them when we get home,' she offered, 'and your knee.' He shook his head. No doubt he wanted to show off his war wounds at school tomorrow.

The water in the concrete pond was thick with litter. The ducks sat on the rocks nibbling their feathers, bright eyes watching for bits of bread. Rachel took out her purse, looked hard at the money before giving it to Franco. She still found it difficult to remember what the coins and notes were worth.

There was a kiosk by the pond, with polythene bags full of crusts for sale. She watched Franco limp slightly as he walked, but apart from that, he seemed to be okay. When he returned with the bread, Santino pulled a crust straight from the bag and threw it whole into the pond. A flurry of ducks descended, a furious heckling of beaks and wings.

'Not like that,' said Rachel, laughing. She took a piece of bread and tore it up. The edges were hard but the middle was soft as sponge cake, like the golden cakes her mother used to make, glued together with a layer of jam and butter cream. Not *used to*, she corrected herself, because she still bakes them, it's just that I'm not there to enjoy them. She realised that the thought of home no longer made her feel as sad as it had done when she first arrived here. She imagined everything in England remaining static, stopping on the day she left, waiting to start up again when she returned.

The ducks paddled across the water, negotiating little islands of coke cans and ice cream wrappers nervously, bead-eyes blinking. Then, at the far end of the pool, leaning over the wire fencing, Rachel saw the boy. His cigarette was lit now and he

drew hard, squinting and blowing the smoke out sideways. The ducks cackled as Franco emptied the crumbs into the pond, the surface of the water shattering and growing whole again.

'More bread,' demanded Santino.

'No, that's enough for today. We don't want the ducks getting too fat or they might sink.' Now the boy had appeared she was desperate to get away.

He tossed his cigarette into the murky pool. Ducks gathered and scrabbled where it had fallen. How cruel, she thought.

'Let's go, you two. Home time.' She wished she could dive under the water, like the ducks, and swim away, unseen. But she had to look about her to make sure she didn't take the wrong path as she directed the children back to the car.

The boys were bathed and in their pyjamas, watching an English cartoon on the video, when the Signora came home. Rachel sat between them on Franco's bed, the soapy fragrance of their just-washed hair making her feel light and happy.

The Signora was wearing a sweatshirt and a pair of jodhpurs, which made her appear both younger and more approachable. Rachel hadn't realised that the Signora went horse riding, even though she had often see a pair of liquorice coloured boots lying in the hallway.

'Mamma. Franco fell off his *bicicletta*,' said Santino.

Rachel had been hoping to tell Signora Bruni herself. Coming from the children made it look as if she had deliberately hidden something. 'I put the bike outside,' she explained, 'at the back of the kitchen. The chain's come off.'

'Have they done their reading today?'

That's all she's bothered about, thought Rachel. She doesn't care if they've hurt themselves. 'Yes, we looked at a story.' She omitted to say that she had read it to them, rather than listen to them struggling with words that were too difficult for them to pronounce. The Signora was so intense when it came to their learning. Rachel hoped she would have more patience with her own children. The positive nature of the thought caught her by surprise. Somewhere inside herself, like a tiny grain of sand, was the certainty of children. Yes, one day, she would have a family of her own. The trouble was, she had no idea when that would be, and in the meantime she had to play at being mother to children who could never be hers.

The Signora was looking at Franco's hand, his knuckles crusted with scabs.

He began telling her what had happened in Italian, then changed to English mid way, 'and I couldn't stop and the bike went like this, and I fell ...' he tipped forwards to show his mother, making light of it, making her laugh. Santino giggled too.

'Okay ragazzi. Time for bed I think.' It was obvious she had other things on her mind.

Franco tried to argue, but the Signora would have none of it. Santino scurried across to his bed, and Rachel stopped the video while the Signora kissed her sons goodnight. I mustn't be jealous, she told herself. But it wasn't simply jealousy she was experiencing; it was a desire to protect. What if there was another argument between the Brunis tonight? The boys could hear everything, and unlike Rachel, they could understand what was being said.

Susan sees the bicycle on its side, near the washing machine, the chain dangling. Franco is so careless, dumping it here where she is liable to trip. Perhaps he has left it here on purpose, to try and hurt her. Yes, there is something rebellious in his face at times. Children should be disciplined and Rachel would do well to realise this.

Franco's bike torments Susan by reminding her of Reetha. She thinks of her peddling down the dirt road, hair tied back in a ponytail. Thirteen. Almost a woman. What were Sam and Lin thinking of, buying her a bike? It will attract the attention of the wrong sort. She imagines Reetha riding past the basketball court, the boys halting their game to watch her go by. And the men outside the bar, pausing with their bottles of beer half way to their mouths. Reetha will enjoy the attention. She will become flirtatious and neglect her studies. Susan knows this because it happened to her when she was thirteen too. Indeed, it is something that affects most girls in that village where nothing much takes place.

There are things Reetha does not know, things that only a mother should tell her. Susan feels as though she is falling, as though she has leaned too far over the banister upstairs and gravity has pulled her down against her will. Loss. Over the years she thought she had become used to it, but right now it floods over her like a tidal wave.

She leaves her glass of tea cooling on the table and goes to her room.

On the bed is the letter she has been trying to write for two days now. There is the date, and the beginnings of a sentence that would not come. She decides not use the ink pen that the Signora bought her because it prevents her from being herself, from writing herself. She uses a cheap ball point instead, which weighs almost nothing when she holds it between her fingers. She traces over what she has already written, picking up the thread, then continuing, the words rolling like the sea when it

is whipped up by a gale, surging and crashing. There are things to say that she has never thought of before. Important things about growing up, about being a daughter so far away. The language of home does not come easy, for it is buried under a veneer of Italian that has built up over the years and is hard to strip away, but she writes quickly enough for the mistakes not to matter, for the meaning to carry across.

She is tempted to write something she has never told, about the night she met Sam by the well. The tree tops swayed with the movement of monkeys, their mocking laughter high above. She knelt before Sam and did his favourite thing, the thing she suspected he had to beg from Lin. When it was over he was so grateful his voice caught in his throat, and he held Susan tight and breathed against her neck. For a moment she almost believed in him, in the situation, but then he had to go, and she had to wait there a while, so no one saw them walking together.

On her way back to the village she heard the tall grasses move, even though the air was still. She listened for animals, but heard the sound of feet on dry earth, fuf-fuf-fufff, moving closer. Fear is the absence of light so close to home, the pattern of shadows imagined in darkness. A hand clamped over her mouth preventing her from crying out. She could smell stale tobacco on his fingers. No. It was not a man attacking her. She would not allow it to be. It was a shadow, a ghost, a story made up to scare her. That was how she was able to deal with the attack.

But she knows she cannot write to Reetha about that night, for it is not Reetha's fault that Susan is uncertain who her father is. She starts again on a fresh sheet of paper, tells her daughter that it is time to be careful, time to stay away from boys. Men are weak and easily tempted, which is why women have to be strong. Education will get her out of the village. She must work hard at school, not go parading around on that bicycle as though she is advertising herself for sale.

Susan folds the paper in three and slips it into the envelope. It feels like something official. She smiles. In a way it *is* official. A letter from mother to daughter, a connection which Sam and Lin cannot destroy, no matter how many bicycles they buy.

Rachel followed the Signora into the kitchen. Susan was standing on a stool, opening a small half-window above the cooker. The steam hovered, reluctant to go out into the night. She scooped it with her arms, hands curved like scythe blades.

'Where did you say you'd put it?' the Signora asked.

Rachel opened the back door and brought the bike in. A rush of air followed her, turning the steam to grey. Susan made a point of showing she was cold as she climbed down from the stool. The smell of soap hung in the air and Rachel was intrigued to know what Susan was cooking, although she couldn't get close enough to see. She helped the Signora stand the bike upside down on some newspaper and watched as she began to tinker with it.

It was easy to imagine Dean in her place, to picture him kneeling on the floor, a white smile of flesh showing where his checked shirt rose up above the waistband of his jeans, motorbike parts laid out around him like fossils.

'Pass us the spanner, love.'

The spanners were kept in a tin case, neatly arranged in size order like a xylophone. She tried to remember which one he'd given her to put back a couple of minutes ago but they all looked the same. She closed her eyes, made a wish, picked up the first one her hand touched.

'No. That one there by yer bloody foot.'



*'Mi dai un po' di olio?'* asked the Signora.

Rachel was hardly listening. Susan dropped the wooden spoon with a huff and passed the Signora a bottle of olive oil, glassy green under the strip light.

Dean always lost his temper with bikes; he preferred cars, but a job was a job. He never turned down money on the side. Rachel bit her lip. Just as she thought she was getting over it, something else triggered the memories. They'd talked about buying a semi, with a garage so Dean didn't have to take up the kitchen when he was working on a bike. Planning things made them seem real. They'd gone into town looking at furniture, pricing beds and settees, even bought sheets to fit a double bed. All those plans, but none of them had included having a baby. The saddest thing was that since working for the Brunis, Rachel could see that Dean had been right. Neither of them had been ready for that amount of responsibility. What could they have given a child? Dean didn't earn much, and Rachel was sure she wouldn't have wanted to go back to work. She would have stopped at home to look after the child, depending on Dean for everything. No wonder he had finished with her.

Susan turned off the gas, singing as she hauled something white out of the pan with a pair of wooden pincers and dropped it smouldering into the sink. It was a sodden clump of vests and knickers, white cotton, plain and serviceable. Rachel suppressed a laugh.

*'Finalmente!'* exclaimed the Signora, spinning the pedals backwards. The chain clicked and whirred. She righted the bike and pushed it to the wall, drops of oil spotting onto the tiles. Susan tutted.

'My husband says Franco is being difficult.' The Signora's comment came as a surprise. Rachel hadn't expected Signor Bruni to have said anything to his wife.

'To be honest, he seems to resent me.'

'No. He likes you, I'm sure. And I can see you like it here.'

Can she? thought Rachel. What about Susan going into my room? And Signor Bruni forcing himself on me? 'Franco can be very rude sometimes, and he's always bullying Santino.' She wasn't sure how far she dare go, but the Signora didn't appear to be listening anyway.

'I have to get changed now. I'm going out later. I'll be eating out, Susan.'

Too busy to care, thought Rachel as Signora Bruni left the kitchen. She wondered who she was going out with; her husband or her lover?

Susan blasted cold water into the sink. Rachel looked at the sinews on her wrists as she squeezed the washing out, imagined her wringing the necks of chickens with similar ease.

'You no see people wash clothes before?'

Rachel hadn't realised she was staring. She picked up the newspaper off the floor, while Susan began to spread her wet underclothes around the room, on the door knob, and the handle of the oven door, and the hooks where the tea towels were supposed to hang. They began to drip, slowly, regularly, blip-blop.

Like Chinese water torture, thought Rachel. Yes, I bet she's good at that, wearing people down by degrees.

The Italians like their pasta *al dente*, that is, tender without being soft and sticky. It should have little resistance to the bite to be absolutely perfect.

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The Straits were busy with ships making for port, and the beach was lined with blue and yellow fishing boats pulled up high, the painted eyes on their prows warding off evil. Susan went from room to room, making sure the shutters were hooked back. The Signora had a habit of flinging them wide, but if they were not secured a strong wind could wrench them off their hinges.

Storms can come at anytime. Susan has seen trees uprooted, cars overturned, waves thrown as high as this house. Like many things in life, the weather is not to be trusted.

Last night it was difficult to sleep, for there are so many things to consider. If Reetha remains in the care of Sam and Lin, how will it turn out? Thirteen. Why does she have to be this age? Everything was so much easier when Reetha was small. Thirteen brings complications. All very well to write stern letters to try and keep her daughter in check, but can a mother's absence be bridged by words? Fiorenza's voice rings in her head like the noise of the telephone, maddeningly insistent. *Why not take a holiday? Go back and visit.*

But holidays are for rich people like the Brunis. Two weeks in the mountains for skiing in winter, a month on the coast in a rented bungalow in August, and in between, the Signora's trips to Paris and London, sometimes for business, sometimes just to buy clothes.

It took all the money Susan could lay her hands on to buy the flight that brought her here; money that should have been used to buy a better coffin for her mother, plus some which Sam gave her to make sure she went. But as well as money it took courage. She recalls her fear at the airport as they forced her to part with her one small battered case, the one that contained a change of clothes and a few things donated by women from the village. To see that labelled then watch it fall away through a plastic curtain was to experience another kind of loss, not as final as the death of her mother, nor as painful as leaving her daughter behind, but significant all the same. People are formed by the things they possess; clothes, make-up, a tired but comfortable pair of shoes. To lose what belongs to you is to lose yourself.

Susan remembers the flight. The air hostesses had porcelain faces and when they leaned over to distribute the meals their uniforms smelt fresh as lemons. How did they manage to look so pristine in the pressured air of the cabin? They made Susan feel a shade darker, as though a layer of dirt had stuck to her on the bus ride to the airport, the smell of diesel and road dust in her hair. Even if she could afford it, she wonders if she could ever go back to that: dirt tracks between villages, exhausting walks to the communal well.

The Brunis' bedroom is always the same, an empty coffee cup and a disordered bed. Signor Bruni has left his newspaper open at the financial pages. Buying shares is a hobby to him, like gambling, but more respectable. No matter how much money he makes, he always tries to make more. As Susan clips the shutters back, the wind blows straight through, knocks the photograph frame over and bangs the bedroom door shut. When she picks the frame up the glass has cracked, separating husband and

wife. She places it back on the bedside cabinet. No doubt the Signora will want an explanation. The easiest way is to blame it on the children.

The privacy of the closed door gives Susan more confidence than usual. Rachel is in her room because it is her day off. The Signora has taken the boys to their grandparents and Signor Bruni has left for work, or so he says, even though it is Saturday. He made a phone call earlier, spoke in a low voice, left the house soon afterwards. No doubt a woman is waiting for him at the yacht club. He likes to spend his weekends there, in the club house, drinking. Susan checks the pockets of his trousers but they yield nothing except disappointment. No matter. It would take more than loose change to pay for a flight home. She smooths the bed and plumps the pillows, then lies down, feeling the gentle give of the mattress beneath her. The plaster on the ceiling is as ornate as the icing on a wedding cake. Susan has leafed through the Brunis' wedding album many times when she has been alone in the house. It is bound in leather which has been polished to the colour of old wood and embossed with the Brunis' initials, Alberto and Elizabetta, AB intertwined with EB, the same as the cutlery box downstairs. In the wedding album, Signor Bruni's face is bright and full of hope, and the Signora looks like one of the stars from *Cinecittà*. Who could believe a couple with so many advantages would end up with nothing between them except deception?

Beyond the window the clouds part and an amber shaft of sunlight breaks through, pouring in at the window to illuminate the Signora's jewellery box on the dressing table. Susan has always believed in God, believed that he watches from above and helps those in need. She sits up and stares at the pool of light, bright as an egg yoke. What if this is a sign? The contents of that box are worth more than she can earn in a lifetime. With money the possibilities are endless; she could return home,

provide for Reetha, be a mother once again. It is frightening to think how quickly an idea can take hold, how easily a dream might become reality.

Rachel picked at a flaky patch of skin on her arm where the sun had burnt her as she had driven with the window of the car wound down. I'm not cut out for hot weather, she thought, wishing she could achieve that glowing tan which made the Signora look so glamorous.

It was her first day off and she didn't know quite what to do with herself. She knew she ought to write to her mother, but what should she put? She had lots to tell her, but it was hard to know where to start. Her thoughts wandered. What would her mother be doing right now? Maybe having a coffee with Kath from next door, the two of them at the kitchen table, pouring over Kath's catalogue. Catalogue shopping was one of their favourite pastimes. Rachel couldn't understand it; so claustrophobic, buying items without ever leaving the house.

I ought to drop Dad a line too, she reminded herself. She'd spoken to him on the phone the week before she flew out here, but it was always difficult to know what to say because nothing seemed to link them to each other, not even the words *father* and *daughter*. She used to wonder what it would have been like if he hadn't left, but having heard the way the Brunis argued, perhaps it was best that he had. After all, who wanted to be surrounded by their parents shouting all the time? She ran her hand absentmindedly through her hair. The repetitive movement soothed her, until she found a hair that felt stiff and wiry. She plucked it out and discovered it was grey. Her first one. Her Mum's hair was entirely grey, not an imposing steel colour either, but yellowish like tobacco smoke. Was that what she had to look forward to?

A piquant smell crept under the door, something Susan was preparing. Food was one of her Mum's main interests, so Rachel began her letter by describing the endless shapes of pasta; quills and spirals and thick hollow spaghetti. Then the sauces; fried aubergine, capers preserved in salt, tiny red chillies that fizzed on the tongue. How different to the roasts and heavy stews her mother cooked. England seemed so far away that she almost couldn't imagine going back.

*... anyway, the food's one thing, but the woman who cooks it is something else entirely. She's totally unpredictable. I don't know why the Brunis put up with her, except they're so concerned with themselves they don't notice what's going on half the time.*

*The children are great though. Especially the youngest, Santino. He's so cute.* She stopped for a moment. Santino hadn't wanted to go with his mother this morning; he had wanted to stay with her. The Signora had told him to stop being a baby. He had started to cry, and in the end she had dragged him howling to the car. He wanted to stay with me, Rachel thought. What would her mother think if she wrote the truth; *I want Santino to myself. I want to wrap him in a blanket and run away with him in the night.*

No.

*You were right, Mum. As far as kids are concerned, it's not all plain sailing, but I think I'm doing okay. I know you were worried about me, probably still are, but I'm not brooding about the abortion. I mean, it's nearly a year ago now. They're are lots of times when I think about it, but I've got plenty to occupy me. When I look at what Franco and Santino have got, I realise I wouldn't have been able to give mine anything, except love, and that wouldn't have been enough, would it?*

*I suppose I picked the wrong bloke. And before you get any ideas, no, I haven't met anyone out here. Although there are lots of nice looking lads around.*

*If you see Carol, say hello from me. I haven't got round to writing to her yet - I haven't had time - but I will, soon.*

*So take care, Mum. Hope you're having a nice rest without me.*

The wind made the glass rattle in its frame. Rachel looked up to see the trees on the banking bend and sway. One had a few dry pomegranates hanging from it, dancing with every gust. The poppies too bobbed about, yielding their petals to the wind. She signed her letter with lots of love, and left it on the dressing table until she bought some stamps.

When she opened the door she saw Susan retreating hastily down the stairs. She was sure she had been spying on her. Bloody woman, she said, under her breath. It looked like rain, but if she didn't get out of the house for an hour or so she felt sure she would go mad.

A knitted dress belonging to the Signora hangs on the line, stretched out of shape by the weight of water dripping from the hem. It drips onto Susan's feet as she hangs a blouse next to it, but she doesn't bother to wring the dress again. Once is enough. If it stretches badly, the Signora will have to buy another. Clothes are no problem for the Signora; she buys new outfits according to the season rather than according to need. Susan thinks of the jewellery box, about what its contents are worth. What would it be like to return to the Philippines with money.



The washing line is outside, at the back of the kitchen, covered by the lean-to of corrugated plastic sheets which are meant to keep the dust, as well as the rain, out. Overhanging branches make scurrying sounds in the wind. Soon there will be a storm. The clouds are perched on the garden wall of the house above, just visible from where she stands. They cast a heavy shadow, one which Susan reads as an omen. Trouble comes from that house, drives down the road in a red car at six in the morning to give the Signora a lift to the stables.

'Hello boy.' Cesare barked excitedly as Rachel opened the pen and knelt down to stroke him. She didn't like the idea of going for a walk on her own. He rubbed his nose against her cheek, taking in her smell. How could she ever have thought of him as fierce? He was like a soft toy found in the attic, once a favourite but now discarded. 'You could do with a wash and brush up.' He held out his paw as if to shake on the deal. 'Oh no. Not me. I can't bath you.'

Susan scowled at them as she hung out the clothes. Rachel imagined putting Cesare in the bath, lathering him with the Signora's expensive shampoo, drying him on her fluffy white towels. What would Susan say to that? 'Let's go for a walk then. Would you like that? Would you?' She stood up and patted her thigh. The dog chomped the air excitedly. At least it would pass the time until the boys came back. The house was dead without them.

'You no let that dog in kitchen,' said Susan, the plastic peg held between her lips falling to the ground as she spoke. Cesare shrunk back.

'I'm going to take him for a walk,' said Rachel. 'Is there a lead?'

'Leeeed?' said Susan incredulously.

'Anything I could clip onto his collar.'

Cesare wagged his tail nervously.

'Leeced?' Susan repeated. 'That dog no go out.'

'Why not?'

'Because I say.' She picked up one of Signor Bruni's shirts and shook it so hard it slapped the air. Cesare's ears went flat to his head.

Rachel was determined to take him. 'Come on boy,' she said, ignoring Susan and beckoning him to follow her. He looked confused. 'Walkies. Walkies.' She wished she knew what the equivalent was in Italian. There again, how could he understand what a walk was if he was never allowed out? She tried to make him sit instead.

There was a belt in her drawer, red leather with little metal studs, a bit tarty her Mum used to say. Rachel realised she was right. She'd liked it once, but that was because Dean liked it. She wasn't even sure why she had brought it with her, except that she had tried to pack everything in her case, to bring her whole life out here and turn it round.

When she came out of her room, Cesare was waiting patiently at the bottom of the stairs. 'You were supposed to stay outside.' She looped the belt back on itself through his collar. He looked better already, red leather, silver studs.

'Come on,' she coaxed, but he sank to the ground, tail twitching with uncertainty.

'Don't you want to go?'

From the kitchen Susan began to sing. The song was tuneful, almost triumphant. Rachel pulled on the lead. 'Come on. Don't let me down now.' The skin on his neck puckered as she pulled him to his feet.

How like the Ingleesh to take a dog for a walk. Susan doesn't see the point. A dog walks himself, no need for someone to show him where to go. Still, it means Rachel is out of the way for a while. She wrings the cuffs of Signor Bruni's silk pullover. All this washing by hand has made her fingers wrinkle, like the ridges left in the sand when the sea is low. Having finished hanging out the clothes she goes through to the kitchen, sharp with the smell of cooking, and checks the pasta baking in the oven. Tomato sauce bubbles like molten rock. Good. *Pasta al forno* takes care of itself, gives her time to see what Rachel has been up to.

There is a letter on Rachel's dressing table, and a pot of face cream used as a paper weight. Susan tries the face cream first, dips her finger in and dabs it on her face. The smell is unexpectedly floral, like jasmine at night. Now she takes the letter and reads what she can. She is surprised her own name does not appear; all the other girls have written home about her. Then she spots 'unpredictable'. It is a word her American teacher used about her when she was at school. So, Rachel does not see fit to call Susan by her name. She takes the letter to her own room, sits on the bed and reads it over. 'The woman who cooks ...' Yes, I am the woman who cooks, she thinks bitterly. I am the woman who cooks and cleans and irons while you have nice time with boys. She studies the writing a little closer, sees the word 'abortion', a word so heavy it is difficult to lift it from the page. So, this is her secret. Susan is proud at having discovered it at last, for she knew there was something; there always is. Everyone has something to hide. She tears the letter into neat little squares and tosses it in the bin. For now, she will keep this secret to herself, until it is time to use it.

In her apron pocket is a coin she found in the street this morning. She puts it in the tin with the rest she has saved. Many of her possessions are in boxes, boxes given to her by the Signora each time she buys a new pair of shoes. They have names on the side, *Carmella*, *Maria-Grazia*, *Angelina*. Susan's shoes do not have names. She buys them from a market stall where each pair is held together with an elastic band and the price is drawn on the sole. Where the Signora goes to buy shoes there is thick carpet to walk on and three assistants all praising the latest style of heel. Susan has looked through the window of shops like these, studied the movements of the rich. It is like looking into a tank of fish, observing their mouths silently opening and closing. The rich, she has concluded, move more slowly than the poor. They take more time over eating and drinking and buying shoes. Yes, money buys time as well as possessions.

Susan's shoe boxes contain various things. In one there is a collection of coloured tissue paper once used to wrap oranges. Each grower has a different mark. Far too beautiful to be thrown away, so she collected them and kept them safe, something to show Reetha she had hoped. In another box there are odd buttons: a single diamanté cluster that came off one of the Signora's dresses, a white bobble with a lion on it that belonged to Santino's baby grow, buttons from shirts and trousers and jackets. An entire family history.

All that time spent collecting, sorting, storing. For what? To provide Reetha with a patchwork of her mother's life here, a way of explaining all those missing years. Again she imagines Reetha peddling her bike, its shiny frame catching the sun, causing the men to turn and stare. Susan sees it as clear as if she were there; the secret rendezvous by the chicken coups, the fumbblings that are a prerequisite to sex. How

can Sam and Lin let her ride around the village like that? At thirteen Reetha needs to be kept inside, not allowed to go pedalling about, flaunting herself.

She looks at the magazine clippings, the hair grips, the circle of crochet never completed. What use is all this if Reetha does not come? Reetha needs guidance. If Sam and Lin are incapable of providing it, then Susan must go there herself. It will not be easy, but she must try, for her daughter's sake. She wonders how Reetha will receive her, how she will explain so many missing years without these objects she has gathered. Perhaps if she were to take one item from each box. Yes, collect only the most meaningful things. Filled with enthusiasm she starts to delve, scrabbling around for the most precious objects; a used eye shadow, a prayer card, a single glass bead.

But this is just the start. There are drawers stuffed with clothes, old but still serviceable, bundles of letters and photographs too, each one with its own memories. Impossible to take everything back, yet such a wrench to leave it all behind. If she takes the jewellery and disappears, the Brunis will search her room from top to bottom, learn things about her that she would prefer to remain private. Therefore, what she cannot take with her she must dispose of. She will dump it in the rubbish bin at the end of the street, and from there it will be taken to an incinerator and reduced to ash. She is reminded of the flames that destroyed the house back in the Philippines. Yes, fire is a terrible thing, but it is the best way to make a new start.

*Sarde A Beccafico*: Deep-Fried Sardines With Cheese Stuffing

This recipe is named after the tiny Sicilian birds known as *beccafichi* or figpeckers. When the sardines are stuffed and deep-fried they bear a striking resemblance to small birds.

750g fresh sardines  
200ml white wine vinegar  
75g pecorino cheese, grated  
3 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed  
1 tablespoon chopped parsley or basil  
salt and freshly ground black pepper  
2 eggs, beaten  
dried breadcrumbs  
vegetable oil for shallow frying  
basil or parsley sprigs to garnish

Slit the sardines open along one side and clean thoroughly, removing the backbones but leaving the heads and tails intact. Open the fish out and place in a shallow bowl. Pour over the vinegar and leave to marinate for 2 hours, turning occasionally.

Drain the sardines. Mix the pecorino, garlic and parsley with salt and pepper to taste. Spread this mixture over the insides of the sardines and fold to close.

Dip the sardines in the eggs and coat with breadcrumbs. Fry until brown on both sides. Drain on absorbent kitchen paper and serve immediately, garnished with basil or parsley sprigs.

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A small three-wheeler van buzzed up the street, the open back loaded with trays of fruit. As it passed, it struck up a brassy tune through the loud hailer fixed on top of the cab.

'Come on boy.' Rachel coaxed. Cesare sniffed the air, only just understanding his freedom.

*Limone, mele*, the loud hailer sounded. The truck bounced and an apple jolted free, landing at the side of the road. Rachel picked it up and brushed the grit off the skin. It was red and yellow, a fairytale fruit, one half sweet, the other half poison. But only if you believed in fairy stories. Which she didn't. Not any more.

Once there had been a fantasy of white, so close she could smell the promise of it on her pillow at night. Carol had tried to tell her the truth behind it. 'All that wedding business is bollocks, love. For richer or poorer, for better or worse!' But despite Carol's warnings she had drifted deeper and deeper into the fairy story, up to the point where she was wishing time would go faster, so that the prospect of marriage would arrive quicker. She wasn't quite sure why she had been so eager; maybe she had wanted Dean to replace her Dad, or maybe she had sensed his reluctance to commit himself. After all, although it was his idea to save for a house, he'd never actually mentioned marriage.

She bit defiantly into the apple, sinking her teeth into the taut skin, the cidery juice running along her tongue. It tasted all the better for being found. Cesare was walking with more enthusiasm now. They crossed the road and took a path that veered off to the right in order to avoid going past the dry cleaners. Rachel recalled taking the curtains for Susan, how the woman behind the counter had struggled to understand Susan's note. Now Rachel knew Susan a little better she suspected she had purposefully written something confusing, just to make her look stupid.

In the city, people lived in restrained apartment blocks, but here in the suburbs the houses had terraces with strings of onions and garlic strung across them, and thorny bougainvillea providing bright splashes of purple and pink. Cesare hung back on the lead.

'What's wrong boy?' she asked him. 'Has Susan cast a spell on you?'

There was a magnificent tree with broad leaves providing a canopy of vivid green. As she made her way towards it she saw something move along the ground. A leaf? A tatter of paper? Cesare pricked his ears and lurched forward, pulling the lead tight, and Rachel saw a lizard dart across the path and merge with the wall.

'Cesare!' She tried to yank him back, but he stood firm, nose pointing. 'Well, at least you've perked up.'

Just then, the lizard flashed back along the ground. Cesare leaped forward, pulling the lead through her hand. She lost her balance and fell onto a sticky mass of rotting figs. Cesare slammed his paw down and threw his weight on top of his catch, barking excitedly, but the lizard was quick to shed its tail and skittered away.

Rachel wasn't sure which of them had come off worse, her or the lizard. 'Look what you've done.' But Cesare was busy rolling the lizard's tail between his paws, turning it in the dust, trying to nudge it back to life.

Beneath the tree it smelled of honey. She moved to a space clear of crushed fruit and sat down for a moment in order to gather herself. Cesare abandoned the lizard's tail and began to lick the ground instead, his tongue becoming peppered with tiny seeds. 'Bad boy,' she scolded, but she couldn't be angry with him for long. After all, it wasn't his fault that the Brunis kept him penned up at the back of the house and never took him out. She wiped her hands on her jeans, feeling sorry for herself. Here she was on her day off with only a dog for company. She missed Santino. It was obvious from the way he had cried this morning that he would rather be with her than his mother. It was all very well bringing Cesare along, but really, she wanted Santino with her. She was the one who looked after him, who made sure he was up and dressed, that his hair was combed and his teeth were brushed. Shouldn't she be given something in return? She began to fantasise about snatching him. It would be like



being in a film. The police would be looking for a blonde girl, but she could cut her hair with her nail scissors and dye it dark brown. That way she would look more like a Sicilian. She knew the idea was ridiculous, that she was making it up because she was lonely, but it gripped her with such a force it made her feel dizzy.

She leaned back to steady herself and saw a little bird flitting amongst the last of the figs. The fruit looked ready to fall with the next gust, but the wind had dropped away to nothing, creating a private world where memories came easily.

There was an oak tree in the park back home where they all used to meet, a gang of them when they were fifteen or so. The tree provided shelter from what seemed like constant rain. The lads always wanted to be kicking something around: a tin can, a stone, a soggy tennis ball found in the grass, while the girls preferred to stand in twos, talking and watching. Rachel used to watch Dean. He wasn't much good at football, but she liked to watch him anyway. The oak tree had love hearts with couples' initials carved into the trunk. Rachel remembered how much she had wanted her own initials to appear there, to arrive one day and find them carved in, but she never did. Shouldn't that have told her something about Dean, about what he really felt for her?

She looked up at the remaining plump green fruits. They were quite low. Perhaps she could reach them. She stood up and tested a branch, the little bird making a thrumming noise as it flew away, startled at her intrusion. The branch was easily strong enough to take her weight. She clambered up, feeling the spring of life in wood that looked old and dead. She didn't want to climb very high, just far enough to sit on the overhanging branch and reach for the figs.

*'Signorina. Stai attento!'*

The shout made her jump. Her immediate thought was that she was trespassing.

'Ciao Cesare.' The man came into the tent of shade below the tree and patted the dog's side, his hand making a hollow drumming sound against Cesare's ribs. Rachel clambered down, her movement shaking the tree and dislodging the fig which the man caught casually in the centre of his palm.

How did he know Cesare's name? She looked at his face, mottled with light and shade. At first she thought it was the shadows cast by the leaves, but then she realised it was the pigment of his skin, uneven patches of white on olive brown. She wished she hadn't stared, but she was wary too, remembering the boy in the park. *You want fucky?*

The man held the fig up before her. It was covered in a fine white bloom.

'For you, Signorina.' The fact that he spoke English, that he knew she was English, left her gaping. How was it that everyone seemed to know her? He pressed his nail into the fig and peeled away the skin in strips. Underneath, the flesh was moist with pinkish syrup, and when he pulled it apart the centre was packed with sticky filaments, like the tentacles of a sea anemone. He popped one half into his mouth and offered her the other. She couldn't help but think of Signor Bruni offering her the walnut. Look where that had landed her! But this man was much better looking than Signor Bruni, and much younger too. She took the other half and bit, a lovely brandy sweetness filling her mouth.

The man picked up the lead trailing from Cesare's collar, then saw the look of distress on her face. 'I am your neighbour,' he said rather formally, holding out his hand.

She wasn't sure what he meant. The Brunis' house was set back off the street. They didn't really have any neighbours. 'I'm all right on my own,' she said, swallowing the last bits of sticky fruit.

'Don't worry. You are the nanny for Franco and Santino, yes?' He spoke slowly, but his English was easy to understand.

How did he know so much about her? 'It's my day off,' she replied quickly, as though that detached her from the Brunis somewhat.

'Then I will show you around.' He was already moving away, Cesare walking happily beside him.

Rachel was stung by the dog's betrayal. 'No, I've got to get back.'

'But I must practice my English,' he insisted.

She became defensive. He had no right to force his company on her like this. 'I don't know you,' she said firmly.

'You don't like me?'

'I didn't say that ... ' She watched him twist Cesare's lead around his hand. I'll be all right, she told herself, he's not a proper stranger. He knows the Brunis. And the dog knows him. Besides, it seemed she didn't have any option.

As they stepped out from under the tree the air was very still.

'Excuse me,' the man apologised. 'My name is Rocco.'

She took a good look at him. The skin around his eyes was dark. Too many late nights, she decided. In fact, there was something slightly rough about him, the shadow of stubble on his skin perhaps, although it only served to make him more attractive. Or was she confusing attractive with dangerous?

'I'm Rachel,' she said. Her mouth still tasted sweet from eating the fig. She smiled at him, felt a tiny spark inside when he smiled back.

'Rachel. Yes. Elizabetta told me.'

Did she, thought Rachel, gaining the impression that she had been discussed at great length by the Signora.

'So,' asked Rocco, 'do you like Sicily?'

'I don't know. I haven't made up my mind yet.'

'Then I must show you.' And with that he took her arm and led her back along the path.

Susan has told the Signora she is going to the doctor's, that acid is burning into her stomach again. Easy to fake pain when you want something. Really her stomach is fine; it is her head that hurts, but it is nothing that a doctor can cure. As she walks down the Via Settembre she feels as though the weight of the sky is resting directly on top of her.

The window of the travel agency has a display advertising holidays in Australia. There is a family, two adults and two children, white smiles standing out against their golden tans. The wife has blonde hair like Rachel, but whereas Rachel's skin is the colour of milk, this woman is vital and alive, even though she is only made of cardboard. It dawns on Susan that she should never have let someone as sickly and insubstantial as Rachel irritate her so much. Too late now. They occupy opposing squares, black and white like the chess pieces which the Signora amuses herself with when she comes home from the office and is waiting for the phone to ring.

Susan studies the window display for a while, debating whether or not to go inside. There is a montage of an entire continent: Ayers Rock, Sydney Opera House, an aborigine's face dotted with muddy paint. She cannot understand why people pay

all this money and travel such a long way to take a holiday. To go for work is different, but just to look? It makes no sense at all.

She notices the staff peering at her from behind their computer screens, sees a spot or two of rain land on the glass. The weather has been threatening all day. The shop looks pleasant and inviting: orange carpet, orange chairs, an imitation sun hanging behind the desk.

Inside, the air is warm with the whirr of computers, more oppressive than the black clouds overhead. Susan feels uncomfortable. She hovers, like a fly wary of being swatted, settles on a seat opposite a man with a beard. He looks older than the other staff. Maybe he is the manager. Maybe he will give her a good price.

'I whan know price for Manila,' she says, nervousness making her accent more pronounced.

As soon as the man keys in the word Manila, his phone rings. He cradles it in the crook of his neck and chats for a while, not about business, but about where he and his girlfriend will eat tonight.

Susan glares at him until her eyes begin to hurt. Eventually he ends the conversation and keys something else into his computer. The screen is at an angle and she can just see the rows of dates and times of flights scrolling upwards. The man presses a button and freezes the information.

'Single or return?'

His question forces a decision she has not yet made. She is not going home for a holiday like rich people take. The purpose of her journey is to take care of her daughter. 'Single,' she says, surprising herself with the speed of her answer. How quickly it is happening, almost as if events have a momentum of their own, buoying her up and carrying her along.

'When would you want to fly?'

Impossible to say. She makes up a date and shrugs it out, as though she is used to jetting back and forth across the world.

The man quotes her the current price, which is more than she expected. She asks if there is anything cheaper but he shakes his head.

'The price includes the transfer from Reggio to Roma.'

She had forgotten about that.

He scribbles the price on a piece of paper then tears it off the pad briskly. She can see that he wants her to leave. He thinks she can't afford it.

Susan takes her time, folds the piece of paper twice and places it in her purse. She is used to people like him, those who judge by what is on the outside, without trying to discover what is within. The office crackles with static. 'This price okay,' she says calmly, 'but I no buy from you. This place is too orange. Makes my head ache.'

Rocco pointed to the sky. 'We must go back, before it rains. It will be a storm. Listen how quiet.'

He was right. Even the background buzz of insects had died away. They began to walk back towards the house. He doesn't need to practice his English, thought Rachel. It's almost word perfect as it is, just a bit slow, that's all. She couldn't help feeling inadequate, for she had hardly managed to remember anything from her phrase book. Why hadn't she tried harder at school? Not that Italian had been on the syllabus, but French had. She wished she had put more effort in, but school had seemed so pointless.

Cesare padded along next to Rocco, the sound of his paws rasping on the dry ground. *Je veux*, she thought. *I want*. She remembered that much at least.

'Rachel. Could I take you out one evening?'

His question didn't entirely come as a surprise, although that didn't make it any easier to deal with. 'Er. I ... No. No thank-you.' She hardly knew him. *Je veux* she thought. What *did* she want? She felt like a tightrope walker, an entire audience fixed on her every movement, waiting for her to fall. She expected Rocco to ask again, to try and persuade her, but instead, he shook her hand as though they had met for business and passed her Cesare's lead. The sky was darker, denser, making the patchy colouring on his face more noticeable. She fished in her pocket for the key to the gate.

'We could meet in the day if you prefer,' he offered.

She was aware of her toes clenching tight to the wire, keeping her balance. 'I suppose we could ...' Yes, daytime would be safer. She wished she hadn't sounded quite so vague though; it had been a while since she had played this game.

'I will see you again.' He took her hand, this time swiftly kissing the back of it. '*Arrivederchi*.' He patted Cesare on the head and walked away.

But they hadn't arranged anything. She wanted to call him back. The house was stifling. Susan was driving her mad. She had to shout him back, now, before it was too late. But as she was about to, Cesare cocked his leg up against the wall.

'Well, you've put paid to that,' she said severely, then smoothed his dusty coat, to show she didn't mean it. 'I suppose a bloke would only complicate things, wouldn't he?' She thought of Santino again, and gazed across the sea to the Calabrian coast. The Signora had told her that she was designing a bridge to provide a road link across the Straits. It seemed an impossible distance to span. Still, if you wanted something enough you could make it happen, couldn't you? *Je veux*, she whispered, thinking of

Santino, and the sea picked up her words, pounding them as the waves washed over the shingle.

Indoors, the house felt even bigger than usual. She listened for Susan; her sounds, her songs. Nothing. She wandered around the kitchen, opening cupboards and drawers, finding bits of string, a nest of rubber bands, an open packet of biscuits that tasted of cardboard. She ate two, despite the taste, simply because she knew Susan wouldn't like it.

In the dining room the velvet curtains were back in place, framing the purple sky. The furniture was pushed up against the walls where Susan had been polishing the floor, leaving a central space free, like a stage, a place for the Brunis to act out all their arguments. When Rachel's parents had fought, the house had such thin walls that every word passed straight through. The neighbour's words came through just as clearly too, so there were times when arguments seemed to come from all directions, as though no one was happy, anywhere in the world.

If only the Signora had left Santino with her today she would have had something to do. She could have taken him out for an ice-cream. Just me and him together, she thought, wandering into the lounge, transgressing the invisible boundaries set by Susan; *you no go in there, you no touch thees*. Easy to pretend it was all hers, the collection of silver snuff boxes, the statue of a horse rearing spiritedly. Easy to pretend that she was the Signora, waiting for her lover to ring.

But when the phone did ring, the fantasy vanished and she was left wondering where she fitted in. Language was another boundary, one that prevented her from picking up the receiver. The phone in the hallway mimicked the one in the lounge, yet there was nothing she could do. If she answered it she wouldn't be able to make



herself understood, and whoever was on the other end would lose patience. She ignored the ringing and went upstairs to her bedroom.

A few heavy spots of rain hit the windows, hard as bullets. But nothing followed, and the clouds continued to hold. If she was going to post that letter to her mother, she was going to have to get a move on, otherwise she would be caught in a downpour. The tobacconist sold stamps. It would only take ten minutes there and back. She looked about her. Where was the letter? She was sure she had left it on the dressing table. She picked up the jar of face cream, half expecting to find it folded up beneath it.

She told herself not to jump to conclusions, but at the same time found herself marching across the landing to Susan's room. Who else would steal her things? She tried the door, almost expected it to be locked, but heard the latch click. Anger propelled her forward.

There was rubbish everywhere, spread over the floor and across the bed, piles of shoe boxes, stacks of magazines, carrier bags bulging with clothes. Rachel picked her way over to the chest of drawers. On top of it was a collection of pebbles and shells, a radio, a mouldy orange, and a statue of the Madonna with piercing blue eyes. Next to the statue, propped up against a candle, were two photographs of a little girl. In one, the child was on a swing, legs in the air, flying towards the camera, her mouth open in a screaming smile, while the other was of the same girl, somewhat older, in her school uniform. The collar of her shirt looked uncomfortably stiff around her neck, making her point her chin in the air. She had dark eyes like Susan, and the same round cheeks.

Who was she? Susan's niece or cousin.

No, thought Rachel. It's her daughter. She couldn't explain how she was so sure, except that thinking of Susan as a mother softened all the sharp edges, helped make sense of the bitterness. But why was she living here alone? Was the child dead? Had there been an accident, a fatal illness? She thought about the spare room with its pink bedspread, the one Susan kept sneaking in and out of when she thought no one was looking. She's not dead, thought Rachel. Susan's keeping her room ready, that's all. I'd do the same, if my child were away somewhere. I'd have everything ready and wait until she was able to join me.

But I never gave my child that chance, did I?

She stopped herself. Susan might come home at any moment, and if she caught her here there would be hell to pay. She turned to leave, and as she did so, her eye caught the shreds of paper in the bin; her letter, torn to confetti. She'd been so busy daydreaming, she'd almost forgotten why she'd come in here.

She picked some of the pieces out of the bin and arranged them on the carpet. They were too small and random to make any sense, but there was no mistaking the fact that it was her letter.

Only a moment ago she had felt sympathetic towards Susan, even imagined some common ground between them. Now all she wanted to do was teach her a lesson. She grabbed hold of the Madonna with the intention of flinging it out of the window. Susan was always praying and genuflecting. How would she feel if her Madonna was smashed to pieces? But the statue's features were so delicate, its cheeks shaded pink like a small child, that Rachel couldn't bring herself to do it. Besides, what good would it do? Better to play Susan at her own game, wear her down in a war of attrition, the way the pebbles on the beach ground against each other as the

waves surged and retreated. It'll take more than a torn letter to get to me, she vowed, deciding to take the Madonna to her room and hold her to ransom.

The rain comes down as hard as stones on Susan's head, running through her hair like cold fingers. She has no umbrella and it is quite a walk from the bus stop to the house. She clutches her bag which contains the piece of paper from the travel agency. She has just enough money in the bank, but the jewellery from the Signora's box would make things so much easier. No doubt the Brunis would call the *carabinieri* if anything went missing, but if she gets away quick enough what does it matter? Suddenly anything and everything seems possible. Her only regret is that she did not think to go sooner. How quickly time has passed. She has worked so hard for the Brunis, yet what has she to show for it? Rough hands, a stiff back, bones that ache in the winter. And all the time her daughter has been growing up without her.

A car speeds past, catching a puddle at the side of the road and sending the water splashing outwards. '*Che pazzo*,' Susan curses. Her legs are drenched by the spray, but even this cannot entirely spoil things. Her thoughts are elsewhere, on a bracelet of yellow gold studded with blue stones and a heart-shaped pendant that opens to reveal a tiny watch. Hard to know what they are worth. It depends on the price she can obtain for them back home, for it would be impossible to sell them here. All she knows is that once she has taken them she must disappear. The idea takes up all the room in her head until she cannot think of anything else. Only last night, on the television, there was a feature about an agency that offers men the chance to marry girls from the Philippines. They keep files full of photographs, each girl smiling sweetly, desperate to be picked because it is the only way out. Susan knows these

girls are mistaken; they are escaping nothing. A husband demands the same wherever you go. She must go back and explain this to Reetha. Yes, to be a wife is still to keep house; this is what she told Don Pipo the other month, when he drank too much beer and stood in the street, outside the gate, begging her to reconsider.

The lights in the house cast a faint glow on the garden; sodden geraniums, dripping trumpets of the hibiscus flowers. Susan goes round the side so as not to trail water down the hall. Cesare is in his kennel. His nose pokes out as he hears her approach but she hisses at him through clenched teeth just in case he is thinking of barking.

There is an open bottle of Marsala on the kitchen table, evidence that Signor Bruni is home. Susan does not normally drink, but she is soaked, and the Marsala has a friendly amber colour which seems to offer warmth. After she has changed her clothes she will come down and heat a cup of it in a pan with two spoons of sugar, grate a little nutmeg and sprinkle cinnamon on top, then sip it to prevent herself from catching a cold. Yes, hot wine is good for preventing illness.

Rachel has been in the kitchen too; there are crumbs where she has cut the bread. Always sandwiches, these Ingleesh. No wonder they are all so pale. Susan thinks about the letter, about the things Rachel wrote, not about Susan, but about herself. *Abortion*. Such an ugly word.

'Susan? ... Susan? *Dovè sei?*' Signora Bruni is calling. She comes into the kitchen, speaking Italian for a change. 'You're back. Good. What did the doctor say?' The boys are with her. They stay close.

'Doctor?' For a moment Susan had forgotten. Her lips tremble around the words, 'Si, si. He say I need rest.'

The Signora looks harassed, perhaps because she has been looking after the children all day. Santino keeps reaching for her hand, but she refuses to let him hold it. She is not used to playing mother. 'Well, now you're here, make the boys something to eat will you?'

'Why you no ask Rachel?'

'It's her day off.'

'I know this,' Susan replies defiantly, 'but I need change clothes.'

There is a silence, short but acutely felt. Franco stands behind his mother, peeks out and pulls a face at Susan.

