

Before I go on with this short history, let me make a general observation—the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some names—along with details of character, incident and place—have been changed. Those changes were kept to the minimum required to protect the privacy of certain individuals in this book.

The challenges posed by Sandra's memory loss mean that parts of her biographical story have required imaginative reconstruction. All dialogue and characters are, however, based on what she does remember and, where possible, interviews with third parties or historical records.

Nothing has been exaggerated.

This is what it says on the back of Sandra Pankhurst's business card:

'Excellence is no Accident'

Hoarding and Pet Hoarding Clean Up * Squalor/Trashed
Properties * Preparing the Home for Home Help Agencies
to Attend * Odour Control * Homicide, Suicide and
Death Scenes * Deceased Estates * Mould, Flood and Fire
Remediation * Methamphetamine Lab Clean Up
* Industrial Accidents * Cell Cleaning

I first saw Sandra at a conference for forensic support services. A gaggle of public servants, lawyers and academics had just emerged from a session on offenders with acquired brain injuries to descend on urns of crappy coffee and plates of sweating cheese. I passed a card table in the lobby where brochures were spread out next to a sign inviting you to drop your business card into an ice bucket for a chance to win a bottle of shiraz. Next to the ice bucket—silver, with a stag's head on either side—a tiny TV played scenes of before and after trauma-cleaning jobs (which brought to mind

the words ‘faeces’ and ‘explosion’). Sitting behind the table a very tall woman, perfectly coiffed and tethered to an oxygen tank, fanned her hand out and invited me to enter my card. Hypnotised by her smile and her large blue eyes and the oxygen mask she wore like jewellery and the images on her TV, I haltingly explained that I don’t have business cards. I did, however, pick up one of her brochures, which I read compulsively for the remainder of the day.

Sandra is the founder of Specialised Trauma Cleaning (STC) Services Pty Ltd. Each day for the past twenty years, her job has led her into dark homes where death, sickness and madness have suddenly abbreviated the lives inside.

Most people will never turn their mind to the notion of ‘trauma cleaning’. But once they realise that it exists—that it obviously has to—they will probably be surprised to learn that the police do not do trauma clean-up. Neither do firefighters or ambulances or other emergency services. This is why Sandra’s trauma work is varied and includes crime scenes, floods and fires. In addition, government housing and mental health agencies, real estate agents, community organisations, executors of deceased estates and private individuals all call on Sandra to deal with unattended deaths, suicides or cases of long-term property neglect where homes have, in her words, ‘fallen into disrepute’ due to the occupier’s mental illness, ageing or physical disability. Grieving families also hire Sandra to help them sort, disperse and dispose of their loved ones’ belongings.

Her work, in short, is a catalogue of the ways we die physically and emotionally, and the strength and delicacy needed to lift the things we leave behind.

We specialise in the unpleasant tasks that you need to have taken care of. Performing a public service as vital as it is gruesome, Sandra is one of the world’s unofficial experts on the living aspects of death. So much is clear from her brochure, which also showcases her intense practicality. Quoth the Brochure of Pankhurst:

People do not understand about body fluids. Bodily fluids are like acids. They have all the same enzymes that break down our food. When these powerful enzymes come into contact with furnishings and the like, deterioration is rapid. I have known enzymes to soak through a sofa and to eat at the springs, mould growing throughout a piece of furniture, and I have witnessed the rapid deterioration of a contaminated mattress.

Most of us will never realise how many of these places there are or that they can be found in every neighbourhood, regardless of socio-economics. We will never see them or smell them or touch them. We will not know these places or lament them. But this is the milieu in which Sandra spends much of her time; it is where she works and takes phone calls and sends emails, where she laughs and makes the office small talk most of the rest of us roll out in the office elevator; it is where she passed into early and then late middle age.

STC services have the compassion to deal with the residents, a very underestimated and valued requirement by its customers.

Her advertising materials emphasise compassion, but that goes far deeper than the emotional-intelligence equivalent of her technical skill in neutralising blood-borne pathogens. Sandra knows her clients as well as they know themselves; she airs out their smells, throws out their weird porn, their photos, their letters, the last traces of their DNA entombed in soaps and toothbrushes. She does not, however, erase these people. She couldn't. She has experienced their same sorrows.

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‘Hi Sarah, it’s Sandra. I believe you contacted me for an interview. If you could call me back on [number] it would be appreciated, but possibly not today as I’m just *inundated* at the moment and I’m on my way to a suicide. So if you could just call me back tomorrow, maybe, on [number], thank you. Bye for now.’

When I return her call, I learn that Sandra has a warm laugh and that she needs a lung transplant. She asks me when I would like to meet. I tell her that I can work around her schedule. So she says, ‘Okey dokey,’ and flips open her diary. ‘How about the café at the Alfred Hospital?’ she suggests, explaining parenthetically that she has a couple of hours next week before she sees her lung specialist.

It struck me then that, for Sandra Pankhurst, death and sickness are a part of life. Not in a Buddhist koan sort of way, but in a voicemail and lunch-meeting sort of way. Over the next few years, she would reveal to me how this unrelenting forward orientation, fundamental to her character, has saved her life.

During my time with Sandra, I met a bookbinder, a sex offender, a puppeteer, a cookbook hoarder, a cat hoarder, a wood hoarder and a silent woman whose home was unfit for her many rabbits and whose skin was so swollen that I thought at any moment it would burst like a water balloon. I heard Sandra bend and flex language into words and idioms she made her own: ‘supposably’, ‘spomatically’, ‘hands down pat!’. I had the rapturous experience, many times, of simply listening to her swear. I saw wonders of the dark world, as true of our collective human life as radio stations and birthday cards: walls that had turned soft from mould, food that had liquefied, drinks that had solidified, flies raised on human blood, the pink soap of the recently deceased and eighteen-year-old chicken bones lying like runes at the bottom of a pot.

I listened to Sandra’s news like it was the middle of the Han dynasty and she had just returned west from the Silk Road, except

that she was really just telling me about her morning or her afternoon—about waiting for the psych team to collect the man who killed his dog so that she could clean its blood off his floors; about a ‘love triangle stabbing’; about the man who died in the ceiling of his home while spying on his family; about the dead hermit eaten by his dog; about the 240-litre container of syringes she filled and removed from a drug house; about the man who threw himself on a table saw and the mess he left for his family to find.

