HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE?

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Submitted for the degree of PhD
I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Date: December 3, 2014
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will always be grateful to my mentors Professor Blake Morrison and Doctor Frank Krause for their patience, dedication and encouragement.

Much thanks and love to my husband Rodd, and my three children Camille, Will and Sophia for their total support.

This work would not have been possible without the trust of Simone’s family, Gabi, Gustl, Alexander and Christina. Thank you for allowing me into your lives and for never losing faith in me.

I dedicate this thesis to Simone Strobel whose disappearance and death on 11 February, 2005 inspired this book and academic research—for her great kindness, warmth and sense of adventure.
ABSTRACT

*Have You Seen Simone?* consists of a creative nonfiction book, *Have You Seen Simone?*, and a critical commentary on the process and context of writing it.

The book investigates the suspicious death of German traveller Simone Strobel, who went missing in February 2005, in Lismore, Australia. After an inquest into her death in 2007, the police stated they believed that Simone’s boyfriend, Tobias Suckfuell was involved in her death, although he has never been charged with any offence concerning her death. I was captivated by the case, and with the agreement of the police I committed myself to uncovering the truth. The book is the story of my investigation; it analyses the evidence, explores new lines of investigation, and recounts my interviews with the couple’s friends and families; included also is an interview with Tobias Suckfuell himself, who remains the prime suspect. Having become intimately involved in the case, the narrative becomes something of an investigation of the self, heightened by the loss of my mother who dies during the writing process.

It should be noted that some of the participants in *Have You Seen Simone?*, the suspects, have exercised a legitimate right to silence, and although it would be legally inappropriate to draw conclusions about this silence, I question the ethics of this decision, as the nature of their silence suggests they have something to conceal. Silence is at the core of this investigation: what does it mean to write about a legally irresolvable case where the *who, what, why, where* of the original series of events remains opaque? Navigating through contentious material and negotiating legal, moral, and empirical judgments in a case that has no preceding narrative or conclusion established by the courts is inherently problematic. What does this mean ethically, cognitively and poetologically for the narrative? Is it fundamentally doomed to fail? Or can a persuasively constructed speculative view illuminate a situation that remains largely opaque?

Bearing these questions in mind, what follows in the critical commentary, after an exploration of the history of the genre—that is the context in which I position myself (from its precursors to its more recent developments)—is a discussion on why my particular work was suited to a reflective, personal account; this is in view of my
background as a newspaper reader as opposed to a journalist who is trained in objective, third-person reporting. I go on to discuss and compare the similar works of Australian author Helen Garner who wrote *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* and *The First Stone*—in this chapter and the following—as I further elaborate on my particular methodology in relation to writing methods, and investigative methods involving elicitation and evaluation. I will end with a discussion on the ethics of writing, specifically on the subject of the participants’ right to withdraw data from a research project.
## CONTENTS

### Section One

Have You Seen Simone?

- Part One  
  p. 9
- Part Two  
  p. 80
- Part Three  
  p. 190

### Section Two

Have You Seen Simone?: Commentary

1. The Choice of Genre: Traditions, Problems and Perspectives  
   p. 307
2. The Narrator  
   p. 324
3. Methodology  
   p. 346
4. Ethics  
   p. 361

Conclusion  
  p. 380

Afterword  
  p. 383

Bibliography  
  p. 397
HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE?
The Story Of An Unsolved Murder

by Virginia Peters
All men should strive to learn before they die
What they are running from, and to, and why.
—JAMES THURBER
PART I
Monday, 14 February 2005

I first saw Simone in a cafe called Succulent, a few streets from the main beach of Byron Bay.

I came here most mornings after my run to the lighthouse. Even though the cafe looked out onto a car park, the concrete was as pleasing as the white sand that fringed the bay. Rows of cars vibrated in the heat, and in the distance the occasional bright green fronds of a Bangalow palm stood out like a beach umbrella against an ocean of blue sky. Inside, the place had a Moroccan feel: mosaic table tops, their iron feet curling like Persian slippers on the polished concrete, rusted tin lanterns hanging from the ceiling.

The swarthy barista looked up and raised two fingers at me. I shook my head and raised one back. One cap; no mother today. I’d not
called her—and it would never have occurred to her to ring me. I was probably reacting to that, but maybe I was also preparing for the possibility she might not always be around.

Sitting in our usual spot, I surveyed the room. Nearby, a couple of women with yoga mats looked limpid-eyed after a session of ashtanga upstairs; at another table two men caved over plates of spinach and eggs. They had a clean, salty look about the ears—surfers, probably. A few more tables of twos and threes created a constant buzz. The waiter arrived at my table with a coffee and a wink: No mum today?

I mumbled something about us taking a break and reached for the Sydney Morning Herald, my daily fix of the real world, miles from here, when I noticed a piece of paper just below the coffee machine, taped to the white tiles of the counter front. Across the top of the A4 sheet, above a photograph, ran a heading in bold print: HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE? The use of the girl’s Christian name seemed to imply I might know her.

It was not a good place to attach a notice. Legs brushed against her, blocking my line of sight. I waited for them to move, and narrowed in again.

She was standing on a beach, surrounded by thick white sand—the fine, floury sort that formed shadowy clumps. The bower of a tree drooped behind her, its stalky branches emanating from either side of her head, just above her ears. She was already statuesque, but with this suggestion of antlers she seemed even more so, like a proud young deer, shoulders and neck erect, face strongly boned, but soft enough to make her incredibly pretty. MISSING SINCE LAST FRIDAY. There was a mobile number to call.

Whoever had made this poster had kept it simple. A parent would have been more pleading, I thought. I wondered whose number it was—a friend’s? A lover’s?

I went back to my coffee and paper, scanning the pages for news, only to find my eyes returning to the counter. There was something
interesting about this girl, the vulnerability of her stance, the way her arms hung loosely at her sides.

Don’t waste your time worrying, I told myself. She’s probably very self-assured. She’ll show up somewhere. She probably already has, hung-over after a weekend binge. She might even be secretly thrilled to find herself the subject of a poster campaign, as though suddenly cast as the central character in a film noir. That’s what would most likely happen.

But then again, something told me it might not. She looked so alone against the counter’s white tiles, the white paper, the clumpy white sand, too surrounded by space, by a sort of nothingness.

* 

I spent the rest of the day at home writing. The short story form, I found, seemed to suit my circular way of thinking. I wore small holes in the page thinking about problems associated with love and domesticity in modern society. I was very self-conscious about my subject matter. Like many writers, I wrote fiction that was largely autobiographical, with wet patches of imagination.

I was doing a creative writing degree at university. The last time I saw my supervisor, he’d held the edges of my story as though it might stain his fingers. ‘I can’t read this,’ he’d said. ‘These people are just awful.’

I felt a flash of sweat beneath my arms. ‘I can’t stand them either,’ I said with a tinkering laugh, as though he and I were co-conspirators. Everything he wrote was about crime, prostitutes, crooked cops.

‘This guy, he’s such a prat,’ he said, waving the pages high in the air. ‘Why in God’s name does she stay with him?’

I was shocked. I wanted to laugh out loud. My husband? Was Rodd really a prat? I’d never considered this before. I couldn’t wait to tell him. We’d laugh our heads off.
‘Your problem is that nothing ever happens in your stories. Nothing.’ He wheeled across the carpet in his roller chair and leaned in close to me. ‘Write about something you really care about.’

What did I really care about? Family? My mother? That night, I went home to my three children and my prat husband and looked at them. Critically. I knew the theory was that people wrote stories either to make sense of life or to give it some meaning. Something would have to happen to this family for me to make sense of it, I decided, and possibly something catastrophic. But I felt fairly certain that nothing ever would. I had an innate confidence we would remain perfectly comfortable, remote, coddled from the world of misfortune to the point of ignorance. And although this was a blessing, I felt numbed by it, as though this safe world I inhabited was ultimately sterile and insignificant.

At three pm I knocked off and headed up the road to Bangalow to collect the kids from school. Surrounded by farmland and quaint, sleepy housing estates, Bangalow was fifteen minutes inland from Byron, on the road to Lismore. You still saw the odd bandy-legged farmer and ladies in housecoats, but mostly the country folk were slowly being outnumbered by aesthetes from the city. The interlopers had preserved the town’s heritage-listed main street so well that it actually looked fake, like a film set façade, and the people—they looked like actors.

I parked outside the pharmacy and popped in for some Alprax, which I used every so often to calm my nerves. As I stepped back out, something on the other side of the road caught my eye. It was the girl from the poster, staring at me from between two parked cars. Her face was now monochromatic and life-size, clamped behind the thin bars of a newspaper billboard. WHERE IS SIMONE? A slightly different question this time, posed in black capitals above her head, its tone distinctly more demanding.

As a rule, I avoided the Northern Star, the parochial rag that
pushed shark scares and car crashes, but there was something about this girl, the uncertainty of her smile. I crossed the road. A few minutes later, after parking in the laneway next to the school, I pulled the paper tight across the steering wheel to smooth the bend in her face. She was more beautiful than I’d first thought. She had European skin, that flawless cream that caramelises when exposed to heat. And although she was smiling, she looked puzzled, as though she didn’t quite know where she was either.

**LOST AFTER A LOVER’S TIFF**

A minor dispute between young lovers has sparked a nightmare for a tight-knit group of German backpackers. After an evening at the Gollan Hotel in Lismore on Friday, German backpacker Simone Strobel exchanged words with her boyfriend before walking off.

It was about 11.30pm and the twenty-four year old had no shoes on, no money, telephone or identification. She only speaks broken English and has no idea of the area.

Her German boyfriend, his sister and her boyfriend contacted police about 10am on Saturday, and river searches took place throughout the weekend.

The boyfriend, too distraught to speak with *The Northern Star* yesterday, had the unenviable task of contacting Simone’s parents via Interpol . . .

‘Look at this girl,’ I said to Rodd that night, wiping spit from the frypan off her face with a tea towel. ‘She’s gone missing. In Lismore.’

‘Mmm. Pretty. She’ll show up,’ he murmured.

I went back to the photo. I tried to steer my mind to where she might be at that very moment, as though I were psychic. I saw green scrub—I always saw scrub when people went missing. I tried harder. Leaning my elbows on either side of her face, I slowly
examined her features, each one singularly, addressing every shadow and cleft with such concentration that my temples eventually ached. In the process I discovered a sharp pinhole of light emanating from her left iris. For a moment it seemed promising, like an entry point that could take me beneath the surface of the photograph, but then it became nothing, just a spot of paper that had escaped the ink.

*

On Tuesday I skipped the lighthouse run and coffee with my mother to concentrate on writing. A six am start allowed me to get in an hour of work before waking the children. I liked to write first thing, when my brain was as fresh as a newly laid egg.

I sat at my small desk, beneath a large oil painting of a lime-green pear, a birthday present from Rodd. It was the sort of art painted yesterday but in the conservative style of Rembrandt—it didn't know what it was. The pear’s bulbous base was suggestive of the female form, but lacked the legs to carry it anywhere. It looked stuck and weighed down with a sort of maternal stateliness. It reminded me of my years as a stay-at-home mum in Sydney, while Rodd was building up his law firm.

I’d had lots of friends there, other stay-at-home mums whom I avoided—wives who were out whacking bloody tennis balls, Rodd had observed, while their husbands were driving their blood pressure up behind desks. I would never play tennis or golf, or do lunch. Even back then, I’d put all my energy into trying to understand—through my short stories—how it was that I’d conspired against myself to live my life in someone else’s shadow.

Rodd had already flown to Sydney that morning. Like every week, he’d be gone three or four days. It wasn’t ideal, considering that we’d come to Byron Bay to escape stress. In fact, we were find-
ing the area had a way of highlighting our issues. Instead of suppressing our arguments in a small backyard of suburbia, we could now rage at one another next to the rushing sounds of a waterfall, or in a field at sundown before a panoramic view. It was always the same argument—the value of unpaid work versus paid—and we were both guaranteed to emerge from it feeling under-appreciated.

A local lawyer friend of Rodd’s had told us, on our arrival in Byron, that there was a dark side to the region. Like any quasi-paradise, he said, it attracted all types. People looking to check out of the mainstream. They found a sense of freedom here, he explained, which some took as a freedom to act with impunity. ‘You wouldn’t believe what goes on up in the hills,’ he told us.

He was referring to the countryside that spread out from Byron’s volcanic rim, in rolling green aftershocks of beauty. We lived on such a hill.

‘Some of it’s pretty disturbing,’ he continued. He was moving out, going back to the city.

I remembered his surgically clean nails as he twirled a shiny balloon of white wine, and the feeling of my own carefully pencilled eyebrow arching with astonishment at what he was saying. I felt gullible: the beauty I’d so admired now seemed artificial, more plastic than natural, as though a thick, bright coat of sky-blue paint and verdant green was covering up something far more sinister, more real.

After an hour and half of work, I got the kids up for breakfast, made three packed lunches, and at ten to nine I drove them up the road to school. On the way back I stopped at the shops and saw the startlingly emotional words outside the newsagent’s in tar-black font: I CAN’T BEAR IT. Something about the headline resonated with me.

I laid the paper across my steering wheel and studied the photo of the young man which took up half the Northern Star’s front page.
He’d clamped a baseball cap down on his long, pale hair, back to front. There were two moles that looked like tears to the right of his nose—to signify a pending sorrow, the Chinese would say.

The disappearance of German tourist Simone Strobel is tearing her boyfriend apart.

Yesterday, Tobias Suckfuell spoke for the first time about his anguish for his girlfriend of six years . . .

‘Anything could have happened. She could have been kidnapped or raped. I can’t eat or sleep with worry. My stomach is going into spasms and I’m shaking all over.’

This guy was something else; Australian men would not speak about their feelings so expressively. I could feel my own stomach begin to tighten with his symptoms.

‘We were very close . . . and the police got it wrong when they said we had had a lover’s tiff. We didn’t argue at all.

‘Disappearing like this is completely out of character for Simone.

‘She is a kindergarten teacher and a very responsible, very sensible person.

‘She is very friendly but naturally cautious and would never get into a stranger’s car or go off with anyone. I know she would contact me if she could.’

What he had to say was curious. The police got it wrong. He was upset and, compounding the situation, misunderstood as well. I marvelled at how the police could have got such basic information wrong. The article went on to explain how the travellers—Simone, Tobias, his sister Katrin and her travelling companion, Tobias’s friend Jens—had enjoyed several beers over a period of about four hours, before
walking back to the caravan park together.

Back [at their campsite] they sat around and talked. Tobias and his sister Katrin had an animated conversation about family matters back in Germany.

‘Simone said something like “oh come on guys, we’re on holidays, turn it off,” and said she needed to take a few minutes for a walk.

‘We had been cooped up together because of the rain and were feeling a little bit stressed,’ Tobias explained.

‘It seemed natural Simone needed some time out.

‘I’ve had to contact her family back in Bavaria. They are distraught too and are ringing me every two hours for news. I have hardly slept since she disappeared.

‘If she is out there by some miracle, and feeling embarrassed about going off, I would ask her to just please, please, please get in touch. We are all so devastated fearing the worst. Just knowing she is still alive would be the best news we could all have.

‘Please ring me Simone if you are out there.’

There had been a sighting of a girl matching Simone’s description in Byron, but Tobias said there was no way she’d hitchhike anywhere. ‘And we don’t even have any friends here that she would have gone with,’ he continued.

So where was she? It seemed incredible that one minute you could be literally walking along a path, then in the next something alters not only your direction but the entire course of your life. Such capriciousness was inconceivable to me. I was aware of every self-determined minute in my day, the complete absence of happenstance.

Anyone could conjure up the obvious: a shadowy predator with a weapon. Before long, he would unwittingly reveal himself—case
HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE?

closed. But, caught up in the swirl of my writing, my thoughts about the news report were starting to blur with my imaginary world. Simone's disappearance was beginning to feel more like crime fiction than crime fact—not a police matter to be solved, but a plot that needed to be worked out backwards. And in fiction, a predator crossing the girl's path was far too predictable.

But real life didn't work like fiction; after weeks working on a story based on my own experiences, I knew that better than anyone. Real life did have a predictability about it, an ordinariness that was totally unsuited to the twists of fiction. Consequently, the story I was writing—about a woman who was lost, in a metaphorical sense—was going nowhere, and it seemed trivial in comparison to this real situation unfolding in Lismore, where a girl was truly lost, and probably through no fault of her own.

*

On Thursday, 17 February, six days after Simone went missing, a body was discovered. It was unrecognisable. As it was found less than a hundred metres from the caravan park where Simone had camped, the Star was assuming it was her. The grounds of the Continental Sports, Music and Recreation Club—a small, fenced-in plot belonging to the Italian community—were now completely wrapped in concealing black plastic, like a low-budget Christo. Superintendent Lyons praised the efforts of his police but refused to speculate on why the body had been overlooked in earlier searches.

I experienced a sense of shock and sadness—as much as you can for a stranger—and then relief that the stasis had been broken. I could go back to my own life now. But later that night, when I shut my eyes, I imagined Simone was standing beside my bed, watching me. She looked just the same as her photo on the beach, except her smile was more surreal, full of irony and innuendo. I kept snapping
my eyes open in the dark, as though if I were quick enough I might catch her before she disappeared.

The Star couldn’t get over her either. Every day over the next week, the pages of coverage devoted to her were branded with a customised masthead, DEATH IN THE HEART, an abbreviation of the paper’s original headline, DEATH IN THE HEART OF THE CITY. It had the tawdry ring of an American melodrama.

I read that the day after the body was found, Tobias Suckfuell had called the Star and ‘pleaded’ with the editor to run a story on the police investigation. The resulting article went under the humiliating headline BOYFRIEND LASHES KINDERGARTEN COPS. Tobias said the police had not taken him seriously when Simone went missing.

‘When they did finally get the dog—six days later—they found the body straight away,’ he had said. ‘Later on they tried to tell me it was a cop, not the dog that made the discovery. It’s like kindergarten cops!’

It seemed a little harsh. I’d read enough news reports to know that, in Australia, we used dogs to find bodies, drugs and lost children, not adults who’d apparently left of their own free will. The Star reported another of Tobias’s complaints, that the ‘detectives who’d reassured him they were “working around the clock” didn’t in fact work after 11pm’. His literal response seemed so Germanic. ‘She lay dead for six days just a hundred metres away from me,’ he’d said.

Had the police been slack? My own sense from the reporting was that they had been working hard to find Simone. Perhaps Tobias was simply resisting the horrible news, attacking those who’d helped him rather than leaning on them for support. He’d been stuck in the caravan park for six days—he’d probably gone troppo. At Lismore, inland from the sea, the heat was particularly syrupy, and the flies were the slow kind that crashed into your lips like fat raisins. Still, Tobias seemed angrier with the police than with whoever had killed her.

Hundreds were now visiting the crime scene, weaving flowers into the fence and attaching cards and letters. An artist had cut a
jagged love heart from corrugated iron and painted it red. People
kneel before the heart as if it were a crucifix, praying, holding can-
dles and linking hands. The mayor addressed the community: ‘In
this terrible hour, we remember how fragile are the things we cher-
ish . . .’ His words had the gravity of a bygone era.

A group of health professionals were said to have begun work on
a ‘model’ to facilitate mass grief counselling. Articles advised parents
on how to soothe their children. A professor of psychiatry created a
profile of an opportunistic killer, his accompanying professional
shot displaying an inappropriately gleeful grin. I found myself
retreating from the macabre circus, the intimacy I’d felt now dissis-
pating. I still bought the Star, but now I fancied I was reading it like
an anthropologist.

One morning the paper ran a full-length photograph of Tobias
and his sister leaving the Lismore police station, their heads down.
Katrin was as tall as her younger brother and was wearing his base-
ball cap. A large T-shirt hid her shape. What stood out to me in the
photograph, despite its apparent insignificance, was a small cross
around her neck. I guessed that it was a symbol of faith rather than
of fashion; her brother was the stylish one. Tobias’s hair was long and
loose, and the sun caught his lower crown so that it gleamed. He
wore a satchel across his torso, and three-quarter-length shorts,
which showed his ankles to be much finer than his sister’s.

They were an unlikely pair, and for some reason this made the
sight of their arms, slung across each other’s back, seem even more
touching. TORN APART BY GRIEF read the headline. In the body
of the article, a resident of the Lismore caravan park complained
that the three Germans were cooped up in their van every day in the
blazing heat. ‘I wish the community could support them in some way
other than having doctors provide them with valium,’ she said.

Valium? What they needed, surely, was decent food. I found
myself thinking about shops in the area that sold imported grocer-
ies: *brot*, *bratwurst*, *weisswurst*, pickled peppers. I pictured myself taking a basket over to Lismore, making enquiries at the caravan park. Coming face to face with the siblings and the as yet unseen Jens Martin. At this point my daydream came to an abrupt halt. Not only did I not own anything so quaint as a basket, I had serious questions about the motivations behind such ingratiating behaviour.