Susan's lips go up into a smile for the Signora, although she is thinking about how she would like to smack Franco and lock him in his room for an hour or two to teach him a lesson. Still, no point making trouble now. Soon this family will be nothing more than a memory. She looks down at her feet, sees the pool of water where her clothes have dripped onto the tiles, almost as if she is standing on ice.

'I go change, Signora. Two minutes, eh? Then I cook spaghetti *con burro e parmigiano*.' She smacks her lips in Franco's direction.

'Did the doctor give you another prescription?'

Normally the Signora is not so concerned about Susan's welfare. Has she guessed something is wrong? But Susan picks up the lie like a thread of cotton and stitches it neatly so there are no loose ends. 'Medicine same as before, Signora. Important thing is rest.' She gives Signora Bruni a curt smile before going to get changed.

*Banana Blossom Ginataan*

2 banana blossoms  
 1 cup coconut milk  
 2 tablespoons vinegar  
 ¼ cup sliced tomatoes  
 ¼ cup sliced onion  
 2 cloves garlic, crushed  
 1 tablespoon vegetable oil  
 2 dried red chillies  
 salt and pepper to taste

Remove the tough covering of the blossoms and slice thinly crosswise. Add 2 tablespoons of salt and squeeze off bitter juice. Rinse in water and squeeze dry.

Heat the oil in a pan. Add chillies and let the skins darken before adding the garlic. Sauté garlic until light brown. Add onion, fry until translucent, then add tomatoes. Cook for around 3 minutes.

Add banana blossoms and vinegar, then bring to the boil without stirring. Simmer for around 3 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste and stir. Continue to cook until banana blossom is tender.

Add coconut milk and remove from heat. Allow to stand for a few minutes to develop the flavours.

xiii

Sunday is a day of rest. Susan dresses in pale yellow and checks herself in the mirror. There is something different about the room reflected behind her, but because of the disorder created by sorting and packing she is not quite sure what is wrong. Things are upside down at the moment, both in this room, and in her head. So much confusion she hardly slept again last night.

She searches for her shoes amongst the mess, catches sight of the toes poking out from under the bed, shiny as beetles. The boys must have been in here playing their tricks again, hiding her things to make her late. Normally she keeps her door

locked, but with so much on her mind yesterday, she forgot. The shoes are stuffed with newspaper because they are three sizes too big; once they belonged to the Signora, but she managed to salvage them from the dustbin. The same with the hat, a floppy-brimmed affair made of straw which looks incongruous against the rest of the outfit. Never mind. A final look round for a pair of gloves and she is ready.

Overnight the puddles have joined together so that the pavement is like a mirror. Susan has borrowed Signor Bruni's umbrella without asking. So what if he does not like it? She will not be his servant for much longer. The drizzle is damp as breath, and the sky is low, a sure sign that more water is due. The tightness of her skirt restricts her step, forces her to shuffle. It is an uncomfortable way to walk, but a little suffering does no harm; nothing goes unnoticed before God.

Other Filipinos attend this church. Susan knows one or two of them well enough to nod to as she enters, but she has always avoided friendships. She did not come to this country to make friends; she came to work. Fiorenza is different. She has many friends in Rome, not Filipino, but Italian. They go for coffee to each other's apartments and exchange recipes and dress patterns. Thinking about her sister makes Susan's heart feel like a brass weight placed on the kitchen scales, moving up and down between jealousy and love. If only they had lived a little closer, so that they could speak face to face rather than down a telephone line.

She walks down the aisle, right to the front. Most of the Filipinos stay near the back but she likes to be near the altar, as close to God as possible. The umbrella drips water, making spots that show dark as blood on the stone floor. She has to push past people who are already seated in order to reach a space at the end of the pew. There is a fat old Signora who does not like being disturbed, but Susan does not care. No one

has a greater need for God than she does at this moment, for her head feels so full it could burst. Does she really dare to buy that ticket and fly back home. If she does, what sort of welcome will she receive?

The gold cross holds a carved figure of Christ crowned with thorns. His eyes are lifted to heaven while his mouth is twisted in agony. Susan prefers to focus on the Madonna tucked away in the corner. She is cast in plaster, painted in blue and white and gold. Susan has a replica of her in her room. Suddenly she realises why her room seemed different this morning. Those boys! They have taken her Madonna. They always get up to no good when their mother is supposed to be in charge. How many times has she told them not to go in her room, not to touch her things. Wait until she gets back to the house.

The Madonna in the church stares serenely out over the congregation, her features betraying no emotion, although her eyes contain the possibility of tears. Susan identifies with this look. It is the gaze of a woman who has lost her child. She thinks of Rachel, who is beyond redemption, for an abortion goes against God and all his teachings. Who would have thought Rachel would do a thing like that? Abortion is murder, a sin that leaves no room for forgiveness.

The priest is new, a young man with a nervous cough at the end of each sentence. He scratches behind his ear from time to time. Susan wonders what he will be like in the confessional. He speaks of the necessity to open one's heart to God. Susan's head starts to throb. Stealing the Signora's jewellery, catching the flight, arriving in Manila then making her way back home. God will see it all. He will see her stealing and judge her harshly. If she could confess her intentions it might prepare Him for what she is about to do, yet she is cautious, for to confess might break her resolve.



There is a story about a saint who was made to lay down while a solid wooden door was placed upon her. Susan cannot recall the saint's name, but knows that stones were piled on top of the door to make it heavier and heavier. That image of skin splitting, of blood leaking from the finger tips, is a powerful thing. Sitting here, listening to the new priest coughing as he talks, Susan feels that something is squashing her, that something inside her is about to be forced out. In her mind she recognises the door as the one from the dining room. The Brunis are laying it on top of her to force her to tell the truth. She feels the air squeezing from her stomach, and before she can stop it, words come out. *Yes. I leaving.*

Did she really speak? The fat Signora turns and frowns, but at the same moment the organ starts, filling the church with its massive sound. Susan joins in singing on the second line, sings loud to cover her outburst, skims over the print in the hymn book and makes up her own words instead, for song is a powerful thing that lifts the heart and makes the head feel light. By singing, the weight that has been crushing her is lifted, temporarily at least.

Rachel flicked through her magazine for the third time. What had she been thinking of yesterday, taking the Madonna? Two wrongs don't make a right, that's what her mother would have said, and Rachel knew it was sound advice. There was nothing to do but put the statue back.

She had it hidden in the suitcase on top of her wardrobe. She stood on a chair, reached for the case and unzipped it. The statue was so beautiful, radiating a certain calm, as though waiting for her to speak. Rachel hadn't prayed since junior school, when prayers were said in assembly, but she needed to talk to someone. 'I keep

thinking about Santino, imagining he's mine.' The statue's gaze neither condemned nor condoned her. She had expected something more, felt foolish talking to a plaster figure. 'Time for you to go back.'

She sneaked across the landing, carrying the Madonna, careful not to make a sound. But when she tried Susan's door it was locked.

'Uuuplaa,' shouted Signor Bruni from the boys' room. He was teaching them golf and had closed the door to stop the golf balls escaping. Rachel heard them knock against the skirting board, heard the boys rush to retrieve them. It was nice that their father was taking an interest, but she knew it wouldn't last, that Signor Bruni would be going out, leaving her in charge.

She turned the statue over so it wasn't looking at her; its serenity was starting to become disconcerting. She had never stolen anything in her life and a sense of panic was slowly engulfing her. What was she to do? She had to get rid of it before Susan returned. All she could think of was to put it outside, as far away from her as possible. She went downstairs and out through the kitchen door. As soon as Cesare saw her he began to bark excitedly.

'Ssshh. We're not going for a walk.'

He stood on his back legs and rested his paws on the side of the pen. She put her hand to the wire netting so he could lick her palm through it. He wagged his tail at the statue. 'No, it's not for you.' Rain pit-patted on the perspex roof overhead and dribbled from a length of guttering. Behind the pen there were some broken terracotta pots, and a flat spade which Susan used to scrape up Cesare's mess. If she could get up on the banking she might be able to dig a hole and bury the Madonna. It didn't seem a very good idea, but it was the only one she had.

She picked up the spade and hurried round the side of the house. There was another gate there, rusted and difficult to move. She pushed against it, once, twice, until it gave and she was through. The banking rose steeply, and with the Madonna in one hand and the spade in the other, it wasn't easy to climb. The rain had made the earth slippery and she lost her footing twice, her jeans becoming stained with grass and black mud. She glanced back at the house. The windows were like eyes, watching.

When she reached the trees she found the ground was too hard to dig, so she moved back down the banking, out into the open again, to where the patch of poppies grew. Most of the blood red petals had been lost in the rain and the seed heads glistened wetly. The earth was soft here, and she started to dig between the plants while the rain spotted rhythmically on her back, adding to the sense of urgency.

Soon she had made a small oblong hole, just big enough to take the Madonna. She laid the statue down, the dark earth accentuating its pale beauty, looked back at the house once more to make sure no one was watching. If Signor Bruni sees me he'll think I've gone mad, she told herself, hurrying to scrape the soil back. As she did so, an unbearable sense of sadness crept over her. Laid in the wet earth like that, she saw the Madonna as her unborn child. The image was stark and frightening. It never looked like that, she told herself. It wasn't even formed. It was a group of cells, not a proper baby. But the image refused to go away.

She trod the earth, trying not to squash any more of the poppies than was necessary. Everything's got a right to life, said a nagging voice in her head, even plants. But it should be a good life, shouldn't it, she argued. She felt as though she had been split in two, as though two Rachel's existed side by side, arguing with each other.

It's too late for that now, she told herself. You can't bring a baby back to life.

*No. But I can replace it.*

When the boys had tired of playing golf they came looking for her. She was in the kitchen, keeping herself busy by sorting and pairing their socks. Already there were three odd ones.

'Papa is taking us to the sail club,' said Franco. 'He says you have to come to look after us. Come on Rachel, hurry up.'

Who did he think he was, talking to her like that?

'I can show you the boats,' said Santino.

'Oh. Thank-you,' she said gently, although it was hard to be enthusiastic about going anywhere with Signor Bruni. 'You'll need your jackets,' she reminded them, 'it's still raining.' She slipped an odd sock over her hand and used it like a glove puppet. 'Come on you two,' she moved her thumb and fingers to make the sock open and close in time to her voice. 'Do as you're told or the snake will get you.' She gestured towards them with the sock.

Santino giggled but Franco looked at her disdainfully. 'You're so stupid.'

She pursed her lips, determined not to show how much he annoyed her.

'I want a go, Rachel,' said Santino, reaching for her.

She fitted a sock over his hand. 'There you go.'

'Look, Franco, it's a snake. I've got a snake on my arm.'

Franco held out his hand and encouraged Santino to come towards him, but as soon as he did so, he grabbed his socked hand and twisted for all he was worth.

'Franco!' Rachel didn't stop to think this time, but launched straight in and slapped his backside hard. Just once, but with a force that jarred her wrist. Still, it was

worth it to see the shock on his face. He let go of Santino's hand and began to snivel but she ignored him and made a fuss of Santino instead, rubbing his arm where Franco had inflicted the Indian burn.

'I'm going to tell Papa,' Franco sniffed.

'Off you go then. And I'll tell him how rude you are, and how you bully your brother. No doubt you'll get a smack from him as well.'

He grabbed a handful of socks and flung them on the floor. 'I hate you,' he shouted. 'you're not my mamma.'

'Thank God I'm not. Now pick those socks up.'

'No.'

She made to grab him but he was too quick and ran into the hall. Oh well, at least he was out of the way. She knelt down to Santino and put her arms around him. 'Give me a cuddle. That's right.' She loved the way the warmth seemed to flow from his body to hers, but he struggled to get free, wanting to follow his brother upstairs.

'What's the matter?'

*'Voglio papa.'*

'No you don't. You want to stay here with me.' She squeezed him tight, pressing her body into his, imagined him melting like butter and slipping through her hands. 'I love you,' she whispered.

When she relaxed her arms, he gasped for breath. She hadn't realised she had been holding him so tight. 'Go and get your jacket then, and tell Franco to hurry up or he'll be left behind.'

He stood there red-faced, almost on the verge of tears because of the force of her hold.

'Go on. Off you go.'

Signor Bruni's car smelled of tobacco, just as it had done on the day he collected her from the airport. Rachel sat in the back with Santino, while Franco took the front seat and played with the electric windows, up-down-up-down.

*'Per favore Franco!'* Signor Bruni complained, but in a good-natured way, giving his son licence to continue.

'Can we go on a boat, Papa?' Santino asked.

Rachel found it odd the way they spoke to their father in English, even though he usually replied in Italian. Today, however, Signor Bruni seemed to be making a concerted effort to speak English. It must be for my benefit, she told herself, uncomfortable with the idea that he should do anything with her in mind.

'I'm going to buy my own boat when I grow up,' Franco said. 'But I won't let you on it, Rachel.'

'I wouldn't want to go on it anyway,' she told him.

Signor Bruni laughed heartily, infuriating her even more. Couldn't he see how fed up she was with Franco? She pulled Santino close, until his head was resting on her breast. A sensual warmth started low in her stomach. She wished they were alone. She wanted to unhook her bra and hold him to her breast, certain that a feeling of bliss lay just out of reach.

The sailing club was hardly the place for children. The club room was thick with cigarette smoke and Signor Bruni made it plain that they were to make themselves scarce. At least it's stopped raining, thought Rachel as she led the boys along the quay to look at the boats. She had put her camera in her bag, and now seemed a good time to use it.

'Stand there while I take your photo,' she said to them.

Franco put his arm around Santino's shoulder and they grinned for the camera. Rachel held her finger on the button, looked through the lens at Franco's grinning face. She didn't want snapshots of him, just Santino. She moved her finger, pretended to take the shot.

'Lovely, that'll turn out really well,' she lied, putting the camera back in her bag.

*Amaretti: Macaroons*

If bitter almonds are not available, use all blanched almonds instead and decrease the amount of sugar by 2 tablespoons.

225g blanched almonds  
 50-75g bitter almonds  
 350g caster sugar  
 25g plain flour, sifted  
 4 egg whites  
 few drops of vanilla essence  
 ¼ teaspoon grated lemon rind

Grind all the almonds using a pestle and mortar. Place in a bowl with all except 2 tablespoons of the sugar and the flour. Stir well to mix.

Lightly whisk the egg whites with a fork, then add the vanilla and lemon rind. Add to the almond mixture gradually, until a smooth soft mixture which holds its shape is obtained.

Place small spoonfuls of the mixture on a greased and floured baking sheet, spacing them well apart. Sprinkle with the remaining sugar and bake in a preheated moderate oven for about 20 minutes or until lightly browned. Transfer to a wire rack to cool completely before serving.

xiv

The rain came down heavy again the following afternoon, patterning the sea like fish scales, clouds so thick and low that when Rachel looked out of the boys' window, Calabria had disappeared entirely. Franco was complaining that he was bored. School had tired him out, but the Signora insisted that the boys read something in English every afternoon, even though the books were so advanced it was difficult for them to get past the title.

'Be good for two minutes while I go and get something,' said Rachel.

'What?' asked Franco, managing to sound disdainful in a single word.



'You'll have to wait and see.'

She went to her room and found the tin of crayons she had bought, on Carol's advice, for emergencies.

'Rachel? Rachel?' Santino had followed her.

'Here.' She handed him the crayons. His eyes twinkled. 'You've got to share them with Franco though.' In truth, she didn't care if he kept them to himself.

He ran back across the landing, his shorts baggy around his legs. How lovely he was. She wanted to pick him up and carry him off right now.

They sat at the low table in the boys' room, Franco gathering the crayons into a pile so Santino couldn't use them, Santino clutching a single colour as though his life depended on it.

'You've got to share,' Rachel ordered.

Santino shook his head forlornly. 'I haven't got any paper.'

'What about the colouring book you had the other day?'

'Susan took it,' said Franco. 'She says we can't do drawing until we give her things back.'

'What things?'

'She says we've been in her room, but it wasn't me. Honest. I didn't take anything.'

'And not me,' put in Santino. 'I didn't take it.'

Rachel could feel her heart pounding. 'Take what?' she forced herself to ask, knowing the answer already.

'The Madonna,' Franco said. 'It comes from a shop in Rome. Susan says when you buy one the money goes to God.'

'I'd better go and find some paper then, hadn't I.' How had things become so complicated? And how long would it be before Susan realised it wasn't the children who had been in her room?

'Can I draw with you?' Franco said when she came back with a note pad. Once, she would have been flattered by this small sign of acceptance, but now she couldn't help wondering what lay behind it.

She sat between them and drew a house, a simple square with a triangular roof, windows with crosses to divide the glass, and a path that wound up to the front door. Santino watched, absorbed in what she was doing, his breath like a feather on her neck. She wanted to close herself around him and carry him inside her as though she were pregnant again.

She added a tree that looked like the broad fig where she had met Rocco, thick foliage hanging low. She wondered whether she would see him again. She'd expected him to call at the house. After all, he obviously knew the Brunis quite well. She wished she hadn't been so cautious with him.

Santino took a black crayon and began to trace over her lines.

'Why don't you try another colour?' she suggested, but he shook his head, content to cover everything with black, even the fig tree.

Rocco, she thought. Such a bizarre name. She wondered how old he was, what he did for a living. Because she knew so little about him it was easy to invent things, to make him into the ideal man. No such thing, Carol would have said. But Rachel liked to believe there might be, somewhere. She took a clean sheet and let her pencil wander. She'd been quite good at art at school. Perhaps she should have carried on. Some of her friends had gone to University but she'd gone to college instead, learnt

typing and word processing, found a job in town. It had seemed all right at the time, but now? Being an au pair was fine, but she didn't want to end up like Susan, waiting on people hand and foot, taking orders all her life.

'Finished,' said Franco, holding up a picture of a car, long and low and bright red, a man and a woman smiling through the windscreen, disproportionately big, as though the car had shrunk to fit around them.

'Who's that meant to be?' said Rachel uncomfortably.

'This one's Mamma, and that's Nino.'

'Nino?'

'Mamma's friend. She's going to go skiing with him after Christmas.'

'No, she isn't,' said Santino. 'You're just saying that.'

'Mamma says she's going to take us skiing too, when you're bigger.'

Rachel was surprised by the ease which Franco spoke about his mother and her 'friend'. Perhaps she had got it all wrong? 'Let's have a look at your picture, Santino,' she said, deliberately changing the subject. The house she had drawn had disappeared into solid darkness, scribbled over with thick black lines.

Franco laughed. 'You're supposed to colour it in. Black's not a colour. *Cretino!*'

'It doesn't matter,' said Rachel, although in a way, she felt it did; black was such a heavy, final colour. 'Why don't you do the garden a nice green to brighten it up.'

Santino surveyed the choice of crayons, pondered the yellow, then went decisively for the red which Franco had almost worn blunt.

This is the third time in as many days that Susan has been soaked to the skin. She sees herself reflected heel to toe in the pavement, as though she is walking on water. Like Jesus.

She finished the housework early today, to give herself time to go to the bank to discuss money. Now she is hurrying through the rain, to get to the bank before it closes. As well as the flight there is the insurance, and a taxi to the airport; unforeseen items which must be paid for. Insurance is important, for what if the plane drops from the sky and she is killed? Who will pay for Reetha's education then? Last night she added up the figures, twice, just to check. The cost of the flight will leave her with very little, for she cannot sell the jewellery until she arrives in Manila. She plans to tell the Signora that Don Pipo has asked her out, so the Signora will give her the evening off. The Signora has always been lenient where Don Pipo is concerned; she thinks a companion would make Susan happy. But instead of going out, Susan will catch the train to Reggio, take a taxi to the airport and board the flight to Rome with her pockets full of jewels. If she leaves the Brunis a cold *fritata* and a crisp green salad for supper, they will not question her absence until morning.

What frightens Susan is customs, the questions they will ask in Rome if they find the jewellery secreted about her body. It might be better to wear it. She imagines how it would feel, the weight of gold and precious stones on her fingers and around her neck. How people would look at her, not with disdain but with respect. Signora Bruni walks with her head held high, the walk of a woman who has never had to answer to anyone. Susan would like that. All her life she has had to explain herself to others. With money she would have to answer to no one except God.

Respect is a word she seldom considers, except in relation to Reetha. Yes, respect is what she would like people to have for her daughter as she grows up. For a

moment she forgets the water splashing up the back of her legs, the damp around her collar, and an image of Reetha comes into her mind, sudden, like a crack in the sky that lets the sun through. She is sitting on a man's knee. He is old and the skin around his chin is slack as a turkey's. Reetha is in her school uniform, her hair in bunches. The man has contacted her through an agency. He places his hand under her blouse and feels his way, says that if he likes what he touches he will marry her and take her to America.

The image is so vivid it makes Susan want to scream. She shakes her head to get rid of it and hurries on towards the bank. All this planning and scheming is sending her crazy. She must get the money and buy the ticket today.

A car slows down just in front of her, a sleek sports car, dripping red. It stops and the Signora opens the passenger door.

'Susan. What are you doing out in this!'

Susan's face tightens as she sees the Signora and, next to her in the driver's seat, Nino.

'Don't just stand there. Hurry up!' urges the Signora.

The rain is like a curtain dividing their two worlds. For now, Susan must say goodbye to Reetha and think of a lie that will explain why she is here when she should be back at the house.

The Signora tips her seat forward to allow Susan into the back, to sit on a seat that is so narrow she has to perch sideways. There are curves of condensation on either side of the windscreen, quiet smiles of damp air. Nino nods to her as she arranges herself.

'What on earth are you doing out on a day like this?' Signora Bruni asks.

'Shopping,' says Susan. She is annoyed with herself for not having a better excuse but she tries not to let it show. The problem is, she has no shopping with her.

The car slides forward, smooth and low, providing a different perspective from the bus she took earlier. Nino drives casually, one hand on the wheel, making Susan nervous. They have met before; Susan served him coffee in the dining room a few weeks ago, placed little almond macaroons on the saucer, made sure the door was firmly closed behind her.

'You should have let me know what you needed,' the Signora offers. 'I could have picked it up on the way from the office.'

There are parcels on the back seat. A piece of peach silk peeps out of a box. Is this what he buys her, delicate items, almost too fine to wear? Susan cannot imagine wearing silk. It would be like wearing nothing at all.

'So when d'you think this rain's going to stop?' Nino asks. Perhaps he senses the tension, for the Signora keeps flicking her hair off her face, which she only does when something is bothering her.

'*Chi sa*. Sky still full.' Susan is capable of speaking more fluent Italian than this, but why bother? She points up through the sun roof, to the clouds which seem to have moved closer to the earth.

The Signora turns the radio on and a tenor voice comes out of the speakers behind Susan's head. Susan doesn't care for opera, but in this confined space she feels something open up inside, as though the sound is not entering through her ears but through her stomach. She imagines Nino making love to the Signora with this music playing in the background. It is easy to imagine them together. Nino looks like the actor, Marcello Mastroianni, when he was younger. He is the type of man women take risks for. Yet perhaps the Signora is not risking anything at all, perhaps she has a

design, like a new building, a plan to leave her husband and marry this man. Put in the foundations, then build up gradually. If the foundations are solid enough you can build for ever. Nothing to stop you touching the sky.

'I noticed you've been clearing out your room,' the Signora says pointedly. 'Actually, I keep wondering about the spare room. It's been empty such a long time and Franco's growing up so fast. I thought I might have it decorated and put his bed in there. He needs a room to himself now.'

The opera singer's voice swells, mirroring Susan's resentment.

'I'm not going back on anything. If you want Reetha to come, she can share with you. We can push your bed against the wall and ... Well, they'll be plenty of room once you've finished tidying up.'

'Si Signora.'

'Rachel tells me that Franco keeps fighting with Santino. That's a sign he needs more space, don't you think?'

Which one of them is she addressing now, Susan wonders, for the Signora is smiling at Nino. The tyres make a sucking sound on the road and the tenor's voice fades to make way for a news report. Susan pays no attention. She never listens to the news. She has enough problems in her life without hearing about other people's.

The kitchen was in darkness. Rachel explored the cold plaster with her hand, touched the switch and watched the black and white flicker of the strip light as it struggled to life. The chairs were upturned on the table, resting on their seats, as though to signify that when Susan was out the kitchen was closed. Rachel lifted them down one by one.

'I want an egg,' demanded Franco. 'A boiled egg.'

'I want doesn't get,' she told him, repeating a saying of her mother's. He pulled a face at her so she pulled one back.

'And me want an egg,' said Santino, following his brother's lead.

'Not me, I,' Rachel corrected.

Franco pushed his brother out of the way to be first to the egg cups. One was in the form of a king, with slanting eyes and a glossy moustache. The other was a queen, her skin dark under the glaze. Their crowns formed hollows where the boiled eggs sat.

'Are you sure these are the right ones?' Rachel asked. They looked more like ornaments and Susan's warning rang in her ears; *you no use these*.

Franco didn't answer, but picked up a knife and started to spin it on the table, twisting it between thumb and forefinger, silver light jumping. The way he avoided answering irritated her. She put the eggs in a pan. 'Shall we do soldiers?'

'Soldiers?' Santino was torn between watching his brother and listening to Rachel.

'I'll show you when I cut the bread,' she promised. 'Franco, stop messing about.'

He gave the knife a defiant spin, so fast that it flew off the table and fell onto the floor with a clatter.

'For God's sake!' She was surprised at the force of her words, surprised at the ease with which her anger came. She looked at the knife which lay on the floor. 'Pick it up.'

He pretended not to hear. Suddenly it seemed of absolute importance that he should pick the knife up. She felt her fingers clench tight, her jaw tense. 'If you don't do as you're told, right now, I'll ...'



At that moment Susan opened the door and Rachel's unfinished threat was left hanging in mid air. She was sorry that the opportunity to give him a good hiding had been taken from her. She turned her attention to Santino instead, and gave him a finger of bread as a treat.

Susan was closely followed by the Signora, and then a man who, at first, Rachel did not recognise. The boys ran to the Signora, tugging on her coat. 'Mamma, mamma.' Santino clung to his mother, as though the touch of her hem was vital. Rachel felt a wounding pain. What right had the Signora to come and disturb things?

*'Ciao ragazzi,'* said the man.

Franco replied, but Santino let go of his mother and scrambled under the table.

*'Santino, vieni quoi.'* The Signora took two bars of chocolate out of her handbag. Franco snatched at one, but she held onto the other one to try and entice Santino out. It didn't work. He remained cross-legged under the table, sucking his thumb. 'Oh well,' she declared, slightly embarrassed, 'I will eat it myself. Have they been good today?' she asked Rachel.

'They've been drawing,' she replied, still annoyed at Franco's disobedience.

The man looked at his watch, slightly impatient, and suddenly it all fell into place. *It's him*, thought Rachel, the man in the sports car. Nino. The one who's supposed to be taking the Signora skiing. She saw him touch the Signora's arm lightly.

*'Susan, un po' di caffè, per piacere,'* said the Signora.

Susan dumped the umbrella in the corner and went to the hob. 'Rachel, thees egg finish cook?'

The Signora was retreating down the hallway, talking to Nino, linking her arm in his. Rachel moved the pan to one side, although the eggs had only just come to the boil.

'Come on out now, Santino.' But he would not move from under the table.

'You know samthing Rachel?' said Susan, making the sign of the cross, 'I see many things in my life, but this house go bad.'

Rachel thought of the holy statue buried outside and found she couldn't look Susan in the eye. She placed the eggs in their cups and cracked the speckled shells open. The white was watery and undercooked, but it would have to do. She sprinkled it with salt and pepper, and put fingers of buttered bread at the side of the plates.

'You know who that man is?' Susan whispered.

'I think I've guessed,' said Rachel, feeling oddly conspiratorial.

'This second time Signora bring him here.' Susan started arranging sugary little biscuits on a plate.

'I know what you're talking about,' said Franco.

'I say to Rachel, not you,' said Susan. 'You bad boy, always listening. Whan day you hear samthing not for you. Then you sorry.'

Rachel braced herself, expecting Susan to cuff him round the head, but she was too busy with the coffee.

'Come on out now Santino. Tea's ready.' Rachel crouched down beside the table leg to try and coax him out. 'Come on or I'll tickle you out.'

He removed his thumb from his mouth. 'No.'

'I'm coming to get you. Tickle-tickle-tickle.'

As he crawled forward, out of her reach, she saw a wet patch on the tiles where he had been sitting. 'Oh Santino!'

Susan saw it too. 'Why you no ask for toilet? You like Cesare. You make pee-pee because you naughty boy. You an' Franco both bad. I see what you do in my room. I call police if you no put my things back. Yes. You laugh Franco. You laugh when you in prison.'

If only I'd left the Madonna by her door, thought Rachel. Why did I have to bury it?

Susan shivers as she carries the tray into the *salotto*. Autumn is a difficult season, with its high winds and heavy showers, followed by days as hot as summer. In Autumn you never know where you are.

*'Caff  Signora.'*

The Signora is talking about horses, showing Nino a photograph of herself when she was young, flying over a jump made of crossed poles.

*'Signora? Il caff .'*

'Put it down over there.'

Susan bows her head. Soon there will be no more orders. She considers how much the Signora's jewellery must be worth. When she takes it, it will not truly be stealing; how can it be when the Brunis have everything insured, even themselves? If either one of them were to die tomorrow, the other would be left with a fortune. Not that they need more money, but the rich seem to get richer without even trying. When the Signora finds her jewellery is missing she will make a claim and in a few weeks she will be shopping in Rome, in Bulgari or Cartier, replacing what has been lost. Perhaps she will be grateful for the chance to replace it, for most of the pieces have been bought by her husband.

Susan places the tray carefully on the table. Total silence as she pours the coffee. Nino is good looking in a manner that Signor Bruni, with his double chin and ridiculous moustache, could never hope to be.

The Signora takes a bottle of grappa from the cabinet. Susan lingers, asks Nino if there is anything he requires. How easy it is to swap from one master to another.

'Draw the curtains please,' the Signora directs.

'*Certo Signora.*' Susan must do her best to appear obliging. She drags the swathes of velvet inwards, takes her time arranging the folds. The light from the wall lamps plays on them like the shadow of gulls on the sea. Before the curtains are fully drawn the Signora has kicked off her shoes and is sitting with Nino on the settee. The creak of the leather betrays their movements. She rests her bare feet against his legs and together they sip coffee.

Susan has given Nino the cup that belongs to Signor Bruni. Odd that the Signora has not noticed. There again, perhaps she has. Maybe it is the sort of thing that gives her pleasure. Nino lights a cigarette and pours a little grappa into a glass. Susan hovers, rearranging two silver pill boxes, giving Signor Bruni's gun a quick polish with her sleeve as she passes. Nino looks uncomfortable when she whisks over the gun like that. No need to worry, thinks Susan. Like many things in this house, it is only for show. Signor Bruni has never fired a gun in his life.

'Susan. That's enough.' The Signora dismisses her with a wave of her hand.

Susan nods and smiles, yet it is a closed smile that hides many thoughts. If only they had not stopped to give her a lift, she would have the ticket now; there would be a date, something to work to. Instead she is in limbo, like the soul of a child who has died without baptism. She thinks of Rachel, ending her child's life before it

had chance to begin. The soul of that child is wandering, lost, and unlike Reetha, it can never be saved.

*Baccalà alla Vincentina* - Salt Cod

1½ kg baccala (salt cod) soaked for 48 hours in 4  
 changes of water.  
 4 tablespoons olive oil  
 4 tablespoons butter  
 2 onions, chopped  
 4 salted anchovies, soaked in milk  
 ½ teaspoon cinnamon  
 ½ cup dry white wine  
 3 cups milk  
 ½ cup finely chopped parsley  
 4 servings soft polenta

Cut soaked salt cod into 4cm squares and check for  
 bones. Heat oil and butter, add onions, anchovies and  
 cinnamon and cook until onions are soft.  
 Add salt cod pieces, wine and milk, and bring to boil.  
 Lower heat to simmer and cook for 1 hour, adding more  
 milk if mixture becomes dry.  
 Add chopped parsley and check seasoning. Serve with  
 soft polenta.

xv

It is late and still the Brunis have not asked for dinner to be served. The food remains  
 in the oven, while in the dining room another argument is ensuing; the loud shouts of  
 previous occasions, accompanied by a slap, then tears. Susan hears it from behind the  
 double doors and decides to return to the kitchen, the safest place.

Signor Bruni's deep voice can be heard booming down the hallway, the way a  
 fog warning sounds over the straits. It seems the Signora has asked for a divorce, but  
 Susan is quite sure her husband will not grant it without a struggle. She hears  
 something break, something heavy; the onyx ashtray containing the butt of Nino's  
 cigarette? Perhaps Signor Bruni has seized the evidence and hurled it against the wall.  
 Stupid of the Signora to leave it there. Or was it intentional?

There again, Signor Bruni is not the sort of man to throw things. Maybe it was the Signora, flinging the evidence in his face, missing his head by a hair's breadth. Either way, it is Susan who will be expected to go down on her hands and knees to pick up the shards of green onyx and sweep up the papery ash.

The appearance of Franco in the kitchen doorway makes her start. He should be asleep at this hour.

'You no see what time is? What you whan?'

*'Un vaso d'aqua.'*

How much nicer he sounds when he speaks Italian. Ingleesh people do not have the same manners. His parents' voices rise once more, a roll of anger, white topped like spume on the waves.

'Why you listen?' says Susan. 'This argument not for you.' She runs the tap until the water clears, fills a beaker and beckons him to the table. 'Now, where you put my Madonna?' She holds the water out of reach. 'You whan water, you tell me.'

But although she wants to know, her resolve is not as strong as it was this morning, for the statue is heavy and there may not be room for it in her case when she leaves. She allows him to drink, only a few sips or he will make pee-pee like his brother. Through the walls comes bad language from the Signora, even worse from her husband. 'Rachel where is?'

'She's asleep.'

'She no good, no take care of you. You come to Susan when you need water. I always here.' She puts her arm around him and strokes his cheek, which is satin, like a flower petal. A snatch of a song comes into her head, one that Don Pipo played on his shabby record player after taking her out one evening. '*Guarda com'i papaveri son' alti alti alti*,' she sings. 'Franco, papaveri, what are in Ingleesh?'

'Poppies,' he replies sleepily.

'How you know?'

He shrugs. 'It was in a book.'

She marvels how a child so small can know so much. 'Okay. Look how tall thees poppies are, so high so high so high, *e tu sei piccolino, e tu sei piccolino*,' she continues, shielding him from his parents shouts.

When Rachel got up next morning there was an envelope left for her on the kitchen table.

'From the Signora,' said Susan, adjusting the tap so that the water slowed to a trickle. In the sink, at an angle, was a flat earthenware dish with a flaky length of fish on it. The kitchen smelled briny and sour, and Rachel hoped they weren't having whatever it was for lunch. She noticed the envelope was damp, crinkled along the triangular flap as though it had been held over steam. She looked at Susan, but she was busy, or at least, she was pretending to be.

*Rachel,*

*Please bring the boys to the stables this morning. I will telephone to the school. Ask Susan if you do not understand the map I have drawn.*

*Elizabetta.*

Rachel turned the note over and looked at the map on the back. *Ask Susan*. I'd rather not, she thought, tracing the map with her finger.



She went to wake the boys but as she reached the top of the stairs, Signor Bruni stepped out onto the landing. Her mouth fell open in a silent 'o', for he was completely naked.

'Buongiorno.' He stood there proudly displaying himself, thick thighs and round belly covered in dark hair, his penis limp in its nest of pubic curls.

I could scream, she thought. But she felt too indignant for that. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' she said, using the same tone as she used to tick off the boys.

'Rachel, I like you. Please, I am a man.'

She almost laughed, but there was a menacing undertone to his words. All he had to do was enter her room when she was asleep, clasp his hand over her mouth, and she wouldn't stand a chance. She imagined his fat belly pressing against her, squeezing the air from her lungs. Carol had once told her that some people achieved orgasm at the point of suffocation, but the idea of Signor Bruni giving her any sort of sexual pleasure was grotesque.

'*Ci veddiamo piu tardi, bella,*' he said, wandering into the bathroom, seemingly unconcerned.

I'm going to have to tell the Signora, she thought, otherwise he'll keep trying it on until he succeeds. But what if the Signora didn't believe her? The thought was like a lump of dough in her stomach, heavy and indigestible. Who could she turn to? If only she had hit it off with Susan. But it was too late to think about being friends now. She went into the boys' room. Franco was awake but Santino was still sleeping. She stood over him, thinking how content he looked, his cheeks tinged with pink as though someone had just pinched them. Her fingertips tingled. She wanted to grab him and run.

When Santino was fully awake, Rachel told him where they were going.

'Me don't like horses. Me don't want to go.'

'You mean I,' said Rachel, 'I don't like horses. Stop talking like a baby.'

'Horses are my favourite,' said Franco. 'We went to see them with Georgina.'

He began to gallop round the room, being both horse and rider simultaneously. 'I liked Georgina better than you, Rachel. She was more fun. She let me do what I wanted.'

'I'm sure she didn't. Now sit down.'

But he insisted on using the room as a racecourse, his feet making the sound of hooves, der-dum der-dum, jumping on the beds and off again, then onto the low desk, scattering crayons.

'*Per favore ... basta!*' Signor Bruni shouted from next door, apparently having decided to return to bed.

'Now look what you've done.' Rachel's patience was running out. 'No wonder Georgina left.' The sentence was accompanied by a twinge of jealousy; had the previous girl really allowed the boys to do what they wanted?

'Per favore, basta,' sang Franco, mimicking his father, 'basta, basta, basta.'

'Stop that right now. I won't put up with swearing.'

He ignored her, repeating the words under his breath.

'Franco! I won't tell you again.'

'You're stupid Rachel. Basta's not swearing.'

'If you don't stop being cheeky I'm going to tell ...' She had been about to say, 'your Dad', but where would that get her? This is impossible, she thought. There really wasn't anyone she could turn to. She clenched her fists, found herself wanting

to hit him, not just a quick slap on the legs but a good hard punch that would knock the wind out of him.

'Rachel?' Santino was tugging at her jeans. 'Rachel, me no like horses.'

'I don't like horses. *I*, not *me*,' she snapped. Why was he being such a baby? She took their sweatshirts out of the drawer and threw them on the bed. 'Hurry up, or we'll be late for Mummy.' Santino waited for her to help him. 'Come on. You're old enough to put a jumper on by yourself.' He struggled to get the sweatshirt over his head, but it was back to front. She yanked it off and turned it round.

'Ow,' he said, rubbing his ears in disbelief.

'Well you ought to try a bit harder, then I wouldn't have to do everything for you.' She knew she was being unfair, but she couldn't help it. Everything seemed so difficult this morning, like wading through water, waist deep, the current flowing against her.

During the night the rain had stopped, and an ethereal vapour hovered uncertainly above the surface of the road. They set off for the stables, up the hill, away from the house and into open countryside. Olive trees glistened, and rows of orange trees glowed in competition with the sun. I shouldn't have taken it out on Santino, she told herself. It's not his fault that his brother's such a brat. She concentrated on the map, making sure she took the right turnings, determined not to get lost. After about ten minutes she was relieved to see the sign for the stables.

'Look, there's Mummy,' she said as she parked the car, pleased she had managed to find her way. If nothing else, she was sure her driving had improved since coming to Sicily.

The Signora was riding her horse at a vigorous trot round the arena, followed by another rider a little way behind. Yesterday's rain seemed to have run off the ground here, and the horses' hooves dug up the dry earth beneath, dust puthering up like smoke.

The rider behind the Signora had his face shadowed by the peak of his hat, but even from this distance, Rachel could make out the light and dark of his skin. She felt her stomach tighten.

'*Ciao Mamma!* Mamma!' Franco waved, but the Signora pressed on into a smooth, effortless canter, squeezing the reins to keep the horse's neck proudly arched. Despite the choking dust, she looked radiant, her movements flowing, as though she shared a special understanding with the horse. Rachel envied her. Why couldn't she have that sort of affinity with things?

Rocco broke into a canter too, glancing at Rachel then pointing his horse at a jump. So, he *had* seen her. Flecks of white froth spilled from the horse's mouth as it took off, making a tremendous arch as it cleared the poles. Rachel caught herself suppressing the impulse to applaud. He rode round and jumped again, then trotted towards the fence. Towards her.

'*Ciao bella.*' He was sweating, his upper lip glistening as though it was studded with diamonds. The horse stretched its neck, its eyes deep and expressive, like a big version of Cesare.

'You like him?' said Rocco.

'To be honest, I don't know much about horses.' She knew she sounded nervous, tried to appear less so by stroking the centre of the horse's head. Tiny white hairs stuck to her hand.

'I must finish riding him before he goes cold, then we talk, yes?'

He gave her the impression that he had been expecting her here today. Had the Signora arranged this visit on purpose? No. Surely not.

'Who is first to give me a kiss then?' said the Signora when she had finished. She dismounted and waited for the boys to greet her. She's bribing them with a day off school, thought Rachel, reminded of the way her parents would buy her sweets after they had had a fight. At the time it seemed fair compensation, but she knew differently now.

'Look, Rachel,' said Santino excitedly. 'A little one. A little horse.'

She heard the whisper of unshod hooves on soft sand and looked over her shoulder to see Rocco leading a small grey pony.

'He belongs to Don Bartolo,' said the Signora, pointing to the old man who was walking Rocco's horse around to cool him off. 'I thought the boys might like to ride him.'

Rachel expected Santino to be terrified, but he let go of her hand and ran across the yard. The pony watched him with quiet interest as he ran up to Rocco and hugged him impulsively. She felt as though someone had stabbed her in the chest with a carving knife, twisting it to and fro, ripping her apart. He's mine, she wanted to shout, but sensed that no one would take any notice. She was on the outside of things, looking in.

'Look Rachel, I'm going to be first,' Santino shouted.

'I think he likes you very much, *cara*.'

Rachel detected a note of envy in the Signora's voice, but it did nothing to ease her own jealousy as Rocco lifted Santino into the saddle.

Suddenly, Franco ran towards the pony too, shouting, 'Hiyar! Hiyar!' and waving his arms about.

'Franco! *Smetti là*.' The Signora's voice echoed round the yard.

'I'd better make sure they're all right,' said Rachel, 'before there's an accident'. She went across the yard and took a firm hold of Franco's arm. He was surprisingly strong for his age. 'You're pushing your luck, you know.' She put her face close to his, trying to force him into submission.

'You lead Rachel, and I will hold Franco and Santino *insieme*, to stop them falling off.' Rocco smiled at her in a certain way, inviting, teasing, but she didn't feel like flirting. She took the reins and held the pony's head while he hoisted Franco up behind his brother.

'*Andiamo*,' he instructed.

She set off walking, acutely conscious of him behind her, breathing down the back of her neck. He said something in Italian which made the boys laugh. The very sound of their words, the roll of them round their mouths, made her feel defensive. They're laughing at me, she thought, pressing her fingernails into the soft leather of the reins.

'Rachel ... Stop. I said stop. I haven't got my foot in the stirrup,' said Franco.

She pulled the pony up.

'You're *so* stupid,' he jeered.

'Franco. Why you say this to Rachel? This is not a nice thing to say.' But Rocco was laughing too. He's as bad as Franco, she thought, but as she was about to say something, the pony whipped its head round and nipped her arm, on the inner part where the skin was softest. She cried out, more from shock than pain.

'*Monello*!' exclaimed Rocco, flicking it on the muzzle with his riding crop.

'Look what he's done,' laughed Franco. 'He's bitten Rachel. Mamma, *guarda*. He's bitten Rachel.'

She looked at her arm, at the pink butterfly where the skin had been pinched, then looked at Franco. 'I've had about as much of you as I can take!' She seized hold of him and pulled him out of the saddle. He stumbled as he landed but she kept hold of his arm, squeezing for all she was worth.

'Me get down too,' Santino panicked.

But Rachel hardly heard him. She raised her arm and whacked Franco as hard as she could, a cross between a slap and a punch that made contact between his shoulder blades and sounded hollow in his chest, a sound that was so satisfying she did it again, *to knock the stuffing out of him*. The phrase was one her Dad used. When? She tried to recall him saying it but couldn't quite remember. Then it came to her. He used to say it to her Mum. She couldn't remember any particular incident, but the sense of it was strong enough; he had hit her mother while Rachel had been tucked up in bed. The truth was buried under layers of memory, tightly packed like the skins of an onion, sure to bring tears to her eyes if she peeled them away. She let go of Franco and ran across the yard.

Susan rubs her eyes, trying to erase the pain in her head. Her fingers smell of salt cod. How she hates to cook *baccalà*. Last night's sleep was a series of difficult dreams, dreams of running but never arriving. The simple explanation is that she was trying to reach Reetha, but although Reetha was in the dream, she did not feel she was chasing her. No, the thing she was after was hot and dangerous.

Now she remembers. She was trying to reach a terrible fire, flames dancing and cracking, heat making sweat stains on her nightdress. She woke at the very point the fire was about to consume her, and lay there, heart palpitating. How real dreams can be. Yet although she was frightened she fell straight back to sleep, head first into another place, vivid red somewhere in front of her, transparent and highly polished. It no longer behaved like flames, licking and leaping; now it was solid. Red for danger, yet she had to pursue it, until the red revealed itself as the fat ruby in one of the Signora's rings.

Words whined about Rachel's head like mosquitoes. She wanted to swat them, to squash them dead.

'Rachel's crying.' Franco said gleefully.

'Oh, shut up and leave me alone.'

'Hey, Rachel ...' Rocco started.

'Leave me alone!' Why couldn't everyone let her be? She was desperate to get away from them all, wanted to go into one of the stalls and bolt the door against the world. Overhead, an aeroplane drew a white line in the sky, pointing towards home. She wished she was on it, going back to her mother.

She began to cry uncontrollably. Rocco touched her arm and she noticed his own arm had little bruises up the inside. Had the pony nipped him too?

'Rachel?' She moved away and squatted on an upturned plastic barrel, put her head in her hands so he couldn't see the tears, heard the Signora's leather boots crunch on the grit underfoot. *Go on*, she thought, *sack me. Put me on the next flight home.*

'Rachel, what is wrong? What has happened?'



She sounded angry, but concerned too. 'It's Franco,' Rachel blurted out, knowing that he was just a small part of it. 'He won't do as he's told.' Her breath fell short between each phrase. 'I'm sick of him.' How childish she sounded, but she couldn't stop now. 'I've tried my best but ... well, I can't force him to like me, can I? I think he made up his mind to be difficult long before I arrived.'

'Franco's very energetic,' said the Signora.

'That hasn't got anything to do with it. There's a side to him which you don't see.'

'I cannot guarantee that they will always behave themselves. They are children, after all.'

Rachel felt as if the whole world was against her. 'I'm obviously not up to the job, am I?'

'You should have said something sooner.' The Signora sighed, her expression softening a little. 'Why didn't you tell me you were having problems?'

'I ...' Rachel stopped herself. Why was she being put on trial like this. Franco was the one who ought to have to answer for his behaviour. He was the one who was causing all the trouble. If it was just Santino she had to look after none of this would have happened.

Rocco offered the Signora a cigarette, cupped his hands while she dipped towards the flame of his lighter. Rachel hadn't seen her smoke before. Somehow it didn't suit her. 'Perhaps Rocco could take you for a coffee?' Smoke came out with the Signora's words.