I learned the many sides of Sandra: the social commentator (‘We’ve some areas where no life skills are taught; we are getting generation after generation that are slovenly.’); the bawdy (‘I’ve had more cock than I’ve had hot dinners.’); the confident (‘If I had better health I’d run for government and I’d be a kick-arse person.’); the self-compassionate (‘I have no shame of what I had to do to get to where I needed to go.’); the philosophical (‘Everything happens for a reason and it’s really hard to say why it happens at the time.’); the perfectionist (‘I’ve always set tough standards. As a prostitute, I was a great prostitute. As a cleaner, I’m a great cleaner. Whatever I do, I do to the best of my ability.’) and the positive (‘This year is going to be my best year ever.’).

Which is all to say, I learned that Sandra is at once exactly like you or me or anyone we know and, at the same time, she is utterly peerless.

One thing Sandra is not, however, is a flawlessly reliable narrator. She is in her early sixties and simply not old enough for that to be the reason why she is so bad with the basic sequence of her life, particularly her early life. Many facts of Sandra’s past are either entirely forgotten, endlessly interchangeable, neurotically ordered, conflicting or loosely tethered to reality. She is open about the fact that drugs have impacted her memory (‘I don’t know, I can’t remember. The lesson to be learnt is this: Do not take drugs, it fucks your brain.’). It is also my belief that her memory loss is trauma-induced.

But there is something else of which I have become convinced over my years of speaking with her. Most people Sandra's age can tell you in detail about how they came up, about the excitements and tragedies of being a young adult out in the world for the first time. This isn't because their brains are any better than Sandra's or because they did less drugs or drank less or had kinder childhoods. It is because they've told their stories more often. Because they were consistently surrounded by friends or parents or partners or children who were interested in seeing them as a whole person.

This is how true connection occurs. This is how events become stories and stories become memories and memories become narratives of self and of family from which we derive identity and strength. Part of the reason the timeline is never clear for Sandra, no matter how many times we go over it, is that, until now, she has never had any reason to repeat it honestly or in full.

'A lot of people know some of the story, but they do not know all of the story.' And here it hits me what it is we are doing by telling this story. It is something at once utterly familiar and completely alien to Sandra: we are clearing away the clutter of her life out of basic respect for the inherent value of the person beneath.

Using words as disinfectants, we are trauma cleaning. Word by word, sentence by sentence, we are reuniting fragments scattered by chaos to create heat and light. We cannot always eliminate what is bad or broken or lost but we can do our best to put everything in its place, such Order being the true opposite of Trauma.

And so your story is imperfect, Sandra, but it is here, made complete, and it is my love letter to you.

Kim

A short drive north from Geelong, a woman lives in a house with broken windows and dark words sprayed across its exterior in writing that looks like it came from the hand of a giant. It says I HATE YOU and BRAIN and WELL BEING? and HUMANITY and THE SHAME. The windows facing the street are covered, variously, with blankets, a battered blind held in place by a blue plastic flute and a sheet of cardboard. On the lawn, random mounds of large rocks, bricks, wooden planks, metal grilles and wires dot the dying grass. A large handwritten sign that says HYPACRITES is balanced across two of the mounds. There are a couple of sun-bleached garden gnomes and an industrial-sized bag of mulch on which more words have been scrawled in black paint: SAME SONG, SWORDS, HOMELESS.

Sandra is sitting in an immaculate white SUV with a large white sticker stretched across the back window that says MISSIBITCHI. She is scheduled to do a cleaning quote at 9 a.m. As always, she is early and she is on her phone. Someone from the Salvation Army inquiring about laundry costs for a client with bedbugs. Sandra replies that it's thirty-five dollars per bag, plus pick-up and delivery.

She covers the phone and whispers guiltily, 'I just started charging for that.' Wrapping up the call, she pops her door open and unfolds her long, slim legs from the car. Sandra is wearing bright pink lipstick, a navy blouse, dark skinny jeans and pristine white ballet flats. As always, her platinum blonde hair is perfectly blow-dried and it floats slowly around her as she turns in the morning light.

The tenant at this morning's job is named Kim. Sandra has been briefed that Kim describes herself as a puppeteer, a magician and a pet trainer and that, though she is 'a smart woman', she becomes extremely suspicious of those trying to help. She will talk about her self-diagnosed conditions which include bipolar disorder and a tumour in her head. Kim is 'very angry' because the previous cleaner got rid of her pets, 'thirty rats, all dead'. I'm still processing the image of thirty dead rats as we walk towards the house. Sandra starts explaining that the goal is to make Kim sufficiently comfortable with the cleaning process so that the job causes her minimal distress.

To reach the short flight of stairs leading up to Kim's front door, Sandra walks down a cracked concrete driveway, around the colossal bag of mulch, past a red sombrero and under a low-slung makeshift hammock full of water. Though Kim opens her front door, she remains hidden deep inside while Sandra explains that she is here to help but first needs to have a look around.

'I'm from a private enterprise,' Sandra explains, breathless from the strain the small climb has placed on her deteriorating lungs. 'We do organisation. We work *with* you, looking after your stuff and making sure it's safe and sound. We do it in conjunction with you, *we work together*.' She is fighting for breath, audibly sucking it in where she can between words. After a beat, peering up at Sandra, Kim seems to accept this and steps back, allowing her in.

You could easily mistake Kim for a young boy but she is a mother in her early forties. She is short, she is fine featured and small boned

and bloated. She has pale skin and blue eyes that are darting and swooping like swallows. She is wearing heavy black work boots, baggy khaki pants, a big black T-shirt and a long black scarf; also a fingerless black glove on one hand. There is an old black blanket wrapped around her waist like a skirt. Her blonde hair has been hacked into a bob and a white road of scalp shines out where a strip has been randomly shaved through it. She has homemade tattoos on one arm. A long wooden spoon has been tied with rope around her shoulders. Standing in her doorway, emerging from the cavernous darkness of her home, she would present as some type of troglodytic warrior but for the fact that she is radiating fear so vibrantly that it is contagious.

‘Can you just watch where you walk?’ Kim asks. ‘I’ve made it as safe as possible.’ Her voice, too, is that of a young boy, piping but gruff, trying to be brave. She gestures towards a box and says in an off-handed way, ‘I study magician stuff, not that I’ll ever do it.’

Stepping inside, Sandra puts her hand on Kim’s shoulder and says, ‘I hear that you’re an animal trainer. I need help with a dog. Here, look at this.’ She starts swiping through photos on her phone, her long red nail clicking crisply on the screen until she gets to a shot of her Lana, small and white, staring at the camera mid-shiver. ‘She’s Lana Turner and I’m Bette Davis,’ Sandra explained the first time I met that damaged and diminutive creature, who barked continuously at a pitch that made me squint. ‘She’s my security girl. I got her from the animal shelter, but she rescued me.’