Five days later, dental records flown in from Germany confirmed the body was Simone’s. Tobias held a ceremony at the perimeter of the crime scene. He invited the *Star* along. ‘It was deeply moving to be witness to their profound and intense grief, exposed here in all its raw emotion for the world to see,’ the reporter wrote. ‘Sobs wracked their bodies . . .’ The prose went on and on, it was nauseating, over the top, but still it moved me. I understood. In our grief we’d risen to some great height and were now clinging to the Germans, not wanting to let go.

And just when it seemed like it was over: *DONATE MONEY TO HELP FLY TOBIAS Suckfuell HOME*. The headline read like an ad. Tobias, astounded by the price of an airfare, had told the travel agent he could live for a year on the money it would take for him to return to Germany with Simone’s coffin. Clearly, it was time for the public to offer some practical help, to make reparations.

My initial impulse was to rush over to the office of Harvey World Travel with some cash, but Rodd was inclined to resent me making these sorts of decisions on his behalf. Still, I found myself mulling over how much to give—and then whether in fact I should be giving at all. Tobias had made it here in the first place, so why was he so shocked about the cost of a return? Why couldn’t he hit on his parents?

A few days later I read that people had arrived in tears with their donations: children had handed over their pocket money, while one single mother on a pension had given her last five dollars. My cynicism turned to self-disgust. What the hell was wrong with me?
The front page a fortnight later depicted four women, arms interlinked like members of a netball team, gazing skyward at an imaginary plane carrying the Germans away. Then there was a small piece covering Simone’s funeral in Bavaria: a long shot fuzzy with falling snow, distant figures in black coats, large grey tombstones. Then nothing. The Star returned to its sharks, car prangs and small-time crooks. I kept plugging away at my desk, falling back into that world where the battle to create fiction blurred with the boredom of the everyday.

* 

Four months passed. On Friday, 17 June, the Star’s billboard read: SIMONE’S BOYFRIEND MURDER SUSPECT. I leapt three steps into the newsagent’s and slid my dollar across the counter.

In an announcement to the German media, the state attorney of Würzburg, Bardo Backert, had named Tobias Suckfuell, Katrin Suckfuell and Jens Martin as suspects in the German investigation into Simone Strobel’s murder. Tobias had apparently given the police false information. There wasn’t enough evidence to make an arrest, but further interrogations in Germany were being planned. In the concluding paragraph, however, the Star quoted a Nimbin man who knew Tobias and Simone well: ‘They were obviously in love and never fought.’ This seemed to throw doubt over the whole premise for an investigation.

There was a photograph of Tobias, who for once wasn’t covering his mouth with his fingers. I was surprised to see his dark goatee—it made his chin look like the pointy end of a pencil and contrasted sharply with the blond locks curling on his shoulders. He could have been a young man from Germany’s Romantic period, a character from Goethe. I’d read The Sorrows of Young Werther a few years before and had been swept along by the narrator’s voluble way of expressing himself. Werther was haunted by his love’s image: ‘Waking or sleep-
ing, she fills my entire soul. Soon as I close my eyes, here, in my brain, where all the nerves of vision are concentrated, her eyes are imprinted.’ I remembered the way Tobias had spoken about his spasms and shakes; the two were not dissimilar.

At the ceremony at the crime scene, however, Tobias had invoked a different genre: the Grimms’ fairy tales from his homeland, Bavaria, gruesome stories that were often about the unexpected dangers lurking on darkened paths.

‘She was an angel on earth,’ Tobias had said, ‘and we can’t understand why Jesus took her away. Nobody can answer this question, but everyone can see her bright shining star now . . . This bloody and evil monster must be brought to justice.’
sat on the edge of my bed and pressed my mother’s number into the phone. She was not good at giving advice, but I’d always found her an avid listener. Usually, by the time I’d finished talking to her, I’d worked out what I should do next, without my needing her reply.

‘Yes, I read about the inquest,’ she said as soon as I raised the subject of Simone. ‘It starts next Tuesday, doesn’t it? I’m definitely going;’ she added.

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m fascinated, that’s why.’ She said it with a hint of defiance.

My mother was eighty-three and had a voracious interest in murder. I felt a surge of protectiveness for Simone.

‘I was thinking of going myself,’ I said tentatively. ‘But I’m not certain I will.’

It had been well over twelve years since we’d done this sort of thing. Spending time at uni in the meantime had made me less instinctive, more self-conscious and critical—sometimes of my mother more than of myself.

I asked her if she didn’t feel a little odd about taking a week out of her life to attend court proceedings that had nothing to do with her. I also talked about the half-hour trip to Lismore being a long way to go for someone who was not remotely involved, and she wasn’t good at driving long distances. She had cataracts and double vision
VIRGINIA PETERS
and sometimes had to wear a pirate’s patch. What I wanted to say
was: *Have you no shame?*

My mother had always seen the gallery set aside for the public in
a courthouse as an invitation to attend a case, not as a space design-
nated for concerned third parties. When I was a child in New Zea-
land, she’d often take me out of school for the day for just such an
outing. After a nice lunch in the legal end of town, we’d invariably
end up at Wellington’s main courthouse. ‘We’ll just slip in,’ she
would say, and we would, breathing in as we moved slimly though
the heavy wooden doors and creeping across the floor on the balls of
our feet. I always had the sense we had to be deathly quiet because
we weren’t really meant to be there. I was in awe of the high ceilings,
the pageantry of the wigs and gowns. I would sit quietly all after-
noon, intrigued by the proceedings as much as by the stern expres-
sion on my mother’s face when she lent forward and pistol-gripped
her chin.

I remember, at around ten years of age, listening to one of the
many defendants in a multiple rape case that involved a bikie gang. I
learned that orange underwear will turn grey when worn everyday
for six months, and other details of that kind. The intimacies and
intricacies of other people’s lives. ‘Justice has to be seen to be done,’
my mother would explain on our way home, as though our inconse-
quential role in the proceedings had actually been of great impor-
tance, as though we were the all-seeing eyes of justice.

On 10 July 2007, I picked my mother up at the BP petrol station
in Ewingsdale Road, for she was determined to come. We’d agreed
to drive to the inquest together, and she’d come this distance to cut
down my travel time, as her house was in the opposite direction to
Lismore. Like me, she wore jeans and a leather trench jacket—black
rather than brown, and much too like my own, I felt.

It was a cool, clear winter’s day. A nice day for driving through
the hinterland to Lismore. I was feeling slightly giddy. My in-laws
had just arrived in town for the week and I would not be there to
whip up lunch or pour tea. Remarkably, Rodd had said, ‘You go.’ It
signalled that things were changing since we’d moved away. Before,
I’d always felt the pressure as Mrs Peters junior to replicate the
nineteen-fifties model set by his influential parents, and as a house-
wife to serve my family ahead of any form of self-interest. Rodd even
suggested that if the case was intriguing, I should follow it for the
entire week.

The main road was narrow and wound through the prettiest
farmland. It made you feel small, like a plasticine figure in a match-
box car, weaving through a diorama of macadamia farms and tiny
villages. Clunes, Teven, Booyong, Nashua read arrows left and right. It
was idyllic, compact, the colours so lucid, as though a drop of lemon
had been added to the light. On the left, a soft blue strip of chalky
coastline appeared and disappeared as we rode up and down.

My mother and I talked about Simone. We talked about Tobias,
commenting on the strangeness of his surname, Suckfuell, pronounc-
ing it (incorrectly, I would later discover) so that it sounded like a
description of someone using a hose to siphon off some petrol. I
wondered aloud if the two of them had driven along this very road to
Lismore the day she went missing—and, if they had, why they’d kept
going past Bexhill, where the terrain flattened and lost its verdant
green.

Lismore was not big on the backpacker trail. It was inland, and a
growing industrial centre. It’d acquired its status as a city primarily
due to its low-cost housing, which encroached on its farmland areas
like an oil spill.

By design, it was a big country town, flat with broad streets and
industrial-sized roundabouts, built to ease the passage of the many
semitrailers and cattle trucks that passed through at a rollicking
pace. Having lost its original rural identity, it had the look of having
had a scrap with itself, followed by a divorce and a slow, inward with-
drawal. Its rows of daggy shops had developed a third-world look about them—they were under-lit, under-stocked or overly cluttered. Along with the overweight women pushing strollers, you’d see carers of the handicapped pushing wheelchairs. They too had been edged out of the pricier coastal areas, as had a private and under-resourced public hospital and the Richmond psychiatric clinic.

At the entrance to the city, we passed the Westpac Rescue Helicopter Services on one side and the State Emergency Services on the other, both drab utility buildings awaiting disaster. As we rounded the corner we saw Saint Carthage’s Cathedral, redbrick with gothic spires. It was the most elegant building in town, and it stuck out like a sore thumb.

When we passed Lismore Caravan Park, on one corner of a four-way intersection, our heads swivelled left. This was where Simone had stayed. Behind a struggling grey hedge we saw caravans packed together too tightly. I’d read that the park catered mostly to permanent residents. These caravans had lost their pastel lustre, and the long grass growing up around their wheels said their days of holidaying were well over.

‘We’ve gone too far,’ my mother said as we passed a strip of car yards on the right. ‘I think we need to go back up Zadoc Street.’

Zadoc. I shuddered. What sort of a name was that? It sounded like an antidepressant.

I turned at the next roundabout and we made our way back. There were no parking spaces free near the courthouse; it seemed like a sign we weren’t meant to be here. I did a U-turn and headed back down the street, puffing out a shot of air. I was almost ready to head back home, but then I found an all-day park in a residential street around the corner.

Hands jammed into the pockets of our leather trenches, and handbags sandwiched under our arms, we paced briskly up the hill, my mother working extra hard to keep up.
In the stillness I heard the sound of feet thudding on bitumen. Balding, thickset and with his thighs low to the ground, a man cut across the road towards us with a strange grin plastered across his face. He stood before us as though he was about to expose himself. Except he didn’t. He bent his knees, then, backing up the hill in a primordial crouch, he began shooting us with a large black camera. Something about his wholemeal-coloured pants and short-sleeve polyester shirt told me he was from the Star.

He would have captured our gasp ten times over in the seconds it took for us to drop our heads. Even then, the shutter went mad as he took shots of our crowns—my mother’s white, mine dyed brown. I didn’t want to be photographed in the news with my voyeuristic mother—the remnants of teenage insecurity, I suppose—so I ditched her and slid behind one of the concrete pillars holding up the new courthouse, but too late.

It was official. My fascination with Simone had now been captured on film. It would take the media no time to realise this pair were not actually part of the case, and the photographs would no doubt quickly find their way into a bin. I had nothing to worry about. We would not appear on the front page under some garish headline. Then I was hit by the flipside of this, the realisation that my connection to Simone was truly insignificant—and, what’s more, it was about to be judged so by others. The ‘relationship’ I’d developed with her was in fact one-sided, a figment of my imagination; and if by some miracle Simone could attend her own inquest, she would look straight through me, as though I were the ghost.

We sat opposite the reporters outside the court like two stray sheep. I envied their camaraderie. They looked me and my mother up and down in a way that made us clasp our handbags tightly to our laps. I hoped we looked like Germans in our leather. Rather than give us away by saying something in our pedestrian New Zealand accents, I thought it best we stay silent.
My mother kept looking sternly at the reporters. ‘Stop staring,’ I whispered in her ear.

Her eyebrows sprang up her forehead. ‘What is it? I can’t hear a thing you’re saying.’

Fifteen minutes later, two men in suit pants came into view, creating a wave of energy as they strode up the corridor, stacks of foolscap folders climbing their torsos. The reporters had stopped talking and flapped about for their belongings.

A man with large, bulbous eyes appeared from nowhere and swung the door open with a theatrically wide arm. The folder carriers entered the court without pause, followed by the procession of reporters and, finally, my mother and me. The members of the press went left. We went right.

We had the pews to ourselves. Reaching into my bag for a new notebook and pen, I realised I had neither, just an old one filled with scribbles from my last story. What did I think I was doing taking notes anyway? Just as I decided I’d simply sit and observe, and perhaps learn, for the purposes of my fiction, how life can take a sudden turn in direction, my mother placed her floral pad and matching pen in my lap.

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We all stood as the deputy state coroner, Mr Paul McMahon, entered the court. As a magistrate, he wore his own head of hair—a thick, white mop with a fringe—and a black gown over his suit. He looked like Phil Donahue, the American talkshow host from the nineties. Instantly, he introduced a touch of reality TV to a room that more resembled a honey-toned lecture theatre than a court.

A police prosecutor was appearing for the Crown. She was a bottle blonde with ironed-flat hair. Senior Sergeant Jodie Shepherd.

She called her first witness: Detective Inspector Wayne George
Hayes of the New South Wales Homicide Squad.

My mother leaned across. ‘Oh, I like the look of him,’ she said.

I could see why. Hayes, in his mid-fifties, resembled my long-dead father: debonair, with slate-grey hair and closely shaven cheeks you could imagine he’d slapped hard with astringent that morning. He set a bristling pace. After thirty-two years as an officer, he was not in the habit of mincing his words.

Hayes told the senior sergeant he was in charge of an on-call team of the Homicide Squad in Sydney. All homicides in New South Wales went through the squad. He’d arrived in Lismore the day after the discovery of the body, and despite being the most senior officer from Homicide, he’d handled the role of family liaison. This was because he had some familiarity with the German language. His role had also given him the opportunity to closely observe the Germans in the days that followed.

Pacing the carpet as she barked her questions, Shepherd built up not only a crackle in the atmosphere but also an electric charge that caused her nylon dress to cling. Distracted by this, I couldn’t help but notice the fabric’s pattern: linking chains that were reminiscent of manacles.

Was Hayes satisfied with the missing persons investigation that had taken place prior to his arrival?

‘I was very satisfied,’ he replied.

‘Was there more that could have been done?’

‘No.’

‘Given the unique concealment of the body, do you believe it was reasonable to take six days to find the body?’

‘Yes.’

‘In fact, a Dog Squad dog didn’t even find the body.’

‘Correct.’

Straight up, this seemed defensive; clearly Tobias’s insulting ‘kindergarten cops’ comments had hit its mark.
We heard that the relationship between Tobias and Simone had deteriorated in their last few days at a campsite in Sandon River, north of Coffs Harbour. But, sticking to their original plan, they’d set off to Lismore on Friday, 11 February. That night, staff at the Gollan Hotel witnessed Tobias and Simone fighting. Katrin Suckfuell was also seen arguing with her brother, so loudly that the siblings were asked to keep quiet. At around eleven pm they were told to leave. Simone, on rising to go, was seen to stumble and hit her forehead on the edge of a table.

Moments later, the group was stopped outside: they were attempting to walk away with their full beer glasses. When asked to hand them back, all except Tobias obliged. He’d paid for the beer, he said, and he yelled abuse at staff for about a minute, continuing even after they had returned inside with his glass. Moments later, further down the road, Tobias abused a bouncer who refused him and Jens entry into the Metropole Hotel, calling him a ‘cunt’ and a ‘fucking security guard’.

CCTV footage indicated that the Germans returned to the caravan park shortly before eleven-thirty pm. With them was a Japanese man named Gun, a young tourist who’d befriended Simone and Tobias earlier in their travels. Coincidentally, he too was staying at the park that night, in a tent just metres from Katrin and Jens’s tent and Tobias and Simone’s van.

Later, other residents of the caravan park would complain about a loud argument that took place at the German camp that night, as well as laughter and the sound of a didgeridoo being played. The times given by these witnesses varied, but most independently agreed that the argument began at around eleven-thirty pm. It was between a man and a woman. Several witnesses independently heard the woman shouting, ‘Leave me alone!’ Another described the argument as being partly in German and partly in English. One witness physically identified Tobias as shouting at a woman inside the Germans’ van.
The last independent sighting of Simone was at around twelve-forty-five am. This witness saw her seated next to Katrin and an Asian man outside the van. When the witness complained to them about the noise, she described the three as looking at her like ‘zombies’. Ten minutes later, she identified all four Germans packing up for the night, and she thought she saw two Asian men—not one—leaving for a tent; it was ascertained that there had indeed only been one. This same witness also thought the fighting had begun at ten-thirty pm, not an hour later, as reported by others. Another witness, corroborating this account, also confirmed seeing the Asian man leave for his tent but put the time at between one-thirty and two am—Gun actually spoke to him, apologising for all the noise.

Two other witnesses at the caravan park but not in the immediate vicinity of the Germans also heard a woman scream, ‘Leave me alone!’ The shout was described as coming from the direction of the roundabout that separated the caravan park from the Continental Club. Of those witnesses, one described the time as being around two am, the other around eleven-thirty pm.

Shepherd asked what Hayes thought about the disparity in times.

The park residents were in the midst of sleep, he said, and so they were approximating. He believed the crime occurred closer to two am, sometime after the sighting at twelve-forty-five.

Why would a predominantly German speaker yell, ‘Leave me alone’?

Tobias and Simone had been living in Australia for six months, Hayes said. Witnesses who had worked with the couple on cotton fields in Moree attested that they were speaking a lot of English.

Next, Hayes described a victimology study conducted by a police profiler. In terms of the likelihood of her being murdered, Simone was generally considered a low-risk victim. On that night, however, the calculation, which used a number of social factors, increased to
moderate risk, given her heavy alcohol consumption and her apparent departure from the campsite. Low-risk victims, Hayes pointed out, were more likely to be killed by a person known to them. Simone’s risk would have remained low if she hadn’t left the park, he said. Hayes seemed to be negotiating with his own position—then I got it. He was introducing the possibility that she had stayed on the campsite grounds.

As Simone had not established a routine in the area, he continued, and as her apparent departure from the camp was unplanned, an attacker couldn't have predicted her movements and planned an attack. This, he said, suggested that the killing had been spontaneous. The lack of blunt-force trauma to her body also suggested that the attacker had not relied upon ‘assaultive behaviour’ to resolve conflict. Hayes was developing a sort of murder equation, I now saw.

In homicide, there were three basic types of body disposal: dump, display and conceal. Dumping occurred when an attacker’s priorities were all about haste and convenience. Display was used when there was a psychological need to punish or degrade the victim. Concealment indicated the attacker’s need to create an emotional distance, as well as a time delay—that is, time to develop an alibi.

Significantly, Simone’s body was carefully concealed in a location very nearby the caravan park. From the Germans’ van, one could take a shortcut through the trees and over the caravan park’s sagging wire fence, then cross the road and pass along the unlit path that ran up the side of the Continental Club, and arrive at the rear chicken-wire fence—the entry point of the body. Her feet were clean, suggesting she’d been carried, not dragged.

The evidence also indicated that Simone had been stripped and then passed face-down through the chicken wire. Abrasions on her body suggested two people had done this, although it was possible for one, Hayes thought, having carried out a reconstruction.

A blond hair that had snagged on the chicken wire had been col-
lected by the forensics unit; possibly it belonged to a perpetrator. It was without its root, so at this point testing for DNA was not possible without destroying it. However, with recent developments in forensic analysis in Europe, the hair would likely be tested eventually, so it was currently being held by the German police.

The impression of a palm frond beneath Simone’s body indicated she had been placed under the low-lying palm, not shoved. Mulch had then been scattered over her face and body, and palm fronds torn from the tree had been laid lengthways to cover her.

The stripping of the body, Hayes thought, was due to the visibility of the bright red skirt Simone was wearing, but perhaps also so as to suggest a sexual attack. There was, however, no evidence of any physical assault. In fact, the complete removal of her clothing was inconsistent with a typical sexual attack, where the predominant motivation was access: the victim of a sexual assault was usually left with clothing gathered at the far regions of the body, not totally removed.

Most interestingly, there were no defence wounds: Simone had not fought her attacker. Consequently, Hayes thought, it was most likely that her attacker was someone she knew and trusted. That is, she did not know the danger she was in. This stopped me short. Was he trying to suggest they were playing some sort of game? I wanted him to elaborate, but we were moving on.

Hayes told the court there had been two autopsies, one in Australia and one in Germany. Both had been unable to identify a cause of death. Toxicology detected low levels of cannabis in Simone’s blood, and although her alcohol reading was very high at 0.286, this could be put down to post-mortem production. I gathered that he was eliminating alcohol poisoning as a possible cause of death. Her larynx was not broken. There were no contusions around her nose and mouth—something you might expect if physical force or excessive pressure was used.
So how had she died? We were all waiting. How had a healthy young girl, after a Friday night at the pub, simply ceased to live?

Finally, Hayes had arrived at his destination. Through a process of elimination, he believed Simone had been asphyxiated, with either a pillow or a plastic bag. I instantly pictured these household items. One had pathos, the other was sickening.

Hayes now directed our attention back to Tobias. In his experience, it wasn’t unusual for family members of a missing person to attack the police, but there were certain behaviours in this instance which he found ‘bizarre’. Tobias had wanted candles in glass containers at the burial site, and when Hayes had difficulty acquiring them, the younger man had become quite irrational. At the travel agency he had become argumentative over the price of an airfare. In Hayes’ experience, this sort of anxiety could be brought about by a fear of detection.