*Coffee? What sort of a solution was that?*

'Franco, you must apologise to Rachel,' the Signora said.

'No.'

'See how you have made her cry,' Rocco coaxed, but the Signora was obviously displeased.

'No more pony rides,' she said, 'unless you say sorry. *Niente. Basta!* Next time, *I* will smack you. Then you will understand.'

Rachel was amazed at the Signora's threat, but there again, she supposed it was her prerogative. She was his mother after all. She heard Franco say 'sorry', but he said it grudgingly. I might as well call it a day, she told herself. I'll never be able to control him.

'Rachel?' A little hand touched hers, and she looked up to see Santino gazing intently at her.

'There,' said the Signora. 'See how Santino loves Rachel?'

Rachel felt a rush of warmth, wanted to pick Santino up and walk away from everything. 'But she smacked me,' Franco complained.

'*Silencio*. If this continues I will speak to Papa.'

Rachel dabbed her eyes with a piece of crumbling tissue.

'I know how difficult Franco can be,' the Signora admitted, 'but this is a bad time for the children. Go home and have a rest. Ask Susan to take the boys for a while.'

'I'll be fine in a minute. I'm just tired, that's all.' Rachel certainly wasn't going to give Susan the satisfaction of seeing her fail.

As she gathered herself, a man rode into the arena on a horse the colour of weak sunshine. She recognised him instantly: Nino. The horse's tail streamed behind it like flax. It was the most beautiful animal Rachel had ever seen, like something out of the boys' storybooks. As he rode past the fence, Rocco held up his hand in a half-salute and called, 'Ciao, Papa.'

*Penne Arrabbiata*

*Arrabiata* means angry, so use the chilli pepper sparingly in this dish!

1 onion, chopped  
 1 clove garlic, crushed  
 1 small chilli pepper, de-seeded and chopped  
 1 tin (450gm) chopped plum tomatoes  
 olive oil  
 salt, pepper, oregano & sugar to season

Fry onion over medium heat until soft. Add garlic and chilli and fry for a further minute. Add tomatoes and level teaspoon of sugar and simmer to reduce. Season with salt, pepper and oregano.

Meanwhile cook 300gms pasta quills in boiling salted water.

When ready, drain and add to sauce.

xvi

Rachel sat in the car, trying to compose herself. Franco pushed his knees into the back of her seat. She told him to stop it but he took no notice. She looked over at Rocco, who was standing by the fence, watching Nino ride his horse. There was a tightness in her chest, as though the tendrils of a plant had wrapped their way around her, slowly crushing her.

'Are we going to school now?' asked Santino.

'No. We're going home.' She started the engine and pulled away. Her hand hurt where she had hit Franco, but it had been worth it. The only thing she regretted now was having to take him home. Why couldn't she have left him at the stables with his mother and taken Santino back on his own. They could have spent the day

together, gone to the park or into town, shopping. But would one day alone with him be enough?

Out of sight of the stables she accelerated, slamming the gears, eager to get away. She couldn't stop thinking about Rocco, riding his horse so confidently, as though he had known she was coming to watch. Why hadn't he told her that his father was seeing the Signora? Had he thought she wouldn't find out? Or didn't he care?

'You're going the wrong way,' said Franco.

'Shut up! This is all your fault.' She knew it wasn't, that she was angry with Rocco too, but it was easier to blame everything on Franco. She carried on driving, unsure if this was the right way or not. It would be easy to become lost here. The idea of never having to return to the house appealed to her. Eventually they reached a junction where a sign for Messina pointed left. Thank God for that. She slowed down, indicated, but then something outside herself seemed to take charge. The world was moving in slow motion, while her thoughts raced ahead. She had been waiting for an opportunity to present itself, hadn't she? Well here it was.

She could see Santino in her rear view mirror. He seemed quite content, a half smile on his lips, as though he were dreaming. I'll make sure he doesn't come to any harm, she promised herself, ignoring the sign and turning right. The road climbed steeply through thin pine trees.

'Where are we going?' asked Franco.

'A surprise,' she said coldly, hardly caring whether he believed her or not.

'I don't want a surprise, not from you. I want to go home.' He kicked his feet against the back of her seat. Normally she would have shouted at him, but she had other things on her mind now. She checked the petrol gauge. There was about half a tank, enough to get ... where? Franco's foot kicked against her seat in time to the

pounding in her head. She accelerated to get away from that too, as though she could escape anything if she went fast enough. The steering wheel vibrated in her hands and the noise of the road shook the car. She tried to shut it out, told herself everything was going to be all right. Santino was with her and that was all that mattered.

'Rachel. I want a pee-pee.'

'You'll have to wait. I can't stop here.'

'You always want pee-pee,' said Franco, prodding his brother in the ribs.

'I thought I told you to keep quiet.' What would happen when they didn't arrive home? The Brunis would call the police, give them the number of the car. People would be on the lookout for an English girl with white-blonde hair. They'd find her in no time.

'I'm going to tell Mamma you went the wrong way, then you'll get into trouble,' Franco taunted.

How she would love to leave him here, at the side of the road, return home with Santino as if nothing had happened.

'Rachel,' Santino persisted, 'I want a pee-pee.'

'All right. I heard you.' She spotted a turn-off, slowed down, heard the indicator click in time to her pulse, turned onto what was no more than a dirt track. Apart from the odd gorse bush and cactus, it was as barren as a desert.

Santino wriggled in his seat as she pulled over, trying to avoid the potholes. 'Okay, out you get, we haven't got all day.'

'I need one too,' said Franco.

Her heart began to beat so hard it made her head throb, her jaw ache. She knew Franco would have to be first as usual, pushing his brother out of the way. She let him out of the car. Santino was about to follow but she put her arm over the seat to

stop him and pulled the car door shut. The awkward way she stretched across the seats caused the muscles to cramp in her arm, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except keeping Santino with her and shutting Franco out. She pressed the locks down, amazed at the ease with which everything was falling into place.

Franco turned to look as she started the engine, but it was too late. The car was already moving forwards, leaving him behind.

The smell of yeast is stronger after rainfall. Susan does not like this smell; the sourness reminds her of Cesare's breath. She is on her way to the bakery, although it might have been best to stay indoors, for her throat feels raw, worse when she swallows. This is what happens when you get caught in the rain; shivers and aching limbs and dreams that make you sweat. This morning she made tea from camomile flowers and sweetened it with honey. The taste lingers on her tongue, but does not sweeten her mood, which is like the sting of vinegar in banana blossom *ginataan*. If it were not for the Signora spotting her in town yesterday, she would have bought the ticket. Now it could be next week before she has another chance, and in the meantime relations between the Brunis worsen and everything hangs in the balance.

The bakery door is open. There are voices, laughter. Don Pipo is telling Maria-Grazia about the time he went to Australia to see his brothers. Eight boys and only *he* stayed here in Sicily. What does she think of that?

'Commendable,' she chuckles, 'highly commendable.'

Boys bring money into the family, thinks Susan. How different her life might have been if her own brother had lived. A man to head the family, to keep it together

after her mother died. She greets everyone with a quick 'buongiorno' and points to the loaves, the usual *ciabatta* and also some *panini al burro*, little butter-rolls that the boys take to school to eat mid-morning. The glazed crusts make them look hard as wood, but they are light as air inside.

'We're better for all that rain, Signora,' says Don Pipo.

Susan nods. For all his foolishness, it is good to be called 'Signora' once in a while.

'Kills the dust,' he continues, 'although a small house such as mine doesn't take much dusting.' His eyes have a way of bulging that makes him look disconcertingly eager.

Susan forces air through her teeth with her tongue, 'tss, tss'. Always these veiled hints. As though she would consider living with him! What has he to offer? It would be like working for the Brunis but without getting paid. She has told him so already but he is such a persistent man. She hands Maria-Grazia the money, then spies some pastry cones filled with confectioner's cream, housed under a glass dome to keep the flies off. Her mouth becomes moist with anticipation. If she doesn't treat herself, who else will? Maria-Grazia wraps one in a serviette and places it in a brown paper bag so it can be carried separately and not become squashed against the bread.

'Careful, you'll get fat!' jokes Don Pipo.

Susan smiles, clenching her teeth to prevent herself from saying something rude. This is no time to cause trouble. There is only one fat person here, and that is him. But there is no point in saying so, for soon she will be on an aeroplane, soaring high, and Don Pipo will be as insignificant as a grain of sand on the beach.

*'Voglio la mamma,'* wailed Santino, pressing his face to the window, hoping for a glimpse of his brother.

'No you don't. I'll be your mummy now,' said Rachel. The road was getting worse, full of potholes, and it was difficult to keep an eye on him while the car bounced and shook. She hadn't expected him to react like this. 'Stop being such a baby. We're ...' Her words had no weight or substance. She was floating upwards, away from reality. It isn't me who's stealing him, she thought, it's someone else. She welcomed the suggestion, the way it freed her from responsibility, but then, as her mind wandered, Santino sat up and grabbed her hair, tearing at it for all he was worth. She felt it give at the roots, hundreds of tiny pin pricks on her scalp.

'Stop that,' she screamed, letting go of the wheel to try and push him away. The car veered to one side and there was a scraping sound underneath, followed by a jolt as one of the wheels dropped down a pothole.

During the ominous silence that followed, Rachel felt as though she had stopped breathing, as though life had decided to leave her and fly upwards to join the wisps of cloud that flecked the sky. Maybe I'm dead, she thought, almost wishing she was. But she knew she was alive because the back of her head was sore where Santino had pulled at her hair. She couldn't believe he had turned against her like that.

*'Voglio la mamma,'* he said miserably.

At least he's not hurt, she thought, turning the key in the ignition. To her surprise the car started. 'Now sit still and don't do that again.' She put it into first gear and slid the clutch but it didn't move. She revved harder, then tried it in reverse. The wheels made a whining noise and a cloud of red dust blew up behind them. 'Shit!' She banged the steering wheel with her fist and Santino began to cry again, a hopeless



wail that cut through her. She noticed a few blond hairs in his hand. How had she arrived at this?

She climbed out of the car on the pretext of inspecting the damage, although really she just wanted to feel the breeze, imagine it blowing all her problems away. The front wheel was firmly embedded in the rut. That's it, she told herself. We're not going anywhere now.

She reached into the back of the car. Santino hung back, obviously unsure what to expect. 'Come on. Don't cry.' She inched towards him until she was close enough to fold her arms around him. She felt his trousers wet against her hand as she pulled him onto her knee. 'Sssh,' she whispered, burying her face in his neck. She could smell soapy skin and salty tears. 'Sssh. I know. It's all my fault.'

As Susan bites into the pastry cornet it oozes pale custard, and flaky blanched almonds fall into her lap. She feels a sense of victory, sitting in the kitchen, eating rather than working. The vanilla cream slides easily down her throat, makes the soreness fade. The pan of tea comes to the boil. She gets up to switch off the gas and almonds and golden pastry fall to the ground like confetti. Rather than bend to pick up the bits, she rubs her foot over the tiles until all that remains are a series of greasy marks.

Despite the illicit pleasure of eating, after three bites of the *cornetto*, she has had enough. The gulps of creamy filling will lie heavy on her stomach, for rich food is bad food. She shouldn't have eaten it so quickly. The pain in her head returns with a vengeance. It is the sort of pain that makes her want to sit in darkness, in silence, but

there is work to be done. The salt cod is for Signor Bruni but the Signora wants *gnocchi* for lunch. Animosity manifests itself through separate meals. It would be nice to go back to bed, to lie with the covers pulled over her head and pretend she has already returned home and is renting a nice apartment in the city, with Reetha attending a good school.

Since yesterday she has had time to think; there are too many gaps in her plans, like moth holes in old lace. Even if she manages to get away, she has no idea how to go about selling the Signora's jewellery in the Philippines. Besides, the thought of going back scares her, for she will return as a stranger to her own country. She cannot even be sure of Reetha's reaction. This is the worst thing; not knowing if your daughter still loves you.

There was nothing else to do but abandon the car. Rachel offered Santino her hand but he refused to take it, so they walked back up the road side by side, their footsteps accompanied by the creaking of insects and the scuttle of geckos.

Before they had gone very far, Santino sat down. 'I'm tired Rachel. My feet hurt.'

'Well, we can't stop here. We've got to find Franco.' He started to cry again. 'Oh don't.' She stooped to pick him up, felt him give against her, soft and formless, no resistance left. 'Franco,' she shouted. She could hear traffic from the main road, so surely he couldn't be far.

Santino nestled against her shoulder. She wished she was back at the house, safe and secure, yet she wouldn't swap this feeling of closeness for anything in the world. Even the beat of his heart seemed to correspond to her own.

When she looked up, she was surprised to see Franco trudging towards her. Her relief was so immense it made her want to cry, but she knew she had to remain calm.

'Look Santino, it's Franco.' Immediately he wanted to be put down. This time she understood she had to give him up. In fact, she was glad to let go, for her shoulder ached where she had twisted it in the car.

Franco seemed puzzled rather than upset. 'Why didn't you wait for me?'

She had assumed events spoke for themselves, then she realised it wasn't so much what she had done, but the way it would be interpreted that mattered. 'I went to turn the car round,' she lied. 'I thought you were having a wee.'

'You went without me.'

'Because you needed the toilet.'

'Where's the car then?'

'We had a bit of a bump.' She tried her best to sound unconcerned. 'I need to find a phone.'

'But you locked me out.'

She knew he was bound to tell on her as soon as they returned to the house. Standing face to face, his brown eyes boring into her, it didn't seem worth lying anymore. 'I locked the doors because I'd had enough. You're spiteful and rude and I wanted to leave you. Lucky for you it didn't quite work out.'

'You're not going to tell mamma, are you?' This wasn't what she had expected. 'I'll be good, Rachel, I promise. I'll do as I'm told. And I know where there's a phone. I saw it on the road.'

'Really?' She had the Brunis' number written on a scrap of paper in her pocket, carried it everywhere in case of emergencies. She gave him a stern look. 'This is your last chance you know.'

Without the gaming restrictions common to other European countries, the Italians are at liberty to shoot almost anything that flies. Shooting is therefore a popular sport, and the smaller and rarer the bird, the greater the delicacy.

xvii

Susan was covered in flour, hands and cheeks dusted pale. Against this, her dark eyes looked blacker than ever. She stood at the table before a mound of potato dough. Rachel hovered in the kitchen doorway, dreading what was to come.

'Susan, Susan,' Franco rushed up to her, words gushing out, English and Italian intermingling.

Rachel knew he had plenty to tell. When they had reached the phone box she had discovered that it didn't take coins, only tokens, and the boys had flopped by the roadside, exhausted. Fortunately, it wasn't long before a passing car stopped. Rachel supposed it was because they looked so out of place. The woman driving the car didn't speak English, so Franco had to explain everything while Rachel waited, petrified that he would tell the woman what she had done. But when he had finished talking, the woman smiled and offered the use of her mobile phone. '*Grazie mille*,' said Rachel, *a thousand thanks*. She wished she could say more, but she was confined to what little she had memorised from her phrasebook. She phoned the house and Susan answered.

'The car's broken down.'

'Broken?' said Susan, squawking down the line, ecstatic that something had gone wrong. 'I phone stables. You stay there Rachel. I phone Signora.'

Rachel had spent an anxious twenty minutes waiting, while the boys sat on a discarded oil drum in subdued silence. And then, when help finally arrived, it wasn't the Signora, but Rocco.

Now Franco was bombarding Susan with the story of how Rocco had towed them out of the rut with Don Bartolo's jeep.

Susan wiped her hands on her apron, a self-satisfied smile making her face look thin. 'So, Rachel, how you feel?'

There was a deceptive simplicity to the question. 'It wasn't a crash, you know. I didn't hit anything. The car got stuck in a rut, that's all.' How much had Susan guessed? Thankfully Cesare began to bark.

'*Stai zitto!*' Susan coughed, not bothering to cover her mouth. Rachel could see right to the back of her throat, imagined Susan swallowing her up whole. 'Signora with you?' she asked when she had recovered.

'No. Rocco came on his own. She must have stayed at the stables.'

'With Nino?' Susan pounced, but Rachel was saved from answering by Santino's interruption.

'I went on a horse, Susan. Rocco showed me.'

Rachel prepared herself, expecting him to give her away, to pick up where his brother had left off and tell Susan why they had been stuck in the middle of nowhere. How had Susan known that Nino would be at the stables, Rachel wondered. Living here was like being caught in a web, each strand so taut it could snap at any moment.

Susan took the half eaten *cornetto* and placed it on a plate. 'This good, Rachel. You try.' Rachel saw it had been bitten into, but was saved from having to refuse by the sound of someone coming through the front door.

'Papa! Papa!', the boys began to shout before they saw him, as if a sixth sense told them their father had arrived.

Rachel braced herself, fearing the worst.

Signor Bruni was smartly dressed in a dark suit and bright shirt. Hard to believe this was the same man who had wandered naked across the landing earlier.

The boys rushed at him, Franco throwing fake punches, Santino tugging at his suit. Signor Bruni placed one arm around each boy, straightened his back like a strong man, and lifted them off the ground.

'*Uno due, tre,*' he thundered as their feet dangled and kicked, and his face began to redden. '*Va bene. Basta.*' He deposited them on the floor in a tumble of limbs, and brushed his lapels. 'Rachel, I hear you have an adventure?'

So he knew. Rachel's teeth ground together.

'My wife has asked me to see if you are okay.' He looked her up and down, making his own assessment. 'You are hurt?'

'No, I ...'

'Don't worry. I will see that the car is repaired.'

'Rocco came in a jeep,' Franco interrupted. 'He let us sit in the front while he pulled the car.'

Signor Bruni stiffened slightly at the mention of Rocco. 'Was mamma with him?' Rachel couldn't help but notice his reaction.

Santino shook his head. 'Mamma's with the horses. I went on a little horse, papa.'

'Si. And why no school?' Signor Bruni's manner had changed. He seemed to be holding himself in, letting his words out one syllable at a time. Obviously the

Signora hadn't told him the boys were having the day off. At least that shifts the attention away from me, thought Rachel.

*'I ragazzi non stanno tanti bene sta mattina,'* Susan cut in. *'Meglio se non vanno a scuola.'*

*'Non stanno bene? Perche? ...'*

They spoke in Italian for a while and Rachel became convinced they were discussing her, comparing what each other knew and piecing together the story. Impossible, she told herself. They can't have guessed. But she couldn't stop herself from imagining the worst. Signor Bruni dug in his pocket and drew out a wad of money held together by a gold clip. He's going to pay me off, she thought, shaking with tension. Santino had started to play with a slug of potato dough that had fallen on the floor, but Franco stood on tiptoe, watching his father count the money. Susan watched too, her eyes large as Signor Bruni rubbed each note thoughtfully between thumb and forefinger, almost as if he were unsure whether he was doing the right thing by parting with them. This is it, Rachel told herself. He's going to sack me.

'To buy toys,' said Signor Bruni in English, passing the money to Franco.

Rachel gaped.

'Grazie papa.'

*'Prego.* But do as Rachel says, or ...' He seemed preoccupied. 'I will go back to the office now. No more adventure today, eh?' He nodded in her direction then set off down the hallway, jangling his car keys.

'You no whan lunch?' shouted Susan.

*'Mangio dopo,'* he replied, and the front door slammed behind him.

He's angry with the Signora, thought Rachel. He doesn't care about me or the car, it's his wife he's angry with. She tried to relax but her heart was still beating hard.



'All thees money for toys, Franco?' Susan coughed as she nipped off some short pieces of potato dough, rolled them quickly between her hands and pressed them against the back of a fork. When she set them down they had a pattern of ridges like seashells. 'Take all morning to make *gnocchi*,' she complained, wiping her nose on the back of her hand. 'Rachel, I tell Signor Bruni that boys no feel well. This why they miss school.'

Rachel was surprised. She hadn't expected Susan's support. 'Did the Signora think the boys wouldn't tell their father where they'd been?'

'Ma!' Susan shrugged. '*Chi sa?* All I know is sometime easier not to tell truth.' She gave her a knowing look and Rachel felt herself blush to the tips of her ears.

'Watch the road,' Rachel warned as Santino raced off in front, eager to be first to the toyshop. She was glad that he wasn't clinging to her quite as much. After all, that was why she had felt so protective of him in the first place. Yes, he was quite a greedy little boy when it came to love. She had brought Cesare along too, much to Susan's disapproval. He kept stopping to sniff the pavement and she had to pull him along in order to keep up with the boys.

'Rachel, can I have a pony?' asked Santino, rushing back to her.

'I don't expect they sell those at the toy shop.'

'I'll ask mamma if we can have one,' said Franco. 'I can feed it and keep it clean. I know how.'

Rachel smiled in a noncommittal sort of way. 'It's a lot of hard work you know, looking after a pony.'

'I don't mind. I can be good you know.'

*Yes* thought Rachel, I expect you can when you want to be.

Two old women, dressed in black, sat on their front steps, knitting. As soon as Rachel had gone by they started to talk to each other and she thought she heard the name 'Bruni'.

'Do you know those ladies?' she asked Franco.

He shook his head.

She supposed that the Brunis' house looked so grand people were bound to take notice of the children. She remembered how imposing the house had seemed when she had first arrived, how the size of the rooms had overwhelmed her. But now she was party to what went on inside, it ceased to be so impressive.

The houses they were passing now were much smaller than the Brunis', the shutters split by the fierce sun and weathered by the salty air. Pieces of paint had shelled off, leaving patches of bare wood exposed to the elements. They reminded her of Rocco, of the patterns of light and dark that covered his arms and neck and face. She tried to tell herself that it wasn't important that his father was the Signora's lover, although common sense told her it would lead to trouble.

They passed the bakery with its thick curtain of ropes across the doorway to keep the flies out. Rachel could hear voices but couldn't see inside. Then the barber's shop, a row of empty chairs, except for the barber, engrossed in his newspaper. Franco kicked a stone along the pavement. She left him to it, keen to avoid confrontation; there had been enough of that today.

She paused in front of a shop selling fresh pasta. 'Look at this,' she said to the boys, pointing to trays of ribbons and quills and frilly-edged ravioli. Cesare pushed his nose flat to the glass, leaving a wet mark like a love heart.

'Rachel?' said Franco, 'are Mamma and Papa getting a divorce?'

His question came out of the blue. 'A divorce? You shouldn't be thinking about things like that.'

'Why not?' he persisted.

'Because ... ' her words trailed away with the breeze that blew in off the sea. 'Is that the toyshop?' She pointed ahead, but he wasn't so easily deterred.

'Have you ever been married Rachel?'

She managed to smile. 'No. But I've never been asked either.'

Santino took her hand, competing with his brother for her attention. She squeezed gently and he squeezed back, a private message between the two of them which made her feel that she was forgiven. What if the Brunis separated, she wondered. Would the Signora still want her to look after the children? She imagined having to let Santino go, seeing him rise up like a helium-filled balloon and drift out over the straits.

Susan gives the salt cod a final swill under the tap and lays it in a dish with crushed tomatoes, onions and herbs. The smell is everywhere, in her hair, on her clothes. When cooked, the fish has the taste and texture of sawdust and the only person who eats it is Signor Bruni. How much work he creates. First he comes back to check on Rachel and the children, now he has phoned to say he wants a late lunch. Ridiculous. It is nearly three o'clock. Susan wishes he would eat lunch in a restaurant like other men. But no, he has telephoned to say he will be home in ten minutes. She wonders whether the Signora knows of his change of plan.

She takes the pepper mill and grinds bits of black over the tomato sauce, adds a *peperoncino* to spice it up. Don Pipo eats these little chill peppers whole, munches

one every morning, 'to stir the blood'. Better for Susan if he does not stir his blood too much. She is glad she is not the one having to take the boys to the toyshop!

Salt cod must be cooked slowly, otherwise it becomes tough. The first time she cooked it, there wasn't enough liquid to keep it moist, and everything including the dish had to be thrown away. There have been many disasters in this kitchen. Food is such an unpredictable thing; if only she could serve bread and tea for every meal. Of course, the Signora would not stand for that. Over the years, Susan has learnt the Brunis' ways, and the Brunis have come to accept her limitations. It has always been an uneasy coexistence. Her time here has been an endless stretch of cooking and cleaning, with only church on Sunday mornings to break it up. It was only the hope of Reetha coming which made her stay so long. Now it is the hope of going home.

The phone starts to ring. She leaves it for a while but it carries on, persistent as a child demanding attention. 'Ooofah!' No doubt it is Signor Bruni, changing his mind again. She slides her feet across the tiles, slow as she can down the hall.

'Pronto?'

'Ciao, Susan.'

Fiorenza. She is pleased to hear her sister, but now is not a good time. The muscles around her mouth set hard and her words come out tightly, as though they don't really want to come out at all. 'Whad you whan?'

'You sound like you've got a cold.' Nothing escapes Fiorenza's attention.

'Don't worry. I fine.' The line has an echo, as if there are other Susan's between here and Rome, all giving the same answer, *fine, fine, fine*.

'I've had a letter from Reetha,' says Fiorenza proudly.

'That nice for you.'

'She seems to be doing well at school. You know, I used to worry about her, but when you see what goes on here in Roma. Sometimes I wish I'd had boys, I really do.'

'You never poor with boys.'

'I didn't mean that, I meant they'd be safer, less vulnerable.' Fiorenza presses on, 'I've sent her a pair of jeans for her birthday.'

'Jeeees?' says Susan, thinking of the sun dresses she has sent. All of a sudden they do not seem such a good choice. Perhaps Reetha will not wear them. Fiorenza is trying to tempt her with skin tight denim and thin tee shirts that show off her bust, the sort of thing Rachel wears. No wonder she is worried for her daughters if they parade around Rome dressed like that. The hallway seems to be getting longer, the door moving out of reach.

'Scusa Fiorenza. I cooking *baccalà*.'

'Ugh. That stuff's disgusting.'

'I only cook. I no eat.' Susan starts to cough.

'Have you taken something for that throat?'

'Si, si. I busy. I go now.'

'Have you thought anymore about visiting Reetha?'

So that is what she is leading up to. 'Scusa, Fiorenza. I busy.'

'Susan!'

She replaces the receiver and holds it down, pressing on it to make sure her sister's voice does not come back. Her head hurts, too many thoughts all fighting for space; some angry, others sad. Fiorenza has never even met Reetha, only seen photographs of her, those carefully arranged poses sent by Sam and Lin to keep everyone quiet. How can Fiorenza imagine what Reetha is like, for her own daughters

have Italian names and carry Italian identity cards in their pockets. Indeed, Susan hardly thinks of them as her nieces; if she does it causes much pain, for their future is settled in a way that Reetha's will never be.

A short, stocky man with a shiny scalp eased himself from behind the counter and spoke to Rachel in Italian. She didn't understand what he was saying but thought perhaps he didn't want Cesare in the shop. The dog had slunk in behind her and flopped on the cool floor, his head between his paws.

The boys said 'buongiorno' and went off in search of toys, leaving Rachel floundering.

'Sono Inglese,' she attempted, determined to have a go.

'Inglese?' The man held out his hands and clasped her to him as though she were a dear friend. His head smelled of hair oil and eau de cologne. 'I have, in Australia, my brothers.' His accent made it difficult for her to understand, but at least he spoke a little English. He pulled his chair out from behind the counter and sat her down, attempting to converse, although the only word she understood now was *caffè*.

'Er, okay. Thank-you.' She accepted because she felt obliged to.

Franco and Santino ran between the shelves of toys. 'Steady on you two. Don't knock anything over.' What it is to be small, she thought, to be amazed by things. Somewhere along the line, during the process of growing up, that sense of wonder was lost. There again, perhaps it had to be, in order to cope with what life threw at you.

The shopkeeper came back with coffee and a plate of biscuits, their sugar coating winking wickedly. By now Franco and Santino were lost in a world of plastic

monsters and rocket powered cars. Tricycles were suspended from the ceiling, and behind the counter a row of dolls, boxed in pink, stared out with unseeing eyes.

The shopkeeper was determined to hold a conversation with her, but she struggled to understand his attempts at English. Hands, however, had a language of their own. He pointed to the coffee and poured, Rachel held her hand flat to refuse sugar. Then he fanned across the cup. Yes, she understood it was hot.

'Look at this,' interrupted Santino, wriggling under her arm to show her a plastic man in army fatigues. Her coffee rocked in its cup.

'Careful.'

The shopkeeper handed him a biscuit. *'Ecco la, piccolo.'* Then he broke a biscuit in half and threw a piece to Cesare, who wolfed it down. Santino followed suit.

'That's enough,' said Rachel.

*'Non c'è problema, Signorina,'* the shopkeeper assured her, patting her arm. The spotlights shone off the top of his bald head.

'I've found what I want,' said Franco, emerging from between the shelves holding a bright red model car.

Rachel felt her stomach start to churn. 'Didn't Susan buy you one like that?'

'That was Santino's.'

'No, his was the green one. She bought the red one for you.'

Franco ignored her and took a biscuit without asking, defiantly pushing it into his mouth whole. Rachel folded her arms to show that she didn't think it was funny. 'You said you were going to behave.'

'I am,' he said, a spray of crumbs coming from his mouth. 'I like this one though. Look.' He pressed and the boot popped open. 'Did you see it?'

The shopkeeper was already on his feet, taking the box from the shelf and waiting to pack it. He produced a box for Santino's army doll too, but Santino refused to part with it. The man chuckled, his plump belly rippling. He was obviously accustomed to children not wanting to give up their toys.

Franco pulled out the money, smiling at Rachel as if to say, *see, I can be good when I want to*. The man waited patiently as he counted the notes, accepting him as a little adult, complimenting him with a loud 'bravo' when he had finished.

'Better say thank-you, both of you,' she prompted.

'*Grazie Don Pipo*,' they chimed in unison.

Don Pipo? She was sure she'd heard Susan mention that name.



*Zabaione:*

This is the most famous of Italian desserts. Make it immediately before serving as it is apt to separate if left standing.

4 egg yolks  
 4 tablespoons caster sugar  
 1 tablespoon warm water  
 7 tablespoons Marsala  
 sponge fingers to serve

Place the egg yolks, sugar and warm water in a bowl over a saucepan of hot water. Beat with a whisk until pale and frothy.

Whisk in the Marsala a little at a time and continue whisking over heat for 5 to 10 minutes until the mixture increases in volume, becomes thick and foamy and holds its shape in a spoon.

Remove from the heat and spoon into tall wine glasses. Serve immediately with sponge fingers.

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The Brunis take their seats in the dining room. Sunlight spears between the curtains and makes the Signora's choker shine. Susan cannot help but notice it. Signor Bruni glowers across the table; at her, or at his wife? Difficult to tell. Certainly it is unusual for the Brunis to eat lunch together, especially so late in the afternoon.

The Signora requests a tiny portion, signals enough with a flip of her hand. Perhaps she has already eaten somewhere else, *with* someone else. All that preparation this morning, rolling the little potato dumplings, for her to push them round her plate! Susan goes round the table and heaps Signor Bruni's plate higher and higher. Like Cesare, he will eat whatever is placed before him. Gnocchi, followed by salt cod, maybe zabaione to round off the meal.

'Susan?' The Signora points at her with her fork. 'Is something bothering you?'

Susan looks behind her, as though the Signora is addressing one of those other Susans she heard echoing down the phone line from Rome.

'My wife and I have noticed you're not yourself,' joins in Signor Bruni, speaking Italian.

Not herself. What do they mean? And since when has Signor Bruni noticed anything about her? To him, she is only there to clean his shoes and make his coffee, invisible at any other time. 'I have cold,' she replies, coughing to reinforce the point.

The Signora taps her fork on the table cloth. 'We wondered, Alberto and I, if there was a problem. Your door was open ... I noticed you were clearing out your room.'

*My wife and I. Alberto and I.* It has been a long time since Susan has heard either of them talk as a couple. Perhaps suspicion unites them? She feels a squirming down her back, as if a snake has fallen from a tree and slipped down her collar. She tries her best not to let them see she is nervous.

Signor Bruni shovels a large forkful of food into his mouth but the Signora eats nothing. Instead, she twists her earring, a sapphire stud so blue it is almost black. There are moths in Susan's chest, fluttering where her lungs should be. If only the Signora had not caught her in town, she could have bought the ticket and been away by now.

Clouds scud past the window, causing the sun to break through intermittently, light and shade, light and shade, as though someone is taking photographs with a flash. Susan knows the Signora is waiting for an answer. Of course, she could tell the truth, that she was packing her things ready to leave. But the Brunis would dismiss her, there and then, put her out in the street with nothing except her name to cling to.

What does it mean to tell the truth anyway? Truth is never single; it has many strands, like a rope made of vine. One or two strands may break but the rope will still hold. This is what Susan will give, a strand of truth, let the Brunis make of it what they will.

'I clear out my room because I looking for something.'

The Signora raises an eyebrow in disbelief.

'Something missing from my room,' Susan continues, deciding that the best way to deal with suspicion is to pass it on to someone else.

'What "something"?' says Signor Bruni, his mouth full of potato dumplings.

'*La Madonna*. Boys go in my room and play trick.'

The Signora's cheek twitches with irritation. This is not what she wants to hear. No one likes to be told their children are bad, so Susan changes tack. 'This what I think at first, but I know they good boys. Franco promise me he no take my things.' All she can do now is lay the blame at Rachel's feet. 'Must be Rachel go in my room and steal.' Yet in her heart she still believes Franco to be the culprit.

'Rachel? *Che brava ragazza*. Why would she take your Madonna?' Signor Bruni pats his mouth with his napkin to hide the smile on his lips.

Susan knows that to him, the Madonna is a trivial thing. He only attends church for weddings and funerals, and if he prays at all it is to the prices on the stock exchange. She takes some satisfaction in the knowledge that when Signor Bruni's time on earth is at an end, the gates of heaven will be closed to him and he will plummet to the hottest place in hell.

'That girl not what you think,' says Susan. 'She write bad letters, wear red underclothes. She kill her own children.'

Signor Bruni laughs out loud, rocking to and fro as though Susan is here simply for his amusement, but the Signora slams down her fork. 'Kills children?'

'Si. She have operation to get rid of baby.' Susan rubs her stomach as she speaks.

'You mean an abortion?' says the Signora, obviously surprised, although she tries to act as though she is not. 'An abortion isn't a crime, Susan.'

'No,' says Susan confidently. 'It is sin.'

The Signora picks up her bag, her car keys. 'I haven't got time for this. I've got to get back to the office.'

'Elizabetta, you haven't eaten.' Signor Bruni points at her plate.

'I didn't come home to eat. I came to find out what was going on, why it looked like she was packing her things. By the way,' she turns to Susan, 'you can make a start on cleaning out the spare room. I want Franco to have his own bedroom as soon as possible.'

Susan looks around the kitchen, knows every crack that runs across these walls, every cupboard and what it contains. So many pots to wash, yet she cannot concentrate on work. She studies the back of her hands, slippery with dishwater. Her skin is the colour of pine nut shells. When she was a child she had a blemish above her eye. She remembers her mother trying to remove it using a paste of lemon juice and honey; it did not work, although in time it faded of its own accord. Reetha has the same mark, or had, for it was not visible on the last photograph. Perhaps it too has faded.

She leaves the dish with burnt flakes of cod soaking in the sink and goes upstairs. The stairs seem steeper today, because of her cold, and she coughs as she climbs. Honey and lemon is said to be good for the throat as well as the skin. She will

mix some in hot water later and sip it for comfort. But right now there are things to do.

In her room, she looks at the mess she has created. The task of sorting seemed impossible when she first began, for everything, no matter how small, had significance. But compared to the dazzle of the Signora's jewels, even the objects she has held dear for years seem useless now: odd cups, pencil stubs, cardigans worn to gauze. What is the point of saving the past when there is the future to consider?

She drags the remaining boxes out from under the bed, sneezing with the dust, doesn't bother to look at the contents, just dumps them one after another into a billowing black bag. She will get rid of everything, leave no trace of herself for them to pour over after she has gone. The Brunis do not know her, and now they never will.

As she tips the contents of her life into the plastic sack, something catches her eye; a doll with silver white hair and bright lips. Its white smock has turned yellow with age, but its face is pink and clean, and its hair has a lustre of newness about it. Imagine being laid in the dark all this time. She is reminded of her mother's funeral, how she chose the cheapest coffin in order to have enough money for the flight. It is a secret that she must take to her own grave, for Fiorenza would never forgive her if she found out.

The doll blinks as she tilts it. Its metallic hair is curled back off its face and its lips are set in a permanent kiss. It is too old to be a baby, yet she takes it in her arms and rocks it, snuggling it to her flat chest and remembering how it once felt. The doll is one of the few things in this room which is not broken, or second hand. She bought it in anticipation of Reetha's arrival. Replace the smock and it would be good as new.

That evening, Rachel sat at her dressing table, listening to the radio whilst trying to memorise the days of the week from her phrasebook, as if the exercise of remembering might also help her forget the morning's events. She couldn't believe how reckless she had been, driving off like that and dumping Franco. What had she intended to do? Where had she intended to go? It all seemed a grey blur from which she couldn't believe she had escaped punishment.

*Lunedì, martedì, mercoledì* ... she repeated. It was getting dark outside and the moon was out. It seemed to have come from nowhere, bright and full, casting light on the branches, making them look as though they were made of steel. The word *amore* featured heavily in the chorus of the song that was playing. She knew *amore* meant love, even without the aid of the phrasebook. She thought of Dean, of his version of love which amounted to so little. Why had she made herself believe in him?

As she went to close the curtains she thought she saw something move against the shadow of the trees. She heard her name, *Rachel, Rachel*, beyond the window, looked hard and saw a figure on the banking waving at her. She opened the window to get a better look.

'Ciao bella.' Rocco was standing where the patch of poppies grew, crushing their hollow seed heads underfoot.

Not there, she wanted to shout, thinking of the Madonna, buried in the earth below. He ran his fingers through his hair and pointed upwards, a dazed expression on his face.

'A special night *cara*. Look.' He pointed up to the sky, which was streaked with purple clouds. 'Is *romantico*, no? Look at the moon.'

She didn't feel like being romantic, not with someone whose father was having an affair with the Signora. She looked up at the moon in order to give herself

time to think of something to say. It was like a ball of almond paste coated in sugar, resting on top of the hill.

'What are you doing prowling around at this time of night?' she demanded.

He seemed baffled by the word 'prowling' and moved forward, cupping his hand to his ear. Now he was away from the poppies she felt more at ease. The angle of the banking made the prospect of his reaching her quite impossible, yet he leaned forward, defying gravity, and held out his hands. '*Dunque*, I come to ask you to have dinner with me.'

What a nerve, she thought, deciding he must be drunk. She watched him sway, but as she was about to tell him to go home she heard Susan coughing on the landing, right outside her door. 'Dinner?' said Rachel. The words were out before she could stop them. 'Yes, that would be nice. When?' She spoke loud enough for Susan to hear.

'Tomorrow night ... seven o'clock?'

She felt her confidence ebbing away. She didn't want to go out with him. She had only said it to spite Susan. 'I'll have to ask Signora Bruni. She might want me to look after the boys.'

'No problem. I ask her tomorrow morning, at the stables. I am sure she will allow this. We will eat in *ristorante*.'

How many times had she been to a restaurant with Dean? With anyone for that matter. Rocco put his fingertips to his lips and blew her a kiss. Under normal circumstances she would have taken pleasure in it, but it reminded her too much of the kiss his father had blown the Signora that day as they had queued in the traffic. She put out her hand, pretended to catch it, then opened her fingers and let it drop.

The next morning, when Rachel came back from taking the boys to school, she found the kitchen unbearably hot. Popping sounds came from the oven as fat spattered against the glass door and the smell of roast meat wafted through the house.

'Smells good,' she said to Susan. 'What is it? Beef?'

'Si. Roast bif like you eat in England.' Susan's eyes were full of mischief. 'You find boyfriend yet?'

Rachel knew she was referring to Rocco and his invitation to dinner, but she was determined not to talk about it.

'You do samthing for me?'

Immediately, Rachel was on her guard.

'You write for me in English and I copy.' On the table was an open shoe box with a pink-cheeked doll inside. Susan layered tissue over the doll's face then pushed pen and paper across the table. 'Please.'

Rachel didn't want to help, but neither did she want to suffer the consequences of refusing. She took up the pen.

'Dear Reetha,' Susan began, then looked up. 'You know I have daughter called Reetha?'

The girl in the photographs, thought Rachel. So that's her name. She pretended to be surprised.

'You English different,' Susan continued. 'No believe in God, no whan baby, you go to doctor.'

Rachel felt her lungs resist breath. She leaned forward, the writing paper creasing under her arm. 'What did you say?'

'I know about you,' Susan smiled.



Rachel could feel her whole body shaking, as though an earthquake had struck. She remembered the shreds of her letter in Susan's bin, the way her writing had been reduced to meaningless little squares. 'You bitch!' The words cleared the way for everything that had been bottled up. 'How dare you. You had no right to go in my room and read my letters.'

'You write bad things about me.'

'I only wrote the truth. You've never liked me being here, have you?'

'You do bad thing.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You kill your own baby.'

'You hateful cow.' Rachel experienced a wave of nausea. *Stand up to her*, she told herself. *Don't let her beat you*. 'I didn't kill anything; I had an abortion. I'm not proud of it, but I'm not ashamed either. I had to do it. Not that you'd understand.'

'God see what you do, Rachel.'

'So what?' She wanted to slap Susan's face. What use was God when you were pregnant and your boyfriend left you in the lurch? 'If He's watching me, Susan, He'll be watching you as well, and you've got a lot more to be embarrassed about than me. Don't think I didn't hear you sneaking about on the landing last night, listening to me and Rocco.'

'You very quick to find boy. If you get pregnant again, what you do? Flush baby down toilet?'

'Oh fuck off.' Rachel's hands were tight fists ready to hit out. 'You're the most twisted person I've ever met.'

She expected Susan to retaliate but she simply laughed. 'Why I care what you think? This house go bad. No job for us soon. You no hear Signor and Signora fight?'

'Listening to them as well, were you?'

'*Certo*. No listen, no learn.'

Rachel tried to relax her hands. Her forehead was burning.

'Signora want divorce. What we do then. No job, no house? You same as me Rachel, you need place to sleep, food to eat. Everyone need thees things.'

The reality of the situation forced Rachel into submission. If Susan was right and the Brunis *were* on the verge of splitting up, they would send her home and that would be that. She thought about Santino. She understood that she could never take the place of his mother, that he wouldn't let her. But she still loved him, and felt obliged to protect him. How could she do that if they sent her home? She tried to hold herself together, although she felt as though she might crumble before Susan at any moment. 'Are things really that bad between them?' She had to know.

'Why you think Signora bring Nino here? Because she want to make Signor Bruni angry, then he give her divorce. But Signor Bruni fat, and fat man is stubborn man. I know. He make Signora wait long time.'

Despite the animosity between them, Rachel understood that she and Susan were in this together, and whatever happened would affect them both. At least I can go home to Mum, she thought. I'm not entirely on my own. But being sent home felt too much like failure.

Susan coughed, then cleared her throat. 'You help me write letter now?' Without waiting for an answer she started dictating, as though nothing had passed between them. 'You be sure to put in good Ingleesh for me.'

The cheek of her, thought Rachel. But she knew that arguing wasn't going to get her anywhere. She made herself concentrate on writing, on following the trail of Susan's words.

'Reetha, I buy this doll for you when you small. I find yesterday.' She tucked a stray hair into her scarf. 'Yes ... this doll cost money, but you no care. I work hard for long time in thees place. I wait. I make things nice, but you no come.' Her tone began to change. 'I keep room clean, put mirror for you to see yourself, and still you no come. You growing big now, I think to come and visit you, I make plan but God see in my head and tell me you no love me. Yes, God see in your head too Reetha.' She paused.

Rachel noticed that her accent had become more pronounced, that her sentences were starting to run into one another.

'Today I look this doll and think, why I go to travel long way, why I think to make this journey. You no whan me Reetha, I your mother but you whan only speak like American on t.v. and ride bicycle for boys. I speak Ingleesh too, see? You no so clever.'

Rachel waited for her to compose herself, expecting her to continue, but she made no attempt to add anything more.

'Is that it?'

'What more I say?' Susan's eyes were moist. 'Sam and Lin, they steal my daughter. You know how that feel?'

Rachel had no idea who Sam and Lin were, and daren't ask because she could see that Susan was about to cry.

'Now thees trouble with Signor and Signora. Ooofah! I think to go back home, but las'night I sit here in kitchen and ask, where my home after all this time? Where I go?' She wiped her eyes before her tears had chance to run. 'Sometime I wish I have this operation like you. Say goodbye to baby before born.'

'It wasn't like that,' Rachel said. 'Dean ... my boyfriend, he didn't want anything to do with me. I couldn't have managed on my own.' Only a few minutes ago, she had hated Susan, but now she regretted everything that had happened between them. 'I'd have had to give up work and I wouldn't have had any money. It didn't seem fair to have a baby and not be able to give it things.'

'This why I work here,' said Susan simply, 'to give Reetha all things.'

Rachel could feel tears behind her own eyes now. She needed to get some air. The heat in the kitchen was suffocating and too much had been said on both sides. 'I'd better go,' she said, 'otherwise I'll be late collecting the boys from school.'

'Si,' Susan took the pen and began to copy the letter onto a clean sheet of paper.

Outside a mist had rolled in off the sea. It was too early to collect the boys, so Rachel sat in the car, thinking. She had heard about women forced to leave their children to earn money abroad, seen documentaries about them on t.v., but she had never imagined Susan as one of them. It certainly put the abortion into perspective, for no matter how depressed it made her feel, getting rid of the baby meant she was only responsible for herself, for her own troubles.

When she set off to collect the boys from school, a thick mist still clung to the coast, as if the sea wasn't there today, just a blank space broken now and then by signs naming the suburbs, *Contemplazione*, *Pace*, *Paradiso*. *Paradiso* was her favourite. Franco, in one of his more agreeable moments, had told her it meant heaven. And today it really was heaven, fluffy like the inside of a cloud. She could only imagine the gaudy boats lining the beach, the fishing nets beaded with orange

floats, for everything was blanked out by the fog. It felt like a new start. She wanted to roll about in the wet air as though it was snow and wash herself clean. Something had happened that she didn't quite understand, a fragile connection between her and Susan. If only she hadn't buried the Madonna.

The boys appeared at the school gate, Franco dragging Santino by the strap of his rucksack, Santino crying in protest.

'What's the matter?' Rachel asked as they collapsed into the car.

'*Voglio la mamma*,' sobbed Santino, '*Voglio la mamma*.' His face was swollen with tears.

She understood the gist of what he was saying. 'You'll see her later, when she gets home from work. What's brought this on? Franco, have you been bullying him?'

'No.' Franco breathed on the window and traced the letter F in the condensation, almost as though he was writing in the mist itself. 'He's being a baby because he doesn't want Nino to be our new Papa.'

'What d'you mean?'

'I heard Mamma say she's going to marry Nino,' Franco said confidently.

Santino had two streaks of gluey snot running from his nose. Rachel found a tissue in the glove compartment and made him blow. 'There. That's better. Now, I don't think mamma's said anything of the sort, Franco. I think you're making it up to frighten him.' *And reassure yourself*, she thought. 'So stop telling lies and ...'

Santino turned on his brother and began to thump him, fists working back and forth, left-right-left, his head bobbing from side to side.