Sandra explains to Kim how Lana was probably abused because she cowers at any quick movement, how the dog still refuses to be picked up and runs off, which is real rough because of her lung problem, you see? Kim cracks a half-smile and drops suddenly onto all fours before explaining from down there that Sandra simply needs to adopt a ‘submissive permissive physical language’ with the dog. Sandra nods at the words with vague interest, not conscious of the

fact that she has just intuitively executed that same move with Kim, who—even in explaining this—is mirroring it right back at Sandra.

‘Right. You can help me, I can help you,’ Sandra says. ‘We’ll work together.’ She looks at her surrounds, raring to begin.

What Sandra does here is magnificent. Beautiful. If we all talked to each other in this way, with warm camaraderie and complete non-judgment, much pain would be spared and happiness generated. And though I will not say that it is entirely altruistic—that so unselfconsciously does she handle her wounded clients that she appears, from where I stand, like Saint Francis of Assisi cooing at an anguished dove—it is still absolutely heartening to watch.

One of Sandra’s talents is that she is superb at—I won’t call it small talk because, though that too is true, it is the form rather than the function—she is superb at instantly conveying a bespoke blend of respect, warmth, humour and interest that establishes a basic human equity and makes nearly everyone comfortable enough to immediately return the favour. This gesture is the opposite of the shaming to which she has been subjected consistently throughout her life, and it is lovely to witness its salutary effect on the whole spectrum of humanity.

Of course, Sandra’s skill at making others feel secure also eliminates a whole host of threats to herself and optimises her ability to move forward with her work and with her life, because Sandra is a virtuoso at survival. As she said to me once, ‘What I feel that I’m good at is that I can talk to Mrs Rich Bitch, Mr Penny Pauper. I can put myself on any level, because I’m probably an actress, you know what I mean? I can then deal with *who* I need to deal with and *how* I need to deal with.’

The house is dark, though some light filters in through the cracks around the window coverings. A wooden marionette dangles by the front door. Different-coloured words are written all over the walls. ‘This is the Hilton compared to what it was,’ Kim says, explaining

that she's been up cleaning for two days without sleep. She itches at one of the open sores on her arm.

'What I'm thinking of doing here so that we can clean it all out for you—tell me what you think—is we're going to bring a safe container in for all your stuff,' Sandra explains softly, before being interrupted by her phone. She takes the call, turning herself towards the wall. The timing is agonisingly awkward but there are extremely few, perhaps no, conversations Sandra won't interrupt to take a phone call. And it's no use getting terribly offended over it because, in the Great Karmic Cycle of Pankhurst, there are extremely few, perhaps no, conversations that she won't interrupt to take *your* call. She briskly deals with whatever it is before returning to focus on the conversation.

Kim is waving at the outside of the house. 'That was just my outcry. It's done now, it's finished,' she says quickly, explaining how she tried to paint over the words, even though the paint wasn't an exact match, as a gesture of goodwill towards the landlord. Inside, though, she insists that the writing on the walls is therapeutic.

'I've got lots of trauma, right? And what I'm doing here is running what is called a domestic violence hypnotic behavioural therapy lab.'

'Right,' Sandra murmurs, encouraging.

'OK, so that on the wall'—Kim motions around the room—'is to do with shock, it's to do with trauma. I started this myself. I was traumatised. I'm only just walking around this complete house myself, 'cause the garage burned down and set...things...off. Very bad.' Kim's voice quivers and she explains that the garage caught fire four years ago.

Motioning to the makeshift splint around her shoulder, Kim says, 'I've got...really...bad muscles. I think it's to do with my tumours that're causing bad signals in my body. This time I've done a lot of work and my shoulder is very sore, so it's a reminder not to use it.' She sets her mouth in a stoic line and looks down at the floor.

‘I want to get your opinion about how you want it to be here, because that’s what my goal is,’ Sandra says soothingly.

A small dog scratches at the screen door and Kim warns Sandra not to let it in because her rats, who act as ‘door security’, are not in a cage. ‘They live in a chair,’ she explains, motioning to a large armchair with a blanket puddled on the seat. ‘And they walk around the house. But they won’t move. They’re actually shit-scared at the moment.’

‘How would a compromise be, if we got this cleaned up and we got you canvases that you could do the exact artwork on for your therapy treatment? I think that’s the best way, don’t you?’ Sandra looks down earnestly at Kim.

‘It is, it is,’ Kim agrees, sighing deeply. ‘But do you know what it is...I draw. It’s my therapy or whatever. But I’ve been locked up, institutionalised, shackled illegally. Mate, to look at white walls...’

‘I understand that,’ Sandra cuts in. ‘But if we could make it like a gallery, with your proper artwork, we’d be killing two birds with one stone.’

As part of her quoting process, it is Sandra’s custom to take photos on her small camera. Kim advises against using the flash too close to the fireplace where a heater has been ripped out. ‘It’ll aggravate them,’ Kim explains, referring to the rats. Then she starts insisting that this clean cannot be like the last attempt. The previous cleaner stole her DVD player. ‘But possessions are nothing. What’s really cut me up is that I come home’—she is indignant, incredulous—‘and he’s chucked these rats out all over the backyard.’

‘Unacceptable,’ Sandra barks.

‘Yep. Not only that, I had to agree to euthanasia. The oldest rats I had—I actually spent twenty-four seven with them, I was making a Christmas video at the time, it was absolutely beautiful—I come home and they’re poisoned. And that was *not* the agreement. It’s not right. It’s not right.’ She is getting visibly furious.

Sandra puts a hand on Kim's shoulder. I wonder how long it has been since Kim has been touched in this way. 'Let's have a look around, shall we?'

I hang back, sapped for a moment by the smell. Hanging over everything is one of two smells (the other being death) that I will discover and come to know during the time I spend watching Sandra at work: human dirt at close quarters over time. We have no single word for it, this smell. We have no adjective to describe how profoundly repulsive and unsettling it is. It's not just human effluence or rot, nor is it a simple matter of filth or grime or feculence or unwashedness. It's not merely nasty or gross or disgusting, or the 'FEH!' of my grandmother. I wonder if, in less hygienic times, we did have a word for it or whether there is one in other languages. Or whether, in fact, the absence of this word communicates something more effectively than language ever could—that such a smell is verboten because it signifies a fundamentally destabilising taboo: a level of disconnection and self-neglect that is, essentially, a living death.

Standing in the hallway, I imagine the smell settling like snow on my hair and my skin, breathing it like smoke into my nose and mouth; how it curls its way into the fibres of my clothing and the hollows of my ears. Like death, it is an old smell; so fundamentally human that it can only be disavowed. You avoid this smell each time you take a shower and each time you wash your hands. Each time you brush your teeth or flush the toilet, or launder your sheets and towels. With every plate you scrub clean, every spill you mop up and every bag of rubbish you tie up and throw out. Every time you open a window or walk outside, breathing deeply, to stretch your legs and stand in sunlight. This smell is the lingering presence of all the physical things we put into and wash off ourselves. But it is equally the ineffable smell of defeat, of isolation, of self-hate. Or, more simply, it is the smell of pain.