Shepherd slipped in the next question without any change in tone: ‘Detective Inspector, could you please tell the court who, in your opinion, committed this crime?’

Hayes raised his chin. ‘I believe Tobias Suckfuell committed this crime. In a fit of rage he has probably suffocated Simone Strobel.’

I couldn’t believe he’d said it. Despite this being the obvious conclusion they’d been leading us to, the accusation sounded as staged as the final pronouncement in a game of Cluedo—more than that, scandalous. It was the lack of a disclaimer, the certainty in Hayes’ voice, the way he held his lips defiantly firm when he’d finished speaking. For a moment, it struck me as a wonderful stroke of revenge. So you think you can ignore our inquest, do you? Well, take that! And we in the gallery were complicit, coming together as snubbed attendees.

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After such a heavy atmosphere, stepping outside into the brightness of the cool day was surreal. My mother and I went to lunch at La Baracca, down from the courthouse. It was like intermission at the theatre, a hive of activity. We were oddly silent. I had tried to discuss the accusation, quietly, but couldn’t find the words to talk about it. As she was inclined to in noisy rooms, my mother was exaggerating her expressions, cupping her ears and craning to hear me better. What was unfolding felt too serious, too subtle to be reduced to short, loud bursts. So we focused on our Caesar salads instead.

Back outside the courthouse, we paced, waiting for the doors to open. I was lost in thought, trying to fathom the moment Tobias had supposedly killed Simone—except that it wasn’t a moment, was it? It was a length of time. Surely a couple of minutes at least. A concerted effort seemed required to turn something as benevolent as a pillow into a deadly weapon.

‘Excuse me.’ It was the usher. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

I looked at his wide arm, which was corralling me aside.

‘The officer in charge of the case wants to know who’s present in the court,’ he continued. ‘Could you please tell me your interest in the proceedings?’

My interest? The word seemed to connote some form of ownership or share, not the other sort of interest that had nothing to do with anything. ‘I’m a student,’ I said. Then, noticing my mother had sidled up, I added, ‘And, um, this is my mother.’

He gave a diplomatic nod, as if ‘mother and daughter’ explained everything.

Detective Sergeant Shane Diehm took the stand next. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his early forties, the local cop who’d taken over the investigation once it became a murder inquiry. He spoke about the searches coordinated by the police, again consciously addressing Tobias’s accusation that they had been too slow to act. This defensiveness was raising my suspicions.
After taking us through a lot of detail relating to the logistics of the investigation, finally we got to hear Simone speak. Diehm read a translated passage from her diary, written on Thursday, 10 February, the day before she disappeared:

[Tobias] flipped out totally, and it’s the baddest vibration between us since we’ve been in Australia—fuck you! We spent the whole rainy day separated like that, Katy and I in the van and the others in the tent . . . Toby hasn’t spoken a single word all day and I was very surprised he came to sleep in the van—but not a word was spoken!—shit one!

We then heard Tobias’s entry, written that same day:

Not a nice day, actually, this was a fucking day!! Simmi got on my nerves right off in the morning. I wasn’t even awake! It’s really getting too much, it can’t go on like this . . . I hardly spoke with Simmi and I was very introverted. Consequently, the mood in our group suffered, it can’t always be good just for the sake of the group. On top of this, it rained all day, so Jens and I hung around in the tent and the girls in the van! . . . This day was downright stupid, on top of that Katy also came across as completely strange. I can’t work her out.

The next day, Friday, Simone’s last day alive, she wrote: ‘Today began as shit as yesterday ended . . .’

Tobias: ‘Mood is still rock-bottom, and I don’t even know what’s going to happen in the coming days.’

The brevity of these final entries left a wake of silence in the court.

Then Shepherd asked Shane Diehm a similar question to the one she’d asked Hayes. ‘Detective Sergeant, do you have your own opinion about what happened to Simone?’
‘I believe Tobias Suckfuell has been involved in the death of Simone Strobel,’ he answered. ‘And I believe that his sister, Katrin Suckfuell, may have knowledge as to her death and concealment.’

Like Hayes had, he was suggesting that if Tobias had required help, as the police profiler thought was necessary—that is, carrying the body and passing it through the wire fence—the most likely person to have provided that assistance would have been his sister. At the very least, Hayes said, the circumstances of the crime and the siblings’ close living quarters afterwards—the van—meant that Katrin ‘would have to have some knowledge of this crime’.

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As my mother and I drove back to Byron, we talked. There had undoubtedly been a fight, but I still couldn’t believe Tobias had sustained the necessary rage to kill Simone. And how could he be so enraged if she wasn’t physically fighting him back? It didn’t make sense. My mother agreed. We were stumped. There was a missing bit to all this, and I couldn’t wait for the next day. Jens Martin—the only one of the three Germans who had returned to Australia for the inquest—would undoubtedly explain everything.

Trials always offered a variety of possible answers before settling on one, which sated the viewer’s need to know—but this was different. We’d never been to an inquest before. The inquisitorial search for facts was generating more and more questions, and no real answers. So much seemed to hang on a rootless piece of snagged hair. By the time we got to Clunes, fifteen minutes away, we’d exhausted every scrap of the information we’d garnered that day, and added a raft of new questions—at least, I had, while my mother had murmured a stream in support. Now emptied out, I had an ache in my chest, feelings of incompleteness and loss for Simone, whose life would never unfold.
I was also conscious of my own lack—why had I never had the confidence to consider some sort of professional role, one that might have enabled me to help Simone? I was a spectator. As the court officer had inadvertently emphasised that day, I had no real interest in what had happened to her, nothing other than the lowest and most pointless form, curiosity. I felt a spike of shame for being so much like my mother—this woman I dearly loved—a housewife with a peculiar habit, rather than a contributor to proceedings.

‘I want to come alone tomorrow,’ I said aloud, even though, frustratingly, I still wanted her there, her shoulder next to mine. I pictured myself solitary, taking notes on plain notepaper and pretending to be someone whose business it was to be there.

She took a deep breath. ‘I have every right to be there.’

A long silence followed, as we both considered what this suggestion of separation might really mean after all these years.

By the time we were entering the car park of the BP petrol station, she was offering to stay at home, as though she’d thought it up herself. She would watch the news updates on TV. More importantly, she said, she’d use the time to complete her crochet—a large piece which she was turning into a lap blanket for me.
In the absence of a photograph, the *Star* had been depicting Jens Martin with a black silhouette. I was keen to sight this mystery man’s face, but ironically, my first impression was not of him but of his knitted jumper. He wore inch-thick stripes of colour: oranges, yellows and greens. Usually, witnesses attempt to enhance their credibility by wearing plain outfits with conservative colours. What was Jens Martin, a construction draftsman, trying to say in technicolour?

In fairness, his jumper was not completely out of keeping with his seventies hairdo: a brown plait that ended in a sharp point halfway down his back. If he’d let the mane flow he’d have resembled Jesus. And it struck me that he was a saviour of sorts, since without him there would barely have been an inquest. He was the only one of the *Polizei*’s suspects who’d made the effort to come.

He hunched sheepishly in his seat, his dark eyes watchful. Sitting next to him, as close as an over-anxious mother, was a pretty, middle-aged woman in a smart navy suit—the court interpreter.

‘Now, Mr Martin,’ Shepherd began, ‘I believe you’ve come all the way from Germany to Australia to assist with this inquest and tell the truth today?’ She sounded faintly antagonistic.

Jens sloped towards the microphone. ‘Yep,’ he said, showing some knowledge of English.

Shepherd, wasting no time, took him straight to his and Katrin’s arrival at Brisbane airport. They had been met by Tobias and Simone.
From there, the four had travelled up the coast to the Great Barrier Reef and various national parks. There had been no quarrels, just discussions over what they did or didn’t feel like eating. ‘It was the best three weeks,’ Jens said. Then it all changed at Sandon River.

‘Something must have happened in the night,’ he said, ‘because Thursday morning, Simone and Tobias were barely speaking.’

What was the weather like?

‘Rain. The arguments continued all day. As did the rain.’ The boys had kept apart from the girls. It appeared that the argument had centred on the van. ‘Certainly, Simone had a right to sit in it,’ Jens said. They were equal owners, he thought—contradicting Hayes, who had testified that Simone was the sole owner. Simone had asked Tobias that morning to fold up the bed so that she and Katrin could shelter in the van from the heavy rain, but he’d refused. He wanted to sleep in.

‘Did you blame Tobias for the turn of events that day?’ Shepherd asked.

‘Certainly.’

‘In the entire time that you’ve known Tobias, have you ever seen him in that type of mood before?’

‘I’ve never seen him flipping out like that,’ Jens said, although he recalled Tobias telling him how he’d run home from a party once because he was so angry, and kicked in a door.

Not such a big deal, I thought, and I recalled putting my own foot through a wall as a little girl. To my horror, the plaster had caved and felt as soft as a slice of bread.

Jens told the court he’d known Tobias for about six to eight years. They caught up regularly, around three times a month.

‘Would you classify him as a good friend?’ asked Shepherd.

‘Up until now. I always thought of him as that, yes.’

Is he angry with Tobias? I wondered, but Shepherd had already moved on.
'Was he someone you could confide in about personal matters?'
'No, we didn’t talk much about personal things.'

The pair got on well but weren’t really that close, he continued, even though Tobias was always open to conversation. He was fun, dominant, persuasive, liked to get his way. When he didn’t get his way he’d grumble and whinge. Jens’s insouciance was making Tobias sound more and more ordinary.

Later that Thursday, when the rain stopped, the boys went fishing and walked on the beach before returning to have dinner with the girls.

Then what happened?
They had a barbecue, and after that Jens and Tobias had a few beers together.

Then what happened?
Nothing. The night was quiet, everybody in their own beds. The next morning they had breakfast.

Then what?
It was as bad as the day before, Jens said. Tobias and Simone were barely speaking. The four of them had packed up the camp. It struck me that everything Jens said had to be extracted from him.

‘On the way to Lismore, what was the mood like?’ Shepherd asked.

Jens had sat in the front with Tobias. They had barely spoken.

‘Just things we had to say, like we need petrol or we have to buy food.’

‘Do you think in this dispute that Katrin was on Simone’s side?’
‘Certainly.’

‘Do you think that made Tobias even more angry?’
‘I don’t think so.’

‘This was a man used to getting his own way?’ Shepherd snapped.
‘Certainly.’

‘And so two out of the four . . . were against him?’
‘What do you mean “against him”?’ Jens complained. ‘Three of us . . .
were all trying to smooth things out, but he wouldn’t let us talk to him about it.’

‘So did you remain neutral in this, aside from trying to placate Tobias?’

‘I asked him a few times if we could sort this out because we only had one more week in Australia. But he kept on saying it would be fine.’

‘Do you have a theory about what they were fighting about?’

‘I think it might have been about the relationship, and I asked him, but he didn’t tell me . . .’

Jens wouldn’t put two and two together. He was circumnavigating every point, and in the process making Shepherd sound stubborn, mulish, even slightly scornful.

On returning to the caravan park after lunch, Jens said, he was feeling a bit tipsy. He’d drunk four or five schooners with Tobias at Mary Gilhooley’s Irish Pub. The girls were also tipsy, he believed. When prompted, he recalled that they’d also smoked marijuana on the way to Lismore. That afternoon, when they met up at the caravan park, they had smoked again.

Jens had convinced the girls to head back to the pub that evening. He told the court he hoped a few drinks might help Simone and Tobias ‘clarify the situation’. But the more Tobias drank, the less willing he was to talk about the problem.

At one point Tobias and Simone stepped away and embraced, but it was only ‘a short interlude’ before the arguments began again. Katrin tried to mediate.

Jens had no recollection of following Simone as she left the Gollan, nor of returning with her, as the CCTV footage showed. Yet he did remember Tobias trying to abscond with a glass and, further on up the road, shouting abuse at the bouncer of the Metropole Hotel when he was refused entry.

‘Where you shocked by his behaviour?’
‘I was a bit concerned or disturbed by it. I found the whole situation, from Sandon River on, quite difficult to understand—the lack of harmony.’

Back at the caravan park, the argument got louder.
‘What were they saying to one another?’ Shepherd asked.
‘They were pointless arguments that kept on . . . escalating. Every time Simone said something, or Katrin tried to intervene, Tobias got more and more angry.’

‘How were you feeling at that stage, in terms of intoxication and affectation?’

‘I was in a great mood, I would say.’
‘Sorry?’ Shepherd looked askance at Jens.
‘I was in a good mood, I would say.’

He explained: Gun, the Japanese tourist they’d bumped into, was teaching him some ‘tricks’ on the didgeridoo. While they amused themselves, Tobias, Katrin and Simone had continued to argue. Some people complained about the noise, a few times. Gun obliged them by leaving for his tent, and shortly before or after that—Jens couldn’t recall which—Simone left too.

‘She was barefoot,’ he concluded.

I remembered the autopsy report, which had stated Simone’s feet were clean.

‘Are you sure she was barefoot?’ Shepherd asked.
‘Either she was barefoot or had flip-flops on. Certainly not solid shoes.’

Could Jens remember any of the words Tobias used that night?
He couldn’t.

‘What about swear words?’

He thought for a moment. ‘Schlampe,’ he said, ‘which could mean “slut” or “bitch”. Also blöde Kuh—German for “silly cow”!’

Tobias, having made up the bed, had been yelling his abuse from inside the van.
After Simone had been gone for a while, Jens suggested to Katrin that they should go after her. Tobias offered to wait in the van—in case she came back or called on their shared mobile.

Did Jens think this was crummy, or suspicious?
No. He thought it made sense that someone wait at the camp.

Did she have a phone on her?
No, but she could always borrow fifty cents from a stranger, he said.

Jens was now offered a map, and he proceeded to show the court where he had searched for Simone that night. He and Katrin had gone out onto Dawson Street and then walked in opposite directions. Jens had turned down Uralba Street, past the front of the Continental Club, where Simone’s body was ultimately found. It was dark but there was street lighting.

He had passed people along the way but had not asked them if they’d seen Simone. His English wasn’t good enough, he said through the interpreter, as was the case with most of his responses. ‘Sometimes I called out “Simmi” or “Simone”,’ he said.

How many times?
‘Maybe five.’

‘How loud?’

‘Do you want me to show?’ Jens shouted out ‘Simmi’—it was loud enough to be heard across a hundred or so metres on a still night, I thought.

‘But no one heard you,’ Shepherd said, with the implication that people had heard other things being yelled that night.

Jens shrugged.

The first search, he thought, took between fifteen and thirty minutes. He and Katrin met up by the caravan park’s broken fence, across the road from the Continental Club. It was over this break in the fence that the police were suggesting Tobias might have carried Simone’s body. That night, the pair stepped over the sagging fence
and went back to the van, finding Tobias still inside. He appeared not to have moved, nor was he overly worried.

After sitting in front of the van for a while, Jens and Katrin agreed a second search was necessary. Once again, Tobias stayed behind in the van. This time Jens went along Woodlark Street, towards the Gollan Hotel and the town centre.

‘I don’t know how far I got,’ he said. ‘I can’t say that precisely.’ It was a long time ago.

If he’d passed through the park by the tennis courts this time, he would have walked directly past the gap in the chicken-wire fence of the Continental Club, the gap through which Simone’s body was fed. Had he passed that way? Shepherd asked.

Jens hedged. When pressed, he said he couldn’t remember, but whichever way he went, he ‘definitely’ ended up outside the public toilets on Dawson Street. ‘There was a chain on there with a lock, I believe.’

The second search was longer by fifteen minutes or so, he thought.

His Honour wanted to ask a question. ‘Mr Martin, on that search, did you get to the hotel that you’d been drinking at previously?’

‘I certainly went past there, yes.’

‘Did you go into any of the hotels?’

‘No, I didn’t go inside anywhere. I just looked from the outside.’

‘Could you see into the windows at that time of night?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Was the pub still open?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘How many pubs did you look into?’

‘As I said, I only walked along part of the street. It can’t have been all that many.’

‘Can you remember if anything was still open at that time of night?’

‘I don’t know, I’m sorry.’
'Do you know what time of night it was?'
'It's very difficult . . . I can't really say, definitely.
'Were there pedestrians about?'
'There were people certainly around, but there weren't many, very few people, I'd say.'
'Cars?'
'I think so.'
'Did you speak to anybody on your second journey?'
'No.'

His Honour had spoken gently but his questions were pointed. Back to Shepherd, whose eyes narrowed back in on the witness.

Did Jens have any explanation as to why this search of his did not show up on Woodlark Street’s security footage?
He did not.

After the second search, Jens continued, it was the same as before:
Tobias was lying in the van in his boxer shorts and T-shirt, his legs covered by a blanket. Again, Tobias said they shouldn’t worry, that she’d come back during the night, that the next morning they would find her there. So Jens and Katrin decided to go to bed in their tent.

Was it possible that Tobias was concealing Simone in the van? Jens didn’t think so. They would have noticed.
Would he have heard Katrin if she’d got up in the night?
He thought so. There was not much space between the beds, and the zipper had to be undone.

Did they check Gun’s tent?
Yes, he and Katrin did, before going to bed. They saw that he was alone, and asleep.

The next morning, Jens and Katrin woke up at the same time, around seven. The first thing they did was check the van. Tobias was awake.

He seemed to be more worried now, and talked about going to the police. They should pack up, he said, as they’d only paid for one
night and had to be out of the caravan park by ten am. They would park out the front; Katrin would stay with the van, and he and Jens would head up to the police station.

‘You went to the police station at ten-forty-five am,’ said Shepherd.
‘Yes. Around then.’
‘And you woke at seven?’
‘And we had a shower.’
‘You’re not suggesting a shower and packing took three hours and forty minutes, are you?’ The police station was only five minutes’ walk away.
‘Certainly not. No.’
‘Don’t you think it’s a little odd you didn’t all rush to the police station on waking?’
‘I thought about that too, but that’s how it was.’
‘Who decided it was more important to have a shower?’
‘I don’t know. I can’t explain,’ Jens fumbled. ‘Maybe it was Tobias who said: “We’ve got the toilets here, we’ll use the facilities.”’

Jens recalled that he had a normal length shower.
‘Didn’t you feel any sense of urgency?’ Shepherd wanted to know.
‘Yes, but I didn’t want the urgency just to come from me.’
‘You didn’t say, “Come on, let’s go, hurry up”?’

Jens made no audible response.
‘Did you think it in your head?’
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I certainly did want something to happen as quickly as possible. It was a difficult situation for me. We were a long way from home.’

Shepherd demanded a minute-by-minute breakdown of that morning. Even with enormously generous time allowances for showering and packing, two hours were still unaccounted for.
‘I think we spoke for at least an hour about what to say to the police,’ Jens added.
‘What happened during the other hour?’
‘We talked about the search in the night and what could have possibly happened.’

‘Mr Martin, that sounds like an awful lot of time to spend doing things that could have been done quite quickly. Had you really any concern about Simone’s whereabouts?’

While accounting for the time, Jens remembered a discussion in which Tobias told him and Katrin exactly what to say if they were questioned by the police. They were to say they only had a few beers that night—specifically, four ‘middies’, each of low-alcoholic beer. They shouldn’t say anything about having smoked marijuana, nor of having been to the known drug town of Nimbin. Tobias also said they shouldn’t say there’d been a row—they would call it a family discussion between Tobias and Katrin.

Jens admitted he had thought this all very strange, but at that time he’d just assumed Simone was alive.

‘Did you and Katrin discuss the reason for these lies?’

‘No, she just agreed, as I did.’

Shepherd pointed out that it would’ve taken Tobias just a couple of minutes to communicate those four points to the others. But Jens disagreed: it had taken a while because he was talking around each point.

Did Jens question Tobias’s motive for lying?

He certainly did, he said, but not aloud, and not even in private with Katrin.

After Tobias had spoken to the police, he and Jens had searched for Simone—for about two hours, Jens thought. Katrin had stayed in the van while the boys walked several streets, checking for Simone in cafes. Then they headed ‘quite a long way’ up to the hospital.

His Honour interrupted. He wanted to know what Tobias and Jens had discussed during this time.

They had talked about what could have happened to Simone, Jens said, about what could’ve gone wrong and whether she might possibly have returned to Nimbin to see friends.
The inquest was then adjourned. ‘I know that you’ve got work commitments that you want to attend to,’ His Honour said. ‘I would anticipate that you would be able to leave, if it’s your desire, by about lunchtime tomorrow.’

‘It’s because of a wedding,’ Jens replied.
‘I thought it was work commitments?’
‘It’s a wedding. I’m on my summer holidays.’