'Right. That's enough. Santino, stop it. You're both even now. Let's forget all this nonsense. Franco, if you mention this again I'll tell your Dad.' She knew she had

no intention of going to Signor Bruni, but the threat of it had the desired effect and Franco hung his head. 'Susan's cooking roast beef for lunch, like we have in England on Sundays.' She tried to make it sound extra special.

'I don't like beef,' said Santino.

'Neither do I,' said Franco.

Rachel sighed and started the car. The fog seemed to stick to the windscreen, and she switched on the wipers, watching them beat back and forth. If only the Brunis knew how much damage they were doing to their children.

When they arrived back at the house, Rachel was shocked to see the red sports car parked outside.

'See, I told you mamma's going to marry him,' said Franco, as he scraped past with his rucksack.

'Oh shut up,' she snapped.

As they climbed the steps to the house, the spaces between the cactus plants seemed darker, less penetrable, as though the garden was closing in. From the terrace, Rachel could see Signor Bruni's car parked further up the street. What on earth was going on?

Susan was in the hallway, sweeping the tiles, the backs of her sandals squashed down, the skin on her heels powdery and dry.

'*Dov'e la mamma?*' Santino asked.

'You go and play.'

'I'm hungry.'

'You go upstairs and Rachel make you something to eat. She call you when ready.' Susan carried on sweeping.

'Franco. Santino. Be good boys and go upstairs like Susan says. I'll be up in a minute.' Rachel expected Franco to refuse, but for once he did exactly as he was told.

'Everything finish, Rachel,' said Susan as soon as the boys were out of earshot, 'everything.' She closed her eyes and swayed from side to side as though meditating on what was to come.

'I saw Nino's car outside.'

Susan's voice faltered as she gestured towards the dining room. 'Signor Bruni and Signor Nino both in there with Signora. She say she in love with Nino.' She leaned on the broom to take the weight off her feet. 'I tell you this. People in love make mistake.'

Yes, thought Rachel. After all, she had been in love with Dean once and look how that had turned out.

'I think the Signora's pretty selfish.'

'Ah! Signor Bruni have lady friends too. He always having affair.'

'But I thought ...' Up to now, Rachel had been convinced that it was the Signora who was in the wrong, despite her husband's advances. It was this which had reinforced her sense of duty towards the boys. How easy it was to misjudge people.

'All this trouble make me forget roast bif,' said Susan. 'Everything burn. You make boys omelette, Rachel. I stay here to listen.' She shuffled down the hall and stood next to the dining room doors, making little scratching movements with the sweeping brush to mimic work.

Voices come through the door, muted but recognisable. The Signora says she wants to stay with Nino in his villa. Signor Bruni says the children must remain here, with him. Tears from the Signora, accusations from Signor Bruni, anger on all sides.

*'Bastardo.'*

*'Bufone.'*

*'Disgraziato.'*

There is something melodic about these insults and the way they are batted back and forth. How well the rich conduct themselves, even in a situation like this. But after a while the argument becomes repetitive, like a ball being kicked against a wall, and Susan tires of listening. Franco came to her again last night; to her, not Rachel, asking for a glass of water. She has cared for him since he was a baby, Santino too. Ingleesh girls come and go, but Susan has always been there for them. Still, no use becoming sentimental now.

Once, when Susan was very young, a man bought her mother a canary. It was placed outside, in a cage made of wood and wire, and as the sun rose and set it would sing. Sometimes Susan's mother would boil a hen's egg and cut it in half, and the canary would peck nervously at the bright yolk, looking about it, as though it wished to share its food. It seemed so lonely that one day Susan took it into her head to release it. She undid the wire and opened the door, imagining it would seize its chance and fly, but it remained on its perch, head on one side, so used to captivity it was afraid to try life outside.

Rachel washed the frying pan while the boys chased each other round the kitchen. What was the point in telling them off? At least they had eaten the soggy omelette she



had cooked. She thought about all the possible outcomes of the Brunis' separation, saw herself in a web again, spiders coming from all directions.

'I make tea,' said Susan, coming into the kitchen and dropping the broom with a clatter. 'You whan?' She had been in the hallway for over half an hour.

Rachel shook her head. She wanted to know what Susan had overheard, but she couldn't ask, not in front of the boys. She carried on washing the pots. Each soap bubble was like a miniature world, fragile, swirled in magical colours.

'This boy Rocco,' said Susan, smiling deviously, 'he take you samwhere?'

Rocco? Rachel had been so taken up with the Brunis that she had almost forgotten about tonight. Immediately she became defensive. 'He asked me out for a meal, that's all.'

Susan smiled. 'This boy have plenty *soldi*. You make sure he take you nice place.'

'Did you know he was Nino's son?'

'Of course.' Susan set about making the tea, humming distractedly.

The boys had slipped out of the back door and were tormenting the dog.

'Susan, he's trying to get out,' Franco called as Cesare barked at them.

'Si. You come inside now.' She turned to Rachel, 'This dog go crazy since you take him out.'

'But it's cruel to keep him penned up.'

'How you so sure? Maybe he like it.'

Rachel picked up the roasting tray that had contained the ruined joint of meat and began to scrub.

'You wash for me?' Susan asked suspiciously.

'I was trying to keep busy, trying not to think about whether I'll be on the next flight home.'

'Si,' Susan conceded. 'Work sometime good for no thinking.'

Susan tiptoes down the hallway. The front door has just this minute slammed shut, and if she is quick enough there will be time to twitch back the curtains in the *salotto* and see whether the Signora gets into her own car or goes with Nino. But as she enters the room she comes face to face with Signor Bruni.

The situation seems to have shrunk him, like a jumper placed in too hot a wash. But big men like him are never finished. He will grow back to size, and then it will be the same as before, complaining that his shirt is not ironed in the correct manner, that there is not enough of a shine on his shoes.

'*Scusa Signor*. I come to see if you whan coffee.' Susan is well practised in making excuses.

He takes a deep breath, his shirt stretching tight across his front. 'Where are Franco and Santino?'

'In kitchen with Rachel.' Perhaps he was afraid that the Signora had made off with them, for if he has threatened her, she will draw her children to her, the way a drowning person clings to a float.

Signor Bruni smoothes his moustache with his finger. 'You might as well know. My wife and I have decided to part, to divorce ... I'd prefer you to keep it to yourself for now.'

Susan's hands start to shake. She hooks them behind her back to keep them steady, but cannot steady her speech in the same way. 'You when I look for other work?' She chews her lip waiting for an answer.

'I'm sure Elizabetta will keep you on. You'll have to ask her.'

A line of anger rushes up her spine, fizzing and sparking, as though a fuse has been lit to every nerve ending. Who do these people think they are? It is an insult that she should have to beg for her job.

'Don't mention any of this to Rachel. I don't want the boys to know just yet. Elizabetta and I are coming to an arrangement. We want them to go to private school, in England.'

'Inglan!' Susan is horrified. 'You send chil'ren away?' How can he say this and not be ashamed? 'Signor Bruni, when I leave Reetha I have nothing. I come here to find work, to pay for her. You have all this.' She points to the silver candelabra that reflects its double on the polished sideboard, the gilt frames that weigh the walls down. 'Why you send boys away?'

'I'll have that coffee now, if you don't mind.'

His lack of reaction makes her want to pour poison into his coffee cup. She would like to say more, but she does not trust her words to come out as she means them, for there is fire in her throat, a dangerous flame that might leap out of her mouth at any moment and set the house alight. Her mouth is dry and her stomach is burning.

She goes back to the kitchen, the scarf around her head pressing tight as a tourniquet. She takes it off and stuffs it in her pocket.

Rachel looks at her expectantly but what can Susan say to her? The Brunis think money is the answer to everything. But children do not understand anything

except love. Love is what they remember after the toys are broken and the money is spent. Look at how many thousands of lira she has sent to Sam for Reetha. If only love had been so easy to transfer from one account to another.

The climate and the fertile land greatly contribute to the success of the Sicilian wines, the most famous of which must be Marsala. The British take some credit for this wine for it was a Liverpool merchant who travelled to Sicily and recognised its potential. Perhaps Marsala's greatest virtue is that it does not deteriorate after opening.

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Rocco was waiting by the gate, the orange street lamp giving his complexion an unnatural glow. He had the same confident look about him as he did when he was riding his horse. Rachel wished she hadn't agreed to meet him. After all, he hadn't told her that his father was seeing the Signora, so what else might he be hiding?

*'Ciao bella.'* He took hold of her hand, brought it to his lips and kissed. She could see the waves in his hair where the comb had passed, slick and silvery as the sea. Dean's hair had always been scruffy and unkempt. She knew she shouldn't compare Rocco to him, but it was hard not to.

A motor scooter was parked on the pavement. It hadn't occurred to her that they might be going out in anything other than a car. She fiddled with the hem of her skirt, pulling it down, willing it to stretch a little longer. Before she left the house, she had looked at herself critically in the wardrobe mirror and thought she looked okay, quite good in fact considering the strain of the last couple of days. Now she wished she had put her jeans on. In fact, she wished she didn't have legs at all.

Rocco mounted the machine first. It looked pathetically small after seeing him on horseback. She followed his lead, put one leg over the seat, and felt the fake leather against her bare thigh, slightly cold. She didn't know what to do with her

hands, where to put them. Around his waist? No. Too familiar. But where else could they go?

'Ready?' he asked.

'Shouldn't we be wearing helmets?'

He laughed. 'Rachel, this is Italy!' And with that he set off, fast enough to make her blonde hair stream out behind her, and her mascara run in dirty streaks across her face. Still, it was good to be getting away from the house. Something had passed between Susan and Signor Bruni earlier. She wasn't sure what, and Susan refused to tell her, but she had caught her looking at the boys and shaking her head in despair.

The restaurant smelled of fish and lemon juice, almost like walking on the beach again, surrounded by the smell of the sea, clean and sharp and satisfying. But it was difficult to think of the beach without remembering the syringe that Santino had found, how she had panicked at the thought of him coming to any harm while she was supposed to be in charge.

'Shall we sit here?' said Rocco, ushering her to a table right in the centre and urging her to sit down. They were in full view of everyone. Waiters dashed past, one of them slapping Rocco on the back and joking with him.

'I come here all the time,' Rocco said to her. 'They serve the best fish here, always fresh.'

His English was as good as the Signora's, and he exuded so much confidence, as though he knew everything. But did he know that his father had been to the house this afternoon, that there had been a discussion behind closed doors that might put an end to Rachel's stay? She wondered if she ought to mention it.

The waiter brought their menus and she ran her finger down the list of food, recognising only a few of the names: spaghetti, ravioli. 'You'll have to explain. I don't know what half of these are.' Rocco began to tell her, but by the time he'd reached the fifth dish, she was even more confused. 'Hang on. I'm getting them all mixed up. What's that one there,' she jabbed her finger at the middle of the list.

*'Cappelli di angelo?* It is like spaghetti, but very thin. Angel's hair we call it. And the sauce is made with ... how you say? Prawn?'

Angel's hair, thought Rachel. How lovely. At the same moment Rocco reached forward and touched her own hair. It was tangled from the scooter ride and hung in lank tails about her face. His gesture might have made her feel beautiful, if she hadn't felt so distrustful of him.

'Angel's hair,' she said. 'Yes, I'll have that.'

Rocco agreed to have the same. 'You have good taste, I think. So many English do not.'

'Oh?' She didn't know how to reply. Perhaps he hadn't meant it the way it sounded. That was the problem with language. Learning the words was just the start. After that came all the subtleties, the nuances that made it so complex.

The waiter placed a carafe of white wine between them. 'From the slopes of Salina,' said Rocco, pouring for them both then lifting his glass. Rachel followed suit, their glasses meeting mid air with a quiet clink. His gaze rested on her until two dishes of steaming pasta arrived, small pink prawns dotted amongst the strands. It seemed a shame to disturb them by eating.

'Please, Rachel, you first.'

She dug her fork into the mound of pasta, twirled and lifted, but the spaghetti slipped off as she made to bite. She tried again but the strands refused to be caught

and she had to resort to using a spoon, winding the pasta until the fork bulged, stretching her jaw to fit it all in. The taste uncurled in her mouth, sweet tomatoes and peppery oil, prawns as succulent as flesh. 'Mmmm.'

Rocco topped up her glass. He's trying to get me drunk, she thought. It was a long time since she had been drunk, and in some ways it didn't seem such a bad idea, except that she didn't trust him and was cautious about where it might lead. Still, he wasn't all bad. She thought about how practical he had been, towing the car out of the ditch, bringing them home safely. She hadn't really thanked him for that.

He ate a little, then said thoughtfully, 'You know about Elizabetta and my father?'

She could see his hands through the carafe, tinted yellow. Why was he bringing this up? He ate slowly, methodically, while Rachel pushed large forkfuls of pasta into her mouth.

'Of course, Alberto Bruni is an idiot,' he added.

She found herself wanting to defend Signor Bruni, despite his lecherous behaviour. 'He's very kind to the children.'

Rocco ignored her comment. 'It is possible that they will divorce. This is what my father says.'

What was this all about? Did he hope that she would give him some snippet of information about the Brunis' private lives which he could take back to his father? She felt a rush of colour to her face, exacerbated by the wine.

'If Elizabetta leaves him,' Rocco continued, 'I think she will bring Franco and Santino to our villa ... and you also.'

'Me?' His confidence, which only a short while ago she had found attractive, now irritated her. 'I'd leave. I'd have to go home.'



'No, cara.' He reached across the table. 'There would be a room for you at the villa.'

She recoiled from his touch.

'Rachel,' he crooned. 'It would be ...'

'Convenient?' she cut in with as much sarcasm as she could muster. 'No thanks.' She tucked her hair back behind her ears. Was this why he had brought her here.

'You are angry? Why? You English girls are all so much passion,' he laughed. 'Georgina was just the same.'

Georgina? She squeezed her eyes tight shut, saw shapes of light dissolve and reform. It had never occurred to her that he might have taken Georgina out. Susan must have known, so must the Signora for that matter. Why hadn't they told her? This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

The waiter brought swordfish steaks, topped with capers and glistening with oil. She wasn't hungry now, but felt she had to keep up the pretence. She took the first bite and the swordfish fell apart on her tongue, softening her mood a little.

'*Che caldo*,' said Rocco, putting his knife and fork down and rolling back his shirt sleeves. The skin on his forearms had the same uneven pigmentation as his face, but there was bruised skin too, more noticeable here than it had been at the stables, small marks of purple and blue on his inner arm. She wanted to believe it was where the pony had bitten him, but it looked like two or three faint needle marks following the line of the vein. She told herself she was getting carried away, that he could have been ill, had blood tests perhaps. But at the same time she remembered the discarded syringe on the beach. The clarity of it made her feel sick. Here she was, alone with a

man she hardly knew. What if he tried to abduct her? *Like you tried to abduct Santino*, said a voice in her head.

'Rachel? You don't like the fish? Would you like desert?'

She swallowed. 'No ... no thanks.' He wouldn't be able to converse like this if he was injecting drugs, she reasoned. But what about last night, the way he had swayed on the banking whilst gazing up at the moon? Everything rushed towards her, the bad things from the past mixed with all the confusion of the present.

'To be honest I'm not feeling very well,' she said. She disliked feigning illness, it seemed a pathetic way out, but she heard herself say, 'I've got a blinding headache. It's been coming on all day. I'm sorry. Would you mind taking me home?'

Susan hears the door. It is just before ten. She had been expecting to wait up until the early hours. Ingleesh girls like to stay out late, have good time with boys.

'Rachel?'

'Yes. It's me,' but Rachel does not appear.

'Whan tea?' Susan tries to entice her into the kitchen to learn the details of her evening out.

'No thanks. I'm off to bed.'

'You have nice time?'

'Not bad.'

Their voices travel the length of the hallway, meeting somewhere in the middle, but without eye contact meaning is difficult to deduce. Susan sips her tea, strong and hot, and listens to Rachel going upstairs. When Georgina went out with Rocco she came back as the sun was rising and was sick down the toilet. This is

typical of Ingleesh girls. Their idea of a good time is to drink so much they make themselves ill, but Rachel hasn't been out long enough to get drunk. Susan bites the skin at the side of her nail and spits it out onto the floor. Maybe not all Ingleesh are the same.

Rachel lay in bed and looked up at the ceiling, unsure whether the lines above her were cracks in the plaster or cracks in her mind. Maybe I'm going mad, she thought. Did the Signora really intend them all to move in with Rocco and his father? It seemed bizarre, but what had Susan said; *people in love make mistake*. How true.

Sleep came hushing like a lullaby, gentle in her ears, impossible to know where consciousness ended and the dream began. She was following Susan up the banking to Nino's villa, which cast a winged shadow over the Brunis' house. As they climbed they both slipped on the wet earth and Rachel had to resort to crawling on her hands and knees, like a penitent, black soil pushing under her fingernails.

At the top, Susan opened the gate in the wall and there they were, in front of the villa, its windows reflecting the line between sea and sky. 'Come. Rachel. We go inside and find boys.' Susan let herself in through a side door, following a corridor until they came to a huge kitchen. Stainless steel and polished chrome, so many reflections. She put some water on to boil and pulled a crust of bread from her pocket. 'Where you think children are?' she asked, nibbling on the bread. Rachel listened for their voices but heard nothing. 'I don't know. Rocco said they would be here, with their mother.'

At the mention of the word 'mother', silent tears began to trickle down Susan's face. 'No place in thees house for Reetha,' she said sadly.

Rachel reached out and put her arm around her. She wanted to hold her tight like she did Santino, believed it would bridge the gap between them, but Susan was so small and brittle she felt as though she might snap. Rachel wanted to tell her that she knew how it felt to give something up, but she realised that her feelings about the abortion had changed. Looking after Franco and Santino had given her a different perspective. Children weren't all sweetness and light, they could be tiresome and demanding. In fact, they would eat you alive if you let them. 'I'm sure the Signora will let you bring Reetha here,' she said. 'Why don't you ask her?'

Susan wiped her nose on her sleeve and pushed Rachel away. 'This no time for cry. I work to do.' She began to open the cupboards, checking each one in turn, picking things up and putting them back again. 'Look at this.' She held a plate up to the light. It was the same fine white china as the Brunis' service, as though the Signora had already moved her things here.

Rachel went to the window, to look out on the Brunis' house below, and caught sight of her reflection in the glass. She looked like a photographic negative. Susan too was just a flat plate of misleading colour. How insubstantial we both are, Rachel thought, but before she had time to dwell on it she heard the boys coming down the corridor. Her heart unfurled like a bright red poppy as they burst into the kitchen, laughing and giggling as they ran towards her. She held out her hands, ready to catch Santino, but just when he was close enough for her to touch he passed straight through. 'Santino,' she called, but neither he nor Franco took any notice.

It frightened her to think she was invisible, and as if to compound this fear, the ceiling suddenly gave way to sky. They were still in the kitchen, but the roof of the house had disappeared. There was a ladder in front of her, the top nestling in the clouds. Maybe it's time for me to leave, she thought. Maybe I don't need Santino

anymore. She set her foot upon the rung. It was bathed in watery light and presented the perfect means of escape, yet when she put her weight on it, she sank straight through. She tried again, setting her foot carefully, but the rungs wouldn't hold and she became locked into a pattern of stepping and falling, stepping and falling, until slowly she became aware that she was in her own room, standing before the shuttered window, stripes of sunrise oozing through the slats and melting at her feet as she tried to tread them. Where had the night gone. She felt as if she had only been asleep for five minutes yet it was daylight outside.

She climbed back into bed and tried to fathom the meaning of the dream. She hadn't walked in her sleep since she was a child, since her parents split up. As she lay there, mulling it over, she saw the handle of the door turn. 'Santino? Franco?' Her heart contracted and cold sweat leaked out of her pores.

'Rachel. This is not what you think.' Signor Bruni entered, holding his finger to his lips indicating for her to be quiet.

Her mouth was open to scream but she found herself voiceless, as though a smooth round pebble rested on her tongue. She struggled against it, determined not to choke, surprised at her vehemence when the words finally came. 'Get out of my room. Get out, now!'

'No Rachel, you are mistaken.'

She'd heard of people sweating blood when they faced death, imagined the same thing happening to her now, red sweat trickling down the back of her neck and staining the sheets.

'My sons must not go to school today. I want them here, in the house.'

She thought she could smell alcohol, even at this distance.

'Do you understand me? You must keep them indoors. They are not to go out.'

He took a step closer, as though he was about to touch her. She froze, yet for some reason he merely stood there. She could feel her heart pounding, but couldn't hear her breath. Was this really happening? Without saying anything more, Signor Bruni left the room.

Beside the tap is a ring. Susan picks it up and examines it in the early morning light. The stone is deep red, like a clot of blood. The Signora must have washed in here yesterday evening in an effort to avoid her husband, slipped her ring off and forgotten to put it back on before she went out. Susan tries it on. It is loose on her finger and the weight of the stone makes it turn inwards, so all that shows on the back of her hand is a plain gold band. She tries it on her wedding finger, just to see how it feels.

People say God works in mysterious ways. Perhaps it is true, for this is certainly like a gift from above. Not that a ring would provide enough for a ticket home, but where is 'home' anyway? If the Brunis are going to divorce the best thing to do might be to stay in Italy and find another family to work for. At least that way she would be earning good money, enough to continue sending money for Reetha. She will look upon the ring as a leaving present, a gift from the Brunis for all the years of service she has given. She unhooks the chain from around her neck and threads it so it jangles against the locket that once belonged to her mother, and against the key to the spare room which also hangs there, on a piece of string next to her heart.

She buttons her collar high and adjusts her apron, considering the decision made. She is leaving. Simple as that. But not before her work is done. She begins by

emptying the cupboards: rice, chick pea flour, packets of pasta. The shelves hold dusty imprints where the packets have stood. She runs a sink full of hot water and rinses her cloth. The scent of washing up liquid clings to her skin, citrus fresh. She will not have the Brunis say anything against her; things will be clean and tidy before she goes. No dust, no dirt, and most important of all, no trace of herself.

'*Chè fai a quest'ora?*' Signor Bruni makes her jump. His eyes are bloodshot, like the devil himself.

Susan straightens, makes the sign of the cross. She has never seen him downstairs this early in all the years she has worked here.

'How I sleep when all go wrong?' she replies, uncomfortable with the way he is staring at her. 'This best time to clean house.'

'I will call for my coffee in an hour or so and you will bring it as if nothing has happened. *Va bene?*'

But nothing *has* happened. What does he mean? She looks at him defiantly. She has no need to humour him now. It may be noisy and overcrowded in Rome, but there is plenty of work there, and Fiorenza can write references in perfect Italian. Yes, she will have no problem finding work.

'What are you smiling at?' He is like a volcano about to erupt.

Susan knows how that heat feels as it creeps up the throat, knows how dangerous it is. '*Scusa*, Signor Bruni. I work to do.'

She watches him go down the hallway, rolling from side to side like a man on a ship. He goes into the lounge and comes out carrying the gun, balanced upright, close to his shoulder. Susan flattens herself against the wall, but Signor Bruni is no longer interested in her. He has shut everything out except his wife's betrayal. He is

not a brave man, but he is a Sicilain, and this is a matter of honour. It is not his wife who he will go in search of, but Nino.

A short while later Rachel entered the kitchen to find Susan busy wiping the worktop with bleach. 'Morning,' she ventured. Susan jerked as though an electric current had passed through her body. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to make you jump.'

'You early.' Susan went to the sink and quickly rinsed the cloth. 'Everyone early this morning.'

'Is everything all right?'

'How not all right?'

'Has the Signora gone to the stables yet?'

A spoon slipped off the draining board and clattered on the tiled floor. 'Why you ask me this?'

Rachel wasn't sure whether she should tell her or not. There again, it involved Susan too. 'Rocco talked about her moving up to the villa, taking me and the boys to live up there with Nino. I couldn't work there, not with Rocco hanging about. Then Signor Bruni came into my room this morning. I just want to know what's going on.' As she finished speaking, Cesare started to bark.

'*Stai zito,*' shrieked Susan. She turned to Rachel. 'Signora no stay here las'night. Maybe she go to villa, with Nino, but she no take boys. They upstairs. I already look. You no listen to Signor Bruni. He drunk.'

Rachel clenched her fingers. So, the Signora had left. No doubt she would be coming to collect the boys today. That must have been why Signor Bruni wanted her to keep them here. It was all over. Mum will be pleased to see me, she thought, but it



was of little comfort when placed against leaving the boys. Even Franco seemed dear to her now. 'D'you think the milk will be here yet?'

*'Chi sa?'* shrugged Susan.

'I think I'll go and check.' She wanted to get out, just for a moment, to feel the fresh air on her face.

'You be careful,' shouted Susan, but Rachel was already half way down the hall.

She went down to the gate to collect the milk. Signor Bruni's car was parked in the street, but Susan was right; the Signora's car was missing. Why had Signor Bruni been so insistent that she keep the boys at home this morning? She hurried back up the steps. An unsettling calm hung over the garden, similar to the stillness which had preceded the storm. Yet the sky was clear, a pinkish haze on the horizon, not a storm cloud in sight.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Cesare barking. 'Not again,' she said to herself, putting the milk down by the door and going round to his pen. His tail beat against the wire netting when he saw her. 'What's the matter with you?' She patted the top of his head. 'Yes, you're lovely, but we're not going a walk. Now behave, or you'll have Susan to deal with.'

He scratched excitedly at the base of the pen, weakening her resolve. 'Oh. Just five minutes then.' It couldn't do any harm to let him have a run round the garden. She slipped the latch. 'Be good while I take the milk in.' He put his head down and began to sniff.

Susan was washing the floor, usually something she did much later in the day. 'I've let Cesare out into the garden,' Rachel said, 'he's very agitated this morning.'

'Dog know when something go wrong.'

Rachel was reminded of those fortune tellers who gazed into a crystal ball to read the future: *I see something go wrong in your life*. She thought about Santino, about how upset she would be when it came to saying goodbye. There was a tightness in her chest, a combination of sadness and helplessness. Best not to think about it, she told herself. After all, it was entirely out of her hands.

She prepared the bottles and took them upstairs, found Santino curled like a seashell, chin tucked to his chest, knees drawn up, a child so tightly curled in on himself that nothing could harm him. She nudged him tenderly.

'Mamma,' he whispered.

'It's not Mamma,' said Franco, sitting up in bed, wide awake, 'it's Rachel.'

'Don't frighten him.'

'Why do we have to have bottles. They're for babies,' said Franco as she passed him his milk.

Santino's face was hot where his cheek had been pressed into the pillow. She pulled him onto her knee and he snuggled against her.

'I hate bottles,' Franco complained, 'I'm not having them any more. I'm going to ask Susan for a cup.'

'Mummy prefers you to have a bottle so you don't spill milk on the bed.' But before Rachel had chance to say anything else, he was up and out of the room, calling, 'Susan, Susan!'. No good running to her, thought Rachel, taking advantage of being alone with Santino. All she wanted was to hold him, to have enough time to whisper her goodbyes.

Cesare is barking wildly. Such a noise that dog makes. Susan goes to see what he is doing, treads cautiously round the back of the house, half expecting to come face to face with Signor Bruni. Did the Signora really spend the night up there at the villa with Nino, or did she decide to go back to the office to catch up on her work? It would not be the first time she has done that, worked through the night in order to make progress on a project. This talk of a bridge between Messina and the mainland is all very well, but she should have concentrated on repairing the bridge between her and her husband. Still, too late for that now.

'I tell you be quiet,' she shouts, for Cesare seems to understand English better than Italian. The next family she works for will not have a dog; she will make sure of that.

When she has finished her jobs she will phone Fiorenza, tell her she will board the overnight train to Rome this evening. Maybe she will spend something on herself for a change and travel first class. Why not? What a pleasure it will be to see Fiorenza's face as she steps out of a carriage reserved for wealthy people and hands the porter some money just to carry her cases.

Cesare bounds past her and runs up the banking, his ribs showing beneath his coat.

'Rachel, you come to this dog please!' It is Rachel's fault that Cesare is so disobedient. How much work that girl causes.

The dog begins to dig, flicking the soil up and back, up and back, causing it to fall like black rain. The poppies have already lost their flowers, and now he is scattering the last of the seed heads too, grey green globes that rattle with the promise of next year.

'Cesare, *basta*.' She picks up a stone, about to throw it, but Franco makes her start.

'Susan, I want a cup for my milk.' He is standing on the terrace in his pyjamas.

'You go inside, now!' she warns, touching her chest as though his appearance has weakened her heart. The ruby ring does not lie flat like the locket, but forms a bump under her blouse which could easily give her away.

'Shall I get him?' asks Franco, picking up the broom. 'I'll make him come down.'

'No. Where your shoes?'

Cesare snuffles the ground like a pig trained for truffles, scratching and scrabbling in the earth.

'Look, he's got a bone.' Franco points at something clotted with dark soil.

A bone? No. Susan recognises it immediately, the folds of the lapis blue robe, cast in plaster, the gold hem shining through the dirt. *Oh Dio*. She sinks to her knees, the flags cold against her legs, and raises her hands in prayer.

'*Che c'e* Susan? What is it? What's he got?'

Susan's lips are twitching as if they have words trapped between them. Cesare comes down the banking, the statue held between his teeth, whips his tail proudly from side to side.

'*Vieni quoi*.' She beckons him, but he is nervous, used to being scolded. '*Dai, vieni*.' She pats her thigh as he creeps along the terrace. When he is close enough, she reaches out, and takes the Madonna gently from him.

The statue is sticky with saliva, and covered in crumbs of earth which she brushes away with her fingertips. Cesare's mouth and tongue are also flecked with black soil and she feels a sense of shame for all those times she has let him go

hungry, and shouted at him to be quiet. Perhaps all he wanted was affection. Perhaps that is all anyone wants. She puts her hand out to stroke him. Hard to believe that in all these years she has never once touched his dusty rust-coloured coat.

'I told you I didn't take it, Susan. I told you it wasn't me.'

'Si, si.' She is about to tell Franco that he is forgiven when the ground shifts beneath her, ever so slightly at first, groaning like a man awakening after a night of heavy drink.

'*Cos'è?*' asks Franco, but there is no time to explain. Realisation is instant, although her feet take time to move. She stumbles forward to grab him, the Madonna falling from her hands and shattering on the flagstones, fragments and jagged edges that can never be repaired.

It seems like forever before the words come. '*Teremoto! Teremoto.*' The movement of the earth sends a shiver through the house that breaks off bits of stucco and sends them crashing to the ground. She hunches over Franco, sheltering him as she makes for the kitchen. 'Rachel. Santino, *teremoto.*' The kitchen quivers like meat jelly, crockery sliding off the draining board and smashing on the floor, a fine crack streaking across the tiles like a bolt of lightening. She pushes Franco under the table and crawls in next to him, hears the house sounding its resistance, hears Santino crying for his mamma. Of course, Rachel will not know what to do, for in England the ground is always safe to stand on. 'Rachel, come downstairs,' but Susan's voice is nothing against the power of the land.

The house has been rocked before, but never as violently as this. A piece of plaster breaks off the kitchen wall and crumbles to pink dust as it hits the floor. Susan begins to cough. 'Rachel,' she calls again, 'you bring Santino downstairs.' What a stupid girl she is.

Then, beyond the heavy throb of the ground, a shot rips the air, a whip crack that cuts through the confusion. So, Signor Bruni has done the honourable thing. But the Signora will not think he is honourable. No, and she will never forgive him.

Franco clings to Susan for all he is worth. She rubs him to try and stop him shaking. Even his teeth are chattering. 'You no be frighten of *teremoto*,' she tells him. 'You safe under table with me.'

'But I heard a gun.'

'How you know what you hear when all things fall down?' As if to prove the point, a jar of olives rolls off the table and scatters black eyes all over the floor. All that work cleaning the kitchen, making everything tidy before she leaves, and now look at it.

'Are we going to die?' asks Franco.

She is about to tell him not to say such things when the ground steadies itself. One or two gentle rumbles, then nothing. Silence.

'See. It over already,' although she knows it could start again at any minute. But for now, nothing moves except the pool of brine from the olives which spreads across the tiled floor, and the milk which leaks from under the door of the fridge. Unbelievable how quickly disorder can take hold.

Rachel enters the kitchen, her face waxen with shock. Santino is in her arms. 'I didn't know what was happening,' she stammers. 'I didn't know what to do.'

Rachel's fear gives Susan strength. How these Ingleesh take fright! At the same time, Cesare pads in from outside, apparently unhurt. He noses about, tests an olive then drops it in favour of lapping the milk.

'Rachel, you bring Santino and sit here, under table,' says Susan. 'Maybe it start again. Better to wait here until we sure, then go outside.'

Rachel glances at Cesare.

'No room for dog,' says Susan firmly, taking Santino from her and sitting him next to his brother. Soon all four of them are under the table, shoulders cramped due to lack of space. Cesare sits in front of them, his tail wagging fliff fliff across the floor.

'*Va bene*,' says Susan grudgingly, giving up her place to him, but only because it serves her purpose. Why settle for a ruby ring when a whole box of jewels remains unguarded? 'Rachel, you keep boys here with you. I go see how bad is damage upstairs.'

'Your Grandmother's up there now,' Susan remembers telling Reetha when she learned of her mother's death.

'Coconut?' asked Reetha, thinking Susan was looking up into the palms.

Her mother had never approved of Reetha, of the circumstances which caused her to come into the world. It made sense to purchase the cheapest coffin. Let the village say what it liked. Her mother was no longer a person, but a memory, revived momentarily with the return of her possessions; a baggy cardigan, a toothless comb, a gold locket. Susan was pleased with the locket; the rice seller told her that undertakers are no better than thieves, chopping the fingers off corpses to steal their wedding rings. In her mother's case this would not have been necessary, for her mother was never married. Indeed, in their family, men were never a permanent fixture.

Don Pipo approached her again the other day, declaring that he has intentions for her. Intentions! She has no patience with the way he talks; too many words for what he wants to say. And such a complainer too. Better for him if he remains single, better for them both.

The staircase shows little sign of damage, just a few more cracks in the walls. She goes up to the Brunis' bedroom, pushes the door open. The room is like a tomb, plaster dust from a hole in the ceiling making the air hard to breathe. Susan looks up into the hole, sees nothing but black. Outside, police sirens hail an emergency; someone injured in the earthquake, or perhaps they are rushing to arrest Signor Bruni. Either way, there is no time to lose. She must take what she can, and hurry, out of the front door with the jewellery in her case and never look back. There is no one to follow her. Rachel will continue to sit under the table like a mouse, the Signora will be too distraught over the fate of her lover, and Signor Bruni ... She hopes he will be locked away for years, then he will understand what it means to be separated from your children, to be trapped like a bird in a cage.

She enjoys the sound that the jewellery makes as she drops it into her apron pocket. It is heavy, but for once she does not mind being weighed down. From Rome she will board the first available flight to the Philippines. This time she will pay no attention to the demeaning smiles of the cabin crew, for she is not the same person who flew here, afraid to use the aircraft toilet in case she was sucked down it. No, she is a different Susan now. She thinks of Rachel huddled under the table. How long will she wait before she realises she is gone? She closes the lid of the box, rests her hand on top of it, puts her trust in God.



'Rachel, I want to make pee pee.'

'You can't,' said Franco. 'We've got to stay here.'

But Rachel's leg was beginning to go numb and she wasn't entirely convinced about the soundness of Susan's advice. Wouldn't they be safer outside? Susan had been gone a fair while now. They couldn't stay under the table indefinitely.

'Come on. You can have a wee outside.' She decided to take them into the garden. After all, Susan could say what she liked but the children were still her responsibility. They filed out of the kitchen, Cesare following them down the hall. There were deep cracks in the mosaic tiles, like arrows pointing to the door.

'Why doesn't Susan come down?' asked Franco as they trooped outside.

'She'll be down in a minute, I expect,' said Rachel, then stopped, words stuck at the back of her throat, like food gone down the wrong way.

A section of garden had collapsed into the street: sandy earth, white cactus roots, the roof of Signor Bruni's car heaped with soil. 'Stay here.' Rachel stepped forward, as far as she dare, to see how bad the damage was. A couple of men shouted and gestured for her to get back. She nodded, moved back a little way and looked down the road to see how badly the rest of the street had been affected. In the distance was a figure with a bright scarf wrapped around her head, a suitcase pulling her to one side. Rachel stood and stared, trying to make sense of it. How could Susan just walk away?

'Rachel. Santino's done it in his pants.'

She turned back, conscious that she was completely on her own, that the boys were relying on her. She looked about her. The garden steps were still in tact. 'Come over here. This way,' she called, then hesitated. The car she used to take the boys to

school was parked on the other side of the road, away from the landslide. Why not?

'Wait there a minute you two.'

She dashed into the house and took the car keys from the hook in the hallway, ran back outside knowing she had to hurry before one of the Brunis turned up.

'Where are we going?' asked Franco as she hurried him and his brother down the steps.

She thought of Susan setting off down the road on her own, thought of her own life like the road, with endless twists and turns, the end impossible to see.

'Rachel! Where are we going,' persisted Franco.

'Somewhere safe,' she said, and smiled.

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<sup>i</sup> Plath, S. (1981) Collected Poems (ed. Hughes, T.) Faber & Faber, London.

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.117)

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from <http://soar.Berkley.EDU/recipies/ethnic/filipino/indexall.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (pp.164-165)

<sup>v</sup> Adapted from <http://soar.Berkeley.EDU/recipies/ethnic/filipino/indexall.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Adapted from <http://www.zip.com.au/~cs/recipes/html>

<sup>vii</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.33)

<sup>viii</sup> Adapted from <http://foodgeeks.com>

<sup>ix</sup> Adapted from <http://www.bellaonline.com/food/italian.html>

<sup>x</sup> Adapted from <http://soar.Berkeley.EDU/recipies/ethnic/filipino/indexall.html>

<sup>xi</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.61)

<sup>xii</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.114)

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/6262/carmen/recipes.html>

<sup>xiv</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.176)

<sup>xv</sup> Adapted from <http://foodgeeks.com>

<sup>xvi</sup> Author's own recipe

<sup>xvii</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.156)

<sup>xviii</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) (gen.ed.) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.186)

<sup>xix</sup> Adapted from Wright, J. (1992) The Encyclopaedia of Italian Cooking, London, Reed International Books (f.pub. 1981) (p.45)



# REFERENCE



**Theorising Contemporary Women's Writing: A Practice-based Study**

**Volume Two**

Julie Diane Mellor

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## Abstract:

This thesis uses psychoanalytic feminist theory, Jungian theory and my personal experience of the writing process as the basis for an enquiry into women's writing. It contains case studies of both my own novel, 'Cork Dolls', and two novels by Michèle Roberts: *Flesh And Blood* and *The Looking Glass*.

I use French feminist theory to examine the position of women in patriarchal society, and to look at how the female imagination might challenge patriarchal definitions of the feminine. I suggest that writing is fed by images from the unconscious. In order to explore this, I consider the work of Carl Gustav Jung. I look at Jung's idea of archetypes, especially the shadow, the anima, and the animus, and suggest that the process of writing a novel is similar to the Jungian process of individuation. Using feminist archetypal theory, I then examine the usefulness of Jungian theory for an enquiry into women's writing.

The analysis of my own creative writing uses the theoretical knowledge outlined above, but also informs this theoretical knowledge by taking into account my experience of the writing process. The shadow persona in my own writing appears to be linked to the anima, which contradicts Jung (who says women experience the animus). Questioning Jungian theory in the light of female experience forms an original contribution to knowledge which I go on to investigate in further detail through my readings of the novels of Michèle Roberts.

Roberts emphasises female experience in her work, encouraging women to tell their stories in order to counter patriarchal thinking. In *Flesh And Blood*, she draws on Jung's ideas to widen definitions of the feminine in patriarchal society, and presents storytelling as a means of survival for women. In *The Looking Glass*, storytelling is also seen as a means of self-knowledge. Roberts' use of the mermaid image in this novel exhibits both shadow and anima traits, supporting my claim that women experience a shadow-anima overlap. I suggest that this is linked to women's struggle, in patriarchal society, to articulate the female erotic.

I conclude that by emphasising the process of writing, the practice-based PhD not only generates new readings of texts, but questions our understanding and use of theory. This has implications for the study of creative writing as an academic discipline, and for studies into female creativity.

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## Introduction.

[W]e have had stereotypical images of the "woman writer": recluse, sufferer, woman in mauve velvet on a chaise ... The images are all too familiar - away with them! In their place, I suggest we picture a woman (of whatever age) sitting (at her desk, on a bench in the playground, on a bus ...) with paper in front of her and a pen in her hand. No more. *But no less*. That woman is asking herself questions (Sternburg 1992:4).

This thesis has evolved out of asking questions about writing, more specifically, about women's writing. My novel, 'Cork Dolls', is evidence of my own creative practice, and this theoretical component will consider how an understanding of the writing process might inform our readings of women's writing. In conjunction with my own work, I will look, in detail, at the novels *Flesh And Blood* (1995) and *The Looking Glass* (2000) by Michèle Roberts. I find Roberts' work valuable because, in her fiction, she presents storytelling as a means by which women can refute images such as those of 'recluse' and 'sufferer' that Sternberg refers to above, images that have been used by patriarchy to define and contain women's creativity. Also, Roberts has commented at length about her own writing process, which enables me to compare my own writing experience to that of an established writer.

Before I began 'Cork Dolls', I had already written a novel for my MA submission. The M.A. novel was set in England and told the story of a girl recovering from anorexia. It was written in the first person and the tone was fairly bleak. My intention was that this would reflect the central character's withdrawal from her family and surroundings, but ultimately it became restrictive and monotonous. Choosing to write another novel was partly motivated by wanting to put into practice what I had learnt writing the first book. However, I did not realise,



when I began, that a new book would throw up new problems, that it was not possible to correct the mistakes of the first by writing the second. Of course, the *experience* of writing the first novel was invaluable, but it did not automatically smooth the way to writing 'Cork Dolls'. According to Roberts, each novel presents a new set of problems. She says:

[m]y thoughts about writing have developed as a result of *doing* it, of wrestling with the endlessly fascinating problems it poses as a *practice*, then trying to solve these through the process of creating forms that embody and express them. Writing contains talking-to-oneself-about-writing (Roberts 1998:3).

Like Roberts, I have found that my own thoughts about writing have evolved through the practice. However, breaking off to formulate ideas *about* the writing initially caused problems, interrupting the creative process in ways I had not foreseen. I found it difficult to do any critical work while the novel was in its early stages, and I realised that I needed to complete my novel, or at least a draft of it, before I could attempt to theorise it. Because the critical work seemed so intrusive to the creative process, there were times when I became sceptical about any attempt to theorise my writing: '[w]ho cares about theory? yells the Forsaken Sibyl: I'm not a bloody academic. I'm a writer. If you're going to wait to write until you've formulated a theory on how to do it, you'll never get anywhere' (Roberts 1999a:50). Although this quotation sums up some of my frustrations, this thesis is not an attempt to find a theory of 'how to write'. Rather, it is an investigation into how the creative process for women might be examined and theorised.

As the author of 'Cork Dolls', I am closer to the writing than anyone else. Julia Bell says we should consider what 'such close proximity to one's own dissection' (Bell 2001: xii) has to offer. In my case it led me to place more importance on the process of writing, on how I created my novel. Initially, I could

not explain why I had allowed my characters to do certain things and not others. This was particularly true in the case of the main characters, Rachel and Susan. Indeed, I only seemed to be able to describe my writing process in relation to them in terms of a 'gut feeling'. However, as well as forcing me to think about my writing process, my engagement with my creative work has also directed my critical work, encouraging me to focus on the process in the work of other writers. Roberts says that being a writer changes the way we view a text, and that when we talk about writing it is necessary to acknowledge our subjectivity. Talking about autobiographical writing, she says: 'I ... speak personally, with no assumption of detachment or objectivity, since the subject [autobiography] arises in my own experience as a writer and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise' (Roberts 1998:5). Accordingly, I must also recognise that my experience as a writer impacts on my critical stance, influencing the way I read a text, and the way I analyse it. Thus, my perspective, even when examining theoretical issues, is that of the practising writer.

Bell suggests that the incorporation of creative writing into university courses has caused us to be more questioning of the writing process.

Increasingly ... as creative writing becomes embedded within many university English curriculums ... [m]any of the critical questions more often associated with literature seminars are now being asked in writing seminars, as students investigate the process of writing a text (Bell 2001:xii).

So, as creative writing becomes an area of study, the questions that are being asked of it come from a literary framework. However, although creative writing students may question the writing process, critics tend to overlook it. The books we read are the finished product, the published version that has no doubt been edited many times. As readers, we rarely have access to the process behind a piece of fiction. Diaries and

journals contain information about the writing process, but these tend to be published as separate volumes, rather than alongside the texts they refer to.<sup>1</sup>

One reason that there is so little information available on the writing process is that many writers are wary of engaging with it. For example, Lesley Glaister says she is reticent to look too closely at her writing: 'I almost feel superstitious about probing into it too much. I feel it might evaporate if I do. I think it's something very close to what happens when you dream' (Glaister 1999:11). Similarly, Margaret Atwood says she does not like discussing her writing because:

I can't remember what goes on when I'm doing it. That time is like small pieces cut out of my brain. It's not time I myself have lived. I can remember the details of the room and places where I've written, the circumstances, the other things I did before and after, but not the process itself (Atwood: 1992:80).

So, it seems writing is similar to dreaming, a process that is difficult to recall and describe afterwards. My own experience leads me to agree with this. As I have said above, I found it difficult to explain why I made certain choices in my work. In fact, I could only explain my choices in terms of whether something felt right or not. The idea that writing is like dreaming suggests that the images that feed the writing surface from the unconscious. Roberts subscribes to the view that writing uses images from the unconscious, describing the process of assembling these unconscious images into a narrative structure as being like the job of an archaeologist.

I'm an archaeologist reassembling shards of pottery I've found. It's important that you see the lines of glue so that you realise that I made up the pot; it's not the original (how can I know what that looked like?) but my own version, my own myth ... Yet I yearn for unity, yearn to repair the pot, to make reparation. So I've turned more and more to the unconscious (Roberts 1983a:67).

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the notes to two novels by Michèle Roberts are published in a separate collection entitled *Food, Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing*, (1998).

Roberts not only recognises the unconscious as a source of the images in her writing, but sees her engagement with the unconscious as a means of making reparation. As I have shown above, Sternberg says that the woman writer has been labelled 'recluse' or 'sufferer'. The reparation which Roberts talks about allows women to question these images and counter them with images of their own, an idea I will examine in more detail throughout this thesis.

Although I made some conscious decisions when I began writing 'Cork Dolls', such as setting the novel in Sicily, initially, the writing did seem to stem from the unconscious. For instance, when I wrote the first draft, a flood of images came to me that were not obviously related to my time in Sicily. Tracy Chevalier says: '[a]n idea for a novel usually begins with a spark that I instinctively recognise will become a fire' (Chevalier 2002:31). The notion that we *instinctively* know what we want to write about again seems to accord with the idea that the images in our writing are generated in the unconscious. I found certain parts of 'Cork Dolls' worked straight away, while other pieces felt heavy and difficult. These heavy sections of prose were the more 'conscious' sections, the ones that I wrote in order to fit the narrative structure. I found they had to be worked on over and over again, and often ended up being cut. This is not to say that the conscious process cannot improve the writing, but I found that writing that had to be laboured over lost its spontaneity.