Instructively, however, over our time here Sandra whispers to me that ‘this house doesn’t smell’ and also that it ‘smells strongly of rats’; a startling and only superficially paradoxical observation that tells you much about the things she encounters in her work on a daily basis.

I walk out of the living room and into a smaller room that feels like a closet due to the fact that most of the walls and ceiling have been painted black. There is a naked mattress propped up against one wall and a couple of wooden chairs, but most of the space is taken up by piles of random items tied together to form strange teepees or stacked like kindling around the room: knotted shirts, ropes, pipes, a ukulele, a lawn torch, hats, wires, sticks.

I stop and stand, transfixed, before a mural in crayon and chalk and paper that dominates one of the black walls. It is vital, beautiful. It depicts the night sky, thick lines of psychedelic colour swirling in on themselves and around a young girl holding a flaming torch. The girl has been torn from a book, pasted to the wall and seamlessly integrated into the larger cosmos of this image. She stands there, staunchly balanced between a lemon yellow dagger and the word ‘Knowledge’. Perfectly primitive, the image is, at the same time, powerfully allegorical and somehow, though of course this seems insane, it appears to thrum on the dark wall with some talismanic promise of power. Also, it conveys as starkly as a road sign the thousand, thousand miles between where Kim is now and where she should have been. With all the appliances ripped out, it takes me a while to realise that this room was once the kitchen.

Sandra enters the room with Kim and compliments the mural while thinking aloud how she can advocate on Kim’s behalf to preserve it under the terms of the tenancy. Perhaps, she muses, they can mount a frame around it, directly on the wall. Kim immediately tries to have another painting in a different room thrown into the deal. I follow them slowly down the hall, passing a graffitied

bookshelf stocked with VHS tapes and DVDs. *Bugs Bunny. Peter Pan. Aladdin. Mary Poppins.* Propped up against the tapes is a photo of twin boys in their school uniforms, maybe ten years old. The same face as Kim except lovely and full of life.

I listen as Kim explains another large image on the wall to Sandra.

Executed with the same talent as the first image, it is chilling and predominantly black. It depicts a dark figure, the type a child would draw, with spiky hair and uneven limbs, but it has been elongated, distorted as though seen in a fun-house mirror. It stands in sharp relief against an indigo sky in which float numbers and letters. There is a roiling hole or bright burning furnace in the centre of the figure. And scratched into the black paint, over and over and over again, are the lines of another figure: the shadow of this shadow man. This is a perfectly realised human world of crisis and isolation as effective as any Giacometti or Bacon or Munch. Except that it is not hanging in the Tate or MoMA, it is painted on a dirty wall next to a free-standing wardrobe with the doors ripped off.

‘This is from when my mother was involved in a murder–suicide. I was five years old,’ Kim explains, leaning against a door on which are scrawled the words TRAUMA and PUNISH and MIND/COST in pea-green crayon. (In different handwriting, a child’s handwriting, are the words ‘incy wincy’ in careful orange script.) ‘I don’t need medication. It’s trauma. It needs to come out. My brain has nightmares which are horrific.’ She explains how she woke up from a nightmare and just started drawing on the wall, because she had to, and I think of her alone in this dark house in the dark night. Exorcising this image onto the nearest wall.

The bedroom. Kim sleeps on the top level of a bunk bed next to a broken chest freezer with the word CUNT scrawled on it in large brown letters. There is an accordion in the middle of her bed. A web of cellophane and rope has been twisted around the bed posts; various funeral booklets are stuck here, suspended like flies. Upstairs,

in the other two bedrooms, piles of clothes and sheets, everything the colour of newsprint. Also, an electric guitar with strings missing and a toy helicopter, its blades smeared with crayon.

‘I can get you a fridge,’ Sandra says casually to Kim as they descend the stairs. ‘And a washing machine, a fancy new one. And a dryer.’ When Sandra does a deceased estate and there is no next of kin to take the bed linen or TV or furniture, she stores these orphaned items and waits for the right fit, then she installs them for free into the freshly cleaned homes of her hoarding and squalor clients.

With an autistic client who had been sleeping on the cement floor of his bare apartment, she once explained, ‘The TV came from a murder, I stored it so it was aired out and ready to go, there was a lounge and I had a table, so I gave him that.’ She gave another client, going through a divorce, ‘a proper lounge suite with a recliner, a foldout bed, a vacuum cleaner, kitchen stuff, a whole range of linen, and I’ve got pillows for him. This is going to be a major transformation for this guy.’

She does this because she is deeply generous but that’s not the entire explanation. There’s also her drive to execute each job as perfectly as possible, which sets her apart from the other industrial cleaners who are happy with doing adequate work. But that’s not the whole story either. She has been intuitively righting her environment—cleaning it, organising it, coordinating it, filling in gaps where she can, hiding them where she can’t—since she was a child. It is her way of imposing order on her world and it brings her profound satisfaction.

Kim walks out of her bedroom and into the small laundry room which leads outside. She is volatile, emitting instability like radio waves, and I too feel jumpy, nervous. While the type of high energy that Sandra gives off always feels warm, like a car engine that’s been driving for hours, Kim crackles. Suddenly, she shoots back out of

the room and runs circles around us, bent low at the waist. I startle and, without thinking, grab Sandra's arm.

'It's the dog,' Sandra says lightly. Kim's dog managed to get inside and she is chasing it back out so that it doesn't attack the rats. We continue into the laundry room where a screen door leads to the backyard. There is no washing machine, no dryer. Just taps on the wall. There is a low table covered in a bedsheet with a velour pillow in the centre, on which various items are stored in boxes that once held tea-light candles and rolling papers. There is a crayon-streaked kettle and toaster, empty packets of chips, bread, tea bags. A small picture of the Virgin Mary hangs high on the wall of this makeshift kitchen. Also, a small postcard of Einstein. The dirty floor is carpeted with a brown blanket on which pink-handled cutlery appears to have been deliberately positioned. There is a toilet in a tiny room off to the side; the floor there is strewn with ten volumes of the *World Book* and the walls are painted bright blue and covered in green writing: OOH PUNCH & JUDY SHOW!, SUICIDE TAB 44 11, MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB. A frying pan lies at the base of the toilet, a crucifix dangles from the toilet-paper holder.

Surveying the dining situation, Sandra asks Kim if she would like a microwave. 'I, uh, I...uh...I would do that...' Kim replies quietly, then pins a coffee can between her feet and hops it to the other side of the room.