It struck me that even the most rudimentary details about Jens weren’t clear. Something wasn’t right with this guy. Could he really be so unobservant, so easily led? He knew nothing about the dialogue of the argument, despite being present. He knew exactly where he had searched for Simone that night, but not whether he had passed the Continental Club and the opening in the chicken wire. He had looked into the pubs but didn’t know if they’d been open. And in keeping with his shadowy silhouette, he had managed to slip between the intermittent clicks of the CCTV. After searching the night before, he’d done nothing in three and half hours of daylight before reporting Simone missing. Was this reasonable?

Jens seemed reasonable, even obliging, despite Shepherd snapping at his heels. But people who didn’t like to get involved annoyed me—people who thought you should let sleeping dogs lie, not upset apple carts. I found them hard to understand, because I was the other sort, constantly questioning and upturning everything around me.

That night, I thought about it more. If Tobias did kill Simone, when had he done it? And where? Was she already dead before Jens and Katrin went searching for her, or had Simone come back while they were out? If we were to believe Jens, and assume Hayes was right about Tobias’s involvement in her death, this seemed to be the only time in which Tobias could have acted without being heard. Could one really squeeze in a quick murder when pressed for time? Or could he have done it later, when she returned after the searches, and the others were asleep?
What about the reported cries at two am? How would Tobias have transported a body across the road during this time when taxis and shift workers were still moving about the town? Was Simone’s body already bundled up in the van as he talked to Jens and Katrin about her disappearance? If so, was Tobias so cool that he could suppress any outward signs—that he could fool them, in fact, by appearing calm and unworried, as Jens had said? I hoped for something the next day—just a hint from Jens about what might have happened.

* *

‘Mr Martin, I want to go through with you again the procedure when you woke up that morning,’ Shepherd began at ten am sharp the following day.

Oh no, I thought. It was like an impossible sum we all knew Jens couldn’t add up. We’d have to relive his dull-witted amnesia.

Jens started to repeat what we’d already heard, then looked across at His Honour. ‘Sir,’ he said. He’d forgotten something. He wanted to inform His Honour that he and Tobias had checked a silver tent at the campsite the next morning. They’d asked the man standing outside it if he’d seen Simone.

‘Why did you pick that tent?’

‘Tobias found that man somewhat strange.’ The man had opened the tent and showed them inside. As to what happened after that, Jens couldn’t remember.

There was something else he’d failed to mention. ‘Tobias also said we should say that Simone had gone out of the front of the caravan park, towards Dawson Street.’ This was another part of the ‘story’ Tobias had discussed with them before going to the police.

‘So which way did she go out of the caravan park?’

‘I can’t say. I only saw her going as far as the toilets.’

This was very strange, His Honour commented.
Jens agreed and said he’d wondered about the point of this lie, too, that morning, but at that time he had no reason to believe Simone wouldn’t be coming back.

‘Well, if this was the case, why go to the police?’ His Honour asked.

‘Because we couldn’t be sure she would come back.’

‘So, deep down, you thought there was a real problem?’

‘As I said, not initially, but when I was in Singapore and I found out a body had been found in Lismore, that was when the concerns began.’

But that was six days later, I thought.

Shepherd, who’d been excluded from this exchange, was back at him. Jens, breathing slightly through his mouth, maintained his composure and a deferential hunch. ‘Sir,’ he kept saying, as though appealing to His Honour’s superior judgement. He was the good witness, the only one to have come all this way—and he’d come to help, not to be attacked.

‘So when did you decide to tell the truth?’ demanded Shepherd.

He admitted that, back in Germany, he had continued to lie to the Polizei (police). ‘But then I became concerned, and something was seething and bubbling inside me, and I felt much better when I told the truth.’

‘But you didn’t straight away, did you?’ Shepherd noted. He had been interviewed several times, and inconsistencies were scattered throughout. Even now there was a lack of clarity. For example, Jens had told the Polizei that Tobias had been asleep when he and Katrin returned from their searches, but yesterday he told the court he’d been awake. Which was it?

Jens explained that he was afraid to change his original story back in Germany, for fear of being charged with making false statements. He was under a lot of pressure, and he’d had so many interviews. He was having a lot of problems, at work and at home. ‘It’s not as easy as it looks,’ he said.
‘Which is it?’ Shepherd repeated. ‘Asleep or awake?’

‘Maybe it was a kind of dozing situation . . . when we spoke to him, Tobias did respond.’

Jens was so maddeningly guileless I wanted to laugh.

Shepherd had another example. Jens had told the Polizei he and Tobias had gone to the police station at nine am, not at ten-forty-five.

‘I can’t pin myself down,’ he offered. ‘I only had a mobile . . . I didn’t keep records.’

Next she ran through the times he’d allocated for the searches, which he’d grossly exaggerated in his statements to the Polizei. It was getting confusing and Shepherd was getting nowhere. She asked for a short adjournment.

Twenty minutes later we were back in the room. Jens had had two interviews at the Lismore police station before leaving Australia, Shepherd began. Did Tobias check that he had stuck to the story after each one?

Yes, Jens said.

Did Tobias show he was pleased Jens had complied?

No, he seemed ‘very sad and very upset’. He spent a lot of time crying on the phone to friends and family in Germany.

About three weeks after Jens’ return to Germany, and a week after Tobias and Katrin’s return, the siblings visited their friend at his home. It was a Saturday. They stayed for about three hours. Jens recalled they watched the German football on TV. There was some talk about what had happened after his departure, about the body being found and the subsequent interviews in Australia, and Jens told the siblings about his interview with the Polizei. He told them he’d stuck to the story.

Was Jens sure that Katrin was there when he said that?

He thought so, but she may have gone to the toilet.

Again, he was having it both ways, I noted.

Shepherd asked if he had spoken with them since.
Jens replied to His Honour instead: ‘Sir, since that day I’ve had no contact with Tobias or Katrin. The German police forbade me to have contact because I could become liable for prosecution.’

‘You say there was one phone call?’ said Shepherd.

‘Sir,’ he began again. Tobias had called after the Polizei searched his house. Jens’s house had also been searched, but he didn’t tell Tobias this. He was forbidden to.

‘Who do you think killed Simone?’ Shepherd asked.

‘I don’t know. It’s possible that Tobias may have had something to do with it, but I’m not going to make any statement about that. It’s not my job.’

‘I’m asking you for your opinion,’ Shepherd pressed. ‘I’m not suggesting it’s your job.’

‘Over all the time I knew him and we were friends, I would say that he would not do something like that, but on that evening, the way he behaved was new for me.’

The deputy coroner wound up the proceedings by thanking Jens Martin for inconveniencing himself. ‘Giving evidence in a different country to your own, in difficult circumstances, would have put you under a degree of stress,’ he offered. But he hoped his next visit to Australia would involve more pleasant circumstances.

‘I hope so too,’ Jens said.

‘And I hope it doesn’t put you off coming back,’ His Honour continued, as though he were an ambassador for the tourism board.

‘No, certainly, it’s a wonderful country.’

And just like that, Jens was free to go. As for the Suckfuell siblings, there was the small matter of two senior detectives having virtually accused one of murder, and the other of being a possible accessory after the fact. Mr McMahon would write to the siblings and extend them yet another invitation, ‘so at the very least they will be afforded an opportunity to clear their names of suspicion’. How civil. How genteel. How like an invitation to high tea.
I’d always had the impression the law was a powerful and mighty thing: if the inquest had reason to suspect that the Suckfuells were guilty, why couldn’t they make them come? Tobias and Katrin had already declined an all-expenses-paid trip, so they’d hardly accept one now, after the allegations that had been aired. Legally, it appeared we’d arrived at the end, but in terms of a story, we’d been left hanging. In fact, it was as though the law, in failing to arrive at a satisfactory narrative conclusion, had set off a scandalous rumour instead.

While the Suckfuell siblings’ absence was not really a mystery, Simone’s family’s failure to attend puzzled me. I asked a reporter about them as we milled outside.

‘They’re pig farmers,’ he said, as though this explained things. ‘And they don’t speak English. Apparently, they’re also very religious. They come from one of those traditional villages in Bavaria that’s hundreds of years old.’

The word around the traps, he said, was that since the Suckfuell siblings had been named as suspects, Simone’s family had bizarrely closed ranks around them. It was as though they were protecting them, but that didn’t make any sense.

‘So, what’s your interest?’ the reporter was asking.

‘I’m going to write a book.’

‘Are you?’ He sounded intrigued.

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‘So now I have to do it,’ I told Rodd later that night. I’d had coffee with the reporter, and even went as far as telling him I was off to Germany. ‘Of course you don’t have to do it. You’ll never see him again.’ But that wasn’t the point.
Rodd and I sat on a park bench the following weekend, outside a haunted-looking house at Movie World on the Gold Coast, watching the passing crowd. They were here to be terrorised, to get a mechanically induced rush of life. After a while, I was looking at the same people walking back and forth between the rides, until it seemed it was the ground that was moving and the people were stuck to the spot.

The haunted house opposite us was giving me a faint memory of being a kid, one who liked to be scared, but right now my haunches felt as heavy as cement on the seat. ‘You’re not a risk-taker,’ Rodd had told me about a year ago, and he’d laughed when I protested. I’d started listing all the adventurous, daring things I’d got up to, but they were from years ago. Without realising it, I’d become a stereotype, a woman completely dependent on a man.

‘I can’t go to Germany. The Strobels probably won’t talk to me. I don’t even speak German.’

‘So you hire an interpreter.’

I tried to imagine this stranger. A man? A woman? Even the mere thought of hanging out with someone I didn’t know felt like a challenge. ‘How will I find one?’

‘You put an ad in a German newspaper. Kerstin could help you.’

Kerstin was a Berliner who worked at Rodd’s commercial law firm. He had a solution for everything. Problem-solving was his job, but how much of this helpfulness was just reflex? He’d never even
owned a set of house keys—I always had to be there to open the door for him.

‘You wouldn’t want me to leave you,’ I said, turning to face him. He kept staring into the crowd. ‘We’d manage.’

The children had spotted us. They wanted one last ride, in the haunted house, but this time I had to do it with them.

‘It’s a baby ride,’ Rodd said, ‘like a ride in a tea cup.’
‘Are you absolutely sure?’

We sat in the little car that moved slowly across the floor in the dark, and I waited for a ghost to jump out. But then I felt the car rising—up one, two, three, maybe four floors. We came to a stop, before a wall.

‘What now?’ I asked.
‘I wonder,’ Rodd said, grinning at me. One of the children squeezed my shoulders and laughed.

I turned, and in the dark saw the twisted thread of a roller coaster. Judging by the wall in front of us, we were about to make a crown dive and tackle it backwards. ‘I can’t do this!’

‘You don’t have a choice,’ Rodd said softly in my ear.

Something in the machinery of the apparatus clicked. My head jolted back. My jaw clenched. It was in that exact moment, as we plummeted upside down into darkness, that I knew I was heading for Germany.

*

Tuesday, ten am, La Baracca. Fishing around in the corners of my handbag, I found half a tab of stale Xanax. I swallowed it dry.

Detective Sergeant Shane Diehm blocked the light as he stood before me. He was bigger than I remembered. I stood and thrust out my hand too quickly. He looked at it, perhaps checking to see it wasn’t a weapon, before offering his own.
At the close of the inquest, I’d approached him, telling him I was applying to do a doctorate in creative writing, using Simone’s murder as the subject for a book. I’d only decided this that morning, so the words felt fresh as they fell out of my mouth. He had nodded with interest, and we’d arranged to meet.

We sat down and he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees in a rugby player’s crouch. He had dark, clipped hair, silver sparks just starting above the ears.

‘The book isn’t going to be so much a crime story,’ I began. ‘But I think there’s a geographical and cultural gap that I might be able to fill by going over there.’ It sounded prim but Diehm was nodding as though this made perfect sense.

‘I’ll help you.’

His words had a sort of religious impact on me. I saw the roof of the Sistine Chapel, the waters of the Red Sea parting.

‘And if you find anything out, you help me. Okay?’

So it was quid pro quo—but even the idea that I, a novice, could find something out seemed mighty generous of him. I had to suppress a wide smile.

He kept going, not pausing to gauge his effect, saying he was concerned about what he could show me but that he’d already made a call to the media department. ‘I’m able to show you all the evidence I have, but you can’t copy it. Okay?’

‘Great,’ I said, as coolly as I could manage. Last week I’d been dusting and rearranging my sentences like ornaments on a mantle. Now I was going to be sifting through evidence in a murder inquiry.

‘Do you think Tobias is guilty?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe all he’s guilty of is not coming to the inquest.’

‘What did you think of Jens?’

‘I think he’s hiding something,’ I said, ‘but I can’t see why. Possibly he’s protecting his friend, but he didn’t strike me as the loyal type.’
'I reckon Shepherd may have gone at him too hard. It was an inquest, after all, not a trial.’

‘But I was with her,’ I told him. ‘I felt the same frustration with him.’

From his lack of response, it seemed Diehm didn’t. We moved on. I had many questions but no idea where to start.

‘Did Simone keep her fingernails short?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Did they find anything under them?’

‘No.’

‘Any markings at all related to a possible cause of death?’

‘Just a little mark where the jaw meets the neck.’ He demonstrated on his face with his thumb.

‘Were interpreters made available?’

‘Tobias had good English, and the other two made do—at first.’

I raised my eyebrows. What did he mean by that?

‘Look, everything’s easy in hindsight,’ he said. ‘You have to remember it was a straight missing persons report. No one thought they were dealing with a murder. And there were sightings of her. A German girl was pulled off a bus in Coffs Harbour. She looked so much like Simone that she’d had to show an officer her passport to prove she wasn’t. There was another possible sighting of her dancing at a pub in Byron Bay.’

I asked when I could see the evidence? Tomorrow?

It was better at night, he told me, when it wasn’t so busy. The detectives were in a pretty small space. He held me off till Friday evening. ‘I might have to lock you in if we get called out on a job. Would you mind that?’

‘No.’

‘Some of it’s pretty heavy going,’ he warned. ‘Photos—are you okay with that?’

I had no idea but I nodded, telling him that it wouldn’t worry me.
Why did he ask? He then mentioned he’d spent a few hours with the body.

‘Could you recognise her?’

He visibly drew himself in, then said softly: ‘No. The heat and the rain.’ He paused, then spoke again. ‘There was another officer there that day too. He’s since left.’

‘Why?’

‘It was a build-up of things. He’d had to travel to Sydney with the body, and ended up having to attend the autopsy too—someone else was meant to. It was probably the last straw.’

I shook my head. ‘What about you? How do you handle it?’

He mumbled something about an old guy he sometimes visited, an ex-cop. ‘But it’s the ones you don’t know that get to you. Suicides . . . people whose names you’ll never know. They’re the ones you see when you wake up in the middle of the night.’

I murmured, and he held his lips tight.

‘So,’ he said, slapping his thighs, ‘can I trust you not to look at things you shouldn’t?’

‘Like what?’

‘Communications from the German police, maybe. I’ll have to think about it. I’ve never had a case before where someone wanted to write a book, so I’m not sure what you should or shouldn’t see.’

I told him not to worry. ‘I’ve never written about crime,’ I said. Let alone a book, I thought. ‘I might have to ask you a lot of stupid questions.’

He smiled broadly, revealing a gap between his two front teeth in the shape of a chevron.

Standing to leave, I warned I had yet to make contact with Simone’s family. There was a chance they might not agree to see me, I said.

He wasn’t really listening. ‘So when are you going?’

‘September,’ I said, with such conviction even I was impressed.
Lismore’s detectives were in temporary accommodation while a new, larger police station next to the courthouse was being completed. I was led to a rickety old weatherboard. The house floated above the ground, balancing precariously on concrete stumps.

Diehm punched some numbers into a security lock attached to the back door and we entered a tiny kitchen. The house was of the era before cooking was central to the home, when women wore pinnies and tending to steaming pots out the back. The linoleum floor, painted cupboards and dull sink looked original. He told me to wait while he got the files. I sat in a plastic bucket seat at a formica dining table and got out a biro and an exercise book. Above me, a fluorescent tube doused the room in a wash of metallic light.

We’d met earlier that evening. Shane, as he now insisted I call him, had offered to show me the various locations related to the crime. He’d looked down at my shoes when he saw me. Converse. I felt embarrassed for having worn something so casual with my jeans, while he was in a shirt and tie. But he’d given the impression we’d be doing some walking, and for some reason I’d automatically envisaged tramping through scrub. Instead, he walked me to an unmarked Commodore parked outside the station.

We drove the short distance to the Gollan Hotel. Shane strode in as though it was no longer a real pub but a film set, kept open purely for re-enactments. The bartender and several patrons seemed to be in on the artifice, doing a good job of looking straight through us as Shane made directorial swoops through the air with his arm.

‘This is where she ate that afternoon . . . And this is where she and Tobias sat with the others, until they broke away to talk.’ He marched across the room. ‘This is where she fell and hit her head,’ and he pointed to the edge of a wooden bar table.
I nodded, intimating that I had the picture, although the whole scene felt alien to me. I liked country pubs but this was not one I'd have wandered into. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip had apparently stayed here for a night in 1954, but the Gollan must have thrown in the towel since then. It was a dump. A horse race muttered away on a wall-mounted television set. An earthy smell of damp carpet and stale beer clogged my nose. Why had Simone come here—first for lunch with Katrin, and later that night with the boys as well? Perhaps there was something ancient about the heavy wooden decor that reminded her of a Bavarian *Gasthaus*.

We stepped out onto the street. Mary Gilhooley’s Irish Pub was across the road. It was where the boys ate lunch that day, keeping some distance between themselves and the girls. What was Irish about it, other than the name in unconvincing pop art letters, I didn't know. Two Germans in an Irish pub in inland Australia—everything was out of kilter that day.

We drove through the caravan park. It was dismal, figuratively the end of the road. I got a shock to see a child in a nappy run out as our car went by—Aboriginal, two plugs of snot bubbling from his nose. Around the corner was the emerald-green triangle of grass where the Germans and other holiday-makers had camped that night.

We got out and walked through the sag in the fence, crossing the road to the grandly titled Continental Sports, Music and Recreation Club. The sign on the storm-wire fence announcing the name was the sort you get at fruit stall: a white-painted board covered in shaky red letters. The high fence, separating the club from the greater surrounds of Jolley Field, seemed paranoid. It was private property, Shane said, which was why it had not been searched the weekend Simone went missing.

The club building, which looked like a small brick toilet block, was soon to be pulled down. No one had used it since Simone’s body
was found. Hardy weeds stood up like prongs in the bocce lanes. Around the back of the club grounds, he showed me the hole in the chicken-wire fence through which she had been passed, and he pointed to the palm right next to it, under which she’d lain.

‘See how low the fronds are?’ Two Phoenix palms—large, stately mounds—fringed the bocce lanes, their lower dead branches like long grass skirts. ‘There was no way you could see her.’ Players had rolled balls right past her body that weekend, he continued, which was another reason the police had felt no need to search the club—it was in use.

I could see what he meant. I could also see how this little enclosure, in all its self-importance, had managed to stump them.

Back at the station, Shane dropped three large folders onto the kitchen table—just the tip of the iceberg, he said as he sat down next to me. He flicked hurriedly through, describing the contents: statements by the police, statements by Tobias and by Jens. A crime scene analysis report. When we reached the back end of the folder, he went quiet. A4 sheets in plastic sleeves. Crime scene shots. He paused, explaining what we were looking at: the positioning of the body, how she was laid beneath the tree on her side, her left hand caught beneath her, her right arm flung back with her left leg in an imitation of motion—gay abandonment, almost.

Her form was recognisable, although she was ‘swollen’, Shane said, as though he was making apologies on her behalf. It was hard to ignore her connection to nature. Beneath the palm tree she’d perished like a stone fruit amongst the leaves and insects: her flesh bruised a variety of shades, from black through to yellow; her facial features, for all their lovely detail, completely indistinguishable; her hair detaching from the scalp—it seemed it had somehow woven itself into a nest.

The plastic sleeves whooshed softly by, and Shane’s voice had become softer too, almost a whisper. It felt strangely intimate, and
I realised he was sharing her with me. However professional he was, he cared about her on some deeper level—and even if I’d thought I had before, now I really did. *Look what happened to me*, I could hear her say. *This is what they did to me.* I knew I would never forget.

‘I just wanted to see how you’d be,’ Shane said. His fingers had reached the pathology shots now: steel bench, steel equipment, the body no longer human, page after page, now turning rapidly. ‘Some people can’t handle it.’

‘I’m fine,’ I said.

‘Good.’ He turned and smiled, the chevron between his teeth making an appearance as his chair scraped across the floor. ‘Now, are you going to be all right if we leave you in here?’

‘Sure. I’ll answer the phones if you like.’

He smiled. ‘Whatever you do, *don’t* answer the phones.’ He was standing at the door with another detective he called Wombat, probably for his barrel build—he was at least a third shorter. ‘When I pull this door shut, it’s locked from the outside, okay, so no one can get in. So don’t go opening it if someone knocks. Anyone that’s meant to come in knows the security code. And if someone *does* come in and they ask you what you’re doing here, just tell them you’re with me. We shouldn’t be long.’