Writing does not exist in isolation; to be a writer you must also be a reader. Reading Roberts, and of course, many others, has undoubtedly shaped my work. Indeed, it is the pleasure I gain from reading that led me to start writing in the first place. In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf describes reading as a 'disease' because of the capacity it has to infect us with the desire to write: '[f]or once the disease of reading has laid hold upon the system it weakens it so that it falls an easy prey to that other

scourge which dwells in the inkpot and festers in the quill. The wretch takes to writing' (Woolf 1964:71). Of course, Woolf is being humorous here, implying that the inspired reader is not necessarily a good writer, and that because of this, reading has a great deal to answer for. But I agree that what we read does inform our writing. For example, my decision to use recipes to head each chapter of my novel was made after reading Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1994), something I will talk about in more detail in Chapter Four.

Although my reading has informed my writing, it is impossible to substitute reading for the *practice* of writing. Barbara Glindermann says the writing process is a dialogue 'between social tradition and personal expression, between craftsmanship and spontaneity' (Glindermann 1999:10). I believe that the craft of writing takes place through a conscious engagement with one's work, whereas the spontaneous aspects of the writing, the sparks that Chevalier says the writer instinctively recognises, are linked to the unconscious. The *craft* of writing takes time to develop: '[g]ood writing depends on practice, like sports; the more limbered up you are, the better you perform' (Bell 2001:3). It is important to stress that I did not write 'Cork Dolls' once, but redrafted it at least four times (although the amount of rewriting decreased steadily each time). Editing is part of the writing process, and deciding what to leave out can be just as problematic as deciding what should remain. I found editing to be a far more conscious process than the initial writing because I was less concerned with exploring images, and more concerned with shaping them to fit into a narrative structure.

I have said that what interests me about Roberts' writing is both her engagement with the writing process and the idea she presents, in her fiction, that women can empower themselves by articulating female experience. Like Roberts, I

am concerned with writing about women and women's experience. However, Roberts is a more overtly feminist writer than myself, and it was difficult, at first, to see how I could develop readings of her work that I could present alongside readings of my own writing. I began by looking at psychoanalytic feminist theory in order to understand some of the issues Roberts raises in her novels. I was interested in the way her novels open up possibilities for women by encouraging them to construct their own narratives, to write or speak of their own experience (both conscious and unconscious) in order to counter the weight of patriarchal thinking. French feminist theory gave me an understanding of how patriarchy views women and how this affects the way women see themselves. I began to recognise that by writing about women, I, like Roberts, was claiming a space in which women's experience could be articulated and understood.

I discovered that Roberts had been interested in the theories of the Swiss psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung, and feminist revisions of Jung's work. Jung considers thoughts and dreams to be inner realities, and that these inner realities are just as important or real as any outer reality we might experience. Roberts shares this conviction that what occurs in the imagination is just as real as what occurs in the outer world. Because of this, she says that the imagination can be used to question what we perceive to be real or true.

The rules I grew up with declare that a chair is a chair and that's that. But even as a child, especially as a child, I knew that a chair could be a doll's house, a doll's fortress, a horse for me to ride on, a weapon, a window. An infinite series of meanings opened up. This multiplicity of meanings, of truths, convinces me far more deeply than any single one. Just as words appear to tell the truth yet make it up, so words tell not one truth but many. Truths: complex, slippery, changeable, fluid (Roberts 1998:13).

In 'Cork Dolls' I had begun by telling what I thought was the truth; I had worked in Sicily as an au pair and I wanted to reflect this experience in the novel. However, I

was equally keen not to put myself into the novel, at least not in the sense of a first person narrator. This is why I created Rachel, to represent myself in the narrative. But when I started to write, I immediately found myself telling a story that was different to my real life experience.

Jung places a great deal of importance on what we experience in the imagination, whether it be in dreams, daydreams or fantasies. I started to realise that my writing could be seen as a series of daydreams and imaginings set down on paper and worked on in order to form a narrative. Indeed, in 'Cork Dolls' I never really made any attempt to tell the 'true' story, for as soon as I began to write I began to make things up. I think this is because I already knew the real story, so it held no surprises for me. Inventing a new story was a process of discovery, which is partly what motivated me: I had to write in order to find out what would happen next.

When I interviewed Roberts for this thesis in 2000, she said that her Jungian phase was in the past. Yet aspects of Jungian thought continue to inform her work, particularly her belief in the reality of the imagination. In the case of my own writing, I had completed a number of drafts of my novel before I began looking at Jungian theory, so I would not say that my writing has been influenced by Jung. Instead, it is my *reading* of my writing (both text and process) that uses Jungian theory, as I will demonstrate. Of course, Jung's ideas about the archetypes of the collective unconscious mean that certain images and patterns will inevitably appear in one's work. However, as I will show, it is our *engagement* with these images which can prove valuable.

Peter Brooks, drawing on the work of Shoshana Felman, says that the conjunction of literature and psychoanalysis tends to mask 'a relation of privilege of one term to another, a use of psychoanalysis as a conceptual system in terms of

which to analyse and explain literature, rather than an encounter and confrontation of the two' (Brooks 1996:22). When I began this thesis, I accepted this relation of privilege that Brooks describes, seeing psychoanalysis as a tool which could be used to understand literature. However, as my research progressed, I began to see that my own writing might intervene and disrupt this relationship. By focusing on the writing process I was adding another dynamic, one which could contest the claim to privilege which psychoanalytic theory might traditionally make. Susan Sellers says:

[i]f the function of theory is to criticize, then generalize, it must always in some measure attack, destroy, avoid, if it is to attain its goal. This is the very antithesis of the way fiction works which, as it builds and peoples its worlds ... offers a different kind of learning, synthesis, knowledge (Sellers in Roe et al 1994:40-41).

I agree with Sellers that theory and creative writing do seem to be opposed because we tend to use theory to pick writing apart, whereas creative writing is primarily about constructing something. However, by considering the process of writing, I think we can place theory and writing closer together, so that instead of them being in opposition, each can inform the other. This accords with Felman's suggestion that we should question the very notion of *application* of psychoanalytic theory to a literary text, and replace it with the idea of *implication*: 'the interpreter's role would ... be, not to *apply* to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to *generate implications* between literature and psychoanalysis' (Felman 1985:9). I find this idea useful because it seems to me that the writing process could act as the go-between, making interventions, and therefore questioning the authority of both theory and text.

Although Jungian theory is helpful when considering the writing process (because it offers ways of theorising creativity), Jung's work is based on patriarchal thinking, which presents problems when examining women's writing. French



feminist theory has enabled me to better understand the position of women, and women's creativity, in patriarchal society, and therefore allowed me to identify the areas of Jungian theory which might prove problematic. In conjunction with the work of the French feminists, I have also found the work of feminist archetypal theorists useful for developing ways of using Jung's work to talk about women's writing. Feminist archetypal theory recognises that the definitions of women in analytical psychology are inadequate, and insists that women's life experiences are taken into consideration when examining unconscious images. Emphasis is placed on what is happening in the individual's unconscious, which I find useful because it supports my decision to study my own writing.

Nicole Ward Jouve argues that criticism *should* take personal experience into account. She says that criticism has become divorced from reality and that all we do is either make more theory, or apply other, well-established, theories to the texts we are studying. This enables us to be regarded as serious and professional, which, for women, might seem to be a means of negotiating patriarchy. However, Ward Jouve argues against this method of study, claiming that '[t]he only way in which you can be genuinely stimulated and fed by discourses you admire or find congenial is if you dare conquer a voice of your own' (Ward Jouve 1991:9). In this thesis I draw on both feminist and Jungian theory, but by taking into account my own creative practice, I am also, as Ward Jouve suggests, making an attempt to find a voice of my own, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters.

What follows is a brief account of the contents of this thesis and an explanation of how it is structured.

Chapter One uses French feminist theory to look at the position of women in patriarchal society, suggesting that women's creativity, in particular, women's writing, may provide the means for women to overcome the constraints imposed on them by the male order. Although the French feminists tend to concentrate on the work of Freud and Lacan, the patriarchal assumptions of Jung have much in common with both these theorists. Therefore, this chapter provides a useful starting point from which to go on and examine the theories of Jung.

Chapter Two looks at Jung's work, focusing on his idea that the unconscious is a source of endless images which, as they are experienced in dreams, daydreams and fantasies, can be worked on and integrated into consciousness. I suggest that fantasies and imagined scenarios are the raw material for novel writing, and that therefore the writing process can be examined using Jungian theory. I discuss Jung's work on archetypes and look at certain archetypal images in detail, namely the shadow, the anima, and the animus. Following on from this, I consider Jung's theory of individuation, which advocates that we try to achieve a balance between consciousness and the unconscious. Finding this balance requires us to integrate unconscious images into consciousness. I draw a parallel between individuation and novel writing, as novel writing also requires that we make sense of unconscious images by shaping them into a narrative.

Chapter Three explores some of the criticisms feminist archetypal theorists have made of Jung's work. My focus is on the aspects of Jung's work which might be considered useful for an enquiry into women's writing. Literary critics, like the French feminists, tend to overlook Jung's work in favour of Freud. Therefore, I draw on case studies of women's visual art, as well as literary criticism, in order to examine the ways in which Jungian theory might be applied to women's writing.

Chapter Four acts as a link between the theoretical chapters of this thesis, described above, and the readings of women's writing which follow on from them. The chapter focuses on an analysis of my own work, and is necessarily placed at this mid-point in the thesis in order to foreground my experience of the writing process, and explain how this impacts on my readings of Roberts' novels in Chapters Five and Six. I look at my novel, 'Cork Dolls', and the process of writing it, using a combination of Jungian and feminist theory. I show that novel writing can be seen as a mixture of conscious and unconscious decisions, and therefore corresponds closely to Jung's theory of individuation, as suggested in the previous chapter. However, although Jungian theory is useful for identifying and analysing the way unconscious images are worked through in the novel, I also show that an awareness of feminist theory is necessary in order to produce a reading that refutes patriarchal assumptions about women. The focus on my own writing process generates ideas which contradict Jung, namely that women can experience the anima (as opposed to the animus), and also, that they experience an apparent anima-shadow overlap. This forms an original contribution to knowledge which I continue to explore in Chapters Five and Six.

Chapter Five looks at Roberts' novel, *Flesh And Blood*. The reading is informed by Jungian and feminist theory, but also by my own writing experience as discussed in Chapter Four. I show that, within her fiction, Roberts questions gender divisions and attempts to widen definitions of the feminine by including an exploration of the masculine. She presents storytelling as a way for women to negotiate patriarchy, and asserts the mother-daughter bond as a means by which women might subvert the male order, or at least survive it. However, the novel

suggests that there are endless stories to be told by women, not just those of mothers and daughters, and that the act of telling itself is an act of resistance.

Chapter Six examines *The Looking Glass*, a later novel by Roberts. *The Looking Glass* shows storytelling to be not only a means of resistance and survival for women, but also a way of attaining self-knowledge. I analyse Roberts' use of the mermaid image as a symbol of the erotic Other which patriarchy has prevented women from engaging with. There are similarities in Roberts' portrayal of women's experience of the shadow persona and my own experience of Susan in 'Cork Dolls'. As in my own work, I find evidence of women's experience of the anima, and an overlap between the shadow and the anima. However, I also suggest that there is a link between this and women's struggle to articulate the female erotic. Therefore, this case study provides evidence which supports my findings in Chapter Four, as well as building on my exploration of Roberts' efforts to widen definitions of the feminine in Chapter Five.

In conclusion, I look at how my findings affect our understanding of women's writing, and the theoretical issues that surround it. I consider the divide between academic and creative writing, and how the inclusion of personal experience in an investigation into writing impacts upon this. I propose that the practice-based PhD is a valuable tool for feminist studies because it enables women's experience to be included as part of a theoretical enquiry. Roberts says that giving space to the imagination is important not only for personal, but also for cultural, development. This leads me to suggest that the inclusion of my experience of the writing process in this thesis impacts not only on our understanding of the work of individual women writers, but also on the wider understanding of female creativity in patriarchal society. Recognising that the reader will bring his/her own experience to the text, I

propose that the thesis resists closure, which mirrors the strategy that Roberts uses in her fiction to encourage women to tell their own stories. Thus, I encourage the reader to use my research as a starting point for his/her own investigations.

## Chapter 1: French Feminist Theory.

Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron define feminism as 'an awareness of women's oppression-repression that initiates both analyses of the dimension of this oppression-repression, and strategies for liberation' (Marks and de Courtivron 1981:x). It is in this sense that I use the term, with my emphasis on women's writing as a strategy for liberation. Psychoanalytic theory is at the centre of the French feminist debate, although it tends to take the work of Freud and Lacan, rather than Jung, as its starting point. However, the patriarchal assumptions of Freud and Jung have much in common. Therefore, I will use French feminist theory to understand the position of women in patriarchal society, and to examine how women's creativity might offer ways of countering patriarchal thought, before moving on to examine the theories of Jung.

### The Position of Women in Patriarchal Society.

Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, is often seen as the forerunner of French feminist theory. De Beauvoir shows how the relationship between men and women is not equal in patriarchal society.

The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used systematically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity (de Beauvoir 1981a:43).

De Beauvoir says it is difficult to see why women submit to being termed this inferior Other when they are not in the minority, and suggests that women fail to

address the way they are constructed and limited because they rarely assert themselves as a group. Even when they do claim affiliation to a group, she argues, they do so by naming themselves 'women', which automatically subjugates them because men have deemed women inferior. If we look at Margaret Atwood's experience, we can see how this affects women writers. Atwood says her generation was told that:

women could not really write because they couldn't be truck drivers or Marines and therefore didn't understand the seamier side of life, which included sex with women. We were told we wrote like housewives, or else we were treated like honorary men, as if to be a good writer was to suppress the female (Atwood 1992:80).

De Beauvoir says that women lack the means to organise themselves into a unit which might overturn their subjective status because they have 'no past, no history, no religion of their own' (de Beauvoir 1981a:47), and unlike the proletariat, they have no work which might foster solidarity. However, I want to suggest that despite Atwood's early experiences, writing might challenge this. Writing is a means of asserting one's self and one's past and, as such, it can question the male values that are purported to be universal.

De Beauvoir sees women's solidarity as necessary if they are to challenge the male order. However, although she calls for solidarity, she says it is easier for women to ally themselves with the role of Other, a role which although demeaning, can offer material protection. This is not a fulfilling way to exist because it denies autonomy. Indeed, de Beauvoir says: 'I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty' (de Beauvoir 1981a:56). A degree of liberty is necessary in order to write, as Virginia Woolf argues in *A Room of One's Own* (1994). Women must be able to claim time and space of their own, and to be able to do this they must have a degree of financial independence.

De Beauvoir picks up on women's lack of liberty again in her essay, 'Women and Creativity' (de Beauvoir 1989). Here she compares how artists living a bohemian lifestyle might expect to be treated according to their sex. For the male artist, his 'eccentricity is evidence of his vocation' while the female artist will be 'viewed not as an artist, but as a madwoman or a monster' (de Beauvoir 1989:22). Gilbert and Gubar say that the images of woman as 'monster', and, conversely, as 'angel', have been ubiquitous throughout literature written by men, so much so that women have tended to accept these images, and reproduce them in their own writing:

the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly: until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image (Gilbert and Gubar 1979:17).

The patriarchal definitions of 'angel' and 'monster' complicate the process of self-definition which Gilbert and Gubar consider to be a necessary precursor to literary production: 'the creative "I AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is' (Gilbert and Gubar 1979:17). So, in order to write, woman must not only refute the patriarchal images which operate to contain her, but also find new images which allow her to experience herself as she is. This, in itself, is problematic, because what woman might be outside patriarchal thinking is difficult to determine.

Toril Moi says that the idea which de Beauvoir draws on, of the isolated genius suffering for 'his' art, has been repudiated by the women's movement: 'women's creativity can flourish equally well in a collective, political and all-female environment' (Moi 1989:2). However, although the idea of women's collective creativity is very much in the spirit of feminism, there are very few collectively-written texts. The ones that spring to mind are community-based publications, which are not necessarily written by women. Of course, there are feminist anthologies of



writing, and perhaps this idea of publication for and by women is what Moi has in mind. Also, as John Mullan (2002) points out, the publishing industry currently seems to be restricting our choice of reading by promoting a narrow band of genre fiction, so it may not be easy to publish collectively-written texts. Yet I remain sceptical about the idea of writing produced in a collective environment, because it seems to me that writing demands periods of concentration that are difficult to realise without a private space to retreat into. Again, Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* (1994) shows that it is more difficult for women to claim this space.

Annie Leclerc asks how women can claim the space required for artistic production when they are expected to devote themselves to supporting men? For while 'man is valuable in and of himself' (Leclerc 1981:79), a woman's value is defined by the support she offers man in order for him to fulfil himself. The solution does not lie in waging war against men, says Leclerc, for men derive pleasure from women's rebellion, wrongly interpreting women's anger as jealousy for the male values to which they cannot accede. Instead, she identifies an area where women hold power: in the act of giving birth.

When I discover that childbirth is a joyful experience and not a slough of torment, it is not only the revelation of a hidden treasure and the pleasure of disclosing a splendid secret that delights me ... For what I sense in that moment is the very principle of their war machine, aimed not only at woman, their most threatening enemy precisely because she is the most gifted for life, but at everything that lives, because they feel hurt by life itself (Leclerc 1989:73).

Leclerc says that man's assertion of virility not only causes him to silence women, but also makes him silence himself because he cannot show emotion. She believes man has made childbirth more difficult for women by denying their pleasure in it. Indeed, she says man's ideas about pleasure are misconceived: 'if desire is the only thing on their lips, their hearts harbour only dreams of death' (Leclerc 1989:77).

Although it could be argued that the revaluation of childbirth might be significant for all women, not just those who experience it, I find this link between pleasure and maternity problematic. It seems to me that it excludes women who have no desire to become mothers. De Beauvoir warns women against thinking that learning to value their bodies will give them a new vision of the world. She says that women who share this belief fall into 'the irrational, into mysticism, into a sense of the cosmic' (de Beauvoir 1981b:153). Indeed, patriarchal thinking tends to denigrate women by equating them with the irrational, as I will show when I discuss Jung's theories.

Claudine Herrmann's work has parallels with that of Leclerc in that she believes that male systems of order exclude life by eliminating things which do not fit in:

there is the proliferation of systems - economic, political, juridical, intellectual - and each considers itself determinant; only life is excluded from them, in order to maintain a model which eliminates everything that does not conform to it (Herrmann 1981a:88).

Like Leclerc, Herrmann sees masculine desire as characterised by the inability to love anything other than oneself, or one's possessions, possessions that can include women and children. She warns: '[i]f woman remains true to herself, and continues to think in terms of harmony rather than struggle, of giving rather than exchange, she will be ruthlessly crushed' (Herrmann 1981a:88-89). However, like de Beauvoir, she does not recommend that women adopt masculine values, because any social gains would be counterbalanced by losses at a personal level. The problem that arises for women writers is that although they might not adopt masculine values, their creativity is often described in male terms. For example, Roberts says we are told that 'creativity demands great intellectual vigour and muscular power, the triumphant mastery of matter' (Roberts 1998:7).

Like creativity, female sexuality has also been theorised within masculine parameters. Luce Irigaray explains that:

the opposition "viril" [sic] clitoral activity/ "feminine" vaginal passivity which Freud - and many others - claims are alternative behaviours or steps in the process of becoming a sexually normal woman, seems prescribed more by the practice of masculine sexuality than by anything else (Irigaray 1981a:99).

Irigaray is concerned with women's self-fulfilment through sexual pleasure. Because masculine sexuality is taken as the norm, women and women's pleasure are not included in this theory of sexual relations. So, within the dominant phallic economy, women are condemned to experience only 'lack'.

For Irigaray, women's autoerotic pleasure differs from that of men. 'He needs an instrument in order to touch himself: his hand, woman's genitals, language' (Irigaray 1981a:100). A woman differs in that she ' "touches herself" constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually' (Irigaray 1981a:100). Heterosexual sex is therefore a violent intrusion into a woman's relationship with herself. Yet if there is an attempt to represent women's autoeroticism within the male libidinal economy, the result is either defensive virginity, or a body open for penetration rather than autoerotic pleasure. Although it is possible for women to experience pleasure within the framework of the male libidinal economy, Irigaray sees this as prostitution of the body to male desire, reinforcing woman's dependency on man.

Irigaray believes women's sexual pleasure lies in touch rather than sight. A woman's sex organ allows her to keep contact with herself through constant retouching, yet it remains hidden, a mystery which prevents her from ever being adequately defined within the present culture. Only with maternity can a woman's touching pass without criticism: '[t]hus maternity supplants the deficiencies of

repressed female sexuality' (Irigaray 1981a:102). If we agree with Irigaray, then the connection Leclerc makes between maternity and women's pleasure can be seen as a result of female sexuality being denied in patriarchal society. Irigaray goes on to say that woman's sexuality is not just double, but plural. A woman has many sex organs: 'the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined' (Irigaray 1981a:103). She says that women enjoy nearness rather than possession (property and possession are characteristics of the male order). However, women are possessions within the male economy, so their desire has to be acted out in secret. Otherwise, women's desire, which is really a call for the acceptance of the plurality of desire, becomes interpreted as an insatiable hunger. Irigaray describes this as the exclusion of a female imaginary (a point I will return to below). The result of this exclusion is that women experience themselves on the margins of patriarchal society, 'only fragmentarily as waste or as excess' (Irigaray 1981a:104).

Irigaray also proposes that there is a specific women's language, 'le parler femme' or 'womanspeak'. Womanspeak occurs when women speak together, but disappears in the presence of men. For this reason, she sees women-only groups as valuable in liberating women, although she warns against them simply reversing the existing order. Moi says that when Irigaray tries to describe this womanspeak she ends up showing 'woman' as a product of the patriarchal logic she is trying to escape. However, it seems to me that what she is doing is proposing that woman stands outside patriarchal logic and is infinitely Other. Indeed, she says:

"She" is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious - not to mention her language in which "she" goes off in all directions and in which "he" is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning (Irigaray 1981a:103).

According to Irigaray, the mother-daughter relationship remains unsymbolised in patriarchal society because it poses a threat to the male order. The mother-son relationship is represented in cultural imagery (most notably in the figures of the Virgin Mary and Christ, her son) but the mother-daughter relationship is absent. Indeed, even to think it can undermine patriarchy: '[t]he relationship between mother/daughter, daughter/mother constitutes an extremely explosive kernel in our societies' (Irigaray 1981b cited in Whitford 1991:77). Irigaray says that the denial of the mother-daughter relationship is akin to murder, and that this is what patriarchal society is founded on: 'the whole of our culture in the west depends upon the murder of the mother' (Irigaray 1981b cited in Whitford 1991:75). Margaret Whitford says that, in Irigaray's view, it may be impossible to restore the mother-daughter relationship within patriarchal society. Certainly women face problems if they try, and their attempts can result in them perpetuating murder amongst themselves (murder that is not necessarily 'real' but cultural). Whitford sees this 'murder' of women *by* women as evidence of their inability to individuate. Individuation represents a means of getting to know oneself, and therefore differentiating from others, through the integration of unconscious images into consciousness. Although Whitford does not attribute the term 'individuation' to Jung, it is central to his theories, as I will show in the following chapter. However, for now, I will examine Whitford's use of the term.

Whitford says women's inability to individuate manifests itself in a lack of perception of difference from other women. She draws on Nancy Chodorow's (1978) work on object-relations theory, explaining Chodorow's view that at an unconscious level, women never separate sufficiently from their mothers. Instead, they remain in a state of fusion where they cannot distinguish between their own feelings and those

of their mother. Boys curtail their primary love as they are pushed out of the pre-Oedipal relationship, but girls stay in the pre-Oedipal period longer because they too 'mother', and are thus preoccupied with feelings of primary identification and lack of separateness. Irigaray suggests that it is this confusion of identity which leads to the murder of women by other women.

So far, I have looked at the position of women in patriarchal society. However, what I want to do now is consider how women might achieve some degree of liberation and autonomy, given their position as Other in the male order.

### Strategies For Liberation: The Female Imaginary.

Catherine Clément says the starting point for change should be in the realms of the female imaginary. I have already used this term in connection with Irigaray's idea of the denial of female desire in patriarchal society. An understanding of Lacanian theory is useful for understanding the concept of the female imaginary more fully and I have found Moi's explanation of Lacan helpful.<sup>2</sup> Moi explains that the Imaginary and the Symbolic are fundamental, related terms in Lacan's work. The Imaginary corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period, when the child believes itself to be part of the mother. At this stage, the child has no perception of difference or lack, no unconscious, no awareness of being separate from the world. The Oedipal crisis represents the child's entry into the Symbolic Order, and is linked to language acquisition. The Oedipal crisis occurs when the father splits the unity between mother and child, forbidding the child further access to the mother and her body.

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<sup>2</sup> Moi's (1990) explanation has since been superseded, but it was current in the mid 1980s, coinciding with the interest in French feminist theory that followed the publication of Marks and de Courtivron's *New French Feminisms* (1981).

From this point onwards, desire for the mother, or imaginary unity with her, must be repressed. For Lacan, the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order is inaugurated by the child's entry into the Mirror Stage. This occurs when the baby is between six to eight months old. The function of the Mirror Stage is to endow the baby with a unitary body image. However, as Moi explains, it only allows for dual relationships: '[t]he child, when looking at itself in the mirror ... only perceives another human being with whom it merges and identifies' (Moi 1990a:100).

As I have shown, above, Irigaray says that the female imaginary is excluded in patriarchal society. However, Clément's idea requires that women be able to experience, and assert, the imaginary, in order to challenge patriarchal thinking. She sees this challenge in terms of cultural revolution, at the same time recognising that society tends to label female revolt as hysteria. She also recognises that women act out their revolt within this framework.

If to be a hysteric is, as I think it is, to suffer in one's body from something that does not come from the body but from elsewhere; if to be a hysteric is to suffer in order to understand, then yes, in this society where one must sell one's ability to work in order to live, we are all hysterics (Clément 1981:134).

Clément describes a dance performed in Southern Italy by women said to have been bitten by tarantulas. Although tarantulas do not exist in this region, their bites are said to be the cause of depression and convulsions. The only way to expel the bites, and therefore relieve the symptoms, is to perform a cathartic dance, the purpose of which is to allow the hysterical subject to re-enter society. Clément compares the role of the hysteric to that of clowns and charlatans, because although they occupy challenging positions, 'positions foreseen by the social body' (Clément 1986:155), they do not bring about change.

Hélène Cixous disputes Clément's view that hysteria is essentially non-productive. She sees hysteria as occurring in different degrees: 'I imagine hysteria as distributing itself along a scale of the possible intensity of disturbance' (Cixous 1986:155). At a certain point the hysteric crosses a threshold where 'everything is turned back against her' (Cixous 1986:155). At this point she becomes paralysed, both physically and metaphorically. But before this point is reached, the hysteric can be a force for change. Cixous refers to Freud's claim that 'what is hysterical yields art' (Cixous 1986:157), implying that until a certain point is reached, the hysteric may well be destructive, but she may also be creative. As a writer I find this interesting, in that I think a certain amount of 'destruction' is required in order to write. Michèle Roberts says we need to be aggressive: '[a]ggression allows you to be destructive: of old literary forms; of your own clichés; towards language itself. You break up old word-patterns then reshape them into new ones' (1998:190). This idea of destroying clichés and old forms seems to relate to the destruction associated with hysteria, although to accept the label of 'hysteric' is problematic, because it places the woman writer once more in the position of madwoman or monster which Gilbert and Gubar say women must challenge if they are to be creative on their own terms.

Julia Kristeva also links hysteria to women's writing. She displaces Lacan's distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order in favour of her distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes: the 'basic pulsions' (Moi 1990b:161) which are predominantly anal and oral. These pulsions are gathered in the *chora* (Greek for enclosed space or womb). The semiotic chora must be split if the subject is to attribute differences and thus signification. Like Lacan, Kristeva sees the Mirror Stage as the first stage to this splitting, and the Oedipal phase as the moment when



the split is fully achieved. Entry into the patriarchal Symbolic Order means the chora is successfully repressed; it is only perceived as 'contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language' (Moi 1990b:162). Kristeva does not attempt to bring the feminine fully into existence; it exists at the margins and must remain here to maintain its revolutionary nature. Indeed, she dismisses feminist demands for a separate language, 'one made of silence, cries or touch, which has cut all ties with the language of so-called phallic communication ...' (Kristeva 1989:116). She sees this as abdicating entry into history, thus unwittingly perpetuating the silence which is brought to bear by the male order. Although she concedes that there is pleasure in revolt, she feels it is more important to question the values which have been upheld as universal truths.

Kristeva notes certain tendencies in women's writing. She says women often write in order to tell their family story. If it is not the real family that is being reproduced, then it is an invented one where the writer constructs an identity for herself and uses it to purge herself of reminiscences. To some extent, I agree with this, because, in 'Cork Dolls', Rachel can be seen as an identity which I have constructed for myself, and the Bruni household might be viewed as an invented family. However, Kristeva sees these family stories, written by women, as a homogenous group, whereas, by looking at the process of writing, I think it is possible, and desirable, to treat each text individually.

According to Kristeva, 'Freud's statement "the hysteric suffers from reminiscence" sums up the large majority of novels produced by women' (Kristeva 1981b:166). However, she also says there are no essential differences between men's and women's writing and that any superficial differences are either the effects of prevailing ideologies, or market forces which impose certain themes and stylistic

devices on women. I agree that market forces can introduce certain themes that both men and women are encouraged to pursue. I have already mentioned Mullan's (2002) article on the publishing industry, which explains how novels must fit into certain genres in order for them to be accepted for publication. Again though, Kristeva is considering writing as a finished product, not a process. It seems likely that for women, the process of writing *does* differ from that of men because of the constraints placed upon women in patriarchal society.

Kristeva questions our definitions of 'man' and 'woman', saying sexual identity is not fixed but constantly remade, a sort of bisexual 'strange body ... neither man nor woman, young nor old' (Kristeva 1989:111). Society is constantly trying to contain this experience of remaking, therefore it is the drives associated with the construction of identity which can be identified in writing, rather than gender itself. I find this a more helpful way of looking at women's writing, because it seems to me that the construction of identity is likely to have an impact on the writing. Indeed, Kristeva says: '[i]n "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies' (Kristeva 1981a:137). For this reason, she sees feminism as a negative practice, in as much as it continually refuses the descriptions of women that society presents.

I have said, above, that creativity is often described in male terms. Cixous questions the 'universal' values of the male order by listing certain binary opposites and criticising them. Like de Beauvoir, she shows that in terms of binary opposition, women are always identified with the inferior opposite. These rigid binary structures prevent any union or exchange between the sexes. Cixous says that wherever there is will, desire, or authority within these oppositions, it is always linked to the father. To take this rule of the father to its extreme, the father acts the mother's role, while the

mother herself becomes 'unthinkable, unthought of' (Cixous 1981a:92). Yet although the male order functions by subordinating women, Cixous sees this coming under challenge. Woman is 'a species of mole as yet not recognised' (Cixous 1981a:93). For her to be recognised as having her own worth she must lay down her own words, as a means of self-definition and self-assertion.

Examining the difference between masculine and feminine political economies, Cixous is careful to point out that we must not read masculine as man, and feminine as woman; there are men who do not repress their femininity and women who assert their masculinity. Neither must we be essentialist and support the idea of a 'natural' anatomical determination of sexual difference, as this would be to implicitly support phallogentric power:

*sexual difference* is not determined merely by the fantasized relationship to anatomy, which is based, to a great extent, upon the point of *view*, therefore upon a strange importance accorded [by Freud and Lacan]<sup>3</sup> to exteriority and to the specular in the elaboration of sexuality. A voyeur's theory, of course (Cixous 1981a:95).

Instead, Cixous locates the difference between men and women in the libidinal economy, occurring at the level of inexpressible ecstasy or *jouissance*. She says women must stop asking themselves what they want; this is a question generated by Freud and Lacan, and the masculine economy that urges women to be consumers. Instead, women must ask themselves how they experience sexual pleasure: '[w]hat is feminine *sexual pleasure*, where does it take place, how is it inscribed at the level of her body, of her unconscious. And then how is it put into writing?' (Cixous 1981a:95).

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<sup>3</sup> Square brackets added by Marks and de Courtivron (1981).

Writing is a way for women to claim space, says Cixous, a way of articulating unacknowledged desires. History has only ever recorded phallogentrism. If women can put their sexual pleasure into writing, they will invent another history. If true sexual liberation were to be attained, feminine and masculine as we know them would disappear, and difference would no longer signify binary opposition.

Because creativity stems from diversity, from 'the presence in the inventing subject of an abundance of the other' (Cixous 1981a:97), it is not enough to write from one's own sex; an attempt must be made to try and incorporate both self and Other. Ultimately, Cixous believes there is 'no fiction without a certain homosexuality' (Cixous 1981a:97). Just as Irigaray describes women's desire as multiple because it is derived from the female body, so Cixous believes that '[w]oman's imaginary is inexhaustible' (Cixous 1981b:246). She recounts a description given to her by another woman of an interior, imaginary world: '[a] world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity' (Cixous 1981b:246). Cixous wants other women to speak of this part of themselves, to find and voice a collective unconscious sexuality. She says that when she herself felt these feelings in the past she did not speak out because she did not understand them.

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives ... hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? (Cixous 1981b:246).

This sense of 'daring to speak' is also how women can experience the writing process, as can be seen by the following comment from Roberts:

I have always wanted to be a writer, and have written since early childhood. In adolescence, increasing alienation from myself and from the view of femininity purveyed by the late 1950's/ early 1960's culture drove me and

my writing underground; I stopped being honest with myself and others about what I felt, and tried to please, and kept my poems, my authentic records secret. I came out as a poet when I found the Women's Liberation Movement in 1970 and realised that I wasn't mad so much as confused and angry (Roberts 1983:64).

For Roberts, the idea of being a writer did not fit the images of femininity that were current at the time, and which, as I have shown throughout this chapter, are still problematic. So, when women writers dare to speak, they also challenge patriarchal attitudes. My own experience is that this is not always done intentionally, but that it can be a consequence of writing.

Cixous says women must put their energies into writing themselves, and leave men to write themselves. This will result in women returning, 'from afar, from always: from "without," ... from beyond "culture" ' (Cixous 1981b:247). Writing is powerfully subversive; it creates a space in which women can exist within, rather than outside, culture. So the woman writer, for Cixous, becomes an escapee from patriarchy. She believes that writing will allow women to see how they have been distanced from their sexuality. The realisation of this will then allow them to regain pleasure and release them from the guilt imposed by the male order.

In the same way Leclerc links maternity and pleasure, Cixous draws a connection between motherhood and creativity. This places the emphasis on the fertile woman, a woman never far from the mother. 'There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink' (Cixous 1981b:251). I find this slightly problematic because, like Leclerc, Cixous seems to place too much emphasis on the maternal. However, for Cixous, the mother can also function as a metaphor. Hidden inside every woman is the source, the locus, of the Other. This Other is the nurturing mother and to locate her is to learn to love oneself, 'to give me my self as myself' (Cixous 1981b:252). Cixous also says that the locus of the Other

which is hidden in women's bodies is akin to bisexuality. Bisexuality is the presence of *both* sexes in oneself, and the non-exclusion of neither. This expands on her idea that there is no fiction without homosexuality. Thus, while men strive to keep their 'glorious monosexuality in view' (Cixous 1981b:254), women will benefit from pursuing this idea of difference.

For Cixous, Capitalism is a male structure which has denied women in terms of inheritance and property. Paradoxically, women have the capacity to 'deappropriate unselfishly, body without end' (Cixous 1981b:259). This idea of limitless giving extends beyond male boundaries.

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken (Cixous 1981b:259).

So, woman is able to give endlessly, disrupting Capitalism and creating an alternative economy. This economy cannot be described in male terms, in the same way that women's writing can 'never be theorized, enclosed, coded' (Cixous 1981b:253), because it takes place outside the phallocratic system. Yet it also seems that women's 'giving' is related to her ability to get to know her unconscious, to experience 'him, her, them' within herself. This corresponds to Jung's theory of individuation, where we become acquainted with unconscious images and personae (both masculine and feminine) in order to integrate them into consciousness and achieve some sort of balance.

I have already mentioned Whitford's use of the concept of individuation in relation to women's lack of separateness from other women. The term 'individuation' has slightly different implications in Jungian theory because, for Jung, the images of the unconscious are pre-existent. Jung's work is often overlooked in favour of Freud,

not only by psychoanalytic feminist theorists, but also by literary theorists. Yet Jungian theory contains some interesting approaches to theorising creativity, which I will now examine.

## Chapter 2: The Theories of C.G. Jung.

Cixous says that women's imaginary is inexhaustible, but that it cannot be theorised because it takes place outside the existing phallocratic system. Jungian theory offers a way of theorising creativity, yet it is rooted in the patriarchal thinking which Cixous sees as excluding women's imaginary. In this chapter, I will discuss Jung's work, focusing on how it can prove useful for the study of writing. Then, in Chapter Three, I will show how feminist theory can be used to make interventions into Jung's work. In this way, a more pliable theory emerges, one that proves useful for examining women's writing.

### The Conscious and the Unconscious.

Rather than merely containing what has been repressed or forgotten by the conscious mind, Jung sees the unconscious as an 'illimitable field' (Jung 1996:276) of occurrences. These occurrences manifest themselves in chaotic and unsystematic ways: '[d]reams, for instance, show no apparent order and no tendency to systematization, as they would do if there were a personal consciousness at the back of them' (Jung 1996:276). The unconscious displays contents which are different from conscious ones, and Jung argues that this difference is important, that every product of the unconscious has significance: '[e]ven the craziest idea must correspond to something in the psyche' (Jung 1996:278). As a writer, I find this helpful. There are often times when images spring to mind which seem to have no meaning, and no place in the framework of the narrative I am trying to construct. I have shown, in the introduction, that unconscious images can provide the raw



material for the writer. As Glaister says, writing is 'very close to what happens when you dream' (Glaister 1999:11). My own experience is that when I sit down with my notepad I often have no idea what I am going to write about, yet I inevitably manage to produce something. 'Free writing' is like brainstorming; the writer sets down anything and everything that comes to mind. It is impossible to know what will be produced, or whether it will be any good. This is an indicator that the writing is not taking place at a conscious level. I find I can usually utilise the ideas from a free writing exercise and work them up into a longer piece, which is where the more conscious process, or craft, comes into play.

Jung encourages us to take notice of the unconscious images that surface and believes they must be investigated in order to see what they might yield. He says:

[w]e call the unconscious 'nothing,' and yet it is a reality *in potentia*. The thought we shall think, the deed we shall do, even the fate we shall lament tomorrow, all lie unconscious in our today ... Hence we must always reckon with the presence of things not yet discovered (Jung 1996:279).

For women, it might be more useful to think of the unconscious not only in terms of what has not yet been discovered, but what has not yet been *articulated*. I have said that Cixous sees writing as a way of articulating unacknowledged desires. She suggests that women must explore the realm of the imaginary in order to acknowledge their desires and thus create a space in which they can exist within culture. I will return to this idea in Chapter Three.

Jung describes the unconscious as Janus-faced; with one side its contents look back on the preconscious, while on the other side it has the potential to anticipate the future. In this sense, no one is born entirely new. We all contain a psychic structure developed by our ancestors. This gives the unconscious what Jung terms its 'characteristic "historical" aspect' (Jung 1996:280). Although Freud was aware of the archaic thought forms of the unconscious, he believed the unconscious had a

personal nature. Jung agrees that a superficial layer of the unconscious *is* personal, but he sees this 'personal unconscious' as resting on a deeper layer which is not derived from, or acquired through, personal experience, but is inborn: 'This deeper layer I call the *collective unconscious*. I have chosen the term "collective" because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal' (Jung 1996:4). Unlike the personal unconscious (or personal psyche as Jung sometimes calls it) the collective unconscious has contents which are similar everywhere, in all individuals. I find Jung's comparison of the collective unconscious to the rhizome of a plant useful for understanding this concept.

Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above ground lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away - an ephemeral apparition. When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilisations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures beneath the eternal flux. What we see is blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains (Jung 1995:18).

The existence of the collective unconscious is recognised by the contents which emerge from it. Jung calls these contents *archetypes*. 'The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear' (Jung 1996:5). The important word here is 'altered'. Although the contents of the collective unconscious are both universal and archaic, they are influenced by the personal consciousness.

The concept of the archetype ... is derived from the repeated observation that, for instance, the myths and fairytales of world literature contain definite motifs which crop up everywhere. We meet these same motifs in the fantasies, dreams, deliriums, and delusions of individuals living today. These typical images and associations are what I call archetypal ideas. The more vivid they are, the more they will be coloured by particularly strong feeling-tones ... They impress, influence, and fascinate us. They have their origin in the archetype, which in itself is an irrepresentable, unconscious, pre-existent form that seems to be part of the inherited structure of the

psyche and can therefore manifest itself spontaneously anywhere, at any time (Jung 1964:449).

Because archetypes exist in the unconscious, they cannot be described until they are given form in consciousness. In other words, they can only be described as they manifest themselves in myths, dreams, art and literature. Thus, Jung describes them as having only 'a possibility of representation' (Jung 1996:79). Through myths and fairytales, archetypes are transmitted from the collective unconscious and handed down. However, Jung stresses that there is a difference between the archetype and its formulation in myth. He is not particularly clear about this difference, but if we remember that the unconscious contents of the mind are altered when they are given expression, then myths can be seen not as a 'pure' product of the unconscious, but as ones that have been changed. Archetypal images are accompanied by much emotion, and attract themes and images to them. They have 'a possessive or obsessive form' (Jung 1995:381) and are numinous,<sup>4</sup> that is to say, pertaining to the divine. Hence, archetypes are linked with religion.

As I have said above, the archetype's immediate manifestation is in dreams and visions. These initial manifestations are more individual, and also more difficult to understand than when they occur in myths. This is because when archetypes show themselves to the individual they have been shaped by the consciousness of that person. I have suggested that writing involves both a recognition of dream images (including daydreams and fantasies) and also a working through of these images in order to make (narrative) sense of them.

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<sup>4</sup> A concept Jung borrows from Rudolf Otto (1923).

When I began writing my novel, I had very little idea of the plot, but I did have a strong sense of place. This sense of place could be ascribed to my stay in Sicily some years ago, although I would argue that I was not attempting to recreate, exactly, the places I had visited, but rather, to create a fictional Sicilian setting, using my memories as a starting point. Rachel began, I believe, as an aspect of myself which I projected into this imaginary place. Susan seemed less recognisable to me, more deeply rooted in the unconscious. The original decision to have a housekeeper from the Philippines was a conscious one; I wanted to avoid the character bearing any relation to the housekeeper I had actually worked with. However, the *character* of Susan first came to me while I was doing a free writing exercise. The spontaneity of Susan as an image does not necessarily mean she is archetypal, but the fact that she almost took over the entire novel at one point is significant, I think. I will look at this in more detail in Chapter Four, but for now I simply want to draw attention to the fact that creative writing seems to offer a space for, and perhaps encourage, unconscious images to surface and be articulated. This is not to devalue the *craft* of writing. As I said in the introduction, writing demands practice. However, in order to be able to practice it is necessary to have ideas or images to work on. Unconscious images which surface in our thoughts and daydreams can provide the material we need to do this.

#### The Journey into the Unconscious.

In order to know and understand the unconscious, Jung advocates a practice called *active imagination* whereby the patient is encouraged to concentrate on, then

articulate and elaborate the images of, the imagination. This is usually done through painting or sculpture, but interestingly, Jung says it can be done through writing. As I have shown above, free writing exercises were useful triggers for parts of my novel. However, like Jung's process of active imagination, I had to work on the images that the free writing generated in order to produce prose that was more coherent and meaningful. I have said that writing is a craft that needs to be practised. In order to produce a piece of writing as substantial as a novel, images which seem significant must be worked on, perhaps many times. It is worth noting that Jung does not acknowledge Freud's distinction between a dream's apparent content and its concealed meaning. Freud describes 'what the dream actually tells us as the *manifest dream-content*, and the concealed material, which we hope to reach by pursuing the ideas that occur to the dreamer, as the *latent dream-thoughts*' (Freud 1973:150-151). It seems to me that by working on dream images (including daydreams and fantasies) it is possible to arrive at meanings that were perhaps concealed in the dream as first described. However, Jung does not treat dream images as necessarily *concealing* meanings.

Jung urges us to get to know the unconscious in order to overcome spiritual poverty and achieve self-knowledge. He says that all esoteric teachings, that is to say, all teachings that are in some way restricted, or intended for an enlightened minority, try to apprehend unseen happenings in the unconscious and claim authority over them. For example, religious images make what was originally hidden in the collective unconscious available to all. Thus, the original experience of them is lost. Similarly, the images contained in myths, as we become more familiar with them, lose their power and significance. We must recognise and accept our spiritual poverty, or what Jung terms our 'symbol-lessness' (Jung 1996:15), and search for

new symbols that contain meaning for us. The writer, Steven Saylor, touches on this search when he says that the most important rule of writing is to write the book you most want to read.

Writing a first novel takes so much effort, with such little promise of result or reward, that it must necessarily be a labour of love bordering on madness. So it was with my first novel, *Roman Blood*. I returned from my first visit to Rome with my imagination on fire. Having become addicted to crime fiction via Conan Doyle, what I most wanted to read was a book that in 1989 seemed not to exist: a murder mystery set in ancient Rome (Saylor 2002:31).

So, it seems that spiritual poverty, for the writer, is the lack of a good book. Thus we write to fill the space where our own idea of a good book should be.

Jung says that the individual's search for symbols can be traced in dreams and fantasies, citing various dreams where the dreamer meets water. Water, says Jung, is the commonest symbol for the unconscious. It acts as a mirror, reflecting us back at ourselves. Self-examination is a way to regain a lost spirituality, a way of replacing tired and empty symbols with ones that are more meaningful to us. Creating characters was, for me, a means of self-examination. As I have said above, initially I saw Rachel as my fictional self, but later I began to identify more closely with Susan. Interestingly, Jung says that looking into the mirror is not simply a matter of looking at ourselves, but looking into and beyond ourselves, in order to discover who we truly are:

whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the *persona*, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face (Jung 1996:20).

This meeting with ourselves is unpleasant, and normally we try to avoid such a confrontation. However, the persona that we confront when we *do* look beyond 'the mask of the actor' is called the shadow.

## The Shadow.

The shadow is a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with it in some form. It cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness. This problem is exceedingly difficult, because it not only challenges the whole man, but reminds him at the same time of his helplessness and ineffectuality (Jung 1996:20-21).

The shadow belongs to the personal unconscious (although it can exist in the collective unconscious and Jung does refer to it as being archetypal). At the level of the personal unconscious it functions as a gateway to the deeper, more meaningful, collective unconscious.

The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty (Jung 1996:21).

The shadow is the personification of all the things which we refuse to acknowledge about ourselves, even though we are constantly aware of them, such as inferior character traits. It can appear in projection in someone else, or personified in dreams. Jung says that the shadow has often been portrayed by poets and writers and gives the Faust-Mephistopheles relationship as an example. He does not, however, speculate on the Goethe-Mephistopheles relationship, which might be interesting in terms of this thesis, as it could be seen as an example of the writer and his articulation of his shadow. I will return to the writer's relationship with his/her shadow when I look at the function of Susan in my own work.