The backyard is vast. A Hills hoist is stuck like a cocktail umbrella in the dead centre of the dead lawn; debris everywhere in the spongy yellow grass. Despite it being the end of summer, the bushes and trees along the fence line are devoid of leaves. An entropic mound of trash and broken furniture oozes towards the house from the far corner of the yard. This is where Kim deposited the stuff that was crowded up to the ceiling inside the house during the last inspection.

I hear Kim telling a story inside like she's at a bar with friends;

Sandra breaks out into long laughter with her. Then they come outside and Kim, frowning, squats and lights a cigarette butt. Sandra's phone rings. 'Good morning, Sandra speaking,' she answers pertly while sitting down on a milk crate and majestically crossing her legs. Balancing her clipboard on her lap, she listens while making notes. The little dog trots over and places its front paws on her leg.

'We might have to take up the carpet,' Sandra says, staring into the middle distance and stroking the dog's head. Her perfectly manicured nails are extra-long acrylics, sufficiently durable for her to participate (ungloved, as is her preference) in an all-day trauma clean and emerge looking as though she has just been at the manicurist. At least, if you don't peer too closely at the undersides. She favours juicy bright shades of cherry red or apricot or watermelon, or a glazed glitter baby pink. Intensely practical about her appearance, as she is about most things, she has opted for permanent eyeliner, lip liner and eyebrow liner so that she can throw on minimal make-up and be ready for the day. Her eyelashes and eyebrows, like her hair, are white blonde and her eyes are very blue, slightly wide-set and enormous. Regardless of what she is doing that day or how long she has been doing it for, she looks immaculate and smells lovely.

The dog jumps onto Sandra's clipboard, leaving brown paw prints on the paper. She reaches around it to continue making notes. 'See, that's because body fluids go through to the underlay. It can be the size of a coin, but spread out underneath,' she explains into the phone. 'You can surface clean it but if you have children crawl over it at some stage, you're likely to be sued later on. In my mind, I'm not happy with that. I'd rather you be safe, sound and it's sterilised. We can certainly look at that for you. That's the trauma side of things but there may be an industrial clean needed, like if the walls need to be washed down because the body fluids have evaporated in the heat or if there was gas in the room, I'm not sure how they killed themselves.' The dog launches itself off Sandra's arm, ripping

two puncture holes in her skin. They start to bleed more than you would think. 'It's my paper skin,' she whispers, covering the phone and then wiping at the blood. Her cortisone inhalers cause skin atrophy; just now it tore like wet tissue. 'Where's the house?' she asks. 'Ah, that's just a hop, skip and a jump for us.' Pleased, she finishes the call.

The dog nestles between Kim's knees. 'Aw, god, you want love,' she laments theatrically as she ties her black scarf around her head like a turban. And then, quietly, 'You want breakfast...' She leans her head back, the burnt-out butt dangling from her lip.

Staring at the mountain of junk in the back corner of the yard, I think of the photos on the bookshelf of the boys with Kim's face and the Disney VHS tapes and the two unused dark bedrooms. I watch as the old sink and the battered washing machine rise up from the pile and right themselves, the two tiny headboards snap back onto the two small bed bases and all the clothes shake themselves off, fold themselves up and assemble in piles. I watch as everything floats up across the lawn and back inside and back through time to before the garage burned, when the walls were white and blankets covered the beds instead of being worn as skirts or used as carpets. But I know that, while Mary Poppins may have sung out from the TV and clothes may have dried on the line, things were not OK. Things here were never OK.

We walk around to the front of the house on our way out. Sandra is professional and obsessively efficient in her work but she cannot stay entirely serious for too long without indulging a playful flirtiness which she fans out like a peacock's tail. When she does this her eyes gleam and she is very beautiful and very hilarious and I cannot help, always, just to be delighted by her. She points to Kim's headgear and says, 'You look like Taliban.'

'I can be,' Kim smiles shyly and then they both giggle.

Despite seeing the same old shit each day for twenty-one years,

Sandra treats each client as unique in their circumstance and equal in their dignity. I asked her, once, how she manages to maintain that attitude of compassion and absolute non-judgment. 'I think it's a drive for me that everyone deserves it because I deserve it as well,' she explained.

Back on the footpath, I look up and down the street. The neighbourhood is shabbier than it first appeared and the smell with no name is here too, high on the breeze, its meaning as public and as private as a song. I ask Kim how she got into puppeteering. She answers that it was a way of working through the things she couldn't speak about. How does she manage to work that marionette hanging inside without hopelessly twisting all the different strings like everyone else?

'It's like playing an instrument. It's like dancing,' she says simply.

Her house looks like the aftermath of a personalised earthquake visited by a vengeful god but even here, in the midst of such disturbing chaos, what Kim has elegantly just confirmed is the profound power of sequence; the beauty of order. Heartbeat, breath, ebb tide, flood tide, the movements of the earth, the phases of the moon, seasons, ritual, call and response, notes in a scale, words in a sentence. Human connection and security lie here. Sandra will start work at Kim's house next week.

It didn't start at the twenty-buck fuck shops. It didn't start in the barnlike brothel where the girls roosted like hens, wire on the windows and around the light bulbs to prevent the men from ripping them out of the ceiling. It didn't start with the boyfriends who stuck around only as long as her money lasted, or with the beatings from the cops who hated boys dressed like girls or with the women who wouldn't open the door when she stood outside pleading in the dark, naked and bleeding. It didn't start with any of that. It started when she was a little boy in a small house with a dirt driveway running up along the side.

Maybe his name was Glen. Maybe it was Daniel. Or John or Mark or Tim. The actual name matters only because it is a piece of information that Sandra chooses to keep for herself. Statistically, it's most likely to have been Peter. And although that was not his actual name, it is what he'll be called. Not for lack of imagination, but because he had the right to be treated like any other boy born that year, and he was not.

If his father drove in a straight line up the driveway, Peter knew he wouldn't be beaten. But if the car rolled in crooked, it meant his

father had been drinking, which meant that he would wobble with purpose to the detached room out the back where his son lay, tensed, in whalemouth darkness. Then he would grab the boy and beat his thin body with the copper stick his wife used for stirring laundry.

‘He’s at it again, Pammy,’ the neighbour would say to her daughter, drying her hands on a dishtowel before turning around to shut the kitchen window gently on the boy’s cries. ‘Better go and turn up your radio.’

Sandra’s father, Robert, was born in 1923 and raised in Footscray. When my father-in-law talks about growing up in Footscray, he talks about the rope walk, long and narrow under its corrugated iron roof, and how the boys who worked at the rope factory became men who died early, their lungs full of resin and dust. Footscray is gentrifying fast now but this inner-city neighbourhood was a major industrial zone from the mid-1800s until the 1960s, when manufacturing began to decline, and a part of town where no one had it easy.