I felt unreasonably trusted, and slightly curious about what was beyond the kitchen, but I wasn’t about to betray him. I also had too much to do. As I couldn’t copy anything, I intended to paraphrase sections of the documents that interested me. Barely lifting my hand, I made a thin, long web with my pen—ten, twenty, thirty pages—fast, endless work.

Later that night, in the quiet, I found myself drawn back to the crime scene shots. The sadness I had felt on first look now shifted, and I gritted my teeth and damned whoever did this to her. I wanted to shove these pictures in his face.
I’d found Rodd working at his desk, a temporary arrangement at the end of our bed while we rebuilt the house. It was after ten. I’d missed eating dinner. The shadows in his face were accented by down-lights. He stopped tapping on his computer and looked questioningly at my bottle of beer.

‘I want to taste what she tasted,’ I told him as I sagged on the corner of the bed.

He kept looking.

‘I’m okay,’ I told him. ‘I’m totally okay. In fact, I’m a bit surprised I’m so okay.’ I felt lightheaded but completely lucid, as though I’d finally worked out the trick of being human. ‘All I can think of is fruit,’ I told him. ‘Fresh, ripe fruit. We’re just as perishable as plums or apples. Even a plastic ice-cream container is more durable.’

Rodd was no mystic; his religion was the law. But when he looked at me grimly and said, ‘I don’t want you bringing a dead girl into this house,’ it was as if she’d returned with me, and he could sense her sitting there on the bed. *Just you try and stop me,* I thought.

‘You need to keep a balance. That’s all I’ll say. Keep a balance.’

‘I am balanced,’ I said. ‘I’ve never felt more balanced in my life.’

As I’d driven home that night, the lines on the road had seemed whiter, more glaring and crisp, the yellow shudder marks dazzling. The car had driven itself, skating across the smooth road. I could have been airborne. What was this feeling, this sense of not really being here? Or was it the opposite—was it, in fact, that everything had become hyper-real after what I’d seen? I felt as though all the windows of the car were down, and the roar of the engine was the sound of wind raking my face. *Exhilarating*—this was the word that came to me. But how could that be?

Perhaps it was more than that. Perhaps I was even transcendent, as though I’d died and was entering another plane. Sickened by the
realisation that her death could be my becoming, I had said aloud in the car, ‘You’re picking up where she left off’—and then I’d suppressed the feeling as quickly as it had come.

‘You can’t see what I saw tonight and just walk away from it,’ I told Rodd. ‘You just can’t.’

He shut his computer. ‘I’m very tired. I think it’s time for bed.’

‘Okay,’ I said, and put the bottle up to my mouth, forcing down another slug of beer.

There was another reason I was euphoric while driving back that night. I’d remembered a psychic I’d seen a couple of years before, in an old house in Byron. She was more of a witch, and not the pretend kind. She had gravitas and Celtic letters tattooed across her forehead, and ten or so books on witchery circulating around the world under her name. She’d picked me as a writer too. Short stories, she’d said, for now. But that was by the by. She saw a big project.

‘You better believe it, honey. It’s all here. I can see it. It’s about a black woman. Violence. Something between two countries.’ Then the vision started to perplex her. ‘Hmm . . . Maybe it’s about a war?’

I hadn’t agreed. She was scratching around now, and I doubted I would ever write about a black woman in a war zone. It was too political. But tonight, driving back from the station after viewing the autopsy photos, I remembered her words. Simone’s face—it was black. The thought blew my eyes and mouth open. She was blacker than a black woman. Violence. Two countries. And it was this, this little glimpse of the possibility that there might be something bigger than all of us—something more than a subconscious, perhaps a sort of super-conscious—into which this woman could tap at will, that filled me with hope. It seemed to me a place where past, present and future were limited concepts, and, dead or alive, somehow we were all in it together.
The drive at our house was clogged with concrete mixers and trucks. Rodd was in a state of high readiness, standing on the edge of all the activity, his knuckles dug into his hips. As I kissed him goodbye, I realised from the distracted look on his face how momentous this morning was for him, how for him these concrete foundations were symbolic of something so much greater than just a new house, and that was his ability to provide for us. But today, the entire process involving trucks and men in clothes covered in floury-powder appeared oddly domesticated to me; the grey sludge pouring like cake mixture, the shape of the slab long and rectangular like the dimensions of a sponge roll tin.

‘I have to go,’ I told him.

‘Enjoy it,’ he said, unconvincingly.

From Sydney, I got off the train at Parramatta, and wheeled my case along the pavement until I found 1 Charles Street, NSW Police Force Headquarters. The specialised squads that were called upon to handle major crime incidents within the state were housed here.

I met Detective Inspector Wayne Hayes in the building’s expansive marble and glass foyer. While shaking my hand, with his other he reached out and gallantly took my heavy case, leading me back out the main doors as though we were heading off on holiday together. We sat in the coffee shop on the verandah. He ordered me a cappuccino, and tea for himself.
I told him I was hoping he might help me by arranging a meeting with the Polizei officers involved in the investigation.

‘I’ve already made the call,’ he replied. ‘In round figures, the German police will have nothing to do with you. It’s nothing personal. As far as they’re concerned, you’re a journalist. It makes no difference to them that you’re from a university. Whereas we’re happy to talk to you. Jurisdictional differences.’

Unlike our system, the Polizei worked directly with the state prosecutor—in this case, a man named Erik Ohlenschlager; he’d taken over from Bardo Backert. I’d seen Erik in a line-up arranged for the local press, when the German investigators had arrived in Lismore. He was a slight, balding man with spectacles. I jotted his name down as Wayne watched me struggle with the order of the letters.

Correcting me, he went on to spell the names of the two police officers. ‘Susanne Grimm—the final e making it Soo-san-ab in German, just as Simone’s name is actually pronounced Sim-oh-nab. And Hans-Jürgen Kämmer. A lovely man,’ he added with a smile. Wayne directed me to put two dots above the u and the a—umlauts, as he called them. ‘His title is Kriminalhauptkommissar.’

His pronunciation was impressive. I asked him if he spoke German.

‘A little,’ he said. ‘The result of having had a couple of German girlfriends.’

Wayne spoke fast, with little modulation. I had no idea how to keep up with his staccato rhythm. I scratched the odd phrase down in my exercise book.

He told me how he’d been over to meet the Germans as part of the investigation. He’d experienced similar resistance from the Polizei, however, when he’d expressed his desire to meet with Simone’s family. His request was declined, despite the fact he’d been the main point of contact for the family in Australia. He found that strange.

Some of the issues that had arisen during the joint investigation
had amused him. He described a series of questions that had been faxed over when it became clear Simone’s death was a homicide.

‘Question seven: could she have died from a snake bite?’ Wayne shook his head. ‘Snakes don’t strip people naked, nor do they fit them through fences and conceal them beneath trees.’

I asked him if the Suckfuell siblings had been suspects during their time in Australia.

‘Yes, they were. Others were also being investigated, as you’ll no doubt know from the files. Heard of Uwe Klein?’ he asked. ‘Tall. Bald.’

I had. He was Tobias’s brother-in-law.

Wayne’s mouth turned into a sore. He believed Klein had blocked the police from Tobias and Katrin. It began at Brisbane airport when Wayne had picked Klein up: Simone’s uncle and brother sat in the back seat, and Klein in the front. ‘Assuming leadership,’ Wayne noted.

‘But he wasn’t even related to Simone,’ I said.

‘Yes, but he spoke the best English. He’s also ex-Polizei.’ Wayne bared his teeth in a fake smile.

He told the three that he was going to take them directly to Ballina, assuming they knew this was where Tobias and Katrin were, but Klein said, ‘No—we go to Lismore.’

Wayne told him again he was taking them to Ballina, thinking he must have misunderstood.

Demonstrating what Klein had done, Wayne pointed his finger in my face and jabbed it as he spoke: ‘No! We go to Lismore.’ He shook his head, still appalled.

Had Simone’s relatives in the back seat reacted to this?

‘They didn’t know what was going on. They didn’t speak enough English. And they were dazed, jetlagged, in shock. They’d left Germany with the intention of searching for Simone and had been informed along the way that a body had been found. Then there had been a moment of hope at the airport when I told them
the body had no dental fillings. But a call to Germany quickly cleared that up. I finally told Klein that the reason why I wanted to take them to Ballina was because that was where Tobias and Katrin were staying, and he backed down.

‘From then on, he acted as the middle man, ensuring that all contact and inquiries be made through him. He even ran his own investigations, interviewing residents at the caravan park, until he was told to back off. He was interfering with a police investigation. He’d come up with some obscure theory about the body’s positioning, convinced the killing was linked to an Aboriginal ritual. Far-fetched stuff.’

After the body was found, Tobias and Katrin had been relocated from the caravan park to the four-star Ramada apartments in Ballina, courtesy of the local government. They were to remain there until the body had been identified. But shortly after Klein and the others arrived, they left for Nimbin, for a property where Simone and Tobias had stayed earlier.

While Tobias and Katrin were still at the Ramada, Wayne remembered, there’d been a problem with their booking. The rooms were no longer available and they were going to be shifted.

‘Tobias said the alternative accommodation wasn’t good enough. He wanted equivalent accommodation to the Ramada.’

I smiled and suggested he might have been becoming a bit of a rock star, with all the media attention he’d been getting. ‘And what about that cap? In every photo I saw it was always on, back to front.’ I said it had seemed quite self-conscious to me, especially at a time when you’d think appearances wouldn’t matter.

Wayne disagreed. With policeman’s logic he said that if you usually wore a cap, there was no reason why you wouldn’t continue to do so. For me, in thrall to writing conventions, it had seemed a telling detail, an indication of character.

I brought up the matter of the air ticket.

‘Yes, I was there that day in the travel agency,’ Wayne said, ‘when
he was complaining about the price.’ He saw it all unfolding: Tobias complaining, the kindly woman overhearing. ‘I wanted to say, “No, no, no—don’t do it.” But there was nothing I could do.’

When I mentioned that it had mostly been pensioners who’d contributed to his air ticket, Wayne looked suitably disgusted. We were complaining about him. It felt like dangerous ground, a sort of self-perpetuating loop.

I asked him how the siblings had behaved prior to the other Germans’ arrival.

It had been a time for waiting, Wayne said, and for watching. He’d taken them to the shops. At one point he’d sat on the sidelines as a couple of officers ran them around with a soccer ball. ‘Katrin was competitive,’ he said. ‘Physically, as strong and capable as a man.’ He believed she could easily have helped move a body.

‘So you thought back then the pair had been involved in Simone’s death?’

‘They were definitely suspects.’

I told him how I thought everyone was tiptoeing around them, especially after Tobias’s complaints in the media about police performance. Even the state government had mentioned the delay in locating Simone.

Wayne’s head shook. ‘Tobias only complained to deflect attention away from himself,’ he said. ‘It was a well-run investigation, complicated by the fact that there were a number of other suspects we were also investigating—one had even made a confession to Simone’s murder. But the Germans were always our number one suspects.’

‘Who confessed?’

He told me a name, which I wrote down and underlined.

‘He wasn’t the only one to confess,’ Wayne went on. ‘There were others. You’ll find them in the files.’

I was confused. ‘So if the Germans really were the main suspects,
why did you let them leave Australia? You already knew from the Gollan Hotel staff they'd been lying to you.'

He lowered his chin and looked at me closely. ‘Many people don't know this, but lying to a police officer is not a criminal offence. Lying in court under oath is. We had no grounds to hold them here.’

‘What about interfering with the course of a police investigation?’ I said, vaguely remembering a charge Rodd had raised.

‘You can't detain foreigners on those grounds. Nor can you extradite them.’

I could feel my frustration rising. The police had been forced to let them fly away. They'd even given them a lift to the airport.

There had been oversights, Wayne admitted. Tobias had been allowed to take Simone's and his diaries with him. ‘The local police had made copies of the last few pages, the critical ones, but procedure dictated they should have retained possession of the originals,’ he said.

‘Check out her finances when you're over there,’ he went on. ‘She owned the van, but I think you'll find she was paying for a lot more than that. He'd only just finished his studies as a physical education teacher.’

I nodded, too weary at this moment to work out what this might imply. Wayne had a mercurial mind and it was hard keeping up.

I told him that despite their refusal, I intended to drop in on the German police anyway. ‘You never know, they might change their minds.’

He drew a mud map of where the station was. ‘Würzburg is a beautiful city. There's a castle on the hill. Festung Marienberg. Rows of grapevines below it. It overlooks the Main river. That's spelt M-A-I-N, but pronounced Mine. You have to go up there and sit on the edge and eat a lebkuchen and enjoy the view. It’s a sort of spicy ginger biscuit. They're really good.’

I smiled and said I looked forward to doing that. ‘Maybe when I
get back, we can meet for a drink?’

His clamped his lips. ‘I’ll have an orange juice. I don’t drink. Or smoke.’

‘Well, you’re very good, aren’t you?’ I said, teasingly, for I didn’t know what else to say.

‘No, I’m not.’ He sounded very sure of this. ‘No, no, I’m not.’

We shook hands. He told me he was leaving the country himself soon, for Iraq. The Jake Kovco case. It was all over the news—the case of the soldier who pretended to blow his brains out when dancing to a song he hated, but the gun was loaded. Subsequently, another soldier’s DNA had been found on the weapon.

How could Wayne move on to another case, I wondered, as my train left Parramatta for the Blue Mountains. How did he ever let go?

* 

Along with four other writers, I’d been selected to spend a week at Varuna, a retreat of the NSW Writers’ Centre in the Blue Mountains. I had planned to work on my short stories, but now their frustrated domestic content seemed embryonic of something else, and that was my growing obsession with Simone. I had the vague sense that solving her murder would in some way solve unrelated issues that had been preoccupying me in those stories.

I spent the entire week drafting a letter to Mr and Mrs Strobel. I kept writing and rewriting it, trying to anticipate their feelings when they read the words. In the end, I told them about how I first saw their daughter’s picture in a cafe:

I’m not sure why some faces mean more to us than others, but your daughter’s has stayed with me.

I attended the five-day inquest . . . and have since spent many hours talking with the detectives personally involved in
investigations here. Like most people in the community, I was very affected by the loss of someone so young, so very beautiful too. We felt your daughter was a guest in our country, we had a duty of care, and ultimately we let her down.

The reason I wish to meet you is that I have begun my own journey, one that I hope will include discovering who your daughter was. My interest is not so much in the crime committed but in Simone’s life, also the personal impact of her death on all those involved in Germany, as well as on the people of Lismore. It seems to me the great distance between our locations has only added to the enormous lack of meaning surrounding Simone’s death . . .

Later, I cringed when I reread those words about my interest not being so much in the crime. But there was some truth in this: I wasn’t intending to write a whodunnit. It was Simone’s murder that had made her fascinating to me, and the fact she no longer existed. I wanted to find what had happened to her.

Rodd’s colleague Kerstin translated the letter for me.

‘Is it okay?’ I asked her over the phone.

It was, she said, but how they took it would depend on what sort of Germans they were. Pig farmers were generally traditional, and quite often very religious. They would have lived in a village all their lives so they were not necessarily open to ideas. As a Berliner, she’d not had much experience of them, Kerstin said.

She agreed to add her contact details to the letter, for any questions they might have, and said she would call them for me after they received the letter. I was blown away. Despite the language barrier, this was a call I could never imagine myself making. It required enormous sensitivity, tact, social skill. I was sure I had none of those attributes; they’d smell my lack of confidence from ten thousand miles away. To avoid a long wait I sent the letter by international
Later that week, I was driving along the motorway when Kerstin called me. Mr Strobel’s voice had shaken with emotion, she said. He had explained to her that they’d decided to shut their doors and retreat from the world since Simone’s death. But after my letter arrived, they’d become curious. ‘They want to meet you,’ she concluded.

I drove straight to the Bangalow pub and sat in a corner, gulping wine, and waited for Rodd, my mother and the kids to arrive. I was astounded. It struck me that I, a nobody, was now inextricably involved. Nothing would be the same again.

*A few days before I left for Germany, a bird flew at our sliding doors. Rodd and I both saw it strike like a kamikaze, leaving a colourless trickle on the glass. It lay on the deck with its beak open, gasping for breath. Rodd picked it up gently and put it on the rock wall, in the sun, out of reach of the dog. When I went to check on it some ten minutes later, it was dead, though its eyes were still shiny with life. I pulled its brown wings open and wrapped them across its chest like a death shroud.

Earlier in the day Rodd had flipped at me because he had no clean shirts. Two had mysteriously disappeared; we were barely talking. He said I’d opted out since starting on Simone’s case, and that my role as his wife should remain my priority.

It was true I was distracted: I was trying to finish my master’s at the same time as I took in the facts of the case, contained in fourteen foolscap binders. I was obsessed with what had happened to Simone. My brain was constantly whirring with questions and realisations. I jotted them down on notebooks, in the margins of newspapers, on the back of bills. With my interest in housework dwindling, I’d taken to dropping off loads of washing at my mother’s. Nothing gave her...
greater pleasure, she said almost boastfully, than to press a man’s shirt. That I was not of the same mind was an amusing mystery to her.

Rodd took a spade and we walked around the back of the shed with the bird. Its body was stiffening by the time I placed it in the hole. I stayed with Rodd as he covered it over with earth. Once finished, he stood there, leaning on the shovel, neither of us yet wanting to move, then we looked up, sensing something shifting above us. A flock of birds rippled across the sky—every detail in life seemed to now be imbued with some sort of corny, allegorical significance.

I was back at the Lismore police station the night before flying out, skimming through the files, re-reading statements. Shane and Wombat were out looking for an armed robber so I found myself alone in the old house, feeling a little callous that I’d chosen to be here and not at home with Rodd and the kids.

I’d come mostly because I needed to see the missing persons poster one more time, to remind myself of how I felt that first day I saw Simone in the cafe. Although the evidence was all about Simone, I was discovering that it was easy to forget her amid the detail. And I didn’t want to do that. I owed her.

I crept along the matted carpet in the hallway. It was an eerie place at night, more like the scene of a crime than of the law. I sat on a desk beneath a strip light in a tiny room off the hall—once a nursery, I thought. The dull cream walls were stacked with boxes and binders that seemed to shrink in on me. Simone was in here with some other guy’s files. John someone. Poor John. His files hadn’t shifted an inch in the couple of months I’d been coming here. I resented him being here at all. This room was like a private vault, and John was a nobody, scrounging a bit of the bottom shelf. I imagined him a hobo. A loser. A Dear John. Simone’s files were substantial and took up the back wall. When I looked at the rows I felt something akin to reverence. I wanted never to become complacent about what happened to her.
I remembered having seen a bundle of extra posters; my plan was to take one with me and look at her picture whenever I felt I was losing focus. But I couldn’t find them, only an assortment of holiday snaps: Simone and Tobias, their heads resting together; Simone and Tobias in swimwear on a jetty, their arms linked behind their backs, a stretch of smooth sea behind them. Simone was smiling wholeheartedly in both shots. Tobias wasn’t. He held something back.

The next picture shocked me, and I felt myself reddening as I studied it. There is nothing more intimate than watching someone in the depths of sleep: the pout of her lips, the way her lashes rested in the hollows beneath her eyes, like long threads. Tobias must have quietly lifted the camera to steal this shot, must have thought her so beautiful he couldn’t resist. The composition of the picture—her face resting on the pillow, her hair trailing like ribbons above her head—made me think of Botticelli. The only distraction was the sporty pattern on the pillowslip, white softballs on a darker background. His pillow, I imagined, and my chest tightened as I realised it might have been this that had been used to kill her.

I turned to the folder that contained the mortuary photos. There was nothing intimate about these. She’d been reduced to a scientific specimen, a blue ticket tied around a swollen ankle, her body bent with rigor mortis. The transformation was horrifying, yet I was transfixed. Was it right that I wanted to look at these pictures again? It wasn’t the second time but perhaps the third or fourth I’d come back to them. I shut the file, afraid Shane might walk in and find me looking scarlet.

I was ready to leave by the time he and Wombat got back from arresting their armed robber.

‘So when do you fly out?’ Shane asked me.

‘In the morning.’

‘Wish I was going,’ he said. He had a slight look of wistfulness under the kitchen’s phosphorous light.
‘Ring me as soon as you get back.’
‘I will. In about two weeks.’ I pulled the back door shut, thinking how strange it was that I was going, not him.
PART II
Frankfurt airport. Nearly missed my train. Holding a scalding cup of coffee, I used the weight of my luggage trolley to launch myself at the train doors. Not braking in time, I nudged a solid woman in the fetlocks. She made an involuntary curtsey, then turned to give me a furious look.

Rodd would have handled things much more smoothly. He would have had us lined up with our bags five minutes ahead of time. Already, I was returning to my natural self.

‘Is this the train to Würzburg?’ I asked a female guard as we departed the station.