The shadow is a moral problem which requires great effort to overcome. 'To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real' (Jung 1959:8). This recognition is essential if we are to achieve any amount of self-knowledge. However, because it meets with resistance it has to be

worked at over a long period of time. The dark characteristics of the shadow have an emotional and possessive nature, and although the shadow can be partially assimilated into the conscious personality, there are certain features which resist moral control. These features are usually bound up with projections. Projections occur when we recognise an archetypal image in someone we meet, and Jung says that we might assume that all projections stem from the shadow. However, the shadow is always the same sex as the subject, whereas projections can refer to the opposite sex (as I will show when I discuss the anima and animus, below). It is worth noting that the shadow is knowable only at the level of the personal unconscious, where its darkness is relative to ourselves. As an archetype of the collective unconscious it becomes an absolute evil which no one has the strength to encounter.

Although the confrontation with the shadow is difficult and arduous, by meeting the challenge we can pass through into the collective unconscious and experience the reward of being at one with the world. This entails a complete reversal of consciousness:

I am utterly one with the world, so much a part of it that I forget all too easily who I really am. "Lost in oneself" is a good way of describing this state. But this self is the world, if only consciousness could see it. That is why we must know who we are (Jung 1996:22).

This idea of being at one with the world, of being part of it and becoming lost in it, of the world being simultaneously outside and within the self, seems to me to correspond very closely to the process of writing. I experienced this sense of what I would call 'receptivity', especially during the writing of the first draft of my novel. At that point, images were coming to me for the first time, quite raw, perhaps superfluous in the scheme of later drafts, but extremely powerful to me personally, in the way Jung suggests archetypal images can be. The images often seemed random and unconnected, and by the time I was writing the second draft I had abandoned



some of them and reworked others. But at the first draft stage I was less concerned with imposing a structure and more interested in getting these thoughts and imagined scenarios down on the page. This initial disregard of structure seems to indicate that the process was largely unconscious at that point, and that it became more conscious as the drafts progressed.

Images, no matter how potent they seemed at the time of writing, had to be reworked, often three or four times, until they made sense in the context of the novel. One such image was that of Susan slowly lifting the hem of her nightdress to reveal Reetha hiding underneath, afraid of the fire that is engulfing her home. This image occurred as if it was happening in the present, and at first I wondered if it was the Bruni's house that was burning down. But I had already decided that Reetha would never join Susan in Italy, so I had to make the scene into a flashback from eleven years ago. Another potent image was that of the poppies on the banking outside Rachel's window. The bright red petals are blown away to leave only the seed heads, yet these 'rattle with the promise of next year' ('Cork Dolls':244). As I worked on this, I saw that the poppies were a way of suggesting hope for the future for both Rachel and Susan. There were, however, scenes that I dropped altogether, such as Rachel's arrival at the airport. Chronologically, this fitted in, but in terms of the novel as a whole, it seemed to delay the start of the action too much. I will say more about this in Chapter Four. However, what is interesting is that the significance of these images for me did not change with rewriting, so that even where I abandoned an image, the sense of it remained and fed into the narrative.

### Anima and Animus.

Jung believes that in the unconscious of every man there is a hidden feminine personality, the *anima*, and in the unconscious of every woman there is a masculine personality, the *animus*. His primary evidence for this is biological.

It is a well-known fact that sex is determined by a majority of male or female genes, as the case may be. But the minority of genes belonging to the other sex does not simply disappear. A man therefore has in him a feminine side, an unconscious feminine figure - a fact of which he is generally quite unaware (Jung 1996:284).

The *anima* and *animus* are archetypal figures belonging to the collective unconscious. Jung says that they show connections with poetic, religious and mythological formulations, and argues that these connections are spontaneous. However, his insistence on the spontaneity of these figures is at the expense of ignoring the social and historical context, a point I will return to in Chapter Three.

*Anima* and *animus* figures are the most powerful of the dream figures. They are: 'masklike, wraithlike, without problems, lacking self-reflection, with no conflicts, no doubts, no sufferings' (Jung 1996:286). If we examine their content, that is to say, the fantasy material that makes them, we will discover many archaic and historical associations. Jung sees this as evidence that they live in the deeper layers of the unconscious: the collective unconscious. Thus they bring into our consciousness 'an unknown psychic life belonging to a remote past' (Jung 1996:286).

Jung considers the *anima* to be a powerful force in men's (not women's) unconscious:

She comes upon us just as a nixie<sup>5</sup> might; she sits on top of us like a succubus; she changes into all sorts of shapes like a witch, and in general displays an unbearable independence that does not seem at all proper in a psychic content. Occasionally she causes states of fascination that rival the

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<sup>5</sup> Water sprite.

best bewitchment, or unleashes terrors in us not to be outdone by any manifestation of the devil. She is a mischievous being who crosses our path in numerous transformations and disguises, playing all kinds of tricks on us, causing happy and unhappy delusions, depressions and ecstasies, outbursts of affect (Jung 1996:25-26).

The anima has a historical aspect and is condensed into the figures of sister, wife, mother and daughter. She is also associated with incest, and Jung quotes an untitled poem by Goethe to define her: '[y]ou were in times gone by my wife or sister' (Jung 1996:285).<sup>6</sup> However, Jung is always keen to stress the spontaneous nature of the anima, saying he has observed many cases where there was no possibility of literary influence. In mythological terms, she appears in forms such as a siren, a wood nymph, a mermaid and a succubus. But however she appears, she is both entrancing (to men) and dangerous, for she has a changeable nature and is able to control men's moods.

Although anima means soul, Jung views the idea of soul as a dogmatic concept. I have already explained Jung's belief that religion has harnessed the symbols of the unconscious and by making them available to us has weakened their power. The soul can be seen as one of these symbols. However, according to Jung, the anima is too alive to be pinned down by dogma. With her, men enter the realm of the gods: '[e]verything the anima touches becomes numinous - unconditional, dangerous, taboo, magical' (Jung 1996:28).

She makes us believe incredible things, that life may be lived. She is full of snares and traps, in order that man should fall, should reach the earth, entangle himself there, and stay caught, so that life should be lived; as Eve in the garden of Eden could not rest content until she had convinced Adam of the goodness of the forbidden apple (Jung 1996:26-27).

Jung draws on his own experiences to define the anima, but obviously, as a man, he cannot draw on personal experience to describe the animus (the masculine

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<sup>6</sup> An editor's note says that this poem appears in Goethe's *Werke*, II, p.43.

figure in women's unconscious). Although he is always at pains to stress the empirical nature of his work, there is an indication that the animus is an assumption for which he sets out to find evidence to support, as can be seen from the following:

[s]ince the anima is an archetype that is found in men, it is reasonable to suppose that an equivalent archetype must be present in women ... Whatever we have to say about these archetypes, therefore, is either directly verifiable or at least rendered probable by the facts. At the same time, I am fully aware that we are discussing pioneer work which by its very nature can only be provisional (Jung 1959:14).

Because there are so many qualifiers in the above, it seems to me that Jung was aware that his concepts would be open to question, and to change. Indeed, I will question some of his ideas in the next chapter.

Jung says that animus means mind or spirit and that it corresponds to the paternal Logos.<sup>7</sup> The anima, on the other hand, corresponds to the maternal Eros.<sup>8</sup>

Jung avoids being too specific about defining Logos and Eros, but says:

woman's consciousness is characterized more by the connective quality of Eros than by the discrimination and cognition associated with Logos. In men, Eros, the function of relationship, is usually less developed than Logos. In women, on the other hand, Eros is an expression of their true nature, while their Logos is often only a regrettable accident (Jung 1959:14).

It is almost impossible not to be struck by Jung's sexist and essentialist beliefs here, but I will save my discussion of these for the next chapter. Jung believes that Logos in women is regrettable because it is the cause of misunderstandings amongst family and friends. Logos lays claim to opinions, so the animus is characterised by a love of arguments. When the woman is animus possessed, 'no logic on earth can shake her' (Jung 1959:15).

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<sup>7</sup> In philosophy, logos means reason or rational argument, but Jung refers to it as Logos, the capital 'L' elevating it to the divine Word, the word of God.

<sup>8</sup> In Freudian theory, Eros, or 'life instinct' is the group of instincts, especially sexual and pleasurable, governing self-preservation.

The anima is seen in the male psyche as a single female figure, whereas the animus manifests itself in the female psyche as plural. Jung compares it to 'an assembly of fathers or dignitaries' (Jung:1953:205-6) who lay down incontrovertible laws and judgements. Indeed, women project their animus figures onto men who are 'either walking replicas of God himself, who know all about everything, or else ... misunderstood word-addicts' (Jung 1953:205). There is, however, a positive aspect to the animus. Through the figure of the father, the animus expresses not only conventional opinions, but also spirit. By spirit, Jung means philosophical and religious ideas, and the attitude resulting from them. So while the integrated anima can give what he describes as 'relationship and relatedness' (Jung 1959:16) to man's consciousness, the animus gives 'a capacity for reflection, deliberation, and self knowledge' (Jung 1959:16) to woman's consciousness.

### Individuation.

Encounters with archetypes, whether they be shadow, anima, animus, or any other (for as I have said, Jung views the unconscious as an illimitable field), cannot be called up at will. 'It is no use at all to learn a list of archetypes by heart. Archetypes are complexes of experience that come upon us like fate, and their effects are felt in our most personal life' (Jung 1996:30). Getting to know the unconscious is a process of discovery. There is no set path to be followed, and although certain encounters are to be expected, they are in no way mapped out. Indeed, Jung places a great deal of importance on the individual nature of experience.

Coming to terms with archetypes is often conducted in dialogue form which Jung compares to the alchemical definition of the *meditatio*: 'an inner colloquy with

one's good angel' (Jung 1996:40-41). It seems to me that the writing process could be described in similar terms, that is, as a dialogue with an inner voice, or voices. Jung says his own descriptions of archetypes are merely generalisations, and advocates describing the process as it occurs in immediate experience, where archetypes appear 'as active personalities in dreams and fantasies' (Jung 1996:38). Writing a novel offers the possibility of doing this. Indeed, as I have said above, writing is an exercise in active imagination, where an engagement with the unconscious is encouraged so that images can be worked on and elaborated.

Jung also believes that the unconscious and its relationship to consciousness can be developed, a conclusion he reached due to his interest in alchemy: '[o]nly after I had familiarised myself with alchemy did I realise that the unconscious is a *process*, and that the psyche is transformed or developed by the relationship of the ego to the contents of the unconscious' (Jung 1995:235). Normally we are unaware of this relationship. However, it is necessary to integrate the unconscious into consciousness, via a process Jung terms 'individuation'.

I use the term "individuation" to denote the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual," that is, a separate, indivisible unity or "whole." ... If unconscious processes exist at all, they must surely belong to the totality of the individual, even though they are not components of the conscious ego (Jung 1996:275).

The individuation process follows the natural course of a person's life, 'a life in which the individual becomes what he always was' (Jung 1996:40). Given what we have said about archetypes having a historical aspect, we can see that individuation is in some ways a return.

Individuation is an ongoing process, rather than something that must necessarily be completed, and although Jung advocates it as a goal, he accepts that it is an extremely difficult task. The two halves of the psyche, the ego-conscious and

the unconscious, should form a whole, but because the unconscious is unknown, it will necessarily be difficult to assimilate. 'Even if you can form a fairly complete picture of the anima and animus, this does not mean that you have plumbed the depths of the unconscious' (Jung 1996:287). What we should strive for, says Jung, is a balance.

Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too - as much of it as we can stand. This means open conflict and open collaboration at once (Jung 1996:288).

In this way, a movement towards unity is achieved. The idea of a balance between consciousness and the unconscious is one I find helpful. On the one hand the writer tries to free up his/her imagination to allow new (unconscious) images to surface, while on the other hand he/she is seeking to make (conscious) sense of them by fitting them into a narrative sequence. Thus it is possible to see that novel writing corresponds to the individuation process.

Jung says that reliance on a group or organisation does not facilitate individuation, because the individual is making no attempt to stand alone. However, he concedes that belonging to something bigger than oneself may be an important form of support:

it is really the individual's task to differentiate himself from all the others and stand on his own feet. All collective identities, such as membership in organisations, support of "isms," and so on, interfere with the fulfilment of this task. Such collective identities are crutches for the lame ... but they are equally shelters for the poor and weak ... and a mother providing nourishment and growth (Jung 1995:375).

The above seems to place Jung at odds with feminism, because feminism offers (at least theoretically) a collective identity. Nevertheless, I find what Jung is saying useful in that he suggests any sort of 'ism' should be no more than a temporary shelter. In this thesis, although I am using both Jungian and psychoanalytic feminist

theory, the application of these theories is informed by my own writing experience.

However, before I begin to analyse my own work, and that of Michèle Roberts, I want to consider some feminist revisions of Jung's ideas.



### **Chapter 3: Feminist Archetypal Theory.**

It is Jung's view of the unconscious as a source of creativity which, as a writer, I find appealing. As I have shown, writers often find it difficult to explain where the ideas in their fiction come from. Before I read Jung, all I could say about the characters and events in my novel was that I felt compelled to write about them, although I could not explain why this was. Jungian theory offers an explanation of why certain thoughts and images are potent to us, and therefore is useful as a means of examining not only the finished text, but also the process of writing. However, as Demaris Wehr points out:

[t]he infiltration of Jung's cultural and gender bias is deep enough that analytical psychology, as a body of theory, does not contain an adequate definition of women and the feminine on terms that substantiate women's "consciousness-raised" experience (Wehr 1998:99).

Therefore, in order to use Jungian theory for an enquiry into women's writing, I will first of all examine the limitations of this theory in defining women and their experience.

#### **Archetypes.**

I have suggested that novel writing can be viewed in terms of individuation because it involves the conscious development of unconscious images. Individuation requires that we engage with archetypal images, but one of the difficulties for the critic is that Jung often blurs the distinction between the archetype and the archetypal image. Analytical psychologists such as June Singer think it is important to beware of losing sight of the difference between the two concepts.

It seems to me that the archetype in and of itself is an "ideal form" ... and that it is impossible to visualize or imagine the archetype. It is pure form - a vessel into which the contents of a culture may be poured and then appear as a collective image, or into which personal contents may be poured and a personal image thus formed upon which we may project our own highly charged emotional fantasies (Singer 1977:60).

Annis Pratt, on the other hand, says that she is 'not willing to separate the archetype from its expression in images, to divorce concepts from life' (Pratt 1985:100). This refusal to separate ideas from experience seems to me to mark the feminist intervention into archetypal theory, introducing a political dimension to Jung's theories. As Wehr says, Jungian psychology's view of humans is almost without context; archetypal factors that transcend time and space are the main forces shaping the individual personality. The problem with this is that when looking at women's experience, many of Jung's followers do not recognise the effects of living in patriarchal society as forces shaping women's development.

Another difficulty with archetypal criticism is how to define the archetype as distinct from the stereotype. This problem is addressed by Pratt who has studied recurrent patterns in women's literature. She says that these patterns constitute archetypal images, rather than stereotypes, because they are 'literary forms that derive from unconscious originals' (Pratt 1982:3). Stereotypes eventually grow stale and become clichés. In the case of archetypes however, Pratt argues that Jung does not see them as fixed absolutes, but as fluid. This fluidity allows for a variety of perceptions:

not only from culture to culture but even within a given culture or the mind of a single individual. Archetypes thus constitute images, symbols, and narrative patterns that differ from stereotypes in being complex variables, subject to variations in perceptions (Pratt 1982:4).

Pratt says that archetypal narratives endure because they express perennial dilemmas, yet she also points out that the nature of the dilemma can change through

retelling. She says that the interpreter must avoid his/her own situation distorting the interpretation, but I would say that this is a difficult, perhaps impossible, task; cultural biases are often so deeply embedded that we are not aware of the influence they exert. What might be more helpful is for the interpreter to accept that he/she has certain biases, and look at how this might influence the analysis. Thus, the feminist archetypal critic will occupy a different standpoint to the traditional Jungian analyst. And because of the multiple feminisms that are available, feminist archetypal criticism may have a variety of viewpoints. My own approach to archetypal theory is one that takes into account both psychoanalytic feminist theory, and also the experience of my own writing. Pratt describes such interdisciplinary approaches as 'spinning among fields' of enquiry (Pratt 1985:94).

Pratt considers archetypal patterns to represent 'categories of particulars' (Pratt 1982:5) which can be described as they relate to each other within a text, or within a group of texts. To see them as preordained and unchanging would distort a literary analysis: 'one must not deduce categories down *into* a body of material but induce them *from* images, symbols and narrative patterns observed in a significantly various selection of literary works' (Pratt 1982:5). Pratt finds that archetypal patterns in women's literature differ from the patterns described by Jung and his followers (I will look her study of the quest narrative below). Thus she suggests that to use existing Jungian theory and treat it as unchangeable is to impose a reading that denies the 'otherness' of women in Western culture.

Similarly, Naomi Goldenberg sees the idea of the archetype as a tool employed by patriarchal society to subjugate women. 'We are told that we women are the way we are because we are conforming to something out there, an archetype which can never change' (Goldenberg 1977a:15). Critics such as Edward Whitmont

have criticised Goldenberg for misinterpreting Jung here. Whitmont stresses that '[a]rchetypes are not ideal objective fixed patterns' (Whitmont 1977:58). However, it seems to me that Goldenberg is not *misinterpreting* the concept but *reinterpreting* it. She is not insisting that archetypes are unchanging, but that it has been in the interests of patriarchy to portray them as fixed ideals in order to maintain the balance of power in society in favour of men. Referring specifically to the anima and animus, Christopher Hauke recommends that we treat the concept of the archetype as more malleable, 'more plastic in the hands of the user' (Hauke 2000:117). This is precisely what Goldenberg and other feminist archetypal theorists are doing.

Goldenberg identifies two major tendencies in Jung's thinking concerning archetypes. The first, as I have outlined above, separates the archetype from its expression in images. Goldenberg says this separation is detrimental to women because it makes them see archetypes 'as ideal patterns "out there." Hence, dreams, fantasies, stories "in here" are inferior copies' (Goldenberg 1977a:16). The second line of Jung's thinking is the one that she finds more fruitful. If the archetype is linked to the image, greater emphasis can be placed on what is happening in individual psyches. Thus, '[e]ach fantasy, dream, or life story becomes archetypal' (Goldenberg 1977a:16). For me, the value of this approach is that it allows me to place a greater importance on my own work. Through the process of writing I have shaped certain ideas that have a particular resonance for me. They may not have the same resonance for others, and neither are they available to others because 'Cork Dolls' remains unpublished. However, with Goldenberg's approach it becomes equally legitimate to work on these personal images as it is to work on images that are more widely available in our culture (for example, through literature, myths and folktales).

### Binary opposites.

I mentioned, above, that Pratt finds Jungian theory problematic because it denies the Otherness of women in Western culture. Perhaps Other is not the most accurate term, for Jung's work actually relies on a series of assumptions about woman as Other. Cixous' critique of binary opposition, which I discussed in the previous chapter, shows how, in patriarchal society, women are always identified with the inferior opposite. Cixous says that rigid binary opposition prevents any union or exchange between the sexes. We can see how this works in Jungian theory if we examine the concepts of Eros and Logos.

Jung claims that men lack Eros (a connective quality) while women lack Logos (a discriminating and cognitive quality), so although men are considered less capable at relationships, women are less capable at thinking. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, for Jung, Logos in women is 'often only a regrettable accident' (Jung 1959:14). Goldenberg points out that while this asserts that men have control over their Logos activities, it not only denies women control of theirs, but discourages them from developing their Logos function by implying that they would be going against their inherent nature. She says that although Jung values the feminine and Eros, he wants women to remain in their sphere, something borne out by Jung's claim that, 'by taking up a masculine profession, studying and working like a man, woman is doing something not wholly in accord with, if not directly injurious to her feminine nature' (Jung 1964:117).

As I have shown in Chapter One, Cixous also criticises the way binary oppositions function to maintain patriarchy. She says that to counter this, women must invent a new history by putting their sexual pleasure into writing. It is not

enough to write from one's own sex; an attempt must be made to incorporate both self and Other. The Other is the nurturing mother and to locate her is to learn to love oneself: 'to give me my self as myself' (Cixous 1981b:252). Cixous also says that the locus of the Other hidden in women's bodies is akin to bisexuality. Bisexuality, for Cixous, is the presence of both sexes within oneself and the exclusion of neither. In Jungian theory, the shadow can be seen as a same sex Other, while the anima or animus can be termed a contrasexual Other. Jung, however, does not see them as Others, but as unconscious aspects of the self which must be integrated into consciousness. Despite this, the idea of the Other can be seen as a point where the ideas of Jung and Cixous converge. Indeed, Susan Rowland (2002) says binary opposition constitutes a point where a dialogue between Jung and Cixous can begin. It is worth noting that in *Jung: A Feminist Revision* (2002), Rowland considers the relationship of both French psychoanalytic theory, and feminist archetypal theory, to traditional Jungian theory. However, where my thesis differs from her work is in its emphasis on the writing process, which necessarily impacts on my readings of both text and theory, as I will show in later chapters.

### The Shadow From a Feminist Perspective.

Jung's description of the shadow has racist overtones.<sup>9</sup> For instance, he describes the demon (a variant of the shadow archetype) as the 'dark half of the personality' (Jung 1953:94) and also as 'dark-skinned and of mongoloid type' (Jung 1953:95). Robin Robertson (1992) defends Jung by saying that just as shadow issues are represented

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley Grossman (1999) says: '[a]s far as race is concerned it would be more accurate to say that there were some racist components in his [Jung's] thought rather than to characterize its orientation as racist' (1999:117).

in the dreams of Caucasians by black figures, Caucasians represent the Shadow for black people. However, he does not support this with any evidence.

Hauke, drawing on the work of Warren Coleman, shows how the status of women and the shadow are linked. Hauke says Coleman's post-Jungian perspective 'emphasises how what is kept for ego and what is abandoned or despised as other, is not neutral or accidental but arises as a result of what the culture will or will not support' (Hauke 2000:133). So, the shadow may be experienced as something dark, but its darkness is representative of what our culture deems other. Indeed, although the shadow belongs to the personal unconscious, it can be a collective phenomenon, expressed as the devil or a witch for example.<sup>10</sup>

Because the shadow is partly linked to societal repression, critics such as Wehr have suggested that women encounter more difficulties when it comes to its confrontation. Interestingly, like the shadow, Jung links women to darkness. For example, he says '[t]he unconscious is the mother of consciousness' (Jung 1996:281) and that fragments of consciousness emerge 'from the total darkness of mere instinctuality' (Jung 1996:281). His point is that man is never entirely free of his primeval past, but what he is also doing is equating the mother with what is dark and instinctive. This tendency to feminize the unknown, the dark, the instinctual, is also apparent in his formulation of the anima, which I will now go on to examine in more detail.

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<sup>10</sup> See Frieda Fordham (1991). Note that Fordham is not a feminist critic.

### Jung's Formulation of the Anima.

Jung claims that the anima, like all figures of the unconscious, is a spontaneous manifestation. However, there are certain aspects of his relations with women, especially his mother, which are interesting to look at in conjunction with this.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, although he attributes aspects of his relations with women to anima projection, it is possible to argue that the anima is not a pre-existent unconscious figure, but the result of men's perception and treatment of women in patriarchal society.

In his childhood, Jung recollects his mother being hospitalised, for reasons he later attributes to difficulties in his parent's marriage. He says he was deeply troubled by the absence of his mother. 'The feeling I associated with "woman" was for a long time that of innate unreliability. "Father," on the other hand, meant reliability and - powerlessness. That is the handicap I started off with' (Jung 1995:23). If, for Jung, reliability is connected with powerlessness, then perhaps he saw his mother's 'innate unreliability' as a source of power. Indeed, he sees her unreliability in terms of the anima, which he describes as a powerful figure in man's unconscious. However, it is just as easy to argue that his mother was unreliable because she was constrained by social convention, and that this had a direct influence on what he later formulated as archetypal. I will return to this below when I look at Jung's idea that his mother had two personalities.

Jung claims that the maid who looked after him while his mother was away had a dual nature. Because she had dark hair and an olive complexion she was

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<sup>11</sup> Sonu Shamdasani (1999) informs us that Jung's affair with Sabina Spielrein may also have influenced his formulation of the anima.



physically very different from his mother, yet she took over his mother's role in caring for him. Thus he found her 'very strange and yet strangely familiar' (Jung 1995:23). Later, the maid becomes a component of Jung's anima. 'The feeling of strangeness which she conveyed, and yet of having known her always, was a characteristic of that figure which later came to symbolise for me the whole essence of womanhood' (Jung 1995:23). As I have shown in Chapter One, de Beauvoir says that women willingly ally themselves with the role of other because, although it may be demeaning, it offers them material protection. However, women who assume this position forfeit their freedom. Irigaray, on the other hand, calls for women to recognise that they are not simply other, but infinitely Other: ' "She" is indefinitely other in herself' (Irigaray 1981a:103). If women can realise this multiple Otherness they can counter the weight of patriarchal thinking. I will consider this point in more detail in Chapter Six when I discuss Roberts' novel, *The Looking Glass*.

Perhaps it is impossible to tell, from childhood recollections, whether the women who surrounded Jung caused him to formulate the anima figure in a certain way, for any archetype is shaped by our personal experience. However, what *is* apparent is that Jung treats women and the anima as being almost interchangeable. Thus, the feeling of strangeness he experiences comes to symbolise 'the whole essence of womanhood'.

The ease with which women's socially determined behaviour can be confused with archetypal traits is illustrated by the following, where Jung recalls that his mother seemed to have two personalities:

[she] liked to talk, and her chatter was like the gay splashing of a fountain. She had a decided literary gift, as well as taste and depth. But this quality never properly emerged ... She held all the conventional opinions a person was obliged to have, but then her unconscious personality would suddenly put in an appearance. That personality was unexpectedly powerful: a

sombre, imposing figure possessed of unassailable authority (Jung 1995:65-66).

Jung does not appear to consider that his mother might have held conventional opinions because that was what was expected of her, that if she did venture to have her own view on something it would immediately seem both shocking and powerful. The ability of his mother to surprise him was reinforced when she gave birth to his sister when he was nine years old. Jung did not know that his mother was expecting, and the shock of the new arrival convinced him that his mother had 'once again done something I was supposed not to know about' (Jung 1995:41).

Of course, much of the above is anecdotal and, as Sonu Shamdasani (1999) has commented, there is a heavy editorial presence in Jung's supposed autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1995), which I have drawn on for much of the above information. However, the editorial influence is perhaps more significant in terms of what has been left out. Therefore, I maintain that Jung's description of the anima can be seen not as an illumination of the male unconscious, so much as a description of the position of women in patriarchal society.

### Masculine and Feminine.

Pratt says that Jung's definitions of masculine and feminine are to blame for the inconsistencies in his theory of archetypes, for although the anima and animus are archetypes, fluid and open to varying perceptions, they contain rigid gender definitions: 'as the anima produces *moods*, so the animus produces *opinions*; and as the moods of a man issue from a shadowy background, so the opinions of a woman rest on equally unconscious prior assumptions' (Jung 1953:205). Estella Lauter says it is not clear why, in a society which values the male, the masculine principle in

women should be discredited. I think the answer to this is that in women, the masculine principle is not perceived to be able to function to its full potential, therefore it is not the masculine principle which is being devalued, but the woman's possession of it.

Part of the source of the anima's power is her numinosity, her link with the sacred. Wehr says that in order to have a clearer understanding of archetypal images, there is a need to separate them from their religious dimension and place them in their social context. She says that both Jung and his followers tend to elevate men's fear of women until it becomes almost mythical, and cites Whitmont (1979), who says: '[f]ear and attraction, in fact, always go together in the confrontation of the world of the absolutely other, the other sex' (Whitmont cited in Wehr 1988:110). This gives confusing messages to women, who while being told they are powerful, experience themselves as powerless. Although I agree with Wehr's criticism, I think her argument is somewhat reductive in that she makes no allowance for the existence of powerful women (or powerless men). Wehr suggests that Jung's concept of the anima might be viewed as a step towards the recognition of a feminine side in men. However, Pratt argues that this fails to benefit women, because although woman is Eros to the male, the woman herself has no 'erotic other' (Pratt 1982:8) to which she can relate. It is this absence of the female erotic which Cixous recognises when she calls for women to invent a history for themselves by writing their sexual pleasure, and again, I will return to this when I discuss Roberts' novel, *The Looking Glass*.

Even if we agree with Jung's reasoning that a minority of female genes are responsible for the development of the anima figure in a man (and the animus in a woman), this does not explain why the anima is a 'feminine' personality. The problem is that Jung tends to elide the terms 'female' and 'feminine'. Thus, socially

determined aspects of women's behaviour, and biologically determined characteristics of being female, become one in the same thing.

Toni Wolff, Jung's mistress and collaborator, developed a representation of four archetypal forms of the feminine.<sup>12</sup> Like Jung's typology (which names four basic psychological functions in order to explain character differences: thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition), in Wolff's system, 'mother' and 'hetaira' (eternal companion) are opposed, as are 'medium' and 'amazon'. The figures of the mother and the hetaira appear in the sphere of intimate relationships, while the amazon and the medial woman appear in reference to the social world. It is feminist revisions of these archetypal images of the feminine which have influenced Roberts' writing, as I will show in later chapters.

Carol Christ says that the Jungian model of the feminine can appear attractive, especially to those 'who are interested in women's experience and spirituality and the contributions it can make to the reformulation of cultural myths and symbols' (Christ 1977:67). The problem is that for many Jungians, 'the "feminine" refers to a secondary and compensatory aspect of the male psyche and is derived from the analysis of myths and literatures created by males' (Christ 1977:66). Goldenberg says that rather than labelling a basic drive 'male' or female', it is more important 'to recognize that the same force is a prime impetus in human libido' (Goldenberg 1977a:15). In other words, archetypes should not be seen as gender specific at all. Thus, the anima, for example, would become an image available to both men and women.

Christ takes a slightly different approach to Goldenberg, claiming that the value of the anima/animus theory is in 'its considerable insight into the psyches and

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<sup>12</sup> Lauter (1985) directs us to Toni Wolff (1956).

psychic tasks of educated (and culture-creating) white males in Western culture' (Christ 1977:68). She suggests that women may use the model not because it is useful as a means of understanding themselves, but to enable them to understand both the 'men with whom they interact, and the male culture in which they participate' (Christ 1977:68). In order to understand women's experience more fully, Christ advocates studying the 'literature, dreams, and myths produced by women *on their own terms*' (Christ 1977:69). This would allow the emergence of 'a theory of a distinctive mode of consciousness and selfhood in women' (Christ 1977:69). This, in part, describes the aim of this thesis. However, although I have written my own novel, whether I have produced it *on my own terms* is questionable, for, as I pointed out when discussing Pratt's interpretation of archetypes, it is impossible for either men or women to free themselves from the culture they live in.

In the following section I will look at a number of case studies in order to examine how Jungian theory can be used to discuss women's creativity. I have already said that the work of Freud is more widely used in literary criticism than the work of Jung. Because of the lack of case studies which analyse women's writing, I also draw on other aspects of women's creativity which have been examined using Jungian and feminist archetypal theory.

### What Case Studies Can Show Us.

Lauter stresses the importance of context when looking at archetypes. In her research into visual art by women, she examines the image of the mother, an image that has been 'solidified, perhaps more than any other' (Lauter 1985:50) by Erich Neumann.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lauter refers to Neumann (1972).

Lauter finds that in women's art, the mother appears to be more vulnerable than Neumann's description suggests, both in her relationship to children, and in her body, 'particularly in the so-called "mysteries" of menstruation, parturition, and lactation' (Lauter 1985:56). Also, where she exhibits strength, it is 'without being "terrible" ' (Lauter 1985:56). This leads Lauter to call for a new line of enquiry. Rather than abandoning the archetype as a concept, she says we need to acknowledge tendencies to form different types of archetypal image. As long as we are careful not to reify them or keep them static, the archetype can act as a means of organising history, thus allowing 'a new perspective on women to emerge' (Lauter 1985:60).

As well as looking at images of the mother in women's art, Lauter also examines images of female independence. She says that '[t]he medial woman (or medium) is the figure Toni Wolff intends to be relevant to the woman artist' (Lauter 1985:74). The medial woman dedicates herself to the spirit of her age. However, for Wolff, this can also mean devoting herself to the work of a man. Lauter says this corresponds more with the image of the muse than the woman artist. She looks at the figure of the amazon to see if she is more relevant to her study. The amazon is 'independent and self contained; her development is not based on a psychological relationship with a man' (Lauter 1985:74). However, Wolff's description carries connotations of woman as warrior, and female independence as threatening to personal relationships. Due to the inadequacy of these images, Lauter says it is important to search for new ones, and suggests that future study might benefit from looking at the goddesses of ancient civilisation.

Goddesses have already begun to be used in archetypal psychology, for example, in Mary Esther Harding's *Woman's Mysteries, Ancient and Modern* (1971). Lauter sees the study of ancient goddesses as being a means to understanding what

she terms the 'enduring aspects of the feminine' (Lauter 1985:75). Rowland terms this area of study 'Jungian goddess feminism' (Rowland 2002:68) and says it offers 'opportunities for feminine fictions of empowerment and agency' (Rowland 2002:68). However, Hauke argues that promoting the idea of a golden age of the feminine is regressive. Instead, he suggests that women should re-evaluate their position as Other: 'it is as the Other that women are aligned with a variety of Others, via the feminine, but it is a mistake to find in this anything about what is essential in women themselves' (Hauke 2000:122). Hauke supports his view with the work of Andrew Samuels. Samuels criticises both the essentialism in Jung's theories and the way Jungian feminists' celebration of the feminine has taken on a privileged tone. As an alternative, Samuels suggests that we celebrate difference.

Not what differences between women and men there are, or have always been; if we pursue that, we end up captured by our captivation and obsession with myth and with the eternal, part of the legacy from Jung. I am interested in *what difference is like*, what the experience of difference is like ... Not what a woman *is*, but what being a woman is *like*. Not the archetypal structuring of woman's world but woman's personal experience in today's world. Not the *meaning* of a woman's life but her *experience* of her life (Samuels 1989:97).

I find the importance which Samuels places on difference helpful. Writing is an expression of difference. Of course, it could be argued, as Mullan (2002) does, that the publishing process irons out difference. However, the novel component of this thesis is not dependent on publication for validation, so the expression of difference is preserved.

Wehr says that Emma Jung, Jung's wife, wrote about women's psychology and the animus with more regard for women's issues than Jung himself. According to Emma Jung, the animus has four expressions: power, deed, word and meaning. All these expressions are characterised by male archetypal images. However, like Wolff's model, the fact that there are only four categories immediately constrains the

notion of difference that Samuels proposes. According to Emma Jung, integration of the masculine in women is possible, especially the 'heroic' aspects of masculinity: power and deed. But where integration has failed and masculine behaviour has taken over, women are 'over-energetic, ruthless, brutal men-women ... not only active but aggressive' (Jung 1987:4).

Interestingly, Lauter finds that the animus concept 'is neither clear nor clearly manifested in works [of art] by women' (Lauter 1985:62). She says that men are not so important to women, as subjects for art, as women have traditionally been for men. Certainly, women do not seem to use portraits of men as a means of representing their own inner lives, and when they do portray men, they employ techniques of realism rather than self expression. Because of this, Lauter concludes that Emma Jung's formulation of the animus 'as an internal spiritual guide comparable to the anima in the male ... is virtually nonexistent in women's art' (Lauter 1985:71). She advocates cutting free from the animus concept in order to allow other patterns to become apparent. One of the patterns she finds in her own study is that of male frailty, which leads her to suggest that the result of abandoning the animus concept might be both a redefinition of the masculine, and a reformulation of the model of the masculine within woman.

Carol Schreier Rupprecht says that although some feminists see claims of universal psychic patterns as simply a means to legitimate the gender imbalance of patriarchal society, to ignore psychic patterns entirely causes women to be cut off from sources of unconscious energy which could benefit them.

The unconscious is a generative system with its own energies that operate with some degree of independence from the conscious mechanisms of the psyche. Using Jung's theory, thus, it is not difficult to justify the search for a "female imaginary" (Lauter and Schreier Rupprecht 1985:224).



In a later essay, Schreier Rupprecht clarifies her use of the term 'female imaginary', describing it as 'woman's psyche and all its creations, from the primarily unconscious dreams to the primarily conscious literary texts' (1990:285). It is interesting that Schreier Rupprecht sees women's writing as 'primarily conscious'. Although I accept that the finished text is shaped by conscious processes, I believe it is unconscious images that surface to feed our writing.

Pratt calls the inclusive approach, as taken by Schreier Rupprecht, 'unconsciousness raising' (Pratt 1985:95).<sup>14</sup> In Pratt's own study of British and American novels between 1700 and 1978, she notes a relationship between 'the ideal and the real' (Pratt 1985:95), which she finds particularly interesting. On the one hand there is conservatism, even in works by feminist writers, with characters appearing to accommodate gender norms. On the other hand, there are strands woven into the texts which seem to contradict prescribed patriarchal roles. Pratt examines how men's and women's archetypal experiences differ by looking at the narrative pattern of the rebirth quest or journey in women's literature. She says that in Jung's (1956) description, the male hero journeys from consciousness (society) to unconsciousness (a realm outside society). During this journey he will encounter the shadow, which at first represents antisocial tendencies, but as he goes from the personal to the collective unconscious, the shadow merges with his feminine self, the anima.

The crux of the adventure is the hero's struggle with this powerful feminine component of himself; his goal is to absorb her import, master her autonomous control over his impulses, and then return, a reborn psyche, to everyday life (Pratt 1985:102).

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<sup>14</sup> Pratt explains, '[i]f in the early years of the new feminist movement, consciousness-raising, or becoming aware of gender roles, was the primary task, in recent years "unconsciousness-raising" has assumed equal importance' (1985:95).

Pratt suggests that male figures in women's quests represent the shadow. 'Women's shadows are socially conformist, incorporating women's self-loathing for their deviations from social norms, specifically the norms of femininity' (Pratt 1985:103). However, I am not sure that I agree with Pratt's interpretation, because to suggest that women's shadow figures are male contradicts Jung's idea that the shadow is a same sex figure. Confrontation with the figure Pratt identifies often forces the woman to comply with social standards, cutting her journey short. Where this happens, the heroine is unable to go further than the personal unconscious. She 'falls into madness, determines to commit suicide, or lapses into a zombielike state that precludes further development' (Pratt 1985:104).

Pratt does find some novels where women characters overcome this 'animus-shadow block' (Pratt 1985:104). When this is the case, the rebirth journey follows the narrative line of the Demeter/ Persephone myth.<sup>15</sup> Heroines who progress to the centre of their quest often encounter powerful mother figures who offer regeneration. Indeed, the heroine herself can become the generative mother. However, this does not mean that the woman's journey ends by leading her back to society. Rather, it tends to leave her on the edge of it, cast out of the community.

Coline Covington's study offers a slightly different interpretation of the heroine and her journey, although it is important to note that she is not studying women's writing, but Grimm's fairytale, 'The Handless Maiden'. In this story, the miller cuts off his daughter's hands as a punishment for her refusal to marry the Evil One. The girl flees, and meets the king, who marries her and has a pair of silver

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<sup>15</sup> Pratt explains that Demeter's daughter, Persephone, is seized by Pluto, god of the underworld. Because she is refused help to regain her daughter, Demeter will not allow vegetation to grow on the earth. When she does finally manage to raise Persephone, she can only have her for the spring and summer months; Persephone must return to Pluto for the other half of the year. Pratt says that Jung found this narrative to be specifically feminine, taking this as an indication that he recognises the female psyche differs from that of the male.

hands made for her. She bears him a child, but the Evil One interferes and causes the king to order the murder of his wife and child. In order to avoid his decree, the miller's daughter flees to the forest with her child and is looked after by another woman for seven years, during which time her hands grow back.

Covington interprets the girl's time in the forest in terms of the process of individuation. The handlessness marks her out for dependency, a dependency from which she escapes through transformation.

Just as the hero has to be able to imagine something other or different in order to be able to separate, the heroine must imagine what is within, to reintegrate matter, and in this way to regain her connection to the world outside. Without the capacity to imagine, the split cannot be resolved and no integration can take place (Covington 1989:251).

What is interesting about Covington's analysis is her emphasis on the importance of the female imagination to transform and reintegrate. Covington says that autonomy, for the heroine, is achieved not through going out into the world, as the male hero does, but through withdrawing into the forest, during which time her hands grow back, enabling her to function properly again. However, 'The Handless Maiden' can also be seen as an example of the way in which, in patriarchal society, women are viewed as passive rather than active. Covington is quite right to say that the heroine does not achieve autonomy by going out into the world, but we need to ask whether the maiden's withdrawal is an act of self-determination, or whether it is socially imposed. It seems to me that it is possible to read the maiden's retreat as an acceptance of the role of other in patriarchal society, which, as de Beauvoir suggests, is at the expense of her liberty. Yet whether this passivity is self, or culturally determined, Covington is nevertheless interpreting it as a means by which women can achieve autonomy. This is similar to Pratt's finding that, in the work of women writers, there is a negotiation between the real and the ideal. Pratt also says that

heroines who progress on their quest often encounter mother figures, or become generative mothers themselves. The story of the handless maiden, although not written by a woman, can be understood in this way. Not only do the maiden's hands grow back when she retreats from the world, but in the version of the tale discussed by Robert Johnson (1993), the restoration of her hands allows her to save her baby from drowning in a stream.

So far, I have examined a series of case studies to find out what Jungian theory and feminist revisions of that theory might offer in terms of an enquiry into women's writing. What I want to do now is examine my own novel using Jungian and feminist theory, with particular focus on the *process* of writing.

#### Chapter 4: Analysis of 'Cork Dolls'.

In this thesis, I have considered the position of women in patriarchal society and how creativity might be a means by which women can question patriarchal thought. What follows are the case studies of my novel, 'Cork Dolls', and the novels *Flesh and Blood* and *The Looking Glass* by Michèle Roberts. Because I am interested in examining the creative process as well as the finished text, I am placing the analysis of my own novel before my work on Roberts. Writing 'Cork Dolls' has given me a unique insight into the writing process and by examining this first, I am able to show how it affects my critical approach.

Also, by placing the chapter on my own work at the central point in this thesis, it acts as a link between the theoretical issues I have looked at in the first three chapters, and the analysis of women's writing that follows. Creative writing and academic practice tend to be seen as separate disciplines, and one of the tasks of this thesis is to negotiate the divisions between them. By including my own writing, and my experience of producing that writing, as part of this study, I am not only asserting the importance of personal experience, but also trying a new strategy for PhD research. Rachel Blau DuPlessis says: 'it has seemed crucial for feminist writing to reexamine and claim the innovative writing strategies for which our century is noted, turning collage, heteroglossia, intergenres, and self-reflexivity (to name just some) to our uses' (Blau DuPlessis 1990:viii). The inclusion of my own novel in this study, and the reflection on my own creative practice, can be seen as arising out of this necessity for feminist enquiry to be innovative. It is important to point out that I do not see my examination of my own writing, and that of Roberts, as separate. In fact,

there are many points where the work overlaps. For example, Roberts describes novel writing as rehearsing the process of having a nervous breakdown:

because to write it [the novel] you not only set out to destroy previous structures of language, and therefore thinking, but you're simultaneously somehow destroying your own psychic makeup ... So you go through a period of complete disintegration and complete chaos and you feel mad ... disintegrating, flying apart. It's terrifying but it's the only way I can write (Roberts 2002: pers.comm.).

I very much identify with what Roberts is saying here, particularly the idea of chaos and confusion which seems somehow necessary to the writing process. When I began my novel, the process did indeed seem chaotic because there were so many ideas I wanted to include. I would suggest that this chaos stems from the unconscious side of the process. Shaping and structuring the narrative, on the other hand, seemed to involve more conscious decisions. Pat Barker says that structuring the narrative is a more unconscious process than we realise, that the 'structure is the gift of the unconscious mind' (Barker 2000: 40). However, I found the structuring to be largely conscious. For instance, I was more aware of the decisions I made regarding the structure, and I felt I had more control over it than I did over the images that fed the writing.

In this chapter I will look at both the conscious and unconscious aspects of my work, using Jungian and feminist theory, and my reading of other writers, to inform my discussion.

### The Beginnings of 'Cork Dolls'.

From the very start of this thesis I knew I wanted to write a book about my experiences in Sicily, where I had worked as an au pair some years ago. Yet I also wanted to do something different to my M.A. Writing submission, which was a novel

written in the first person focusing almost exclusively on a single main character. To move away from this I decided to write my new novel in the third person. Another conscious decision I made was that the prose should be more lyrical and descriptive than it had been in my previous work. What is interesting is that although I made these conscious decisions, when I began 'Cork Dolls', ideas seemed to come to mind without invitation. It was as though they were already there, waiting to be examined. I called my main character Rachel, and wanted her to represent myself in the story, but I soon had ideas for her which were not autobiographical and did not seem to be related to my experience.

One of the strongest images that came to mind was Rachel's arrival in Sicily. This seemed more ominous than my own arrival, and as soon as I started to spend time writing about it, a host of other ideas and characters crowded in. I think this uninvited gathering of images corresponds to what Roberts describes as 'chaos'. Many of the images were out of sequence or seemed unrelated to my original idea, so I wrote them without knowing whether they were part of the novel or not. Rachel's arrival was something I worked on for quite some time, although it does not appear in the final draft because later I decided that the novel should start from Susan's point of view. Also, I felt Rachel's apprehension could be used to better effect elsewhere, such as specific scenes with the children, Susan, and Signor Bruni. However, the following is a passage from the very first draft, before any changes were made:

Rachel felt awkward sitting next to him [Signor Bruni] in the car. The seat was padded so hard it wouldn't let her sink in. It left her on the surface, an outsider. And she was conscious of her legs, waxy white, itching and sweating against the gold-beige draylon.

She hadn't been prepared for the pillow of heat that had puffed up against her as she came down the steps of the aeroplane. A sack of feathers, warm and stuffy, pressing against her face, warmer and warmer with every step down. For a moment she'd actually wanted to run, clank clank, metal tipped heels sparking, back into the body of the plane. Back to the security of air conditioning and English instructions behind the seats. But there was the

weight of passengers behind her, stretching and yawning in the heat, nudging their knees into her back, *come on, scusi, permesso*, shoving at her, forcing her down step by step until her spiky shoes stuck into the soft tarmac of the runway. Her first disconcerting steps on Italian soil. Like walking on a mattress.

Despite having edited out this passage so it no longer appears in the final draft, the theme of being a stranger in a new country has remained central to the novel. Both Rachel and Susan are outsiders, trying to make a life for themselves in a country which is not their own. This idea of not belonging, of difference, seems to dominate much of what I was writing at the beginning. It led me to explore both Rachel and Susan's situations, what living in a strange place might do to them, how it might affect their behaviour.