The Collins family lived on Droop Street initially, a road that drops obliquely, if not with melancholic defeat, away from West Footscray and sags towards Footscray proper as if gradually shoved out of place over time by forces beyond its control. Robert was eleven when his fourteen-year-old brother, Harold, died in 1934. In 1939, sixteen-year-old Robert Griffith Parker Collins carried his four names across state lines to Greta, New South Wales, to enlist in the Second Australian Forces, but by 1942 he was back home living with his parents and working as a labourer.

By then the family had moved to Birchill Street, which shows itself as a tiny T on the map of West Footscray; an oddly shaped street possessed of not one but two dead ends. It was, however, agreeably nestled within easy walking distance of Sims grocery store and St John’s Primary School as well as the chemist, the post office, the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and, were she to deny

one's pleas for intercession, as she did regularly but through no fault of her own, Footscray Hospital. Seven years later, Robert was still living at home—now with his wife, Ailsa—and making a living as a grocer while she worked as a saleswoman.

By 1954 the couple had finally struck out on their own, at least as far as the small white cottage immediately opposite his parents. From here Robert, whom people inexplicably called Bill, would set out each day for his clerical role at the Royal Australian Air Force Base in Braybrook, followed by an evening shift at the Plough Hotel during which he would drink himself into a rage and then drive sloppily home to beat his wife and children. This was Peter's home, where he was brought after he was adopted through the Catholic Church in the early fifties. Six weeks old.

In the taxonomy of pain there is only the pain inflicted by touching and the pain inflicted by not touching. Peter grew up an expert in both. Malnourished, the skin on his thin neck perpetually covered in boils, he was as scarred as the surface of Mercury; a planet lacking atmospheric protection, exposed to the hurtling debris of space and wearing its history of collision and battery on its face.

The second child and the oldest son, he was adopted after Bill and Ailsa lost a son in childbirth and were told that they could have no more biological children. For about five years it was just Peter and his older sister, Barbara. But then Ailsa fell pregnant, first with Simon and two years later, Christopher. That's when they told Peter that he had been adopted as a replacement for the son they had lost. And that they had made a mistake because they now had not just Simon but also Christopher, you see? This was stated clinically, as a matter of fact, 'nothing bitter and twisted or anything'.

A few years later, they moved Peter out of the room he shared with his brothers, with its bunk beds and black walls and bright red bedspreads, and into a low shed his father built in the backyard.

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Ailsa is the ‘prima donna of sponges’. She loves to bake, and Peter’s first memory is of hugging her leg in the kitchen. When he grows too tall for that, he never stops trying to be close to her. His eyes follow her around the kitchen, around the house, out the door. His eyes map her face. Is she angry? Is she sad? What can he do to make it better? To feel the weight of her hand pressing gently on the back of his shoulders; maybe even her warm cheek on his ear? Is there something he can help her with after his father leaves for work in the morning? Something he can do for her after school? He would give anything to sit quietly next to her while she talks on the telephone with her sister or flips through a magazine. If he is lucky enough to eat dinner with the rest of the family, he will check her face during the meal and again while he is cleaning up. When that is done, he will check once more just to be sure that nothing has changed, that there’s nothing he might have missed. And then he will look at her, silently saying goodnight, willing her to come tuck him in, to stay next to his bed where he can see her outline in the dark and hear her breath while he falls asleep.

But though sometimes she seems less angry, or at least more distracted, he never finds what he is looking for. Instead, she busies herself with the house and the shopping and the cooking and cleaning and her church, and her other children as Bill beats Peter for their misdeeds.

‘See? See what you’ll get if you do it again?’ his father, breathless and sweating, warns the other kids after he gets through with Peter. And then he locks his son outside to watch from his room in the yard as the house lights glow yellow and then go out.

Because Peter is not allowed into the family home after 4:30 p.m. each day he lives delicately, like lace, just at the edges. This presents a range of practical problems. First there is the food issue: he is always hungry. How does a starving child feed himself? If he is smart, he steals canned fruit or baked beans from the pantry when

no one is looking. And that will work until he accidentally burns part of the house down.

One of Peter's chores is to light the hot water system and one day he forgets. He panics. He tries to fill it up with the petrol that goes in the lawnmower, and the laundry room catches fire. Strangely, he doesn't get beaten for the fire; he gets beaten for stealing food after his stash of crushed, empty cans is discovered hidden behind one of the walls that burns down.

The 'whole street is family'—both blood relatives and 'your close people' whom you would also call aunty and uncle. Aunty Dot lives right next door. Aunty Rosemary lives next door to Dot. Peter's paternal grandparents still live across the street; Grandma grows lilies in the front garden. His grandparents come over on Sundays for dinner and, while they know Peter has his own room out the back, to them it is just a practical measure in a small house. What they do not know, as they sit there at the table with their son and daughter-in-law and four grandchildren eating 'a roast and three veggies overcooked to the shithouse', is that this is the only night of the week that Peter is allowed inside the house, the only time he is given a meal.

Throughout the year, everyone carries their hard rubbish to the vacant patch of land at the end of the street. Here, as the seasons change, rises an increasingly sprawling pile: the chair missing a leg, nubs of brooms worn down with sweeping, wooden crates missing planks like teeth; all the broken things mixed together to form a jagged accumulation that is monstrous against the night sky, though its parts are as familiar as breathing. And then, on Guy Fawkes Day, it is lit and the children cheer.

Peter loves this time, when he feels included in something both ordinary and majestic. The adults stand around, chatting and drinking while they stare into the flames which burn themselves to death, leaving the ashes that will blow away over the coming days

so that the next chair can break and be dragged down to start the pile anew.

Without regular nutritious food, Peter's teeth start snapping off at the gums. In a few years, he will break several teeth at once by biting into a banana sandwich. All his teeth need to be removed by the time he is seventeen. None of his siblings have similar problems. The gully trap by the side of the house where he squats over the drain for a drink is also the only place he can wash. He is not bathed regularly nor taught how to clean himself. There is an outdoor toilet he can use but the bathtub is inside and he has no access to it. His pale skin becomes red and inflamed; he is uncomfortable and embarrassed in his bubbling body.

The hours spent alone grind by in stupendous boredom but of greater import is the unfulfilled human need to belong, to be loved: to feel sufficiently safe that energy can then be directed towards learning and growing and loving others. The door to Peter's family shuts on him every day at 4:30 p.m. and therefore that door, along with so many others, never truly opens.