‘No, this train goes to Woorzburg.’

I couldn’t believe it. I was on the wrong train. ‘So where’s Würzburg?’ I asked, thinking it sounded an awful lot like it Woorzburg. And after we batted the word back and forth several times, it turned out that Woorzburg was Würzburg. A small shift—an oo instead of er sound—and everything looked completely different.

The grey sky was so low it hung like a dust cloud over the rail yards and ugly buildings, turning the hard shapes soft and ghostly. I’d been to Germany once before, on my honeymoon. Our thoughts about the place back then had been connected to the war. The autobahns we sped along in our hire car had become runways for the Luftwaffe; the forests reminded us only of camouflage; heel plates clicking in the platz of the sound of the Schutzstaffel. How could we help it? Being raised on a diet of war films and documentaries,
we’d come here with so many pictures and sounds in our heads that it had been like revisiting a past life.

This time, however, as soon as I saw a fir tree shaped like a biscuit, I knew I was regressing. Germany was now becoming the land of my childhood. I remembered I had a vinyl record of the Hansel and Gretel story that went *ting* when I needed to turn the page of my picture book, and I remembered the pleasure and trepidation packed into that *ting*, my certainty and satisfaction that the story was unfolding. I’d forgotten that feeling, and now it was back.

A little further on we wended through woods and clearings dotted with white and yellow, a fine spritz of rain needling the window. I leaned in close to the glass and felt the dampness on my face, thinking how *alive* I felt to be here—but the sensation was cut short as I pictured Simone’s face beneath the palm tree. She should have been making this journey home, not me, a woman who’d already played her cards in life.

I was getting a kind of second chance, I realised, because Simone’s first had gone so terribly wrong. Could I ever make it up to her? Already I was beginning to doubt that it was possible to get to know someone back to front, as it were, after they’d gone. I also worried that getting closer to knowing her might break the spell her death had cast over me by rendering her too real, perhaps even incompatible with me. I wanted her to haunt me all the way to the end, to urge me on. Perhaps I even wanted to imagine she might have liked me.

But I’d heard she’d cared for the handicapped and other people’s small children. I could think of no worse job. It required patience and generosity, and I feared I had neither. Her family, in the depths of their grief, would probably have a sort of X-ray ability to see through me. What was there? Inadequacy, I suspected, due to my lack of experience with tragedy. What if I upset them? I flinched at the thought of this as the train hit a tunnel with a thwack. As we plunged into the darkness, we seemed to hurtle even harder towards
Würzburg. And would you turn around if you could? I asked myself. No. You just can’t help yourself.

*

The buildings on Sanderstrasse unfurled on a pleasing curve, an even row of pale, flat frontages, except for one—the Hotel Till Eulenspiegel. As though a magic seed had been sprinkled in its footings, a thick pelt of spinach-green leaves covered its face like a beard. Central and modestly priced, it was a traditional Gasthaus, Frau Nagel had told me. Eulenspiegel translated as ‘owl mirror’. The suggestion of wisdom and reflection sounded promising. Frau Nagel’s surname meant ‘nail’—as in hammer and nail, she said. I wasn’t sure what to make of that. She was my interpreter and I was meeting her in less than two hours.

‘You need someone sensitive yet at the same time confident,’ Kerstin had warned me, but the odds were against me finding the right person. Germans in general were not as outgoing as Australians, while Franconians—the name given to the people in this region of Bavaria—were another story. They were very parochial, conservative types. She thought most would shy away from this sort of job on privacy grounds. For weeks I’d tried language departments at various universities, but usually couldn’t even get a reply. Finally, I was given the name of a language school by a German journalist with whom I’d been put in touch by the reporter from the Northern Star. I faxed the school, explaining that I was conducting interviews that were highly sensitive and centred around a crime committed in Australia.

That same night, Frau Nagel left me a message. ‘I’m very interested in this job,’ she said. She was a language teacher and professional interpreter—and, I was sure, would be way out of my price range. I played the message over a few times to the kids. We all
liked the bell-tone quality of her voice, and she even sounded faintly familiar. I popped half a pill and waited twenty minutes before calling her back.

I needn’t have worried. Implying that our connection was fated, she told me she had walked into the language school that day quite by coincidence, after a period of sickness, just as my fax was unscrolling in the tray. When I began to tell her the specifics of the case, she already knew them—it had been all over the news in Würzburg. I couldn’t pay her much, I explained, since I was a student.

She brushed this aside. ‘How can I put it, Frau Peters . . . I want this job.’

After we had hung up, I had the strange sense that I’d not found her—it was more she who had found me.

Now, I looked around my small attic room at the Eulenspiegel, which was as Spartan as a novitiate’s quarters. A rest would be sensible after twenty-eight hours of travel. But you only have twelve days. I took out a brown paper bag I used for the children’s school lunches. On it I’d written a series of numbers in ballpoint. There was one person alone on my list who spoke English: Manfred Schweidler, the journalist covering the case for the Main Post. I would phone him and arrange a meeting.

To avoid an error, I spoke the numbers aloud as I pressed them into the handset. The unfamiliar ring sounded like an engaged signal. I was about to hang up when I heard the clatter of the receiver being picked up at the other end.

‘Hallo? Dies ist Frau Strobels Mutter. Wer ruft?’ It was an older woman’s voice, frail and slightly urgent.

There was only one word I recognised: Strobel. I’d called the wrong number on my list. I froze.

‘Hallo? Hallo?’

I remained silent, breathing, like a prank caller, a stalker. My meeting with Simone’s family was not for two days. So much depended
on them receiving me well. If I uttered a word of English, how would I ever extricate myself from the call? They only spoke German. I looked at the cradle for a button to press, and just as the voice croaked out another _hallo_, I pressed my finger on the square, ending the call.

Appalled, I sunk onto the bed. I was failing them already. _Do nothing—not until you’ve slept._ _Idiot, idiot._

Now my phone was ringing. I stared at the flashing red light. Someone knew I was here. Of course they knew I was here—whoever I’d just called had called me back. Germans were technically savvy.

I went back over to the desk on which the phone sat, and with a yank I dislodged the plug from its socket. The ringing and flashing stopped. Heart pumping, I looked around the pale green room—at the bed, pristine white, at the plumped pillow that had been shaped like a fortune cookie to receive my head, at the modular green table and matching chairs, at the diaphanous sheers greying with light. Twelve days here, alone. What the hell was I doing?

* * *

‘What do you think?’ I asked Frau Nagel after telling her about my bungled call to the Strobels. We sat upstairs in the Opera Cafe. Peach-toned frescoes infused the room with a strange orange hue.

‘Oh, _man_, I don’t know.’ She puckered her lips and dragged on her cigarette. ‘I’m sure it will be fine,’ she added on the exhale.

I liked her. I liked the way she said ‘man’ with a long vowel. There was something reassuringly American about it. She also had a motherliness about her. Although I was much older, she was bigger, more comely and already showing concern for me.

She’d asked if I minded her smoking. I said I didn’t. I watched now as her curve of white smoke streamed away from me. I _did_ mind her smoking. As an ex-smoker, I despised the smell and the parched air that surrounded it, but I decided to enjoy her smoke as a German
cultural experience, an atmospheric enhancement to a story that was already full of its own smoke and shadows.

Frau Nagel was twenty-eight. Her simple pants and top said nothing about fashion and much about discretion, blending in—something I decided a good interpreter should want to achieve. Her skin was flawless, blanched almond from years of long, dark winters, her hair similarly cool, with a hint of sage in the blonde. She wore it long, scraped back in tight elastic. It sat flat to her head and made her look slightly austere, with her determined jaw and square spectacles.

She ordered lunch for me in rapid German. Shortly after, an enormous mound of vegetables arrived, decorated with feta, olives and bright yellow pickles, accompanied by a basket of roughly sawn bread. Frau Nagel had chunks of tuna with hers. She stubbed out her cigarette and waved a hand over the food.

She had more questions. Why did the Australian police open their files to me? She thought it extraordinary. It would be impossible for something like this to occur in Germany, she said. The police were very secretive here.

‘They gave me an office too,’ I said.
‘No way! This just amazes me.’

I confessed I’d been informed by the Australian police that the Polizei would have nothing to do with me. ‘But perhaps they’ll change their minds,’ I said. ‘I can only give it a try.’

‘What? You’re just going to walk in there?’
‘Yes.’

Her eyes lit up behind her glasses, and I felt her disbelief emboldening me. But I suspected it was less a case of me being brave, and more to do with the cultural difference. In Australia, we took our freedom of information for granted—we expected open disclosure. Later, when I saw the German law covering access to information, I was not surprised to see that it focused on caveats more than on rights.
We talked about the case. Did I think Tobias was guilty? What about Jens? The sister? I told her I didn’t know, and that’s what I was here to find out. As soon as we’d eaten our salads, she lit another cigarette.

I changed the subject to her assignment. The only appointment I had confirmed was with the Strobels, but I had so many more people I wanted to see—potentially hostile people. ‘Are you confident in making these calls for me?’ I asked.

‘Sure,’ she said. ‘You just tell me what to say. You’re the boss.’

I’d never been called the boss before. Rodd had been right: Just give her clear instructions and she will follow them exactly. Kerstin had done that, and from the look on Frau Nagel’s face, it seemed she would too. The downside, Rodd had warned, was that if I left something out, perhaps because I thought it so damn obvious, there would be what he called a ‘cultural disconnect’. Assume nothing.

I told Frau Nagel she would need to be very persuasive on the phone, while maintaining a perfectly even and reassuring tone. Personally, I knew I would make a shocking job of these calls if I spoke German—I was too attached to the outcome—whereas Frau Nagel would simply be following my instructions, I imagined, rather like a puppet. It was the perfect arrangement.

She looked at me anxiously. ‘I’m an atheist. I really hope this isn’t a problem.’

The word sounded alarming. I hadn’t heard it used with such seriousness other than in the paranormal movies I’d watched years ago. ‘What does being an atheist have to do with meeting this family?’

She explained that rural Germans were generally very religious. She hadn’t spent much time in these areas. She was a city girl, born in Tokyo to German parents on a company transfer. Culturally, she felt international, so she really wasn’t sure how she’d be received. And she couldn’t handle zealotry.
‘You’ll be fine,’ I told her. ‘I’m Catholic, but non-practising. We’ll make something of a pair.’

‘You know, I can’t believe we’re sitting here.’ She shuddered. ‘I can’t believe what we’re about to do. We’re just going to walk into these people’s homes, their lives.’

It was true. What’s more, we were strangers who’d just met in a cafe, because of a murder committed ten thousand miles away. There was a bizarre element to it all, but I felt I needed to dampen her incredulity. It was her use of ‘we’. Did one plus an interpreter automatically become we? I’d never considered this before, and wasn’t sure how much I wanted to share this story with her. So far, the relationship I’d invented with Simone was a very private one, and part of me wanted to keep it that way.

‘So, tell me why were you drawn to this story in the first place,’ she was asking.

I’d already covered this in my emails to her, but I explained the facts again, in monotone. She listened closely, and when I’d finished, jetlag moving through my body like syrup, she leaned forward, her elbow anchored to the table as she balanced her chin. I thought she was going to say ‘man’ again.

Instead, she said, ‘But tell me, Virginia, why are you really doing this?’

Any impression I had that I was the boss disintegrated. It was her shrewdness, the gleam coming off those glasses, my loss of words. I had no uniform or wig and gown to legitimise what I was doing, and now my self-title, writer, that catch-all occupation, felt like a thin pretext on which to walk into other people’s lives. My interpreter was after motive, and instantly I felt guilty, as though I was some sort of voyeur with a macabre interest in crime, like my mother.

‘You can’t go to an inquest like that and just walk away,’ I heard myself saying. ‘Not without the end to the story. People were accused
of murder . . . ’ I trailed off. Whatever the real reason was—and I wasn’t sure yet—I could feel it burning my face.

* 

Church bells rang every hour throughout the afternoon. It was dark when I rose. Etched spires and thin crosses ranging across luminous clouds made a mystical horizon above the shingled rooftops. Beneath the closest spire, a clock face angled at my window shone like a low moon.

Frau Nagel said she would be happy to eat with me that night, and although I’d have enjoyed the company, I said no. I was the boss, and I gathered this meant I had to set a clear boundary. I picked a Weinstube down the road, drawn in by the amber glow from the boiled-glass windows. It was noisy inside but I noticed the whirr of voices hush as I looked around the room. They were all grey-headed patrons in groups of four or more, beautifully groomed, the men with shaven faces and comb-lines in their hair, and the women with lobes that drooped with costume jewellery. One even wore a felt hat sprouting a little feather.

As I passed under the wooden chandelier, they nodded and chorused, ’Auf Weidersehen.’ I nodded back, following the hostess, an old Frau in a dirndl. Her enormous white breasts were trussed high, and I watched them quiver beneath a short rope of fat pearls.

While I waited for my goblet of wine and chicken salad, I noticed the walls were decorated with sepia photos of the reconstruction effort—eighty per cent of the centre had been destroyed in the Second World War, then meticulously restored. The city was authentic but inauthentic, original but reproduction. As I looked around at these people, they seemed to be reproduction too, from an old-fashioned era: war babies, smiling and laughing as though nothing had ever happened.
By the time I was ready to leave I’d drunk two goblets brimming with wine. The patrons all paused, eerily on cue, to bid me *auf Weidersehen* again, and as the door opened I felt squeezed out of the room like a pip, the thick atmosphere of the past resealing behind me.

The next morning I met Frau Nagel—or K, as I came to abbreviate her, since there was already a Katrin in this story. Perhaps I was also sensing a latent potential for my interpreter to become a character in her own right, and I was attempting to manage her influence. I had a spare day before meeting the Strobels, so I got her to make a few calls on my behalf. Her tone was bright and earnest. Next, I asked her to stay for my meeting with Manfred Schweidler, whose English, I had discovered on the phone, was rusty.

‘How will we recognise him?’ K asked.

I told her he had sounded tall and skinny, but when we arrived there was only one man in the cafe. As he stood up to offer his hand, I saw that he was not at all tall but rather solid. Soft, hedgehog hair framed his lugubrious face, and his flak jacket on this warmish day gave off the sweet, damp smell of oilskin—it went with the big road bike he proudly showed me later. Manfred Schweidler was the touring crime reporter, zooming around Würzburg and its outer regions with the wind in his face, in the spirit of a vigilante on horseback, I imagined.

‘I will give you the contact details of everyone involved in this case, Frau Peters,’ he said after I gave him a short precis of my background. He spoke deadpan English, quietly and with gravity. Then, lifting his eyes, he proceeded to draw long telephone numbers from the air above his head.

‘The Strobels will not talk to the media,’ he continued. ‘On the day of the funeral the men from the local sports club had acted like guards, keeping the cameras and reporters out. Maybe you’ll have more luck as an author, but I doubt it.’

I resisted my urge to tell him otherwise, and instead asked him why he thought the Strobels were supporting the Suckfuells.
‘Mother Strobel,’ he said. ‘She is very religious. She and Mother Suckfuell are connected through the church. The Strobels are very private and very anti-press.’ He wasn’t sure what was going on, because he’d never had a chance to get close enough, but, like K, he talked about the villages as though they were microcosms independent of mainstream society.

He seemed to be suggesting that religious faith—a mystery to the three of us, judging by our perplexed expressions—was somehow connected to the Strobels’ belief in the Suckfuell siblings’ innocence. What an incredible test of faith, I said, considering the siblings and Jens had been named as suspects by the state attorney of Würzburg over a year ago. How could they uphold that faith when the siblings had refused to go to the inquest?

Manfred didn’t know. There was only so much he could report, so he hadn’t tried to investigate the case further. Privacy was a big issue in Germany since the introduction of the so-called Caroline Act, he explained. Named for a case brought by Princess Caroline of Monaco in the European Court of Human Rights in 2004, the act had gone some way to raising the standard of protection of private life and redefining the scope of the term ‘public interest’. The press remained wary about what ‘legitimate interest’ warranted an intrusion on privacy, so Manfred hadn’t tried to find out anymore about the relationship between the Strobels and the Suckfuells.

There was little that either of us could infer from the siblings’ refusal to attend the inquest, but we agreed it was curious. And it seemed that the loyalties of the Strobels, as parents of a murdered child, were being divided, or compromised.

K was ebullient after we farewelled Manfred on the street. ‘He has no idea you’re walking in there tomorrow,’ she enthused.

‘And I didn’t want him to know,’ I told her flatly. Her excitement was alarming me, so I mentioned something about earning trust and respecting the Strobels’ privacy. Like my mother, K was turning
out to be a barometer of raw feeling, making me feel sober with responsibility.

I listened as she made two calls back at the hotel, one to the pathologist who had performed the second autopsy, and the other to Jens. She sounded keen and polite. He was very nice, she said of the pathologist, but he said he could not meet, as he would be compromised as a witness if there was to be a case. As for Jens, he said he would like to contact his lawyer for advice.

I hummed sceptically. It was a slow start, but I was too apprehensive about meeting the Strobels the following day to feel too much disappointment.

‘They will be looking to you to take control,’ Rodd had told me. ‘Take it slowly. Make simple points about your intentions. Make them clear and concise.’ That night I wrote my points in a notebook before popping an Alprax. I lay on my bed as I waited for the pill to work, wondering what it was I was feeling. Fear? Yes, that’s what it was. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt it. Proper fear.
found K on Sanderstrasse, staring at the entrance to the Eulenspiegel as she waited for me to appear. She was wired. So was I, but, unlike her, I was retreating inwards.

‘I've just realised, I'm in this,’ she said as we drove away. ‘I'm becoming part of this story.’ Moments later, she said, ‘I could actually write my own book, from the interpreter's point of view—you know that?’

I hadn't thought about that; it sounded threatening.

As we entered the motorway to Rieden, she told me she had a confession to make that would help to explain why she wanted to do this job. Her friend's father had been killed. A petty dispute that went haywire. Justice had never been done. The killer had just pointed a gun and shot him. ‘Can you imagine?’ she cried. ‘Can you imagine how that family must feel, not receiving justice?’

I could. It was shocking. But not now, not right now. I sat paralysed in my seat as K's voice rose higher and higher, whip-thin firs flying past the window, the steel road throbbing under the tyres. I felt faint, and in a way transcendent with fear.

We left the autobahn and set off along a thin grey road, cutting through expansive, flat fields, the strip of wheat-colour softly meeting an equally pale and wide sky. I tried to focus on Simone, the sense of home she must have felt as she drove through these plains. K asked if she could lower the window and light a cigarette.

‘Go for it.’ It would keep her quiet for a bit.
She shot smoke expertly through the crack. ‘I’m so nervous.’

‘I’m really nervous too,’ I assured her, but in truth I was starting
to sink into calm—I’d taken one and half tabs, otherwise I’d be as
wound up as her. By rights I should’ve been nodding off to sleep, but
my adrenals were putting up a fight.

‘Nervous? You?’ she exclaimed. ‘Oh, God, I didn’t realise. I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay, it’s okay.’ I liked this girl. I liked the way she’d said it as
if she really cared.

We sped into a narrow street walled by buildings painted cream,
salmon and sage. I swore as another car came towards us, pressing
my brake foot flat to the floor. K didn’t flinch—with her spectacles
honed on the road, she just made a slight veer to the left before
swooping around another bend.

Now a tractor was coming at us, the driver’s head covered in a
knitted beanie.

‘Did you see that?’ K said.

‘What?’

‘The way he looked at us?’

‘No.’

‘They’ll all know we’re here.’

‘Who?’

‘The people in the village.’

I’d seen the man look at us, but it had been no more than a cur-
sory glance. Surely they couldn’t all know we were here?

At a small T-intersection a life-sized adult Jesus lay dying across
his mother’s lap. ‘Look at that,’ I said. Like an enlarged living room
ornament, it seemed oddly domestic in the streetscape.

K said nothing.

‘Where are the shops?’ I asked her. ‘I’d really like to see the town
centre before we arrive.’ I wanted to see where Simone would have
hung out. Where she bought her sweets, or the bakery where her
breath might have fogged up the glass as she stared at rows of kuchen.
‘There probably are no shops,’ K replied.
‘But where do people buy their bread and milk?’
‘Probably in the next town.’ Then: ‘We are here.’

Lindenstrasse was a narrow lane, one car-width wide. K had paused beside a high brick wall covered in vine. Before I could take a breath, she surged through the gates and into the concrete courtyard. We were surrounded by a U-shape of buildings: two wooden barns, one to the left, another straight ahead, with a wagon wheel and rake nailed on the wall, and on the right Simone’s home. It was a typically Germanic two-storey building, with small recessed windows that barely interrupted its sheer face. It was painted a milky spearmint colour. Deep, long cracks appeared in the stipple finish, like scars.

‘Look.’ K was pointing at a car parked in the barn. In the bottom right-hand corner of the rear window was a sticker featuring a bright painted sunflower. English text scrolled around the petals: *In Memory of Simone*. Another small car next to this one also carried the sticker, in the same place.