Jung says that archetypal images are shaped by individual experience. As I have said above, I had worked as an au pair in Sicily, so I have no doubt that the sense of displacement was influenced by my own experience. But the writing seemed to go beyond this, to move away from autobiography and into an imaginary realm. In the first draft, when Rachel arrives at the house, everything intimidates her. The plants and animals, even Signor Bruni, are all outside her experience. Perhaps they were strange to me when I arrived too, but I do not recall being wary of my surroundings in the way that Rachel is. Again, this section does not appear in the final draft:

inside the gate a row of steps led straight up, furred with moss and scaly lichen at the edges, worn to smooth dips in the middle. Years of people had passed this way. Spiteful plants poked over the wall at each side preventing Rachel from putting her hand out for support, and somewhere in the undergrowth of dead cactus, something slithered.

'That eese gecko.' Signor Bruni pointed. 'Ow say you? Lizard?'

She was torn between horror at knowing there were lizards in the undergrowth, and the fact that Signor Bruni knew the word for lizard. A dog started to bark. Rachel couldn't see it but it sounded fairly close. She hesitated but Signor Bruni signalled for her to keep going. She placed her feet carefully, her high heels so impractical for these narrow little steps. It was getting dark. Above her, the night clouds were squeezing every last



drop of daylight out towards the edges of the sky. She couldn't read the time on her watch anymore.

Although I sensed that the house contained some sort of danger or difficulty for Rachel, at this point in the writing I did not know what this would be. I knew she did not fit into her new surroundings, and I had a vague idea that she had trouble communicating with the other people in the house: Signor and Signora Bruni, the children, the housekeeper. However, my ideas were very general and much of what I was writing lacked tension. This changed when I started to look more closely at the Brunis' housekeeper.

For the housekeeper, I created a Filipino character, Susan. She sprang to life from a free writing exercise, but initially there were some conscious decisions involved in her creation. For one thing, I wanted a housekeeper in the story, but I wanted to make sure she bore no relation to the housekeeper I had actually worked with. It was for this reason that I decided she should be from the Philippines (I had met many Filipino housekeepers and maids during my time as an au pair in Sicily). I also wanted her to be physically very different from Rachel. Obviously, a Filipino woman would have dark skin and hair, in contrast to Rachel who is blonde. Although I did not realise it at the time, when I decided Susan should be from the Philippines, I was immediately forcing myself to use my imagination in a different way, making myself step inside another skin. It could be argued that I had to do this with other characters too (Signora Bruni for example) yet I found Susan was by far the most powerful. Although making Susan have a dark physical appearance seemed to be a conscious decision, I now see it as being informed by an unconscious image of darkness which encompasses both Susan's physical appearance, and her cultural difference. As I have said in Chapter Three, Christopher Hauke says that what is deemed Other is not accidental, but the result of what our culture refuses to support.

Although I was unaware of it at the time, in my decision to make Susan physically different from Rachel I was also placing her in the position of Other, both to Rachel and to myself. I will return to this below when I examine the unconscious images that fed into my work.

For now, however, I wish to examine, in more detail, the conscious decisions I made regarding Susan. One decision was to give her a European name. Many of the Filipino housekeepers and maids I met during my time as an au pair had English or Italian names. In 'Cork Dolls', an American teacher gives Susan her name, and although this is to help her and her classmates learn English, the implication is that the teacher has the power to name the native children. Shirley Chew's (1993) experience of naming is interesting in relation to this. She says she had an affinity with her Chinese name in Mandarin, 'Zhou Lan', but that she did not like the English name on her birth certificate and which she would be known by at school. Susan, however, embraces the name given to her at school because of the possibilities it offers for her to become someone else and set herself apart from the rest of the village. When she goes to work in Italy, she continues to use the name 'Susan', because it makes her acceptable to prospective Italian employers. Yet an Italian name would make her more acceptable. Indeed, her sister, Fiorenza, has taken an Italian name and has managed to integrate successfully into Italian life. However, I wanted Susan to retain a degree of autonomy, and choosing to keep the name she likes is part of this. Thus, although the act of naming can be a means of subjection, as when the teacher names the children, it can also be a means of empowerment.

Around the time I started to invent Susan, I was reading *Flaubert's Parrot* (1985) by Julian Barnes. I was surprised to learn that Flaubert changes the colour of Emma Bovary's eyes; sometimes they are blue, sometimes black. Barnes is willing to

accept this, and rallies against the critic who makes a literal reading of Flaubert's work, and who considers the colour change of the eyes to be an error. However, Barnes then goes on to question the value of describing a woman's eyes at all in fiction:

I feel sorry for novelists when they have to mention women's eyes: there's so little choice, and whatever colouring is decided upon inevitably carries banal implications. Her eyes are blue: innocence and honesty. Her eyes are black: passion and depth. Her eyes are green: wildness and jealousy. Her eyes are brown: reliability and common sense. Her eyes are violet: the novel is by Raymond Chandler. How can you escape all this without some haversack of a parenthesis about the lady's character? (Barnes 1985:78).

Although Barnes is being humorous here, it seems to me that he misses an important point. The 'banal implications' do not come from the colour of a character's eyes, but from the cultural assumptions about women upon which these clichés rest. Reading what Barnes had to say about women's eyes in fiction made me angry. I imagined Susan's eyes would be black, but I did not associate them particularly with passion. Instead I saw her darkness as representative of secrets and pain. She was unfathomable to the other characters in the household, especially to Rachel, and I knew her power would derive from this. In part, Susan's power is magnified by Rachel's insularity. Rachel is not used to mixing with people from other cultures and, without knowing Susan's background, she is unable to understand her motivations. When she realises that Susan has had to leave her daughter in the Philippines in order to earn money in Italy, the dynamic changes, for not only does she begin to understand the problems in Susan's life, but she also becomes more aware of her own privilege as a white European. Indeed, because I created Rachel to stand as myself in the novel, writing Susan has also made me question my own values and attitudes as a white European woman.

What follows is an extract taken from my first attempt at describing Susan, a free writing exercise which I later typed into short paragraphs. There was still very little in the way of plot holding the writing together, but as Susan came to life on the page, she seemed to create a tension in the writing which had not previously existed. Later, this tension helped me to develop the plot.

Susan's eyes are black; oval shapes where pupil and iris merge. Cut-outs like the eyes of a carnival mask, so no one knows, no one can never be quite sure, who or what is behind them. They hold inky secrets. Blue black secrets that stain like squid sauce, *sepia nera*, that thin salt-soaked substance that she squeezes out of pale rubbery fish flesh with such relish. Fingers pinching.

Susan's eyes are strong enough to repel, to push away, to send anyone out of her kitchen, including Signor Bruni. They have a strength that is physical. They make up for her body, which is petite, small and neat as a young girl's, yet thin and wiry too. From the back she could be mistaken for an old woman, stooped as she so often is, over the steaming pans, or roasting yellow peppers over the gas flame. Such pleasure she gains from peeling back those charred skins, stripping them to reveal the tender flesh underneath.

Susan's eyes are obsidian. Black volcanic rock, polished so it reflects the light, flashing the sun back at itself. People can't look into her eyes without squinting. She can hold her gaze fixed, on Franco if he has been cheeky, on Santino if he refuses to eat his meat (for to turn away from Susan's food is to turn away from Susan herself). She can hold her gaze on the Signora too. No matter that Signora Bruni is her employer, no matter that the house belongs to her. Susan will not be told her job. And even when her voice is 'Si Signora,' with childlike sweetness, the truth is in her eyes, wide and staring, no blink of the lid to damp them. Black and flat and unfeeling.

Susan's eyes can answer back, poke fun, pick fault. She could cause real trouble with those eyes one day.

I have quoted my description of Susan at length because I think it is interesting to see which fragments remain in the finished novel, and which have been left out. For instance, the references to cooking and food later became integral to the story. Through writing about food I was able to address cultural differences and convey Susan's relationship with the other members of the household. For example, when Signor and Signora Bruni want different meals, their disagreements immediately

impact upon Susan, increasing her workload. Also, although Susan cooks a variety of food, she prefers sweet tea and bread for herself. I liked the ambiguity of this. It signals an act of resistance to the Brunis and the complicated dishes they request, and reinforces the sense that Susan is stinting herself (as she does in other ways, in order to save money to send to Reetha). However, the tea is also an indulgence because it is loaded with sugar and because: '[b]ack home, tea was once a day' ('Cork Dolls':41).

After writing the piece about Susan that focuses on her eyes, and discussing it with my supervisor, I realised that Rachel's position of importance in the novel was being rivalled. I had begun by making a conscious decision to tell Rachel's story, with Susan as an incidental character, but it was quickly becoming Susan's story too. The intermittent use of the present tense when describing Susan was unintentional, but there was something immediate about her which I needed to convey. This, in turn, changed the tone of the prose. Christa Wolf describes a similar experience.

All of a sudden, sentences began to form which you thought were useable beginnings ... You had found your tone. You refused to believe that you'd have to start all over again, but in the morning the sentences still held up - although they had to be taken out later, of course - but the tone remained (Wolf 1983:22).

Like Wolf, I refused to believe that I would have to start again, but I could not prevent a new story from forming, one that was about both Rachel *and* Susan, and the tensions between them. This was a significant departure for me. My M.A. novel had revolved around a single main character. Allowing Susan to rival Rachel for space forced me to widen the scope of the book.

Although I was writing new material, like Wolf I kept removing sentences and paragraphs, sometimes whole pages if they seemed superfluous. I tried to balance Rachel and Susan, to give them equal weight in the narrative, but progress

was quicker where Susan was concerned. I did some research on the Philippines, mainly over the internet, and combined it with what I had seen, first hand, of the working conditions of Filipinos who kept houses for wealthy Italians. Areas of confrontation began to develop in the narrative, petty aggressions magnified by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the house. These tensions generated the plot. I hardly knew what was going to happen next until I sat down to write, which is an indication, I think, that developments in the narrative were taking place at an unconscious level.

### Writing the Unconscious.

As I have shown in Chapter Two, Jung likens our examination of the unconscious to looking into water, or a mirror. 'The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the *persona*, the mask of the actor' (Jung 1996:20). I would say that Rachel was, in the early stages of the novel, the mask; I used her to present the side of myself which I thought needed little explanation. However, Jung says that when we look into the mirror of the unconscious, we are not simply looking *at* ourselves, but *beyond* ourselves, to discover who we truly are. Susan was much more a figure of my imagination than Rachel, yet she quickly began to seem far more 'real' to me. This might sound contradictory, but I think it illustrates Jung's belief that the inner world is as real as the outer world: '[a]ll that is outside, also is inside' (Jung 1996:101).<sup>16</sup> Imagined objects and situations can be just as 'real' as those we can witness and touch. My own approach is to think in terms of the possibilities that an engagement with the inner life can offer. If we only believe in what we encounter in

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<sup>16</sup> Jung, as he often does, is drawing on Goethe here.

the outer world, we are closing ourselves off from the possibilities offered by the imagination. As a writer, I want to widen the scope of my writing, and accepting the 'reality' of the imagination is one way of doing this. Similarly, Roberts has said that she makes no distinction between inner and outer 'realities' (Roberts pers.comm.). They are both equally important to her. Indeed, her novels often begin by portraying a dream as though it were a real event, thus blurring the distinction between the real and the imaginary.

Christa Wolf says the writer is motivated by the desire to create a fictional double, a double that allows us to experience what real life does not. 'The longing to produce a double, to express oneself, to pack various lives into this one, to be able to be in several places at once, is, I believe, one of the most powerful and least regarded impulses behind writing' (Wolf 1993:11). Although I wanted Rachel to represent myself in the novel, it was Susan, not Rachel, who enabled me to experience another side of myself. I think it is possible to explain this using Jungian theory.

I have shown that Jung says the first stage of looking beyond ourselves is characterised by our meeting with the shadow.

The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is (Jung 1996:21).

The shadow is a same sex figure, the personification of all the things which we refuse to acknowledge about ourselves. It is the repressed side of the personality and wants to do the things we do not normally allow ourselves to do, which is why it is usually experienced as something negative until it is integrated. It seems to me that Susan can be seen as my shadow persona. She is a same sex figure whose actions seemed to come naturally to me, even though I would not normally behave as she does. Susan often behaves in a negative manner, yet I found her liberating because of

this. For example, in the following scene where she punishes Franco for knocking over the washing, I did not have to think about how she would behave because somehow, instinctively, I knew.

Susan let out a screech, like a bird trapped down a chimney. *'Vieni quoi. Dai, subito.'*

Franco cowered.

*Die?* wondered Rachel. What on earth did she mean? But she hardly had time to consider as Susan grabbed Franco's hand and pressed the iron purposefully to his finger. So quick that Rachel could hardly believe what was happening. Franco's cry came right up from his stomach, a yell that made her heart stop. Santino started to wail, but Susan was shouting above it all, *'cat-ee-vo, cat-ee-vo!'*. She put the iron down and smacked Franco as hard as she could on the behind, once, twice, her breath coming huff huff as her hand made contact with him.

Rachel wanted to stop her but it was as if an invisible wall surrounded her, preventing her from interfering. 'Susan, for God's sake,' she said, eventually finding her voice ('Cork Dolls':80).

Jung gives the Faust-Mephistopheles relationship as an example of the portrayal of the shadow in literature. However, both Faust and Mephistopheles are creations of Goethe's imagination. Therefore, it seems to me that Mephistopheles is more likely to be *Goethe's* shadow, in the same way as I have suggested that Susan is my shadow, rather than Rachel's. After all, she comes from *my* unconscious; any unconscious thoughts that Rachel has (for example, the dream near the end of the novel where she enters Signor Nino's villa with Susan) are products of my imagination. Natalia Ginzburg claims that the dark side of the personality is necessary to writers. She describes her writing as a vocation 'which also feeds on terrible things; it swallows the best and the worst in our lives and our evil feelings flow in its blood just as much as our benevolent feelings. It feeds itself and grows within us' (Ginzburg 1992:145). What Ginzburg is saying is that in order to write it is impossible to deny the unpleasant or repressed side of our lives.

Interestingly, I actually described Susan as a 'shadow' in the novel. Indeed, I was well into the third draft before I had read Jung, so it is not the case that Jungian



theory influenced my writing. Rather, as I said in the introduction to this thesis, I have found that Jungian theory has influenced the way I read my work. For instance, I can now see that Susan allowed me to voice the ambiguous feelings I had related to children and mothering. When I wrote the scene where she burns Franco's finger, I felt a sense of release; Susan could do the things I would not allow myself (or Rachel) to do. According to Jung, the shadow often embodies a moral problem. I think Susan encapsulates the problem of how to be a mother far from home, how to look after children who are not your own, how to fit into a country, and a household, where you are treated as inferior.

On closer examination, it seems that not only Susan, but the whole novel, is concerned with shadows. There are shadows in the corners of the rooms, shadows made by the washing as it hangs on the line, even shadows in the imagined darkness when Susan is raped. Clouds cast shadows over Signor Nino's villa, and in Rachel's dream, the villa itself casts its own shadow over the Bruni's house. Rocco is also shadowed, by the leaves of the fig tree, and the peak of his riding hat. It is possible that Susan, as a shadow persona, was so strong for me that her presence crept into other areas of the writing. However, although Jung says that the shadow belongs to the personal unconscious, he also refers to it as archetypal. I think that the preoccupation with shadow imagery in the novel is, like the theme of not belonging, an archetypal pattern, one which is shaped by my own experience.

There is perhaps a difficulty in drawing a link between a dark-skinned character and the shadow persona, but unlike Jung, it was not my intention to make 'dark' equal 'primitive'. Indeed, Susan is much quicker to adapt and take advantage of situations than Rachel is. In part, Susan's behaviour is produced by economic necessity; lack of money forces her to leave her daughter to seek work abroad. Also,

it is important to remember that Susan represents part of myself. Therefore, whatever is unacceptable about her behaviour is also an unacceptable aspect of myself. Frieda Fordham (1991) says that the shadow is linked to societal repression, and can be experienced as the devil or a witch, for example. Interestingly, I described Susan as a witch from the first draft onwards: 'Through the mauve steamy haze she looks like a witch from their storybooks, black hair hanging in limp tails round her face' ('Cork Dolls':6).

I said in the previous chapter that because the shadow is partly linked to societal repression, critics such as Wehr have suggested that women encounter more difficulties when it comes to its confrontation. I cannot say if my encounter with Susan as a shadow persona has been more or less difficult than it would have been if I were a man. However, the issues I address through her *are* specific to women, for instance, the complexities of mothering which I have mentioned above. Hauke says the status of women and the shadow are linked because they are both deemed 'Other' in Western society. What I find interesting is that I was aware of the difficulties in writing a character whose race would immediately place her in the position of Other within the novel. Yet instead of avoiding writing about her, I felt compelled to give her a voice. I believe this is because of her power as a shadow persona, an unconscious Other whom I needed to write, not only in order to better understand myself, but also to understand and develop Rachel, the character I had intended to stand as myself. In racial terms, this might seem problematic because I am using a black character to understand myself, a white woman. However, in Jungian theory, the aim is not simply to understand the shadow (or any other archetypal image that one engages with) but to integrate the unconscious image into consciousness. In

doing this, what is perceived as 'dark' becomes an aspect of one's conscious self, and is therefore no longer viewed as Other.

Despite this, I acknowledge that my theoretical stance may have imposed certain limitations on my ability to engage with issues of race in 'Cork Dolls'. Ania Loomba says: 'feminist psychoanalysis has not yet cleared the ground for thinking about issues of race and ethnicity' (Loomba 1998:149). One of the problems, according to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, is that Western feminist analysis of postcolonial issues tends to have a 'homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group' (Mohanty 1984:261) which leads to the envisioning of an 'average third world woman' (Mohanty 1984: 261). This woman, says Mohanty, is perceived as being poor, uneducated and victimised. This is in direct contrast to the way Western women position themselves as educated, modern and free.

Toni Morrison's examination of the inclusion of African and African Americans in literature written by white Americans is interesting in relation to this. Although the social and historical relationship of the white American writer to the African is necessarily different to my relation to the Filipino, I think her work has some implications for my understanding of my construction of Susan. Morrison says: '[t]he fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious' (Morrison 1992:17).

Morrison says that in the past, American writers 'were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture' (Morrison 1992:66). It could be said that I have created Susan to serve a similar purpose (for example, when she burns Franco's finger with the iron). However, it is important to remember that I have also portrayed Rachel as a woman

who is prepared to abduct someone else's child. Indeed, it seems to me that 'Cork Dolls' is complicated by the fact that both Rachel and Susan 'act out the forbidden', and also because the novel is concerned with characters from three different countries: England, Italy and the Philippines. Although England and Italy can be loosely grouped together as Western, in Italy, Rachel is constantly reminded of her difference.

Morrison says that there are certain linguistic strategies employed by the white American writer when portraying an Africanist character, one of which she calls 'metonymic displacement' (Morrison 1992:68). This is where '[c]olour coding and other physical traits become metonyms that displace rather than signify the Africanist character' (Morrison 1992:68). I have already shown how important it was for me to write about the darkness of Susan's eyes, which can be seen as an example of this metonymic displacement. However, I also describe Rachel's skin as being 'the colour of milk' ('Cork Dolls' 141). Indeed, Rachel is 'so pale she looks sick' ('Cork Dolls' 17). Therefore, the dynamic between Susan and Rachel, and myself and Susan, cannot be reduced to a binary opposition that equates white with 'good' and black with 'bad'. Nevertheless, as I have already pointed out, the problem with Jungian theory is that it tends to encourage us to think in terms of binary opposition, and I am aware that my exploration of Susan as a shadow figure could be seen as problematic because of this.

### Conscious Development of Character.

Working on Susan did not immediately change the rest of the writing. For a long time, the pace of the novel seemed too slow, especially in the sections which concentrated on Rachel. My supervisor pointed out certain scenes which might benefit from being worked on. One of these was the incident at the stables which leads Rachel to hit Franco. In the first draft, I had not created any tension between Rachel and the boys. Rachel's dissatisfaction stemmed from the way the Signora treated her, rather than from any difficulties she had with the children, as can be seen from the following extract:

[Rachel] pressed her fingernail into the soft leather of the reins and made a little crescent, as if to prove her presence. Because that was the trouble with this job. No one took much notice of you. Like the Signora just now, the way she'd dismissed her; *You go to them*. Harsh. Abrupt. Not that she did it only to Rachel. She'd heard her with Susan, and also with her husband, her voice sounding through the connecting door.

In a later version, the tensions between Rachel and Franco had begun to surface. Rachel's dislike of the Signora and her uncertainty about Rocco had started to develop too. However, rather than making Rachel face them, I tended to concentrate on her internal thoughts, leaving no room for physical conflict, as the next extract shows:

'Rachel. He said stop.' Franco's voice first, then Santino. 'Rocco said stop.'

Her stomach growled. She hadn't had time for breakfast. The pony halted without her even touching the reins. She'd been lost in thought. Now embarrassment crept to her cheeks, tingeing them red. Rather than turn to face Rocco she made a fuss of the pony, stroking its muzzle. Dry flakes of food were stuck to it, barley maybe, or oats. She didn't know much about what horses ate. Grass in England, but where was the grass out here? The earth was sandy, as though the beach had crept inland, smothering the soil.

I was still concentrating on Rachel's thoughts at the expense of the action, thus preventing the writing from moving forward. Indeed, shortly after the above extract, Rachel faints through hunger, which closes the scene down before any real conflict

can take place. I rewrote the stables scene a number of times, but it only started to work when I allowed Rachel to become angry. Previously, Rachel had been very controlled. However, after I had let Susan lose her temper with Franco, I felt I had the freedom and the courage to allow Rachel to lose her temper too. This made the scene much more compelling, and precipitated the idea of her attempted abduction of Santino. The following is taken from the finished novel:

[Rachel] looked at her arm, at the pink butterfly where the skin had been pinched, then looked at Franco. 'I've had about as much of you as I can take!' She seized hold of him and pulled him out of the saddle. He stumbled as he landed but she kept hold of his arm, squeezing for all she was worth.

'Me get down too,' Santino panicked.

But Rachel hardly heard him. She raised her arm and whacked Franco as hard as she could, a cross between a slap and a punch that made contact between his shoulder blades and sounded hollow in his chest, a sound that was so satisfying she did it again, *to knock the stuffing out of him*. The phrase was one her Dad used. When? She tried to recall him saying it but couldn't quite remember. Then it came to her. He used to say it to her Mum ('Cork Dolls':184).

What stands out for me about this extract is that all the detail is significant. This is because I had begun to understand what Rachel wanted. It was not enough for her simply to come to terms with her abortion; she had to try to replace what she believed was missing in her life (by abducting Santino). The courage she needed to do this suddenly seemed possible once I had let her hit Franco in front of his mother. By writing Susan, another side of myself had been allowed to surface, which I was now learning to incorporate into Rachel. Thus, I was no longer using Rachel to try and present an acceptable side of myself.

### Integration and Self-knowledge.

Individuation is the means by which we can integrate unconscious images into consciousness. Jung uses the term 'to denote the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual," that is, a separate, indivisible unity or "whole" ' (Jung 1996:275). I think writing a novel can be viewed in terms of individuation because it involves developing unconscious images and integrating them into consciousness by making them fit into a narrative structure. Indeed, as I have shown, it is possible to identify the first step in the individuation process in my own work: the meeting with the shadow.

Maggie Gee says '[a]ll writers write to be read, to communicate, to share dreams, memories, visions, jokes' (2001:18). I am sure that the desire to communicate is a factor in writing, but as there are no certainties about being published, I do not think that this was a major motivating factor for me. Wolf describes the writer as being motivated by the desire for self-knowledge:

[t]he writer's compulsion to write things down stems from the fact that this may be the only possibility he has of not missing his true self. And this explains the tenacity with which writers cling to their profession even in the most adverse circumstances (Wolf 1993:45).

Wolf's description seems to be both close to my own experience, and to Jung's individuation process. In order to find our true selves we must engage with the unconscious; writing provides us with a means of doing this. The encounter with one's shadow marks the very first stage of the journey, yet the unconscious is an 'illimitable field' (Jung 1996:276), so the process of knowing ourselves is unending. There will always be some new aspect of ourselves to be encountered. According to Jung, individuation must be regarded as an on-going process, something we should aim for, but that we may not necessarily complete because it is such a difficult task.

I have shown how Rachel and Susan can be seen as aspects of myself; Rachel is the conscious aspect, and Susan is the more unconscious aspect which the writing has enabled me to integrate. However, as I have said above, there are always other selves, 'various lives' (Wolf 1993:11) as Wolf calls them, to be explored. Jung says that after the realm of the shadow, we can pass deeper into the collective unconscious. A man's unconscious contains a complementary feminine element, the anima, while the unconscious of a woman contains a masculine element, the animus. I have already discussed the doubts which exist amongst feminist researchers about the usefulness of the animus concept for women. However, at this point I might be expected to argue that after I had become acquainted with my shadow persona, I was able to engage in a dialogue with other selves, that this is how Signor and Signora Bruni, and the children, Franco and Santino, came into being. But although this would fit neatly with Jungian theory, it would not be an accurate description of my writing process. The minor characters in my novel exist far more as plot devices than as personae in the Jungian sense, and perhaps one of the faults of the writing is that they are not more fully realised.

Annis Pratt (1982) says we must not deduce categories down into a body of work, but induce them from the work. I have found this extremely difficult. Reading Jung has made me aware of certain archetypes, and the characteristics which they might be expected to exhibit. I cannot undo this reading, and so I have tended to identify, in my work, what I am already aware of, namely the shadow. However, there is one area where the writing has generated something new, and that concerns the anima. As a woman, I should not experience the anima, but the animus. Yet in Susan there seems to be something like a shadow-anima overlap. As we might expect of an anima figure, Susan has a capricious nature which generates both small acts of



rebellion and harsh acts of punishment. Many of her actions seemed spontaneous to me, almost as though she was writing herself at times. There was also a muse-like quality about Susan during the writing, which again is something Jung associates with the anima. Perhaps it is possible for women to be lured by an anima figure in the same way Jung suggests men can be. After all, everything the anima touches becomes 'unconditional, dangerous, taboo, magical' (1996:28), which is an apt description of Susan's effect on me. In the previous chapter, I have shown that the anima can be seen as the result of men's perception and treatment of women in patriarchal society. If this is so, then women's experience of the anima could be read as confirmation of male assumptions about the feminine. Yet Susan subverts many of the received ideas about motherhood (she is an absent mother to her own daughter and her mothering of Franco and Santino is not particularly nurturing). Therefore, it seems to me that women's experience of the anima might be empowering, enabling them to challenge male prescriptions of the feminine.

### Endings and Titles.

One of the hardest parts of writing 'Cork Dolls' was bringing everything to a satisfactory conclusion. It took a number of attempts and a lot of support from my supervisor to get over this last hurdle. I found Susan's story easier to resolve than Rachel's because with Susan, I always had a sense that she would survive, which again is perhaps due to her being an archetypal image. It seemed more difficult to fathom Rachel's direction, even after I had developed her further as a character. I think one of the reasons I struggled with the ending was because I did not have a synopsis. Apart from the initial idea of writing about Rachel's arrival in Sicily, I had

allowed the writing to take me where it wanted to go. In this sense, I was very much led by my unconscious, and only had a vague idea of plot. I think this was why, for a long time, the writing lacked direction.

A friend suggested that as a backdrop to all the social and domestic tensions, a natural disaster could be looming. I had already written the scene where Susan accompanies Rachel to the market and takes pleasure in telling her that Messina is prone to earthquakes. This is historically accurate; the last major earthquake was in 1908 when 80,000 people lost their lives. So, I decided to end the novel with a minor earthquake, even though I was nervous that this might sound like a cliché. However, when I wrote it, I found that the scene brought Rachel and Susan closer together, only for a brief moment, but long enough to demonstrate that they shared some common ground. From here it was easier to let them go their separate ways, for Susan to take the jewellery, and for Rachel to decide to take the children after all (although I tried to leave this slightly ambiguous).

The idea that Rachel and Susan are closer to each other than they care to admit is something I wanted to reflect in the title. It might seem odd that I should mention the title near the end of this chapter, but I did not settle on it until the novel was finished. Somewhere between the first and second drafts, when I was starting to discover the form, I decided that each chapter should be preceded by a recipe. This was a conscious attempt to foreground the domestic work which Susan, and to a lesser extent, Rachel, are involved in. Where the recipes worked best they added another dimension to the writing, increasing the sense of tension. A number of authors have used this technique, but it was E. Annie Proulx's novel, *The Shipping News* (1994), which first gave me the idea. Proulx uses seafaring terms and descriptions of knots to head her chapters. I wanted my recipes, like Proulx's knots,

to pull the writing in a slightly different direction, making the reader think about something that is not directly expressed in the body of the novel. For example, dog stew is never prepared by Susan in the novel, but the recipe acts as a comment on her relationship with Signor Bruni's dog, Cesare.

One recipe I discovered was for cooking banana blossom. Banana blossom sounded so rich and alliterative that I felt it would make a good title. My supervisor pointed out that it might come across as too 'sweet' but I stuck with it for a while, until I wrote the earthquake ending and changed it to *Fault Lines*. This seemed to reflect the tensions in the Bruni household, but unfortunately it did not point to any common ground between the two main characters. Finally I changed the title again, to 'Cork Dolls'. This was after my supervisor suggested I look at the poem, 'The Babysitters', by Sylvia Plath (1981). 'Cork Dolls' seemed a more fitting title because it tied in with an episode in the book where Susan belatedly parcels up a doll to send to her daughter, Reetha. Also, in the poem, there is a reference to women waving across continents, which is a good description of the dynamic between Rachel and Susan.

#### Response to the Manuscript.

Since I finished the novel I have sent it out to various agents, one of whom approached some publishers on my behalf. Although the novel has not, as yet, been accepted by a publisher, I think it is useful to look at some of the comments I have received. The main thing publishers have mentioned is that they are unsure where in the market they could place 'Cork Dolls'. Hodder and Stoughton said:

I thought it was the kind of novel that's terribly hard to make an impact with at the moment - confidently and skilfully written, but a little too quiet and narrow in scope to excite the trade and media and reach a wide audience.

Similarly, Transworld Publishers said: 'The author really has the feel of Italy perfectly, and it's a rather affecting story. However, I'm afraid it is probably a bit too quiet to be able to make it in this very competitive area of the market'. After receiving these two responses, the agent came back to me and asked me if I had any thoughts on further work I might do on the book. Although I was quite open to making changes, I did not feel I could turn the novel into what the publishers were looking for. To try and inject more action would require a different style and tone. The agent then sent the manuscript to Time Warner Books, who also said they would struggle to sell it because they felt it was too quiet. Macmillan went into greater detail, saying:

I love the manipulative characters - in the end no one is [the] winner, and I felt sorry for them all. However, like it as I do, this is the sort of fiction that we don't seem able to publish that well here - it falls somewhere between Picador and Pan and we just don't ever seem to get the focus right.

Obviously it was disappointing that the novel was turned down by these publishers, and initially their comments led me to question the saleability of the book. However, I can think of numerous 'quiet' novels which have been successful. Also, an extract of 'Cork Dolls' achieved third place in November 2002 in 'A Novel Approach', a national writing competition run by Durham County Council, which I think is an indication of the strength of the work. Of course, I intend to try other agents and publishers, but I am now more aware that they view manuscripts with a commercial eye.

On recently rereading the novel, one of the things I have noticed is that the writing seems a little restrained in places. Perhaps this is why some publishers have described it as quiet. During the writing, I was constantly aware that it would be

difficult to negotiate the theoretical component of this thesis without having the novel more or less complete. Therefore, I suspect the tone of restraint is partly due to the time limits I set myself. One thing I tended to do quite often was abandon writing longhand and type straight onto the computer to save time. I would not do this again because I think it affects the depth of the prose. Proulx makes an interesting comment in relation to this:

I don't think fast enough to write on a computer. I know a lot of writers do that but I think it leads to facile clichéd prose ... Writing by hand is just the right speed for me ... and I also like the shapes of the words and the sentences on the page and often these turn into diagrams and ... partitions and framed passages that I know need amplification later (Proulx 2003).

For Proulx, writing longhand seems to offer more creative possibilities than typing words straight onto the computer. I found that by working on the computer my writing flowed slightly faster, but, with hindsight, I understand exactly what Proulx is saying. The typeface on the computer imposes a uniformity on the prose, whereas handwriting has its own characteristics and makes its own patterns. These patterns are just as likely to inform the work as the actual words themselves. Of course, I am not as close to the work now as I was when I completed it, so it is easier for me to see problems like this. During the writing I doubt I would have changed my working practice because it seemed to suit me at the time. Also, although Proulx's comment makes sense to me now, after the novel's completion, perhaps at the time I was writing, I would not have understood its implications.

Interestingly, although there has been a consensus about the novel being too quiet, there were some widely differing responses to the main characters. I sent the first few chapters directly to the small publisher, Smith/Doorstop Books, who replied that although they were only taking poetry submissions at the moment, they liked what they saw of the novel, particularly Susan: 'your portrayal of Susan really lives'.

In contrast to this, Virago said they found Susan 'unbearable'. Friends and colleagues who have read the manuscript have been similarly divided as to whether they sympathised with Susan or Rachel. Perhaps Rachel remains slightly unsatisfactory because I did not manage the ending of her story as well as I managed Susan's. On the other hand, I sometimes portray Susan's thoughts as being quite simplistic. This is the result of creating a character who speaks pidgin English (her command of Italian is a little better, and she certainly understands more than she lets on). In places I have tended to show Susan's thoughts as having the same restrictions as her speech, which has caused problems for some readers. Jung tends to equate the shadow's 'darkness' with what is primitive, yet I have argued that I did not write Susan in order to claim authority over a black character. Nevertheless, I must recognise that I have limited Susan linguistically, which has the effect of placing me in a position of power over her. This was unintentional, and seems to be both a product of the unconscious image I had of Susan as unfathomable, and the culture I belong to which deems darkness to be Other. What is interesting is that despite the linguistic limitations, Susan comes across as a strong character, and certainly more independent than Rachel. Indeed, at the end of the novel it is Susan's ability to act, rather than her competence with language, that enables her to walk away with the Signora's jewels. Thus, the linguistic limitations I have placed on her do not necessarily result in powerlessness.

I think it is important to stress that I had no commercial considerations when I wrote 'Cork Dolls'. Of course, I would like to see it in print, but I did not write it primarily to achieve publication; I wrote it to satisfy myself. What I discovered was that it was not enough to write an account of my time in Sicily, to use Rachel as a

vehicle for telling the reader about my experiences. I had to dig deeper, not to reflect my experiences but to interpret them. As Christa Wolf says:

Let's let mirrors do what they were made to do: to mirror. That's all they *can* do. Literature and reality do not stand to each other in the relation of mirror to what is mirrored. They are fused within the mind of the writer. The writer, you see, is an important person (Wolf 1993:44).

## Chapter 5: *Flesh And Blood* by Michèle Roberts.

In this chapter I will look at Roberts' novel, *Flesh And Blood*, to show how Jungian and feminist ideas can be used to analyse her writing, and also, how my own experience of the writing process can be used to develop a reading of her work. Roberts presents storytelling as a means for women to negotiate patriarchy, as an act of resistance which she encourages other women to pursue. I said in the introduction to this thesis that to be a writer you have to be a reader. Reading Roberts' novels has encouraged me not only to tell my own story, but also enabled me recognise the value of my writing in questioning patriarchal assumptions about women and women's creativity.

### Representations of the Feminine

*Flesh And Blood* is made up of a series of stories which move through different gender perspectives. These shifts in identity, along with shifts in time and place,<sup>17</sup> enable Roberts to examine the constraints which patriarchal society imposes on women. Roberts takes the Jungian view that masculine and feminine are images which are available to either sex.

I see them not as essential attributes of a given biology, but as images of forms of energy existing within each of us in different ratios. The feminine way tends towards receiving, opening, waxing and waning, relating, uniting. The masculine way tends towards dividing, ordering, separating, naming (Roberts 1983b:65).

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<sup>17</sup> These time shifts echo Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1964).



Because Jung's definitions of the feminine are stereotypical (as I have shown, the anima has a seductive and capricious nature, while women themselves lack Logos, which is access to the spirit or intellect), Roberts draws on feminist revisions of Jung, namely the work of Nor Hall. The proximity of Roberts' definition of the feminine to that of Hall can be seen from the following:

[w]atching the moon in the course of its monthly growth and diminishing is a way of reminding ourselves that the periodic need to be in-full-view and the opposite periodic need to be alone or withdrawn are not only natural but essential to the feminine (Hall 1980:4).

The word 'natural', however, seems to indicate a biological link between women and the feminine. Thus, despite Hall's conviction that '[f]emininity is a mode of being human that can be lived out ... by both men and women' (Hall 1980:4), female and feminine become inextricably linked. Indeed, Demaris Wehr says that 'for Jungians the feminine is ... biological, innate, even ontological' (Wehr 1988:10). However, rather than deny this link, Roberts attempts to widen definitions of the feminine by examining ways in which women might include the masculine principle. Later in this chapter I will show how she suggests that, for a wider definition of the feminine, it is also necessary to focus on the mother-daughter relationship. In so doing, she turns away from Jungian theory and aligns herself more with the work of French feminists, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

The spiral structure of *Flesh And Blood* facilitates the examination of gender divisions,<sup>18</sup> allowing transitions between male and female, masculine and feminine. In the first chapter we meet Fred, who metamorphoses into Freddy. Both Fred and Freddy turn out to be aspects of the female character, Frederica.

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<sup>18</sup> Published notes show that Roberts had this structure in mind while writing the novel: 'supposing the novel's shape were a spiral?' (Roberts 1998:207). She has also compared the structure to a zip because of the way the novel is broken into two halves which the reader can join back together (Roberts 2000: pers. comm.).

Fred is on the run after murdering his mother. He sees himself as a *male* criminal, 'one of those men, framed in black, on a police poster' (Roberts 1995:1), yet he is in a dress shop, a space we perceive as 'feminine'. When Fred encounters Madame Lesley he has already disguised himself in a flesh-pink dress. To Madame Lesley he is a girl, yet the reader sees him as a boy cross-dressing. Roberts offers the possibility for 'he' to become 'she' by blurring the line between reality and the unconscious. This ambiguity is intentional as can be seen from her notes: 'the idea of a sex-change as part of the narrative/ technique, part of the subject of metamorphosis, part of the plot ... let the reader work out the trick' (Roberts 1998:204). Clare Hanson, in her reading of *Flesh And Blood*, states that the novel 'opens with the story of Frederica' (Hanson 2000:241). However, as I have said, we are introduced to Frederica as 'Fred', which encourages the reader to assume, initially, that the character is male. Indeed, the reader cannot make all the connections between Fred and Frederica until the end of the novel.

The Catholic faith is prescribed for Freddy as a cure for nonconformity: 'The Catholic religion would be a good dose. To get me regular, normal. To cope with my growing pains' (Roberts 1995:12). However, with the onset of menstruation she is marked female, Frederica, and therefore 'Other' in the male economy. Through her mother's magazines she learns that men know 'what real women should be like' (Roberts 1995:16). Less censored images are available through her father's collections of reproduction Old Masters and pornographic magazines, both of which portray opposing male ideals of naked women.

In my own novel, Rachel's passivity makes her more typically feminine than Susan, yet in some ways I found this constraining. When Rachel is at her most interesting she is refusing the passive role, for example, when she attempts to abduct

Santino, or when she resists Rocco's advances. One of the things I wanted to do in the Rachel-Rocco relationship was avoid a traditional romance scenario, where the heroine falls for an enigmatic man. Perhaps this is one reason why the end of the novel is slightly unsatisfactory. The reader wants something to happen to Rachel, and conventionally this might have been a successful love story. The absence of the romance ending is perhaps one of the reasons that Rachel's story remains unresolved.

In *Flesh And Blood*, Frederica's femininity is tied in with her religious beliefs, her devotion to the Virgin Mary being presented as a manifestation of her need for her mother's love: '[the Virgin] held both her hands out to me in a gesture of complete love, complete acceptance' (Roberts 1995:17). Roberts has said that she herself experienced feelings of separation from her mother at an early age because she was a twin, and therefore could not have her mother's undivided attention. Hanson (2000) says that this, coupled with being half French and half English, goes some way towards explaining the 'constant preoccupation with fragmentation and wholeness, splitting and unity' (Hanson 2000:232) apparent in Roberts' work. It does seem that Roberts' childhood shares something with the story of Frederica, as can be seen from the following quotation:

[s]o my mother was for me the powerful, queenly Virgin Mary, the land flowing with milk and honey, and I was the Israelites in exile, yearning to be reunited with her. It was to her that I dedicated the May altars that I built ... and to her that I prayed for forgiveness. My anger at my loss of her was, I was convinced, a terrible sin, akin to murder. Guilt encouraged me to make reparation: the mother whom I damaged in fantasy could be magically restored with offerings (Roberts 1983b:54).

Yet the 'fragmentation and splits' (Roberts 1983a:66) which Roberts is preoccupied with do not only occur on a personal level. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, and as Frederica's father's collection of nudes shows, patriarchy tends to categorise women as either/or: 'whore/madonna, you've got a body *or* a soul, you've got brains

or beauty, you can't be a mother *and* an artist' (Roberts 1983a:66). As the Angel, Cherubina, explains: '[t]hey like to see you coming out of one door or another. Then they know who you are, what kind of being, and what to think of you' (Roberts 1995:111). This fragmentation of the female psyche occurs at the point when the daughter leaves the mother, 'when you are born out of Paradise' (Roberts 1995:111).

The story of Eugénie illustrates how the male order physically separates mother and daughter. Madame de Dureville bears a daughter, Eugénie, after several stillborn sons, yet she denies the relationship she might have with her in the name of religious devotion: '[s]he put the little one from her as much as possible ... caused her never to be allowed treats or indulgences' (Roberts 1995:61). Madame de Dureville's husband considers his wife to be perfect, 'a martyr destined for heaven' (Roberts 1995:61). Her sense of Christian duty encourages her to send Eugénie away to be educated at the convent, and while the mother strives for transcendence, the nuns instil in Eugénie the conviction that, before God, she is a worthless sinner.

Eugénie grows up to be virtuous, but eager to escape the convent. Thus she accepts her father's choice of husband, the sadistic Monsieur de Frottecoeur (who is based on the Marquis de Sade). Through Eugénie's marriage, Roberts shows that virgin and whore are closer than patriarchal definitions care to admit. Eugénie is raped by her husband and his mistress, yet we see her 'palpitating and scarlet under the effects of the sensual delirium she had just passed through' (Roberts 1995:70). Rape abdicates responsibility, allowing Eugénie to experience erotic pleasure without abandoning her virtue. Indeed, her compliance and 'unflinching obedience' (Roberts 1995:78) lead her to take up the whip as her husband commands, crossing the boundary between virgin and whore, a crossing which places her in a position of power.

Speaking some years before the publication of *Flesh And Blood*, Roberts named four archetypes that make up the female psyche: 'mother (creating babies and art); lesbian (lover of women who may also be mother); companion to men (lover, comrade); sibyl (woman who gives birth to poetry and art)' (Roberts 1983a:67). Roberts explains that these are 'shifting points' (Roberts 2000:pers.comm.) in a woman's life. These images are similar to those developed by Toni Wolff (see Chapter Three). Susan Rowland correctly points out that these are not archetypes, because archetypes are essentially content free. Rather, they are archetypal images, all of which can coexist within a person in different proportions. Rowland says that Roberts treats them as '*fictions of identity*' (Rowland 1999c:37), which I find helpful, because if they are seen as fictions, they can be contested.

One example of this can be seen in Roberts' description of the female artist. In patriarchal society, female creativity is suppressed; great art can only be produced by men. In *Flesh And Blood*, Frederica's desire to produce art causes gender confusion. The artist is not a role suitable for women. To overcome this, Frederica cuts off her plait and wears trousers and heavy shoes. Cross-dressing allows her to assume a masculine identity, helping her break free of the limitations imposed on women by the male order.

The freedom gained by cross-dressing is examined in more detail through the character of George/ Georgina. George is an artist who responds in an opportunistic way to Félicité's flirtation, the result of which is a sketching trip where he seduces her. 'This was the great moment of her life. She was about to give herself to her lover, just like all those women in books. She arranged herself in a pose of controlled languour [sic], like a model in a painting' (Roberts 1995:52). Félicité has learnt how to be feminine from the images she has encountered in books and paintings, images

which reproduce patriarchal values. As an object of exchange within the male economy, she can either *give* herself to her lover, or be *taken* in marriage; neither role offers her the freedom she craves. When she says to George, '[y]ou don't understand. I want to be free. Like you' (Roberts 1995:53), she has already realised that the bohemian idea of free love only benefits men. Indeed, after giving herself, she is more trapped than before, and when her fiancé, Albert, finds her, he asserts his ownership by raping her.

Later in the novel, George is revealed to be a cross-dressing woman, Georgina. As with Frederica, cross-dressing allows Georgina to fulfil her desire to produce art, and for her work to be received without being derogated as 'feminine'. Roberts seems to posit the experience of being in between, or crossing over, as fulfilling the shortcomings of masculine and feminine roles. For women, this is the place where the split enforced by patriarchal culture can be healed: '[Georgina] allowed herself two selves, two lives, or was it three? Her life as a woman in London, her life as a man in France, his/her experience at the moment of crossing over from one to the other and back again' (Roberts 1995:155-156). The moment of crossing becomes a possible third state of being, which Roberts compares to a marriage.

Two bodies, apparently separate and different, male and female, which were joined together by the to-ing and fro-ing between them... She [Georgina] married two split parts of herself, drew them together and joined them, and she also let each one flourish individually (Roberts 1995:156).

Experiencing the masculine and feminine aspects of the self can lead to a balance between consciousness and the unconscious, and therefore can be seen as part of the individuation process. Yet it seems to me that Roberts looks beyond the Jungian idea of uniting masculine and feminine in her search for a wider definition of the feminine.

### The Mother-Daughter Relationship

In Chapter One, I said that Cixous locates the difference between men and women in the libidinal economy, occurring at the level of inexpressible ecstasy or *jouissance*: 'women's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculine economy' (Cixous 1981a:95). She says writing is a way for women to claim space for themselves within patriarchal culture, and draws a connection between motherhood and creativity: '[t]here is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink' (Cixous 1981b:251). This reflects the situation which Roberts depicts through the characters of Frederica and Georgina. Both are artists who have had to cross-dress in order to survive, yet as women they can give birth to children as well as art.

According to Cixous, inside every woman is the hidden source of the Other. This Other is the nurturing mother, and by locating her, women learn to love themselves, 'to give me my self as myself' (1981a:252). I think this has some relevance to my own work. Susan has been forced to leave her child due to economic circumstances, yet as well as the difficulties of being a mother to Reetha, it seems Susan is also unable to love and nurture herself. She saves all her money to send to her daughter, but there is also a sense that she is going without in order to punish herself. Rachel's inability to love herself is connected to the abortion. She tries to replace what she has lost by attempting to abduct Santino, but this only results in her doubting, even more, her ability to mother. In order to love herself, she must accept the abortion (which represents both an inability and a refusal to mother).

In *Flesh And Blood*, women who strive to locate the nurturing (m)other pose a threat to patriarchy. In my own novel, women's threats to patriarchy are not so overt, but they are present, nevertheless. During the course of 'Cork Dolls', both Rachel and Susan refuse relationships with men. Remaining single enables them to retain a degree of independence and autonomy. Similarly, Signora Bruni refuses to be constrained by marriage, although her affair does not necessarily offer an alternative to marriage, and, in a sense, indicates that she is not as independent as she might wish to be.