Though Peter does not like school, where he is regularly caned by the nuns and made to kneel in the corner for acting out, he enjoys the walk there each morning. Left on Blandford, then down an unmade road through the tip in order to bypass the house with the Alsatian, emerging onto Essex, past the house of the woman known only as the Witch and then straight down until Eleanor Street. He loves looking at the way the ladies do their gardens. He feels safe on the way to school, not because there are no dangers but because he knows clearly where they are and how to avoid them.

Forbidden to bring friends home, he starts visiting the nuns at St Joseph's Convent after school. He spends all his spare time there doing work for the sisters, who are cold but predictable, and whose small house across from the school is a sanctuary. When he knocks at their door, they put him to work with odd jobs or

errands and in this way he is made to feel useful and accepted. Being of service is its own reward; it distracts him, fills him with purpose and pride. Also they feed him afterwards: a cup of tea, a slice of toast.

At thirteen he gets a job after school sweeping up hair at the barber shop. Someone comes in asking for French letters and: 'Do we sell French lettuce?' Peter politely inquires of his boss. The men in the shop disintegrate into barking laughter and never stop giving him shit about it. He spends his pay on toys and new clothes for his little brothers. He buys Simon a chemistry set and carries it proudly back to Birchill Street, where Bill throws it out of the window in a drunken rage, smashing it to pieces.

Bill continues to regularly attack Peter, his hot breath smelling of booze and his caterpillar eyebrows meeting in dark concentration as he sets about beating his child with his fists or the copper laundry stick. When he is feeling particularly sadistic he will tie the boy to the clothesline for better purchase. And though everyone turns away, and his mother's silence slices through him—still, Peter climbs in through the kitchen window every time he hears his father doing the same to her. But his parents always reconcile and then they both, somehow, just hate him more.

Peter avoids playing with other boys, prefers the company of the girls in his class, so Bill tries to toughen him up by forcing him to join the army cadets. Peter dreads the weekly session at the Drill Hall. To avoid going, he feigns ingrown toenails so painful he can't walk. At school, forced to play football, he stands apart from the team, eyes lowered, hands jammed deep in his pockets. He tries to act casually invisible, hoping the ball never comes near him and hopping out of its way when it does. He endures the jeering and wrath of the other boys.

And then, one day, a change. The family is going on holiday; they will take the overnight ferry to Tasmania and drive around the

countryside for a week. Peter is not invited. Bill tells him to paint the house while they're gone; Ailsa says if he does a good job they'll bring him back something special, something he really wants. His siblings chatter excitedly in the back seat until his mother slams the door shut on their voices and he watches the car drive away.

After he finishes painting each day, Peter carefully rubs the white flecks off his skin with turpentine before walking down the road to the quarry next to the YMCA, where he picks through rocks and trash under the darkening sky. He selects the cleanest bricks and hauls as many as he can back home. Kneeling at the edge of the lawn, he arranges them with great care into a neat, scalloped border. The process of imposing beauty on the backyard is calming and his heart skips a little when he imagines the surprise, the appreciation on his parents' faces. He would do all this for them, happily, in the hope that it might be his key inside, but his mind does also wander to the gift his mother promised.

The house is freshly painted and the garden is perfect when the car pulls up a few days later and Peter runs out to greet them. Ailsa herds the younger children inside, Bill silently unloads the luggage and carries it in. And then Peter is just standing there, alone again in a tidy yard. His sister leans out of the screen door and shoves the small package at him: a pair of plastic cufflinks in the shape of Tasmania.

Sandra's voice gets tight with the memory of that day. 'They said to me that they would bring back something I really, really wanted, and all I really, really wanted was a transistor radio, so I could have some company.' She gets up from her large green sofa and walks into her kitchen where she reaches over the sink and grabs something off the window ledge: a small radio. 'I didn't get it off them, but I have this one now as a constant reminder.'

As she turns the dial back and forth between her long red nails, tinny voices swell and fade in the space around us and I remember

reading that all static is radiation, still, from the Big Bang; a living memory, an echo.

Ailsa is at her cake-decorating class and it is raining on the night Peter is finally exiled from his family. Bill is barking at him, forcing him to get his hair shaved into a crew cut. This time Peter refuses and Bill throws him out. Seventeen years old. Peter will only see his father three or four more times before Bill dies of heart problems at the age of fifty-five. On one of these occasions Bill tries to run him over in the street with his car. And then there will be Peter's eighteenth birthday party, when Bill turns up drunk and wielding a knife to the tiny flat where Peter is living. Peter will have no idea what sparked his father's rage that particular night but will be forever grateful to his neighbour, a Hungarian single mother, who intervenes and drives the man away.

As an adult, Sandra knows nothing about her biological parents. Only that she was meant to die in her first weeks, sick perhaps, and that she was adopted through the Catholic Church, which sent her home with a florid and violent alcoholic. She has no desire to find out more information about her biological family. 'Especially now, 'cause like, how'd you be? Rocking up at the door and going: "Hi, I'm your son!" They'd have a fucking heart attack!' She laughs. 'You've gotta take the good with the bad, you know what I mean?'

Her younger brother, Simon, is the only family member she has maintained contact with throughout her life. But Simon, who was not spared Bill's violence by virtue of being his biological son—or less effeminate—would never talk about their childhood, cutting Sandra off when she tried. She did, however, go back to their old street when she was in her forties, to visit Aunty Dot, who still lived next door.

Sandra called her up and told her 'what the situation was' (that she was now living as a woman) and that she would love to pay her

a visit. Aunty Dot invited her over. Sandra was emotional on the drive back to her old neighbourhood. She was trying not to cry because she had applied her make-up with extra special care that day and didn't want to look 'like a shitbox' by the time she arrived. Her desire to look respectable and successful and feminine magnified the silent struggle for dignity and autonomy faced by all adult children trying to go back home on their own terms. She knocked on the door and Aunty Dot welcomed her in.

'I always thought there was something different about you, Sandra, because you loved frilly curtains and you loved girly things,' Aunty Dot said to the graceful woman sitting on her couch. They had a cup of tea and spoke lightly of easy things and for long moments Sandra let herself feel the impossible warmth of if *this* were her childhood home and Dot were *her* mother; wrapped herself in the feeling like a fur coat in a store and then cast it off before she got too comfortable.

Finally, Sandra said, 'I've got to ask you Aunty Dot, no one will validate that anything ever happened to me. I don't know whether I dreamed all this or I was imagining it 'cause no one would *talk* about it. Can you tell me, was it all in my mind or did things really happen, was I bashed like that...'

And Aunty Dot was probably speared by the question. She probably felt a maternal urge to protect Sandra by not pressing on the wound, felt her tongue falter under the golden rule against mixing in but also a justified anger at Bill's criminal violence. So she said to this lovely blonde lady, in whom she clearly saw the sweet face of the gentle boy she had known, 'Well, let me put it to you this way, my dear. It wasn't a very good life for you.'