I swore through my teeth. Whatever we were entering into, it had developed something akin to a logo, as though it was a club or a cottage industry.

We made our way to the front door in silence. At the base of the steps stood a large six-pointed star on three legs. Cut from wood and painted metallic gold, it had been positioned to greet whoever came to the door. K whispered a translation of the inscription inside the star. I heard two words: *Heaven* and *Simone*. We smiled weakly at each other and swallowed. K raised her fist. I gave her a nod and she banged the knocker.

I’d tried to imagine this moment before but had always drawn a blank. I felt the same blankness now, although a fainter, more breathless version, as the door instantly clicked open. She must have been waiting on the other side. Standing before us was a tall girl in a
bright red jacket, about twenty years old, I guessed. She was larger-boned than Simone, and blonde—the pale, creamy blonde of chilled butter. Her skin was creamy too, cheeks faintly apricot as she smiled. ‘Hello,’ she said in a whisper. ‘I am Christina. Simone’s sister.’

I shook her hand.

‘And this is my father,’ she said, stepping back.

Gustav Strobel had small eyes, but this only seemed to add to their unusually intense sparkle. As he squeezed my hand, on reflex both his eyes and mine began to water. Behind him, in the shadows, I caught sight of a stubby black crucifix hanging over a door.

Christina led us into a lounge room. Simone was on the wall above the sofa, her face twice its real size, dominating the room. With her hair brushed smooth, her expression looked softer and more content than I’d ever seen before. She was resting her head in her palm, smiling curiously. *So you finally made it,* she seemed to be saying.

We were to sit where we liked, so I sunk into the long dark-leather sofa, with Simone hovering above my head.

Did we want water?

‘Yes. Thank you.’

Christina left the room. Gustav perched on a footstool on the other side of the coffee table, his elbows on his knees. He said something in a deep, quiet voice.

Gabi was still at work, K interpreted. She would arrive shortly.

‘Gut,’ I said, and he smiled, nodding encouragement at my lame attempt at German.

K continued talking to him. I didn’t mind, and took the moment to look around. I remembered rooms like this from houses I’d visited as a child, where the contents were collected over a long period, where sentiment was valued over decoration. This carpet, sofa, curtains—Simone would have grown up with it all, and its textures, I could imagine, would still be ingrained with her touch.
The built-in shelving was covered with photo frames, candles, books, cards, baskets. The top of an upright piano had become a shelf too, as had the window sills, picking up the overflow of memorabilia, mostly photos of Simone. On the far wall, above a dining table, light strained through sheers covering a small window. Above the window, fixed to the wall, was another crucifix. It seemed to be a shield against evil, or perhaps a warning: Do no harm.

‘We’ve just been discussing the weather for farming,’ K said. ‘Wheat. He grows wheat, he told me.’

‘And you have pigs?’

‘Ja, zweihundert Sauen.’ ‘Two hundred pigs,’ K said.

‘Where are they?’ I asked. He spoke softly.

‘In the barn on the other side of the courtyard,’ K translated. ‘But they’re so quiet!’

‘Schlafen.’ ‘Sleeping?’ I’d guessed correctly, and Gustav’s eyes twinkled as he laughed.

Christina arrived with the water. She placed the bottle on the table and went over to the sill. Striking a match, she tipped the flame into a yellow glass decorated with a red heart, and murmured something.

‘Whenever they enter a room they always light a candle,’ K said. ‘For Simone. It gives them comfort.’

It had been eighteen months since she died. How long could it continue? How could it stop?

Christina poured the water. We were momentarily transfixed as it gurgled into the glasses. Then she sat on an armchair next to her father. Silence. They were waiting for me to speak.

‘As you know from my letter,’ I began, ‘I followed Simone’s story in the newspaper in Australia, and later I attended her inquest. At
the end of it I was struck by the realisation that I only knew a small part of her story, and that the other half was here in Germany. Is that too much?’ I asked K.

‘No. I remember everything,’ she said, and off she went. How could she possibly remember? And how could I trust she was saying exactly what I’d said?

‘I want very much to know what happened to her,’ I added, and went on for a bit longer. They looked at me intently, yet somehow blankly as I spoke, then K stepped in and captured their interest straight away. It was disconcerting.

We heard a car engine, and shortly after Simone’s mother entered the room. She ignored my hand and opened her arms wide. ‘Willkommen,’ she breathed, enfolding me.

‘Frau Strobel—’

‘Nein, call me Gabi.’

She hugged K with the same enthusiasm, then settled on the edge of a seat between her husband and daughter, still talking, bright with nerves. Where was I staying? When had I arrived? How was my flight?

I could see Simone took after her mother in looks—high cheekbones, generous smile—and I imagined she had the same excitability, too. Gabi was youthfully effervescent yet conservative, with her pewter hair, beige jumper and the sort of pants we called slacks when I was growing up. Gustav, sitting next to her with his small ears and small amber eyes, looked as dependable and solid as an upholstered bear.

I noticed she was calling him Gustl rather than Gustav, and I asked why.

‘I never liked the name Gustav. It’s old-fashioned, so I changed it to Gustl,’ she said, raffishly.

For her benefit, I repeated what I’d told the others about my project. When I said I would probably need to come back to Germany several times, she asked how I would pay for it.
‘I hope to get a scholarship. Otherwise the book will have to pay back my expenses.’ The book. Fact Buch, I heard K call it, as though it were already manifest and not just some faint hope I was harbouring.

As the room grew quieter, I turned to the subject of evidence, telling them I was still in the midst of reading it.

The skin on Gustl’s forehead gathered. ‘Really?’ He looked astounded. ‘We have only just learnt on the sixteenth of August that Tobias and Katrin and Jens had been telling lies. Herr Kämmer from the Polizei came here and told us. We were shocked. We had no idea of this.’

That was only a couple of weeks ago. Now I was astounded.

‘You know more than us,’ Gustl said. ‘Please tell us everything you know.’

I thought for a moment. ‘It might be better if you tell me what you want to know.’

Gustl lowered his head. He scrutinised his hands, clasped and squeezed them, before looking back at me. ‘How did my daughter die?’

Surely he’d read that in the newspaper, or heard it broadcast—just as I had. ‘Have the police not told you this?’

‘They just told us she did not suffer.’

‘There’s no evidence she struggled. But the autopsy report was inconclusive. Through a process of elimination, they determined Simone may have been suffocated,’ I heard myself say. I was surprised to hear the voice sounded like me, as though it should have changed to suit the circumstances and I’d have sounded more like a policeman, or an actor playing a policeman, but it was just me—the tone too thin, too light for the words.

‘With either a plastic bag or a pillow,’ I added, when K had finished, and immediately I regretted mentioning the vile plastic bag.

Gustl sucked in a shot of air, nodded slowly. Gabi put her hand on her heart and made an invocation, while Christina just sat there, looking into space.
‘You should have been told,’ I said.

‘I think the Polizei were not able to tell us,’ Gustl said. ‘Because of our close relationship with Tobias and Katrin. And we ignore the press.’

‘The yellow press,’ Gabi added, bitterly.

I thought for a moment. ‘I can try to answer your questions. I don’t want to affect the success of a German prosecution, but the crime was committed in Australia, and in our jurisdiction the evidence has been aired in court. I’m not breaking any privilege. And I’m sure your right to this information far exceeds mine. Firstly, though, can I ask when you last saw Katrin and Tobias?’

They looked at each other. ‘Katrin was here only three weeks ago,’ Christina replied.

‘And Tobias spoke to us on the phone from South Africa,’ added Gabi. ‘Just recently.’

‘Are you angry that the siblings didn’t go to the inquest?’

‘Yes,’ said Christina. It wasn’t that she thought Tobias guilty of harming her, I later learnt, but she felt he’d let her sister down.

Gustl equivocated. ‘Yes and no. Tobias was sick of the allegations. I can understand this. On the other hand, we need to find out who the murderers are, and that’s the one thing he can do for Simone. Being in South Africa and saying “It wasn’t me” is not enough.’

Gabi agreed. ‘But I don’t want Tobias to suffer any more psychological pressure,’ she said. She looked tortured, as though she fully understood him, and as if his pain was the same as hers. She’d written to him three weeks ago, she continued, after Herr Kämmer told them about the lies. ‘I want to know the truth from him.’

‘Have you heard back?’

‘Not yet. He might be in Mozambique.’

‘What about Jens? When did you see him last?’

‘Tobias and Katrin told us he doesn’t want to meet with us,’ said Christina.
‘He came to the funeral,’ Gabi added. ‘But he never introduced himself.’

I looked at her questioningly.

‘Yes. We thought it very strange too,’ Gabi added.

Strange? It was more than strange. Their daughter had spent the last two weeks of her life with Jens. He’d travelled to her inquest and given evidence. Why had they not sought him out during the last eighteen months? Something was going on here, something beyond what I understood as normal behaviour.

The light was getting dimmer now, I noticed, and everything in the room with it—the pictures, ornaments, the dark, comfortable furniture, a stack of washing piled up on an ironing board. Even the family was becoming subdued. All that was bright and lively was the flicker of flame in Simone’s candleholder.

There is a German word I came across in a book that encom-passes the idea of home as a private dwelling as well as a homeland. The word is Heimat. We have no real equivalent in English, but it beautifully describes the truly German home as a tree that sinks its roots deep into the interior of the soil, forming a union between blood and earth.

I remembered this word as I sat there with the Strobels. We could have been beneath the earth, huddled together like moles in the dim light of that room. The Strobels had sensed that something about the investigation was not right, but they didn’t know enough to do anything about it—and maybe this was because they didn’t want to know. With the crime having been committed in Australia, there was the issue of language, and this problem was being exacerbated by the secrecy of the Polizei. Apart from this, though, to me they seemed so passive. They were accepting their circumstances rather than railing against them. Why? Perhaps it was for the sake of Heimat. And if so, who was I to disturb their home, their way of doing things? Then again, how could I say nothing?
I began tentatively. ‘I have to tell you that after reading what I have of the evidence, I have suspicions.’

Gabi clasped a hand to her chest and cried, ‘No!’

‘It would kill us if we found out Tobias had anything to do with Simone’s disappearance,’ Gustl said, shaking his head. He looked at me guardedly. ‘As I told the police, I would put my hand in the fire for him.’

My heart was pounding. This was beginning to feel too much like my fiction—something of my own creation, loosely based around a set of facts. What did I really know about this crime? Everything I’d read was supposition.

By now Gabi was crying. ‘They have stood with us at the grave-side and held us. What sort of people would do such a thing if they were responsible?’

My own eyes had begun to water. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘but I want to be frank with you. I have questions for Tobias and Katrin.’

Gabi leapt to comfort me: ‘It’s all right. You’re right to tell us how you feel.’

I thanked her, and after a moment said, ‘Can I ask, are you in touch with the Suckfuell parents?’

‘Yes,’ Gabi replied. ‘Since all this happened, we have got to know them. Hiltrude has become my very good friend. I’m walking with her on a pilgrimage on Saturday.’

‘Do you talk with them about the case?’

‘Not really,’ Gustl said. ‘When we mention it, understandably, they get very upset.’

‘In what way?’

‘When the announcement was made in the media that their children were suspects, the family were naturally traumatised. They believe their children have been unfairly treated. We’ve felt the same way.’

I nodded, but with no real understanding of how this could be. ‘Do you think the Suckfuells will meet with me?’
‘I don’t see why not,’ Gabi seemed surprised. ‘They know you’re coming.’

‘Herr Kämmer knew you were coming too,’ Gustl added.
‘Did you tell him?’
‘No. He mentioned it several weeks ago, when he was here.’
‘Kämmer,’ Gabi said, shuddering. ‘I can’t be here when he comes. I have to leave the room.’

I didn’t get a chance to ask why—the phone was ringing. And Alexander, Simone’s brother, arrived home from work at the same time. He was different from the others. Edgy, pale with strawberry-blonde hair, his hand clutched mine. I told him I’d like to meet with him over the coming days, to explain what I was doing. He agreed, nodding earnestly.

Gabi called from the hall. ‘What day would suit you to meet the Suckfuells?’ It just so happened to be Hiltrude Suckfuell on the phone, Tobias and Katrin’s mother.

I looked at K. ‘Tell her we can come tomorrow.’ I’d really not expected it to be so simple.

Now someone else was knocking on the door. Father Jochen, the priest from Würzburg who’d buried Simone. ‘I’ve come for the homemade sausages,’ he told me in English, patting his large stomach, but I could tell from the narrowing of his eyes that he had another purpose. He was checking me out, preparing to bestow or withhold his blessing.

Would we would stay for dinner? Gabi asked. Yes, good. In the meantime, she wanted K and me to look at family albums. She pulled out Simone’s first communion photos. She was as beautiful a child as she was an adult. One photo showed her standing alongside a little boy in a suit. She looked like a bride in frills, and he a groom. I pointed the boy out to Gabi—who was this?

He died the year before Simone, she said. Drowned in a bathtub from an asthma attack. Simone had attended his funeral just before
she left for Australia. ‘Little did she know she would be joining him so soon,’ Gabi said, her eyes welling, and for a moment all she could do was sigh.

But the sigh didn’t last long—she was desperate for us to see more photos. Over the next half-hour Gabi spoke in a stream. Simone was not academic like her other siblings. She liked boys with purple and green hair. She loved crazy clothes, bright colours, sunflowers. She wore ripped-up jeans—her father tore the legs off them one day, to stop her from wearing them to school. She worked terribly hard as a student, just to get through. She needed extra tuition and ended up triumphantly passing. She worked hard in the house, too. Even if she had a crashing hangover, she’d get up and sweep the yard before going back to bed again.

If she was staying with the Suckfuells, at Tobias’s family home, she’d come home to have breakfast with her parents at six am. She believed in God. She played guitar. Tennis. The trumpet in the village carnival. She played leading roles in the community theatre: a housewife, a glamorous woman, a vixen. Off the stage, she never wore makeup. She played hard. She smoked. She drank beer. She suffered from bad digestion. She worried about her weight.

She cared deeply for others. She left her family little notes in unexpected places, lines of poetry, sentimental thoughts. Once, Gabi, while pregnant, had driven into the yard to find her toddler Simone standing in a second-storey window, holding an umbrella. She was about to jump, thinking she could fly like Mary Poppins. The fright gave Gabi contractions, and ever since Simone claimed responsibility for the birth of Christina. She was strong. She was opinionated. If she had a row, she would call later, before the sun set, to say she was sorry.

‘She couldn’t go anywhere without wanting to hold you like this,’ Gabi said, grabbing my forearm and clasping it to her chest. ‘She craved affection.’ She slept with her sister often, to be closer to her. On the night before she left for Australia, Simone even slept with
her parents, between them the whole night.

‘She slept with you?’
‘Yes,’ Gabi nodded.

The next day, Katrin Suckfuell had come with her brother Tobias to collect her. Simone had sat in the back seat of Katrin’s car. It was the last time Gabi saw her face, as the car pulled away, Simone turning to wave through the rear window.

‘Oh, her expression,’ Gabi sighed.
‘What was her expression?’
She shook her head. ‘Oh, Mumma,’ she cried. ‘What have I done to you?’

*

We sat down to supper at a built-in table in the corner of the small kitchen, our faces sanguine in the golden glow of a pendant light. Crowded around us were more pictures of Simone, made into posters and montages, pictures of Simone and Tobias, too, their heads together like Siamese twins. A kangaroo postcard, a map of the eastern seaboard of Australia, with pins tracking Simone’s progress down the coast, the last stuck in Lismore.

A spread of cold meats had been laid out around Simone’s tea candle, which was now flickering in the centre of the table. Black sausage. Pork terrine. Homemade salami. White sausage. Beef tartar. Dark rye bread. Tomato and white cheese salad.

The priest sawed up the sausages industriously, devouring them like a man pressed for time. ‘I come here to slaughter the pigs with Gustl,’ he told us, leering threateningly. ‘I eat their chooks too.’ K looked daggers at him, as though he might sense her an atheist and threaten to eat her next.

We talked, laughed and drank rose, but mostly we ate. Then everyone disappeared, leaving Father Jochen with me.
His eyes narrowed again, and, bringing his face closer to mine, his tone changed. ‘So,’ he said. ‘What are you doing?’

I told him.

‘Yes, but why are you doing it?’

‘If I knew exactly why, I probably wouldn’t have come,’ I replied, looking him in the eye. ‘It’s kind of like a vocation, Father.’

He gave an obstinate nod, and that was that, for Gabi was back in the kitchen, proposing we make a trip to the graveyard. The grave was just behind the house, she said, a few minutes’ walk up the hill. She visited every night.

*Perhaps like any mother,* I thought miserably, *dropping in on her daughter after work for a chat.*
The Suckfuell home wrapped itself around a corner like a two-storey bank, defining the edges of the intersecting streets. The most impressive home in Altbessingen by far, it was built from large blocks of rough-hewn stone, a beard of ivy creeping up its grey front. I found it hard to believe the family kept pigs in a barn at the rear. But then again, the thought of these animals sleeping in their own wing only added to the building’s medieval charm.

I’d never attempted to imagine where Tobias grew up, but now, confronted by his home, all the strange associations I’d felt when looking at his photos fell logically into place—the long wisps of flaxen hair, the faraway look in his eye—he’d always struck me as an eighteenth-century character, and now it was clear to me that he’d come not just from another culture but also from another time.

Portrait windows ran across the front of the house in two rows, only large enough to fit a head and shoulders. In the panes hung small squares of lace, as white as icing sugar. I stood on the street with K, looking up at the windows, then the thought crossed my mind that someone might be viewing us through the hexagonal holes in the lace. What would they think of us, gaping at their home like tourists on some leisure trail?

‘How do we get in?’ I asked K. The entrance was as big as a garage door, arched and made from wooden planks. Were we meant to hammer on it with our fists? K pointed to a narrower arch alongside.
This door was decorated with swirls of hammered iron and a row of tiny wooden crosses. I wanted to savour the detail, the workmanship, and most of all the rising trepidation I was feeling, but K was already turning the iron ring.

‘Listen,’ I said.

She stopped.

‘Birds.’ They’d just started on the other side of the door. Not just one or two birds, but a multitude, tinkling like crystals in a chandelier.

We looked at each other as the volume went up and down like sonar.

‘Birds,’ K repeated, but blankly. I could tell she wanted to get this over with; pushing the door wide, she stood back, waiting for me to enter.

To say that the birds hushed at that moment would not adequately describe the cut from sound to silence—it was as though a switch had been flicked off somewhere. We stood in an interior courtyard and stared up into the belly of a tree, round and dense with tiny pale leaves. I expected to see at least one bird, or hear the flutter of a wing, but they must have been holding perfectly still, their beaks clamped shut.

After a small run of steps, we arrived at a steel and glass door, an ill-considered addition from the seventies, it seemed to me. K pressed the button and we stared into the dark recesses of a hall, listening to the buzzer sounding inside.

‘They must be in there,’ she whispered, after moments passed. ‘This is really weird. I don’t like it.’

At that moment the door clicked. We watched as it eased itself open, about half a foot from the jamb, the gap like an invitation to enter. We frowned at each other.

‘Do we just go in?’ I asked.

‘I have no idea,’ K said.
Something about the gap seemed ominous, as though it were a test, or a trap. We waited, listening for another sound from within, but none came. It was getting ridiculous. I decided that I should take the lead. Gingerly, I stepped into the hallway, and in that moment a figure appeared at the other end. In the dimness I could see the bright yellow of flaxen hair. I recognised her face immediately. It was Tobias’s sister, whose pictures I’d studied in the *Star: Katrin Suckfuell*. I’d expected to meet only her parents, but she’d decided to come too. My heart lifted: they were taking this seriously.

She stayed where she was, so I moved towards her. ‘Ich danke Ihnen für ihre Zeit,’ I attempted, forcing out the words I’d been rehearsing on the way here.

She smiled. Huskily, she said, ‘It’s okay, I can speak English.’

I was surprised—she sounded so competent.

‘Just call me Katie.’

Her tanned cheeks went pink as I held her hand. Two years ago, Katrin had appeared pale and full-faced in the papers, her mouth a thumb-hole of disbelief. This girl was lean, edgy, not at all like a thirty-year-old woman. In fact, she had boyish good looks—she even drove her hands into her pockets and shifted her feet like a boy.

K stepped forward from behind me to take Katrin’s hand; I’d completely forgotten she was there. At the same time, another figure appeared, his smooth, hairless head dipping beneath the lintel in a serpentine movement. The shiny skin on his head seemed to gleam more as he grinned.

‘This is Uwe,’ Katrin said.

We stood clustered together in the T-junction of the dim hall. It was becoming quite a bottleneck.

‘I am the brother-in-law,’ Klein said, his voice stiff with pronunciation.