In *Flesh and Blood*, the male order is challenged in more obvious ways, for example, by Bona's introduction of the feminine into religious worship. Bona is an Abbess who is accused of having flouted the holy rules, and, amongst other things, of committing 'lewd acts with the other nuns, in which she usurped the natural function of a man' (Roberts 1995:126). The 'receiving, opening ... and uniting' (Roberts 1983b:65), which Roberts associates with the feminine, incorporates aspects of the maternal and the female erotic.

The Abbess bared her breast. She said: this is my body, which was broken and given for you, and this is my blood, which was shed for you... Then each of the nuns came forward and kissed the Abbess's breast, and let her mouth rest there, as though she was an infant being nursed by her mother (Roberts 1995:135).

Introducing aspects of the maternal-feminine into religious practice becomes a matter for the Inquisition. Bona must stand trial, and be judged by patriarchal law. Again, cross-dressing becomes a means of survival for women. Dressed as Dominican friars, Bona and her co-accused, Giuditta, escape from prison. The escape is arranged by Bona's mother (the father having already resigned himself to his daughter's fate). This salvation of the daughter by the mother undermines patriarchal laws and moves towards repairing the split between mother and daughter symbolised by the murder



of the mother at the opening of the novel: '[a]n hour after murdering my mother I was in Soho' (Roberts 1995:1).

According to Irigaray, the 'murder' of the mother in patriarchal society is achieved by denying the mother-daughter relationship. The relationship remains unsymbolised, which means there is an absence of 'linguistic, social, semiotic, structural, cultural, iconic, theoretical, mythical, religious or any other representations of that relationship. There is no maternal genealogy' (Whitford 1994:76). Fred's 'murder' of his mother can be read as a symbolic act which aligns him with, and ensures the continuation of, the existing male order. However, if women attempt to create a different social order this can lead to the murder of women by women. 'Real murders take place as part of it, but also (insofar as they can be distinguished), cultural murders, murders of minds, emotions and intelligence, which women perpetuate amongst themselves' (Irigaray 1981b:14 cited in Whitford 1991:79). In this sense, the murder of the mother in patriarchal society is two-fold, carried out by both men and women. Thus, when we learn that Fred is really Frederica we are confronted with the possibility that it is not the son who has murdered his mother, but the daughter.

I have said that Roberts uses the Fred/Frederica relationship as a means of widening definitions of the feminine by incorporating what, in patriarchal society, is deemed masculine. We might assume, therefore, that Fred represents Frederica's animus. However, Jung says the animus tends to appear as a group of important men who lay down judgements. These judgements are seized upon by women, making them unbearably opinionated. In *Flesh And Blood*, Frederica's experience seems to be shaped by the stories of female experience which unfold during the course of the novel, rather than by any guiding male voices. Similarly, in 'Cork Dolls', Susan and

Rachel have more impact on each other than any male figures in the story have on them. Thus it seems that female experience is more influential, for women, than the experience of the animus which Jung proposes.

The story of Rosa examines not only what happens when the daughter's relationship with the mother is severed, but also how this relationship might be restored. Rosa's mother flees the house and runs out into a snowstorm to escape the confines of marriage and domesticity. Although this is not literally murder, the mother is presumed dead, and Rosa dreams she sees her hanging from a butcher's hook while the priest says Mass and her father kicks at a litter of bones. This implies that the patriarchal institutions of marriage and religion have murdered the mother. Rosa seems ambivalent to the loss of her mother and assumes the role of wife with chilling complacency, saying to her father: '[d]on't worry ... you've still got me. I'll take care of the house. I'll look after the other children. Everything will be all right' (Roberts 1995:97). So the daughter takes the mother's place, even going as far as to comfort her father in bed.

A comment which appears in Roberts' notes links the father's interest in his daughter to the mother's absence.

Her mother closed her eye against her, refused to see or acknowledge her reality, and her father opened his eye of sex upon her and pronounced her *his*. So her only identity was as her father's fantasy sex object. Nothing from the mother to fall back on (Roberts 1998:202).

The absence of the mother not only leaves the daughter prey to the father's advances, but also creates a space which the daughter, as his dutiful servant, believes she should fill. Interestingly, it is not the possibility of incest which alarms Rosa, but the chance that her father may want to marry her. As in the story of Félicité, marriage is a threat to women's limited freedom.

The confinement which Rosa's mother experienced in her married life is reflected by the snow which builds up around the house once she has gone. Only the father is able to dig his way out. When Rosa realises that he has gone off in search of her mother, she understands that she has failed to take her mother's place. This leads to feelings of rejection and worthlessness: 'I wasn't beautiful like my mother ... I was starving, I was alone. Abandoned in a desert of snow' (Roberts 1995:102-103). Irigaray says that if women do not threaten the patriarchal order, if they remain unsymbolised, they will exist in a state of *déréliction*, which is akin to being abandoned by God. Women who experience this state exist without hope or refuge, which explains Rosa's feeling of isolation and loss.

What saves Rosa is faith, not in patriarchal religion, but a belief in the return of the maternal. Irigaray says that even to think the mother-daughter relationship is to pose a threat to the patriarchal order. It seems to me that Rosa is 'thinking' this relationship when the Angel, Cherubina, appears to her. Cherubina represents the feminine aspect of spirituality which is excluded from patriarchal religion. She is 'cut out of solid moon' (Roberts 1995:95), which links to the 'waxing and waning' (Roberts 1983b:65) which Roberts associates with the feminine, and her appearance is accompanied by feelings of bliss and sweetness. Cherubina leads Rosa back to the mother in 'Paradise'. Paradise is sensual and light, its fertility contrasting with the cold, barren landscape, dominated by the father, which Rosa has left behind. It is a place where we can all walk, naked and anonymous. It is possible to read this as Roberts addressing the reader as 'you', returning not just Rosa, but the reader, back to the mother:

swimming in our waters we listen  
to our heartbeat

we is one whole undivided

you/me broken now mended  
you/me restored mamabébé  
our body of love pickedup putbacktogether  
repaired  
made whole again (Roberts 1995:109).

Roberts has said that the language that women have is not heard because patriarchal society chooses not to listen to it. However, she believes that male and female language are not that separate: 'they refer to each other, they are confused by each other, they miss each other' (Radford 1978:18). As I have said in Chapter One, Irigaray sees women's language as very different to men's, terming it 'le parler femme' or 'womanspeak'. She says it occurs when women speak together but disappears in the presence of men. Although Roberts does not see male and female language as so distinct, I think the 'Anon' chapter can be seen as an example of what Irigaray's womanspeak might be like: a free-flowing dialogue between mother and daughter.

What I find interesting about *Flesh And Blood* is that the restoration of the mother-daughter relationship does not necessarily lead to 'wholeness'. For Marie-Jeanne, fragmentation of the self becomes a strategy for survival, one which is maintained even after the daughter is found. The story of Marie-Jeanne begins: '[w]e are two but we speak as one' (Roberts 1995:142). The split occurs when she gives birth to an illegitimate daughter by Monsieur de Frottecoeur. 'We found we were two in that small room in the nun's jail, just as the child got born. We tore in two. That made it not quite so bad' (Roberts 1995:149). Instead of accepting an 'either/or' definition of femininity, Marie-Jeanne subverts the male order by assuming two selves. She becomes 'they', the Mad Dog girl and the Rock girl, who take to the road and spend the next twenty years searching for their daughter. And when Marie-Jeanne finds her daughter she locks herself in the cage at the fairground in order to

stay with her. In this way she accepts the restrictions of patriarchy, yet threatens the male order from within these restrictions by asserting the mother-daughter bond. The daughter, Eugénie, is the virtuous child of Madame de Frottecoeur in a previous story, which encourages the reader to construct various possibilities. Yet there is no single truth. As Marie-Jeanne says to the man at the fairground: 'if you have some more cash to spare, we will tell you one more tale. This one, we swear, is the real truth. There are two of us you see. So there are two tales' (Roberts 1995:154). Rather than strive for unity, women can embrace the divisions imposed by patriarchy and become empowered by the multiple truths these divisions create.

This seems to correspond to the simultaneous acceptance and refusal of patriarchal thinking which Juliet Mitchell associates with hysteria. Interestingly, Mitchell attributes hysteria to women writers.

The woman novelist must be an hysteric. Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse (Mitchell 1984:289-290).

It seems to me that not only Roberts' character Marie-Jeanne, but Roberts herself, uses this strategy of acceptance and refusal. As I have said in Chapter One, linking the woman writer with hysteria can be problematic, because it places her in the role of madwoman, a role patriarchal society prescribes to contain and devalue women's creativity. Roberts suggests that 'art' would perhaps be an interesting substitute for 'hysteria'. Thus, she suggests that art is simultaneously what a woman can do to both be feminine, and to refuse femininity, in patriarchal society. Of her own art, writing, she says:

I must enjoy writing novels about people who want to tell stories, because I think that's the impulse perhaps behind a novel ... wanting to tell a story, or wanting to fight your way out of someone else's story that's been imposed on you (Robert: 2000:pers.comm).

The stories Roberts is constantly fighting out of are those told by patriarchy to contain and control women. In Chapter Two I quoted Steven Saylor as saying that we must write what we wish to read. However, I think what Roberts is saying is more complex, and more political, because it takes into account the position of women in patriarchal society and the fact that so many of the stories that exist are either written by men or accept patriarchal thought as universal.

*Flesh And Blood* ends with Frederica finding out she is pregnant: '[w]e were young, and full of hope. It was the sixties. So we walked back through Soho and into the next story' (Roberts 1995:175). A new mother-daughter relationship is about to unfold, one informed by the stories that have gone before. In this way, the novel resists closure. The negotiation of patriarchy continues, and Roberts leaves it up to other women, other storytellers, to pick up the thread and weave their way back 'into the labyrinth' (Roberts 1995:7). It is this opening up of possibilities which I find so compelling in Roberts' work. To complete a novel you need help and encouragement, and for me, Roberts offers this through her fiction, raising awareness, showing that there are endless stories by, and about, women, yet to be told. In the next chapter I will look in further detail at her ideas on storytelling, and how the experience of writing my own novel affects my understanding of her work.

## Chapter 6: *The Looking Glass* by Michèle Roberts.

In Chapter Four, I have shown how Susan can be seen to function as a shadow persona. The main narrative voice in *The Looking Glass* is that of Geneviève, the orphan maid. In this chapter I will look at Geneviève's story as an example of a woman's encounter with her shadow. I will also examine the function of the shadow persona for the woman writer, thus linking back to the point I made in the previous chapter: that Roberts encourages women to tell their stories in order to counter patriarchal assumptions.

### The Mermaid Image as Shadow and Anima.

Set in the early 1900s, *The Looking Glass* is narrated by five women, all connected by their various relationships with the poet Gérard Colbert, although the poet himself has no voice in the novel. The opening section of the book shows Geneviève looking back to the time when she worked as a maid for Madame Patin. Geneviève misses the sea, yet her yearning is punctured by nightmares warning her to stay away. She is haunted by a ghost:

[a] ghost who loitered speechlessly at the tight, twisting turn of the steep stairs. I thought she was drowned and gone for ever but she kept drifting back, that body washed onto the beach ... Black ribbons of seaweed draped her shoulders. Water streamed from the sodden rags of her dress. I had not managed to kill her after all (Roberts 2000:2).

The ghost recalls the near drowning of Geneviève herself who, we later learn, once attempted suicide by walking into the sea. Yet it can also be seen as the image of the mermaid, introduced in the folktales told by Madame Patin. Roberts presents the mermaid as an image from Geneviève's unconscious which, through the course of the

novel, Geneviève must integrate into consciousness if she is to achieve a greater understanding of herself.

Geneviève most often sees herself in the mirror in the bar where she works for Madame Patin: '[t]he mirror covered part of one of the side walls in the bar. Every time I came in to sweep and dust I looked at myself in it. I had not lived in a place with mirrors before' (Roberts 2000:11). Previously, Geneviève was in the care of the nuns at the orphanage, where there were no mirrors for her to look into. Yet in the employ of Madame Patin, she is constantly confronted with her reflection. The importance of the mirror is not only that it shows her herself, but that it also shows her the image of the mermaid *within* herself.

According to Jung, water, the commonest symbol of the unconscious, acts as a mirror, reflecting us back at ourselves:

whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the *persona*, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face (Jung 1996:20).

The mirror can show Geneviève another side of herself, the 'mermaid' self previously required to be hidden. In Madame Patin's folktale we learn that the mermaid has the power to lure men to their deaths, although, '[y]ou wouldn't call it drowning. You'd call it bliss' (Roberts 2000:24). In the folktale, when the mermaid tries to pursue one young man onto dry land he cuts her throat. Her body is then hung above the church door where it turns into a piece of seaweed, '[w]hich is why people hereabouts still hang seaweed outside the back doors of their houses, to foretell the weather and to warn their sons to keep away from bewitchment' (Roberts 2000:25). We can see that the folktale acts as a warning to men about the seductive powers of women. However, it also serves to warn women about the dangers of female sexuality in



patriarchal society. Women's power of seduction, like the mermaid, must stay out at sea; it must remain in the unconscious. If women try to experience their sexuality by bringing it into consciousness, they face death.

The mermaid reverberates in Geneviève's dreams: 'half-woman, and half-fish, a beauty who was also a monster' (Roberts 2000:24). At this point in the narrative, Geneviève is not beautiful, but her dream prefigures how she will flourish under Madame Patin's care. In the same way that I have suggested Susan is a shadow persona in my own work, it seems to me that Roberts presents the mermaid as Geneviève's shadow. The shadow is a same sex figure, which the mermaid is to Geneviève, and it embodies a moral problem, requiring great effort to overcome. 'To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real' (Jung 1959:8). In my novel, Susan can be seen as embodying the problem of how to be a mother in patriarchal society. For Geneviève, the mermaid embodies the problem of how to understand herself more fully in a society where female sexuality is repressed. Although it is possible to comment on Geneviève's experience of the shadow image, it is more difficult to extend this to Roberts because I am not party to her writing process in the way I am my own. However, both Geneviève and the mermaid are products of Roberts' imagination, so it seems reasonable to suggest that the mermaid is, on some level, an articulation of an image from Roberts' unconscious.

The shadow is considered to be an archetypal image because it can be experienced at the level of both the personal unconscious (for example, the mermaid in Geneviève's dreams) and the collective unconscious (such as the mermaid in the folktale). Archetypes are shaped by our personal experience, and Geneviève's identification with the mermaid is strengthened by her attempted suicide. However, it

is important to remember that Madame Patin recounts the mermaid story, which suggests that the mermaid haunts her too. Indeed, perhaps the mermaid haunts every woman living in patriarchal society, for the male order denies women sexual freedom. Women like Geneviève's mother, who have sex outside marriage, are punished by being forced to give up their children (there are parallels here with the situation of Susan in 'Cork Dolls'). Sexual knowledge, and knowledge of the female body, is repressed, to the extent that there is no language for it within the male economy.

Did the mermaid have that secret nameless opening between her legs like ordinary women? That was what I wanted to know, but could not say so, since there wasn't a word for it, and anyway it was filthy even to think about it let alone try to refer to it out loud. Did men fear mermaids because of drowning or because they couldn't make love to them? Or both? (Roberts 2000:25).

Susan Rowland (1999a) has noted Roberts' use of the mermaid image in an earlier novel, *The Visitation*. Rowland cites the source of Roberts' inspiration as Nor Hall's *The Moon And The Virgin* (1980). As I have said in the previous chapter on *Flesh And Blood*, Hall tends to view the feminine as 'natural' for women, so that although she reclaims various images of the feminine, she works within male definitions. In *The Visitation*, the main protagonist, Helen, is struggling to understand herself, a struggle that is reflected in her inability to write. At one point, she sees herself as a mermaid: '[o]n a sudden impulse, she reaches down and hauls her tail, slippery and shining, out of the sea. Fish-woman. Fish-woman from the waist down. Seductive and cold' (Roberts 1983c:92). Rowland suggests that the mermaid, in this context, represents a point where the woman is not mature, where she is not individuated.

It takes great courage for a woman to begin to pull her 'fish nature' up into the air where it can be seen. This would mean revealing the coldness

concealed beneath her charm. Or the selfishness behind her apparent ability to please everybody (Rowland 1999a:97).

Similarly, Geneviève's love for Madame Patin also has an underside, for she is jealous of her employer. 'I wanted to steal her house and push her into the street and let her be the orphan, the vagabond' (Roberts 2000:18). This is the coldness concealed beneath the charm which Rowland describes above. In order to understand herself more fully, Geneviève must learn to accept both jealousy and love as aspects of herself.

Jung stresses that individuation is a process of discovery which involves developing a relationship between the unconscious and consciousness. As long as Geneviève denies the mermaid within herself, then there can be no progression towards individuation. However, neither can she allow her mermaid shadow to have a free rein, for the uncontrolled sexuality that the mermaid represents can be as dangerous as sexuality that is repressed.

So far, I have considered the mermaid as an archetypal image contained in the psyche of women. However, according to Jung, the anima (the feminine element in a man's psyche) can manifest herself as a mermaid or similar figure. Jung says that looking into his unconscious, man must become a fisherman.

Sometimes a nixie gets into the fisherman's net, a female, half-human fish.  
Nixies are entrancing creatures:

Half drew she him,  
Half sank he down  
And nevermore was seen.

The nixie is an even more instinctive version of a magical feminine being whom I call the *anima*. She can also be a siren, *melusina* (mermaid), wood-nymph (Jung 1996:24/25).

We can see from the above that Jung considers the mermaid to be a classic anima image, entrancing yet dangerous. However, in the chapter dealing with the analysis

of my own writing, I examined how women, as well as men, can experience the anima. I drew attention to what seemed to be an anima-shadow overlap in the image of Susan. The mermaid in *The Looking Glass* appears to be another example of this overlap. According to Jung, women should not experience the anima, but the animus, the masculine potential within themselves. Yet there is no evidence of this in *The Looking Glass*. Not only are there no guiding male voices, the novel is narrated entirely by women, and the poet, Gérard Colbert, is denied a voice.

Geneviève's experience of her shadow shows that the split which patriarchal society imposes on women, divorcing them from their sexual selves, has been internalised. The duality of the mermaid, half woman, half fish, beautiful yet dangerous, corresponds to the duality imposed upon women by the male order, particularly by religion. As I have shown in my analysis of *Flesh And Blood*, Roberts frequently addresses this either/or split in her writing. 'In Catholicism the whore is separated from the Madonna. The Madonna's good, and sexless, but has a baby, and the whore is wicked and sexy and must be repented ... obviously as a feminist you struggle to reintegrate them' (Roberts pers. comm). One of the things this either/or divide implies is that only 'good' women can become mothers.

Geneviève craves mother love, which Madame Patin, a childless widow, is well suited to give. Yet Geneviève also takes on a mothering role, calming Madame Patin when she is anxious over money: 'I'd brush her hair for her, gathering the thick tail in one hand and drawing the brush through it with the other, over and over again. It calmed her down' (Roberts 2000:14). The description of Madame Patin's hair as a 'thick tail' again links her to the mermaid. As I have said above, perhaps all women are in some way connected to this image because of the difficulty they have in experiencing their sexual selves in patriarchal society. For men, the mermaid image

serves to enforce their fears about the dual nature of women. For women however, it seems to offer the possibility not only of understanding how men see them, but also of engaging with their erotic Other.

It is also possible to see the mermaid as a means by which Roberts, as the author, might also engage with *her* erotic Other. Hélène Cixous says that for women, writing is an act of self-assertion, a way for them to articulate unacknowledged desires. She calls for women to put their sensual pleasure into writing because this enables them to assert their difference from men. Looking into the mirror allows Geneviève to begin to integrate her erotic Other into consciousness. Similarly, perhaps writing allows Roberts to articulate, and to some extent integrate, *her* erotic Other into consciousness. I will return to this point below.

When Madame Patin marries Frédéric and becomes pregnant, Geneviève wears her employer's cast-off clothes, and adopts her mannerisms, so that the idea of a double takes on new possibilities: 'I thought I might borrow not only her gestures but her husband too. He might loan himself to me. He had taken my place. Now I could imagine taking hers. It was a way of being close to her again' (Roberts 2000:74). Stealing Frédéric seems to be less connected with Geneviève's revenge, or sexual satisfaction, than with recovering her lost relationship with Madame Patin (now Madame Montjean). The mother love she had wanted to believe her employer could give her has been taken away through marriage. Thus, the world of the imagination is overtaken by reality, where Geneviève places herself strategically as Madame Montjean's double in order to regain lost love: '[p]ressing myself as close to her as her shadow. I was her young ghost, dancing along behind her and imitating her every move' (Roberts 2000:74). Geneviève is the shadow image here, not the

mermaid Other. This can be seen as the start of her acceptance of this unconscious image as a conscious aspect of herself.

When Frédéric Montjean creeps into Geneviève's room and rapes her, she retreats into a world of stories, refusing the patriarchal myth, in which the mermaid's throat is cut, in favour of her own version which promises survival.

I began ferociously to tell myself a story about a mermaid; only this time she would not die; she would escape; she would dive into the depths of the sea and hide there; she was not speechless at all she shouted out for Madame Patin Madame Montjean to come and rescue her she shouted sorry sorry sorry and she certainly had nothing between her legs and so she could not be interfered with but swim swim swim (Roberts 2000:83-84).

There is a certain ambiguity here in that the 'half fish' form prevents the mermaid, and therefore Geneviève, from being interfered with, yet it is also a form that seduces men. Geneviève's retreat into the imagination enables her to endure and survive, but at the same time, it is a way of abdicating responsibility, for the rape is partly the result of her attempt to take Madame Montjean's place.

The individuation process requires that the life of the imagination must be balanced with 'real' life. But after the incident with Frédéric, Geneviève sees herself as 'bad', indicating that her shadow side has gained too much control over consciousness. As she tidies up after the christening feast for Madame Montjean's sickly baby, she once again looks at herself in the mirror.

Sometimes it felt like having a sister who looked back at me and joined in the discussion about what I should do. Sometimes the mermaid flicked her tail at me and laughed and swam away as I got up, dissatisfied. Sometimes a good girl appeared opposite. More often these days, a bad one scowled back (Roberts 2000:94).

As I have said, individuation involves achieving some sort of balance between consciousness and the unconscious. However, in her efforts to incorporate her shadow into consciousness, Geneviève realises something is missing: '[m]irrors are supposed to give you back yourself as you are, but my self-portrait was incomplete'

(2000:94). Her incompleteness is linked to her lack of knowledge about the female body. Realising that something is also missing from the story told by Madame Montjean, Geneviève again constructs her own myth: '[t]he mermaid had had a mirror. She had been able to hold it between her legs and discover whatever it was she had there, even if that could not be told in the story. I too was curious. So I lifted my skirts' (2000:94). Geneviève uses the mirror to view the reality of her sexual self, but Frédéric intrudes upon her self-examination and tries to take advantage of her. Like the mermaid, she has summoned the man. Although the summons is unintentional, Roberts presents Geneviève as partly responsible for Frédéric's intrusion, showing that for women, integration of the erotic Other is fraught with difficulty. Madame Montjean's arrival prevents things from going any further, but the damage is already done and Geneviève must leave.

### Individuation.

In the second section of Geneviève's narrative we see how, having run away from Madame Montjean, she is drawn to the sea like the mermaid, to the death which the patriarchal myth prescribes for seductive women. She is saved from drowning by Gérard and his mistress Isabelle, but the suicide attempt seems to have been somehow necessary, the immersion in water signifying an immersion in the unconscious, one that brings about a measure of self-understanding. Geneviève realises that others can accept her as whole, even if this is not the way she experiences herself: '[t]hey collected me up, stomach, face, hands; they insisted I was not just a mess of loose bits but a person they recognised and pretended they knew' (Roberts 2000:155). Irigaray says that women who attempt to recognise the multiple

nature of their desire must exist on the margins of society, experiencing themselves 'fragmentarily as waste or as excess' (Irigaray 1981a:104). This seems to describe how Geneviève sees herself at this point in the narrative.

Like Geneviève, the narrative itself must also strive for unity. *The Looking Glass* is narrated by five women, thus the novel is fragmented by five voices. Roberts sees the writing process as a means of bringing together various fragments in order to make a whole novel: 'writing ... explores separateness and separate bits of a form, in order to make a whole' (2000 pers. comm). Within her technique of using multiple voices, Roberts also finds it necessary to give space to the voices of the unconscious: '[w]hen you've got one voice telling a story, for me there's always an unconscious that starts to erupt, and subvert that confident one voice telling' (Roberts pers.comm.). Thus the mermaid *does* seem to be recognised, by Roberts, as an unconscious Other, an inner voice subverting her telling of Geneviève's story.

In order for the shadow be integrated into consciousness, Geneviève must make sense of the images of the unconscious. The act of storytelling allows her to do this. The beginning of the novel indicates that she is looking back on events in her past, recounting her story to the reader. She is no stranger to storytelling. In the orphanage she allowed herself to daydream, and at night told her stories to the other children: 'Fantasies of revenge, of wild adventure, of exquisite pleasures in fairyland' (Roberts 2000:9). As in *Flesh And Blood*, storytelling is presented as a means of survival for women. Yet it is also a means of self-knowledge and self-fulfilment. Stories give Geneviève power over others, as well as offering an escape from a restricted and loveless life. Indeed, storytelling becomes an uncontrollable ecstasy, a moment of liberation that affects all who listen.

I would shiver all over and then language would fly out of my mouth and it felt as though we all held hands and jumped off the cliff together and then



above us the great silk wing of words would flare out and float us away to the magical island across the ocean where we were free (Roberts 2000:10).

In contrast, the nuns see storytelling as the equivalent to lying because, in their strictly ordered world, there is no room for flights of fancy. Fantasy might generate images which challenge those prescribed by the Catholic religion, and by extension, the male order; therefore storytelling is dangerous.

Instead of seeing them as an *escape* from the truth, Geneviève recognises her dreams and stories as an alternative truth: '[t]hose bright pictures were the most real thing' (Roberts 2000:10). Naomi Goldenberg says that for archetypal theory to benefit women, emphasis must be placed on what is happening in the psyche of the individual. In this way, '[e]ach fantasy, dream, or life story becomes archetypal' (Goldenberg 1977a:16). This is precisely what Roberts is doing: allowing the character to give preference to her dreams, rather than the 'reality' of patriarchal thinking and the images of the feminine that women are encouraged to identify with.

Not only does the imagination offer an alternative truth, it selectively preserves truth through memories. Marie-Louise, Gérard's niece, says:

imagination and memory are one. And to remember is to become an archaeologist, discovering images of the past whole and undamaged. Or, at least, knowing how to fit the remains together again, to mend what was destroyed; to make something new out of it (Roberts 2000:236).

This corresponds closely to Roberts' own view of writing, which I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, and which I think is important to look at again:

I'm an archaeologist reassembling shards of pottery I've found. It's important that you see the lines of glue so that you realise that I made up the pot; it's not the original (how can I know what that looked like?) but my own version, my own myth ... Yet I yearn for unity, yearn to repair the pot, to make reparation. So I've turned more and more to the unconscious (Roberts 1983a:67).

Recovering images from the unconscious and 'gluing' them together through writing becomes a way of making something new and whole. Roberts' desire for unity is

satisfied through the narrative process, a process that allows unconscious images to be given narrative space. In Jungian theory, individuation is 'the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual," that is, a separate, indivisible unity or "whole" ' (Jung 1996:275). However, as I have shown in Chapter One, Margaret Whitford uses the term 'individuation', in relation to Irigaray's work, to describe how women struggle to separate from their mothers. It seems to me that 'separateness' is a more accurate term than unity or wholeness, and by placing the emphasis on separateness, it is possible to bring the Jungian concept of individuation, and psychoanalytic feminist theory, closer together. Irigaray embraces women's infinite Otherness: woman is 'indefinitely other in herself' (Irigaray 1981a:103). Emphasising separateness allows for multiple Others. Indeed, if we go back to Roberts' comment above, we can see that although she says she yearns for unity, she also wishes to leave the lines of glue showing in her writing, an indication that she embraces women's indefinite Otherness, and wants to make it part of the narrative.

After Geneviève is saved from drowning, she experiences a short period of retreat, where neither consciousness nor the unconscious hold sway, where sleep is 'a soft hammer blow that sent me happily down, down, down to depths where there were no dreams, only all-enveloping blackness' (Roberts 2000:155). This period of retreat is similar to the time in the forest that Covington (1989) remarks on in her analysis of the tale of the handless maiden.<sup>19</sup> Although the maiden withdraws for several years, and Geneviève only for a few days, Geneviève emerges restored, becoming the housekeeper for Madame Colbert. The Colbert household is the place where Gérard likes to write, and can therefore be seen as his creative space.

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<sup>19</sup> That Roberts is aware of the tale of 'The Handless Maiden' is evident in her story 'No Hands', contained in the collection, *Playing Sardines* (2001).

The household is comprised of Gérard, his mother, Gérard's niece Marie-Louise and Millicent the governess. While men like Gérard have the freedom to write, women like Geneviève must suffer the consequences of a suppressed imagination. Thus, her dreams swarm with monsters:

monsters whose names I knew, to whom I'd given birth, abortions I'd scraped out of my innards then drowned secretly in the waves when no one was watching. Night after night these poor deformed creatures rose from the sea to confront me, holding out their cold white arms and crying to be rescued (Roberts 2000:163).

Cixous says women must incorporate both self and Other into their writing. Although we can see from the above that, for Genevieve, the mermaid shadow is linked to the maternal, it is not the nurturing maternal that Cixous describes. Indeed, the mermaid is the other side of that nurturing ideal; she is dark and deadly, drowning her deformed offspring in the sea. However, this still indicates a connection between the female imagination and the female body, a connection that Roberts confirms when she describes her novels as being like a woman's body:

full of words, of unborn words or words coming out like children dancing about perhaps ... almost like a sort of womb. So in that sense the female narrative is the kind of holding containing skin of the book and inside it there might well be several voices clamouring to tell stories (Roberts pers.comm).

Because Geneviève has not yet managed to give birth to what is contained in her unconscious, the images remain trapped and threatening. In order to be able to release them she must acquire sexual freedom, for she has not been able to satisfy her curiosity about sexual love. For this reason she follows Miss Millicent along the corridor and watches her enter Gérard's room, longing 'to touch their hot skins and watch their mouths meet, their hands play; I wanted to know how people behaved when they desired each other and chose freely to make love' (Roberts 2000:165).

After Madame Colbert's death, Geneviève embarks on an affair with Gérard. She accepts that men often sleep with their maids, an acceptance that prevents her making claims on Gérard like she did on Madame Montjean. Indeed, her jealous love for her former employer made her homeless and despairing. This time she is careful not to lose control. 'I could abandon myself in bed but inside myself I held back; my soul remained my own and did not stretch out of me' (Roberts 2000:211). It is easier for Geneviève to hold back now that she recognises that she has the capacity to love more than one person, and to love in different ways: as companion to Madame Montjean, lover to Gérard, and nurturing mother to Marie-Louise.

When Gérard goes away, Geneviève relies on her imagination, on storytelling, to keep her spirits up. 'Over and over I imagined Gérard's return. I told it to myself like a story, repeating it, refining the details, getting it just right' (Roberts 2000: 216). Because she is telling her story to the reader we enter this romantic fantasy with her, believing in it as though it is the 'truth'. She says Gérard returns to marry her, but then we discover that this is not what really happens. 'I had told myself the false story, which annoyed the true one, and so the true one burst out and took over, a torrent which could not be stopped' (Roberts 2000:219). As well as commenting on the dangers of allowing the imaginative life to have precedence over 'real' life, this can also be read as an attack on the traditional romantic ending where the heroine marries the man of her dreams. When Geneviève tries to place herself in this happy ending, she is once again haunted, this time by the ghost of Madame Colbert, the powerful matriarch who is determined to protect her son from falling prey to unsuitable women.

This haunting is a manifestation of the guilt Geneviève feels for having enjoyed her sexual freedom with Gérard, and is linked to the mirror in which she

catches a glimpse of Madame Colbert's corpse: 'her mysterious and terrifying other self' (Roberts 2000:223). It also implies, once again, that all women are divided by patriarchal thinking, split into Madonnas or whores, cut off from their unconscious Others. In death, Madame Colbert becomes the mermaid, embodying all that is repressed and denied within Geneviève.

She was as gruesome as the mermaid washed up on the beach then slaughtered. She was that bruised, bloated body that would not drown but kept on resurfacing, shrouded in rags and seaweed, however often the sea dragged her back. She was the wicked girl who did not deserve a mother's love, who deserved to die, and so the ghost was coming for her and would get her and would not let go (Roberts 2000:223).

The ambiguity between self and Other complicates the text here. Geneviève feels she must protect Gérard 'from my wicked self and from the cold mother who was hunting for me to kill me' (Roberts 2000:224). The cold mother can be read as both Madame Colbert, and Geneviève herself, who believes she is unfit for motherhood. She wants to save Marie-Louise from the loneliness of boarding school (where she is sent after Madame Colbert's death) yet, at the same time, she imagines another woman, Isabelle, in the role of mother.

Madame Isabelle would forgive me for having slept with Gérard. She would love Marie-Louise like a daughter. I would restore the child to the mother. I would restore the mother to the child. The child would not die. The mother would not die. The damage would be mended and the breakage healed (Roberts 2000:247).

Geneviève is telling stories again here, imagining different scenarios in the hope that one at least will be actualised. The death of the mermaid still haunts her as a possible outcome, especially when she finds herself wandering into the cloistered cemetery. It seems that in creating her own story, she must constantly struggle against the patriarchal version of the mermaid myth where women are punished for their transgression. For instance, when she sees the carving of Eve, she is immediately reminded of the Madonna/whore division: '[h]er good hand welcomed me and her

bad hand stretched out to grasp the forbidden fruit ... She was the mermaid. She had come to remind me, to show me the way' (Roberts 2000:250).

When Geneviève and Marie-Louise finally arrive at Isabelle's shop, they are surprised to find the dismissed governess, Millicent, there. Of this scene, Roberts says, 'it was very important that they all came together ... I knew these three women were parts of me and therefore, at some point, they had to all be in the same room, on the same sofa ... to be integrated, just for a moment' (Roberts pers. comm.). Roberts is recognising the women as aspects of herself, which indicates that not only the mermaid, but Geneviève, Isabelle and Millicent are all significant Others to her. As I have said in Chapter Four, in 'Cork Dolls', Susan and Rachel were both powerful characters who can be seen in terms of the Other in relation to myself. However, the rest of the characters seemed to be consciously created to further Susan and Rachel's story, rather than to explore unconscious images that surfaced in my writing. Perhaps further work on the peripheral characters would have led me to engage with them on a deeper, unconscious level, but it is important to remember that Jung says archetypes cannot be called up at will. It is interesting that, in *The Looking Glass*, Gérard, like my own male characters, is not central to the story, and not, according to Roberts, an Other in relation to herself.

After arriving at the safety of Isabelle's house, Geneviève falls ill and sleeps, mirroring the sleep she sank into after her rescue from drowning. When she wakes, she finds that:

[t]hings are in their proper place once more. You can come back to yourself in your proper shape; no more parts of you floating off and wandering about, dissolved and unhappy, wanting to get back in but not knowing how (Roberts 2000:271).

Thus it seems that the value of storytelling for women is that it enables them to negotiate patriarchal divisions and allows them to experience a degree of

separateness. This takes us back to the concept of individuation. Not only is Roberts writing stories in order to challenge the patriarchal denial of women's multiple Otherness, she is also, through the writing process, becoming acquainted with these Others as parts of herself. Jung says individuation is an ongoing process, rather than a task to be completed, and both *Flesh And Blood* and *The Looking Glass* accord with this by resisting closure.

In *The Looking Glass*, although Geneviève has come some way to integrating her shadow, other voices jostle inside her head: '[t]he voices of orphans clamouring in the dark. The voices of mothers and fathers crying for their lost ones to come home again. Crying out for all their lost words to return' (Roberts 2000:277). In an ending that seems slightly at odds with the rest of the novel, we are told that this is the summer of 1914. This explains Gérard's untimely death, and encourages the reader to think of the voices that continue to haunt Geneviève as the spectre of the First World War. Jung says the shadow can belong to the collective, as well as the personal unconscious. This reference to the war can, perhaps, be read in terms of a collective shadow. However, unlike the personal unconscious, where the shadow is relative to ourselves, the shadow in the collective unconscious is much more than ourselves, and its power is such that it cannot be confronted by the individual. Although we might view the First World War in these terms, what is more important, I think, is that the mention of 1914 also places the reader in the position of archaeologist, piecing together a new story, one that extends beyond the end of the novel and must be constantly rewritten, like 'the salt foam tracing filigree lines of script onto the loose shingle and then erasing them, repeatedly, the sea endlessly writing its life into ours and into our stories' (Roberts 2000:277). As in *Flesh And Blood*, *The Looking Glass* opens up the possibilities of storytelling, encouraging us

to recognise that there are endless stories that need to be told in order to assert the importance of women's experience and bring it from the realms of the imaginary into consciousness.



## Conclusion.

In the introduction to this thesis I considered the idea of a relation of privilege between literature and psychoanalysis, with psychoanalysis traditionally being used to examine a literary text. My analysis of my own creative work has enabled me to intervene in this relationship, showing that the writing process can inform our understanding of both text and theory. Felman suggests that instead of applying psychoanalytic theory to literature, we should consider the *implications* in the relationship between the two. I have used feminist theory to inform my reading of Jungian theory, and, in bringing the work of feminist archetypal theorists together in Chapter Three, I have presented a body of theoretical knowledge, informed by the integration of various strands of psychoanalytic theory, and my own writing experience, which has not previously appeared.

My emphasis on the process of writing has impacted on both my understanding of psychoanalytic theory, and the analysis of my chosen texts. The analysis of my own novel suggests that Susan can be seen as a shadow figure, which agrees with Jung's theories. However, I also find that she exhibits anima traits (I experienced her as capricious and muse-like), which leads me to question, as feminist archetypal theorists have done, Jung's claim that women do not experience the anima, but the animus. Estella Lauter says that she can find no evidence of the existence of the animus in women's visual art: '[the concept] is neither clear nor clearly manifested' (Lauter 1985:62). Similarly, there is no evidence of the animus in my own work. 'Cork Dolls' is a novel about women, and the male characters are not central to the narrative. Indeed, the figure that guided much of the writing was Susan, and, as I have said above, it was her potency and muse-like quality that made me

consider her as an anima figure as well as a shadow figure. Thus, my consideration of the writing process prevented me from simply 'applying' psychoanalytic theory to my writing. I have found it necessary to think in terms of Felman's idea of 'implication' in order to produce readings that not only interpret the text in light of my own experience, but also question the very theories I have drawn upon.

I have been unable to find any studies of women's writing which suggest the possibility of a shadow-anima overlap. Pratt draws attention to what she identifies as a shadow-*animus* overlap, but makes no mention of a shadow-anima connection. In fact, there seems to be an absence of theoretical work in this area. Thus, my proposal that women experience a shadow-anima overlap, and that this is connected to the difficulties of articulating the female erotic in patriarchal society, could be a fruitful area for future investigation.

My exploration of the mermaid image in Roberts' novel, *The Looking Glass*, provides an example of how women experience the anima, and shows that this is closely linked to their experience of the shadow. Because the shadow is linked to repression, I think it is possible to see women's experience of the anima, and the apparent shadow-anima link, as ways of reclaiming aspects of the feminine that are denied in patriarchal society. Cixous says that writing is a way of articulating unacknowledged desires, and it seems to me that through writing about their experience of both shadow and anima, women are doing just this: articulating that part of the feminine which is unacknowledged in patriarchal society. Rachel Blau DuPlessis says:

[f]or any woman, and especially for a cultural producer, a vital question is how to imagine herself, and how to imagine women, gender, sexualities, men and her own interests when the world of images and, indeed, basic structures of thought have been filled to overflowing with representations of her, and displacements of any "her" by the representations others make (Blau DuPlessis 1990:161).

However, she also argues that a woman writer may not be constrained or limited by her gender, even though she *will* be affected by it. This forces me to look at my findings in a slightly different light, not to see women's articulation of the shadow, or their anima, as simply ways of challenging patriarchal assumptions about the feminine, but as empowering assertions of the feminine in their own right. Indeed, Margaret Drabble suggests that women may be in a fortunate position as writers because they have a 'cause', in patriarchal society, which is to work out new ways of being for the future. She says:

[o]ur subject matter is enormous, there are whole new patterns to create. There is no point in sneering at women writers for writing of problems of sexual behaviour, of maternity, of gynaecology - those who feel the need to do it are actively engaged in creating a new pattern, a new blueprint (Drabble 1983: 159).

This need to create 'a new blueprint' might prove to be both the imaginative spark that precipitates the writing, and a motivating factor that encourages women to continue.

Although this thesis has intervened in the relation of privilege between psychoanalytic theory and literature, there seems to be a gendered divide between creative and academic writing which functions to maintain this relation of privilege.

Heather Leach describes the divide in the following terms:

[f]or a long time, goes the story, creative writing was something that happened out there, in the field, the outback, the world's jungles. Critics and theorists (on the inside, at the centre) gathered in and examined textual objects, artefacts perhaps, using them to deduce, define and name the cultures that made them. Authors were witches, dreamers, madmen, women and natives; theorists/critics were priests, doctors, experts and anthropologists (Leach 1999:157).

In a theory/creative writing binary, theory is seen as 'male' and therefore in a position of authority, whereas creative writing is perceived as 'female' and therefore

subjugated. The divide is further complicated by the difficulty of articulating the differences between the two:

[t]he differences, borders, edges, between creative and theoretical writing are substantially undefined, unexplored, and untheorised, but are everywhere patrolled and policed with a blind yet meticulous care. There seems already to be a line, that separates them, the creatives, from us, the theoretical - and then the theoretical from us the creatives. (Leach 1999:157).

The structure of this thesis can be seen as both an acceptance of this divide and a refusal to be constrained by it. Because there is a practical and a theoretical component, the creative/theoretical divide is maintained, yet, at the same time, I have sought to incorporate my creative experience *within* the theoretical component. Nevertheless, Cora Kaplan says that writing for the university system became, for her, 'writing for patriarchy par excellence' (Kaplan 1983:57). Of her own, unfinished, thesis she says: '[t]he subject - Tom Paine and the radical press in the late eighteenth century - was partly inherited from my father who as a young man had adopted Paine as one of his radical heroes' (Kaplan 1983:55). This desire to please her father can also be read as a desire to please patriarchy, and meet the demands of 'male' theoreticians. However, in my own case, I would argue that this thesis has not been about writing for patriarchy, but about producing, and engaging with, writing that might *question* patriarchy.

Blau DuPlessis seems to agree with Kaplan's view that criticism is dominated by patriarchal demands. She says there is a 'sustaining fiction of objectivity, distance, and neutrality in critical studies' (Blau DuPlessis 1990:viii), which as a feminist, she has often felt it necessary to challenge. She says that even the presentation of academic work is governed by patriarchal assumptions, and draws our attention to the fact that 'nice, normal presentations of material ... [seem] to partake of the same assumptions about gender that they would claim to undermine' (Blau DuPlessis

1990:viii). She says that she finds the essay to be a useful form of resistance because it offers the women writer a certain amount of freedom to be innovative and experimental. A doctoral thesis might seem to offer less freedom, as a writing strategy, because of the academic regulations which govern it. However, the practice-based thesis allows for some innovation, as can be seen by the fact that I have been able to present my own novel as part of a more 'traditional' theoretical enquiry. Because it provides the space for the inclusion of personal experience, the practice-based PhD does not necessarily conform to the assumptions about what constitutes a theoretical enquiry, assumptions that seem to be linked to patriarchal values.

Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn say that feminist scholarship has two concerns:

it revises concepts previously thought universal but now seen as originating in particular cultures and serving particular purposes; and it restores a female perspective by extending knowledge about women's experience and contributions to culture (Greene and Kahn 1985: 2).

This thesis is an intervention into an academic area which tends to overlook the creative process. Indeed, although Julia Bell mentions the increase of creative writing modules on university English degree courses, there are relatively few practice-based creative writing theses in existence. By bringing together the creative and the theoretical, this thesis revises the 'traditional' concept of a PhD submission, and restores the female perspective by making my own work, and my experience of creating that work, part of the subject of enquiry.

Commercially, it does not seem likely that 'Cork Dolls' will be successful, yet for me personally, writing the novel, and engaging with it on a theoretical level, has been an extremely rewarding experience. Indeed, the theoretical engagement has enabled me to recognise that so much of what novel writing has to offer does not

come from publication. Virginia Woolf was sceptical about measuring the success of novels:

"This great book", "this worthless book", the same book is called by both names. Praise and blame alike mean nothing. No, delightful as the pastime of measuring may be, it is the most futile of all occupations, and to submit to the decrees of the measurers the most servile of attitudes. So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters (Woolf 1994:114-115).

I do not agree entirely with Woolf's view that both praise and blame mean nothing. Although rejection can be difficult to deal with, I found many of the comments I received from publishers were helpful in terms of understanding the market and the my novel's potential saleability. Certainly they will have an impact on my future writing. However, Woolf's assertion that it is important to write what we wish is interesting, because it takes me back to the point made by Steven Saylor that we should write the book we most want to read. Not only has the practice-based PhD given me the space I needed to do this, it has also given me the space to examine my writing critically and recognise its importance as a contribution to the thinking on women's writing. Therefore, I would suggest that the practice-based PhD is a valuable tool for feminist enquiry.

Roberts calls for us to recognise the importance of the imagination, saying that it is not only at the heart of the individual, but also at the heart of culture:

I'm suggesting that the place of imagination is at the heart of each of us, at the heart of culture, of society. It's the place inside us where we hold and contain a kind of thinking which re-members how we were as children and still can be: non-rational, wanting to make and give gifts, playful, aggressive, destructive, sad, reparative, joyful. It's a safe place, in which to let go of old certainties, let boundaries dissolve, experience the kind of chaos necessary for new life, new ideas. It's a space we need inside our culture (Roberts 1998:22).

So, recognising, and giving space to, the imagination, is an act of renewal that has implications not only for the individual, but also for society. I find this interesting because it shifts the emphasis away from the self, and places it on cultural,

development. Thus, the examination of my writing not only benefits me personally, but by enriching my understanding of my own work, it impacts on our understanding of female creativity in patriarchal society.

Although I have emphasised the process of writing throughout this thesis, it is important to recognise that there is also a process of reading which must necessarily affect the way my work is received. Indeed, Lynne Pearce suggests that we should place our emphasis on the *process* of reading, rather than the practice of it, and also that we must allow for the fact that 'the politics of any event is defined not only by what we do, but by what is done to us' (Pearce 1997:3). Thus, the reading of this thesis will necessarily be affected by what the reader brings to the text, and what the text produces in the reader. Because the reader is likely to discover meanings other than those I have drawn attention to, the thesis resists closure. In Robert's work, resisting closure is a feminist strategy that encourages women to do their own telling. With this in mind, I will now leave it for the reader to take up the thread and weave their way 'into the labyrinth' (Roberts 1995:7) of women's writing, in the hope that he/she can make use of my findings and generate new readings of his/her own.

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