Sandra walked back to her car in her good shoes, past her old house with the bungalow out the back and drove away. Not long after that, Aunty Dot died.

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Sandra touches on a number of theories about her parents.

‘I always thought that my mother was my mother, but my father wasn’t my real father and that’s why he hated me,’ she says. But that theory went out the window when they told her she was adopted. So it led to a different idea.

‘I can always remember being in the kitchen with my mother before I was seven and hanging on to her leg because I think all I ever wanted was to be loved by somebody and, by being an adopted child, there wasn’t that love there,’ she says, her voice quivering very slightly.

An aunt once told her that Bill was her biological father, and that her real mother was in fact Ailsa’s sister Sheila, with whom Bill had been having an affair and who died in childbirth. She doesn’t know what to believe.

‘My father hated my guts. He made no bones about it. Look, they knew I was different but they just thought I was a gay person, I think. But *I* didn’t know what I was myself! I just always knew... well...I don’t really know.’ She pauses to think. ‘I just sort of felt different. I didn’t feel normal.’

The key question in Sandra’s cosmology is not to do with sexuality or gender or adoption or Catholicism or alcoholism. It is how a parent can shepherd any newborn through infancy and childhood into adolescence, and cease entirely to care about that child’s way in the world.

You want to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Imagine Bill and his self-loathing or trauma or mental illness; imagine his helplessness and rage every time he decides to raise another glass and throw another punch. Did he blame himself for the death of his brother all those years before? And find an echo in the death of his newborn son? Did he meet something in the army that ate away at him like mould, turning him dark and soft on the inside until he could not hold himself upright without a drink?

It is impossible for a parent to be an alcoholic without spreading their emotional isolation, like a disease, throughout the home. Imagine Ailsa, the girl who loves to bake, the woman whose cakes are light and high and whose dark religion tells her to fear her effeminate son. Imagine how every day she drags herself out of bed to wrestle with her dead baby and her newborn and her three other children and her husband who cannot stop drinking and beating her. Imagine her nausea rising from sheer exhaustion, the helplessness and fear and pain that bubble up to scald her and everyone she touches. Perhaps Ailsa and Bill are sufficiently hateful to deny us even the basic satisfaction of conceiving of them as villains.

And yet. Imagine the feeling of holding a six-week-old baby boy, using your arms for his bed and your hand for his blanket and your name for his name. Think of the way his heartbeat slows when you hold him close. Imagine that baby as a boy frozen in his bed, straining to read the sound of a motor in the driveway over the noise of his own racing heart. Think of the pain his father deliberately inflicts on him, think of his paralysis and how, in some universes, the Big Bang happens in reverse: an instant retraction of time and space to a point of singularity.

No longer allowed home, Peter went to stay with the McMahons, the family of his friend Mary who lived about five kilometres away. They took him in and included him as part of their family for six months until they left for a long holiday overseas. Before they went, they arranged for him to move in with their eldest son and the father connected him with his first real job.

Fitting and turning wasn't really his bag because he hated the greasy hands, but the security the job offered was a welcome relief. For the first time, Peter felt normal, even successful, turning up to work each day at Brunton's Bright Steel, freshly showered, always on time, a Vegemite sandwich shyly tucked in the small bag he

carried with him on the train. He felt tall inside walking into the factory complex in the growing shadow of the Westgate Bridge, then being built. He was an efficient worker, too, and a quick learner and excellent with people, so he was quickly promoted to the laboratory where they started training him in metallurgy.

Peter was in the lab at 11:50 a.m. on 15 October 1970, when the steel girders on the bridge turned blue under pressure and collapsed with a roar that could be heard over twenty kilometres away, killing thirty-five construction workers. The light bulbs in the lab and on the factory floor burst out of their sockets, plunging the rooms into a darkness in which one worker became caught in a machine, screaming while the ground trembled. Over the factory's back fence, Peter watched emergency workers arrange their cars into a square where they threw body parts away from the crowds that had gathered nearby. It was his 'first seeing of death'. By the time construction on the bridge resumed in 1972, Peter had moved on to another job.

'I was married by then...I'd met a girl on the way to...'cause I lived at, um, I must've lived at Williamstown then, over the Mars Music Store...because on the Williamstown train, going to Spotswood, that's where I met this girl...'

Sometimes, listening to Sandra try to remember the events of her life is like watching someone reel in rubbish on a fishing line: a weird mix of surprise, perplexity and unexpected recognition. No matter how many times we go over the first three decades of her life, the timeline of places and dates is never clear. Many of her memories have a quality beyond being merely faded; they are so rusted that they have crumbled back into the soil of her origins. Others have been fossilised, frozen in time, and don't have a personal pull until they defrost slightly in the sunlit air between us as we speak. And when that happens there is a tremor in her voice as she integrates them back into herself, not seamlessly but fully.

Sometimes, though, the smallest particulars—names and feelings and exquisite details—are so quickly recalled and finely drawn that it is like she has been holding them, all this time, in the palm of her hand. She can sketch, at any moment, the floor plan of her childhood home and explain to you how the master bedroom was near the front door, which had a glass panel running down the side. How you stepped down into the lounge room and where her mother's display cabinets were built into the wall and how they were filled with the good crystal. Where Barbara's bedroom was and the boys' bedroom was. How you stepped outside into the backyard onto 'a patio-type affair' that eventually became the bungalow to which she was exiled. But the age at which that exile occurred changes drastically. Sometimes it is seven, then eleven, other times it is thirteen. No matter how many times we go over this and over this, it is never clear.

What I think is that there were two seismic shifts in the way Sandra was treated as a child. The first came when her younger brothers were born. From the age of seven, she was subject to significant neglect and abuse. However, she probably continued to live inside the house, sharing a room with her brothers, until she was around thirteen. I say this because the yard that she landscaped while her family was away on their Tasmanian holiday included a fishpond. The bungalow that Bill built for her to move into was placed over that fishpond. So she must have been sent to sleep out there when she was thirteen.

This might have been a practical measure to save space in a small house or maybe, like the army cadets and the crew cuts, it was the way the Collins boys were toughened up to become men, but it was also a continuation of the particular neglect and violence that she had been subjected to for most of her childhood.

So I tell the story here as Sandra remembers it most often—as an exile from the table and the home and the family at seven years

old—because all memory is a particular metaphysics in which our experiences of reality constitute our only reality. Regarding the question of historical truth, the answer is both that there must be one and that there is none. When it comes to Sandra's history, this problem is compounded: her reality is as conflicted as it is real.

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