‘Yes, I know who you are.’ I shook his hand. ‘I remember you came to Australia too. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Uwe.’
Perhaps I was not what he expected. He was still grinning as he undulated beneath the door, back to where he came from.

‘And this is my father,’ Katrin said. Her face had turned ashen.

Hugo Suckfuell did not have Tobias and Katrin’s flaxen hair, nor their golden skin. He was pale, devoid of the lines and patina which Australian men acquire after years in the sun. In keeping with his agelessness, his hair was a dense thatch of dark brown. In need of a cut, it sat heavily on his head like a wig. He wore a matching moustache, so thick that it, too, looked like a disguise. I’d been prepared for a prematurely aged man, one worn out by the toll of the last twenty months, but all that gave Hugo Suckfuell away were the grave eyes beneath his brow as he took my hand.

His palm felt large and strong, worn like a wooden tool. I felt a pang of sadness for this man who used his hands to make a living. I offered him the string handles of the gift bag I carried. ‘This is for you,’ I said. ‘New Zealand wine.’

He took the puny string with his big fingers and made a harrumph as he looked inside, shaking his head with displeasure as K explained in German that Frau Peters was originally from New Zealand, not Australia. He was still shaking his head, unimpressed.

Had I made an error? I’d brought the wine as a precaution, in case they were planning on offering us dinner. I looked worrily at K, then, remembering I’d not introduced her, I did so in what seemed a gratingly pleasant voice.

Hugo turned to his daughter and spoke in a bark. He had the most deep, resonant voice. His F-sounds were particularly forceful as they passed through the hair of his thick moustache, like fistfuls of sound. ‘What is he saying?’ I asked K.

‘Mr Suckfuell said you’re too young to have funded this trip,’ she replied. ‘You can be no more than thirty.’

‘Thirty,’ I cried. For a moment things seemed to have picked up. ‘Your lighting is being far too kind to me,’ I said, unable to repress a
grin. ‘I’ll take it as a compliment, Mr Suckfuell, but I can assure you, I’m much older.’ We waited as K translated my words, unfortunately emulating a little of my tone, as she was trained to do, so I sounded frivolous for a second time. ‘I’m forty-three,’ I added, as he was still glowering at me.

He hurled another gruff statement. ‘He says you are a spy for the Australian police,’ K said.

‘I am not a spy. And I do not work for the police. I’m a student researcher,’ I replied firmly—although being accused of being a spy was as thrilling as being accused of being thirty.

Father and daughter remained at the head of the hall, both now with their hands jammed in their pockets. K and I looked back at them, matching their stare. We were overcome by inertia.

I’d come this far, I decided, and I wasn’t stopping. ‘Shall we?’ I asked, intimating the direction in which Uwe Klein had disappeared.

In the lounge room, the lighting did not improve. The carpet looked grey with age, and the glass coffee table and leather lounges were in shadow. It was a room where a family had lazed for years, soft furnishings as worn as old socks and slippers. The only brightness came from Simone, who sat on the sill in a picture frame, her head resting on her hand—a similar photo to the one I’d seen at her parents’ home. Unlike everyone present, she looked at ease with the situation.

I chose to sit next to Katrin. As she returned my smile, she looked surprisingly flushed and bashful. Across the room sat Hugo, on the edge of his seat, his whole body and expression one of resistance; I sensed his incredulity that he was being made to go along with this charade. Moments before, I’d watched him shove my wine bag onto a shelf behind him. No chance of that being cracked open tonight. Now he cupped his hands together with a thwack and grunted.

It was all wrong, yet I had to persist. I needed to know more about this family, and they needed to know more about me, for, quite peculiarly, we’d all become part of the same conundrum.
'No tape,' Uwe Klein said, as I pulled my dictaphone out of my bag. 'I will not give you my voice.'

He was the one in charge, it seemed. He sat on a low stool, elbows leaning on elastically wide knees, his grin almost lascivious now.

'Do you believe in God?' he continued in English.

'Well, I'm a Catholic,' I answered. 'But I would say I believe in an afterlife more than an actual God. Why do you ask?'

'Because the information we give you comes from our hearts. Be careful with it.' He nodded slowly, and I nodded so that our heads bobbed slowly together. 'God is watching you,' he added. It sounded threatening; perhaps realising this, he bared his palms: 'We are in your hands.'

I'd always thought of Christians as earnest and pious. But Klein was oozing God like some men oozed sleaze.

Looking down at my notes, I took a deep breath. 'Thank you for allowing me into your home,' I began. 'I come with good intentions. I want to find out what happened to Simone, and to know who she was. Tobias was such a big part of her life, but so far he has been portrayed as a killer by the press. I want to understand more about him, and about their relationship. I also want to hear about what you've all been through.'

'When did you decide to come to Germany?' Klein asked.

'After the inquest. As you probably know, it's over now. We just have to wait for the magistrate to hand down his findings.'

'I will talk to you about that later,' Klein said, cutting me off with a hand chop.

Hugo spoke up. 'We're very interested in these findings.'

'I can understand why,' I said. 'The findings should shed some light for you.' He made no response, so I turned to Katrin. 'Can you tell me why you did not go to the inquest?'

Her face fell and she barked something in German. Then it came in a torrent, a roaring tirade at no one in particular. Watching
someone lose the plot in a foreign language was peculiar. Since I didn’t know what she was saying, Katrin’s sounds and actions seemed accentuated: the spluttering, the howling, the tossing of her head. It was an oddly remote experience.

K held up her hand to stop her. ‘She says she could not go back there, to that place. And if the police had got sniffer dogs in the first place, like they’d told them to, and had run a better investigation, none of this would have happened. She blames it all on the police.’

I looked back at Katrin. I knew I should feel more empathy for her. Her anger at the police might even have been reasonable, but she was a suspect and I couldn’t get that fact out of my head.

We were distracted by the sound of a door opening in the distance. Moments later, a small woman entered. She looked around the room, her face crumpling with fine lines.

‘Hello, you must be Hiltrude,’ I said, standing.

The woman narrowed her eyes as she lent across and briefly clutched my hand. I could see where her children’s flaxen good looks had come from, but Hiltrude’s own had dried out like a flower. She looked parched and worn from her day at work, and was now alarmed. I felt sad for her.

She chose a narrow, upright chair, like her husband, and began speaking quietly to K. How long was Frau Peters in Würzburg? Where was Frau Peters staying?

I replied, uncomfortably aware that Klein was listening closely. My stomach rumbled and I wondered how I’d ever considered the possibility of them giving us supper. Of course they were going to be suspicious of me. Following the most serious crime possible, their children were suspects. They were under siege and had gone into lockdown. I was the enemy.

I explained again the purpose of my research, for Hiltrude’s benefit. ‘I want to portray your son as a real person. For now he’s
been labelled in the most negative way possible. Do you think he
might talk to me?’ I was encouraged by her nods.

‘We’ve spoken about you,’ she said. ‘He knows you’re here. But he
says, “Why would I give her my story? What do I get out of it?” He
says he will write his own book.’

*What do I get out of it?* What did he want? Simone was dead.
Hiltrude seemed nonplussed by her son’s somewhat crass reasoning.

‘Well, I’ll be very interested to read his book, if he gets around to
doing it,’ I said, ‘but in the meantime, perhaps I could start by asking
you some simple questions.’

She looked at Hugo, and they both gave a nod.

Hugo was a farmer, he told me, but his main employment was in
the German army, taking care of the facilities. Maintenance. Out-
side of that, yes, he farmed pigs and grew wheat. Hiltrude worked for
the local baron, as a housekeeper. They’d never travelled far. Hugo
had once had a dream of going to Canada, during harvest time, but
he spoke of it in the past tense.

‘Have you ever thought of travelling to Australia?’ I asked.

‘No, that is too far.’ He chuckled nervously.

‘But not for your son?’

Katrin answered, explaining that Tobias had been inspired by
his teacher, who’d been there several times. It helped that Simone
had wanted to go as well. *Don’t think he dragged her,* she seemed to be
saying. I regretted having mentioned him: they were clamming up
again.

‘He worked in his semester breaks to pay,’ Hugo added.

I knew Simone had worked full-time for three years, and Tobias
only six months, but I sensed now was not the time to ask about the
size of their kitties.

‘Tobias and Simone met at a party,’ Katrin recalled. ‘That was six
years ago. They had been together ever since.’

‘There was one other girl, though, wasn’t there?’
Klein waved my words away. ‘Simone was special. That other was only a casual connection. He was sixteen. The world was pink. You understand?’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Can you describe your son for me, Hugo?’

He drew a breath, and the room stood still as he made a slow list. ‘Very honest. He knows who he is. Stable. Not volatile. His focus is on community. Yes means yes with him.’

‘We follow Jesus,’ Klein reminded me.

‘One very important point: he never liked to fight,’ Hugo added, unsubtly. ‘He couldn’t stand people fighting. He tried to negotiate between the parties, and if he had a problem he talked about it—at home. Not with strangers. We brought him up that way.’

Hiltrude wanted me to know that his mother was very important to him. ‘Sons often have a better relationship with their mother.’

Hugo agreed. ‘It was always, “Daddy, where’s Mummy?” when he came home from school. Mothers make the food.’ Tobias’s love was football, he went on. His dream was to coach the German soccer team to victory. He studied and got his license to do this,’ he added proudly, as though the dream was still possible.

‘He loved snowboarding too,’ Katrin piped up.

‘Did he help you much with your farming, Hugo?’

He chuckled again. ‘No, I couldn’t get him out of bed for that. Katrin was the one to help me.’

Lazy, I thought sceptically. ‘So he will not be taking over the family farm?’

‘No.’

‘And what’s he doing in South Africa?’

‘Surfing school,’ said Hiltrude. ‘He doesn’t have any other options at the moment, unless he becomes a citizen there.’

‘Toby is down there because the press stole his home country,’ interrupted Klein. ‘And Australia stole his future wife. If the case is solved, he will come back here.’
‘The press stole our son,’ Hugo added. ‘We were betrayed by the attorney of Würzburg.’

‘It could all have been very different,’ I said, ‘if he’d only attended the inquest.’ Wasn’t it obvious? He’d had the chance to stand up like a man but had run for the hills.

Klein took a breath. ‘In Australia and Germany, there are things going on that you cannot understand using common sense.’ He went on in this oblique manner, mentioning strange happenings at the campsite and mistakes that had been made by the police. ‘And the press are just interested in squeezing people. Nobody is interested in the truth,’ he concluded. ‘They just put pressure on Tobias.’

‘Who—the press or the police?’ I asked.

‘Of course it is the job of the police to find out the truth, but they didn’t see things.’ Klein had begun to rant. ‘People moved their tents. Look inside my tent! You know the Silver Tent Man?’

I nodded. He was the guest staying in a tent not far from the Germans’ camp, the one whom Tobias and Jens had thought strange. Initially, he had been considered a suspect by the police, but they’d lost interest after conducting surveillance on him. Clearly, Klein hadn’t.

Katrin rejoined the conversation with a boom: ‘I have a feeling about that guy.’

‘Mr Silver Tent Man was in prison for domestic violence a few weeks earlier,’ Klein went on. ‘Katrin had lots of feelings about this man. Female feelings have to be taken into account very seriously.’ He eyeballed me to gauge the effect of his words. ‘This man moved his tent the day after Simone disappeared. He said he wanted shade, but he’d been in that spot for two to three weeks already. I think this man wanted a clearer view of where he knew the body lay, a view uninterrupted by bush. Isn’t this suspicious?’

It was; I needed to look at the Silver Tent Man more closely. ‘There’d been a lot of criticism about Tobias never looking for Simone—’ I began.
‘But remember, it was be that wanted sniffer dogs,’ Hugo added.

I’d have been more impressed if he’d actually bothered to search for her himself, I wanted to say, but what was the point of inflaming them?

‘We report someone missing,’ Katrin cried. ‘It takes hours for the police to come to our bus. They say,’ and she mocked some cop in a drippy voice, “My stomach tells me she’s just having a party in Nimbin . . .” Then in the evening three or four police pretend to be searching the canal—but it’s too expensive to get a dog in from Brisbane? For six days, no one took care of us, but when Simone was found we were taken to a five-star hotel. “You want cigarettes? Have five packets. You want beer? Have a whole tray.” It’s not normal. If she’d been found earlier, they could have found the tracks of where she walked. There was no rain.’

This was true. If a dog had been brought in earlier, the chances of finding Simone’s body sooner would have greatly increased. But equally, if the three Germans had told the police the truth about the night Simone went missing, a different investigation would have resulted, one that might have refined the search to their immediate location. I didn’t want to kill the conversation by raising the subject of the lies, though, so I tried another tack. ‘Could we talk a little about your relationship with Simone? Hugo?’

He was quiet for a moment. In the dimness I saw him clamp his lips together, to stop himself from crying. ‘When I was down in the garden, or with the pigs, she would drop by and say hi to me,’ he said, shyly.

‘She was a part of our home,’ Hiltrude added. ‘She felt like home. We lost her too, you know—although I know the Strobels lost a child. She brought beer here. She felt comfortable here. Warm and welcome. It’s so difficult for us.’

‘Tobias pushed things aside for a long time,’ Hugo said. ‘But he has to finish this chapter in his life now. He has to move on.’
How could he? It was so completely unrealistic.
Katrin was crying now. ‘Tobias said she was not only his girlfriend, she was his soul mate. He’d just look at her. There was no need for words.’

‘We never saw them fighting like other couples who don’t talk for days,’ Hugo added.
‘How have the people of the village treated you?’
‘Without wanting to, you retreat from society,’ Hugo began.
‘No, Daddy,’ Katrin boomed from across the room. ‘People have treated us well.’

‘A lot of people are surprised that Tobias has been judged without a trial,’ Hiltrude explained. ‘The matter has even been raised in church, with the priest warning people against being judgemental, and for them to be wary of the yellow press.’

‘The press were guided by the police,’ Hugo added.
‘Are you referring to Manfred Schweidler in the Main Post?’ I asked.
‘Yes.’
‘Daddy, no!’ Katrin boomed again. She turned to me. ‘Scratch that out.’

‘I beg your pardon?’
‘Manfred Schweidler.’
‘His name,’ K said. ‘She wants you to cross out his name.’

Why were they afraid of Manfred? It seemed so paranoid. I made a scribble in my notebook to appease her.

‘He’s obviously in close contact with the police,’ Hugo said.
‘Katrin read in his paper that she’d been accused of manslaughter.’

‘Friday, the tenth of June. A Monday,’ Hiltrude remembered.

When Hugo heard the news on the radio, he had been in the stables, he explained. He had almost fainted, thinking Tobias was to be arrested in minutes. ‘You cannot imagine what this is like.’

I looked sympathetically at him. He was a decent man, a hard
worker, someone who’d not seen much of the world, and now it had arrived here on his doorstep, grasping at his only son. TV channels had camped outside the house, I knew. In the neighbours’ gardens. Mothers taking their children to school had been stopped and asked questions.

‘We all had to get psychological help,’ Hugo said.

I commiserated; they’d had a dreadful time. But there was one last thing I had to ask. ‘Katrin, I still don’t understand why you and Tobias did not come to the inquest.’

It was Hugo who answered from across the room.

‘He says they were not invited,’ K murmured.

‘Really?’ My voice was full of doubt.

‘No, Daddy,’ Katrin exploded. ‘You must not lie! They sent an email,’ she reminded him, more softly now, her palms placating him.

I turned to Katrin again. ‘So why did you not come?’

‘You don’t know what happens if you go there,’ she said. ‘They may not let me come back. If I saw Lismore, I would freak out. I’ve said everything I know. I’m scared they would make me pay for something I did not do. I would pay for their mistakes. No matter what we say, they always turn against us. Sometimes you go crazy. I don’t sleep at night.’

‘The Strobels trust us,’ added Hugo. ‘The police try to pull us apart. The newspapers say: “It must have been them, it must have been them.” It’s such a psychological pressure. I’ve lost all ability to concentrate.’

‘And the pain is not just mental,’ added Katrin. ‘Sometimes it’s physical.’

Hugo shook his head. ‘Someone must solve this. It’s not possible to go on.’

Katrin turned to me. ‘Did they say at the inquest how she died?’

‘Suffocation, they think,’ I told her. ‘With either a plastic bag or a pillow.’
She pondered this. ‘Did they say what colour the pillow was?’
For a moment I didn’t know what to say. ‘They don’t know the colour of the pillow,’ I answered.
And she nodded, her focus dissolving as she gazed at me.

* 

They had every right to be defensive. ‘No one in that room killed Simone,’ I said to K in the car.
‘They face the music while he surfs in South Africa,’ she replied.
Guilty or innocent, we agreed, to run out on your family was bad.
‘Maybe he didn’t do it,’ K said. ‘Or maybe he did, and Katrin and her parents don’t know.’
Katrin couldn’t have helped him shift the body, we agreed as we drove the winding road out of Altbessingen: she was too emotionally volatile. And what about the question about the pillow? We both thought that strange. Still, we resolved to respect these people, probably as much out of respect for ourselves; we preferred to believe in their innocence than to feel that we’d been deceived by them.
K needed to pee—did I mind if she pulled over? I found an old tissue in my bag and handed it to her, and she squatted on the grass verge. ‘How unprofessional!’ she cried. She couldn’t believe it. Pissing in the dark with a new client. But it made sense to me. We were so pent up, peeing was a way of letting it all go.
Personally, I felt I’d failed on some level. I’d wanted answers, and I hadn’t expected further confusion. Frustration, too, for it had felt like a battle of wills. I was perplexed by the Suckfuells. Their complaints about the police investigation and their failure to provide sniffer dogs earlier made them seem more concerned about being seen as suspects than about Simone’s death. Why were they so defensive? Perhaps it had been ridiculous of me to expect them to trust me.
Before I’d left, I had said we’d only scratched the surface, and there was so much I wanted to cover. I told them I would need to come back. The meeting had gone so badly that I really didn’t expect them to agree, but with exhausted acquiescence they nodded yes. And I left with the uncomfortable feeling that, owing to their friendship with the Strobels, they hadn’t really had a choice.

* 

The next night, K and I sat at a table in a small dining room off the kitchen with just Hugo and Hiltrude. The ceiling felt low and the curtains were all drawn. It was dinnertime again. In the centre of the table was a plate of biscuits thinly coated with chocolate.

I was pumped up. I told them their son had done some stupid things, but I didn’t believe that made him a murderer. I thought they’d be happy with that statement, but in fact I’d startled them. ‘What stupid things?’ they asked.

‘He lied to the police, for starters.’

‘But only about the alcohol,’ they replied.

‘No, he also lied about his fight with Simone.’

‘No—the fight had been with Katrin,’ they countered, ‘And those two raise their voices so loudly that people could easily mistake a discussion for a fight.’

‘No, the fight was with Simone,’ I said firmly. I sensed they were foxing. Even Tobias had finally admitted to the Polizei that he’d lied to conceal his fight with Simone. I told them this, and they just shrugged, as though suddenly learning about a fight between their son and a girl who was about to be murdered didn’t really matter.

‘He cleared up all those lies before he went to South Africa anyway,’ Hiltrude said.

*But be never offered to clear them up,* I thought. He’d only admitted to lying after he’d been caught out.
‘Just because you have a fight, it does not mean you murder someone,’ said Hugo. ‘And if the lies were really so bad, why didn’t they make him attend the inquest?’

‘They couldn’t force him,’ I said, my heart sinking. I was dumb-founded by their lassitude. We were not just speaking different languages, but our ways of seeing were just as foreign. Later, Hiltrude referred to the fight herself, saying she had never believed Tobias’s fight with Simone was so big a fight that it could end in murder. By then she seemed well aware that they had fought. Next Hugo deviated from his story: having told me the night before that his children had not been invited to attend an inquest, tonight he proudly confirmed that he’d communicated with Wayne Hayes himself about the inquest, and had informed him (via an interpreter) that his children were psychologically incapable of appearing before the court.

I sensed the Suckfuells were being disingenuous with me—was I right to feel so frustrated with them? Certainly, they didn’t trust me, but did this give them licence to mislead me?

*

Before I left Germany, I met with as many people who would see me. I discovered that most knew nothing of the results of the inquest, and that the negative, yet accurate, reporting in the Main Post was as credible to them as a Grimms’ fairy tale. The consensus was that Tobias could not have killed Simone, accidentally or otherwise. Having only scratched the surface of the evidence, I wasn’t in a position to speculate either, but their refusal to even question why Tobias had instructed the others to lie annoyed me.

During my rounds of the villages, I met with Simone’s uncle, Hermann Zeissner. Simone and Tobias had stayed with him and his family for several days before departing for Australia. Hermann’s small children wanted to know why we were talking about Tobias,
whom they called Uncle Toby. Like Gustl, Hermann solemnly said he’d ‘put his hand in the fire’ for Tobias—an expression, I would learn, that arose from the ‘ordeal’ of the thirteenth century, when the accused were often tortured in order to test their faith.

I met with Simone’s closest girlfriend, a bright, wholesome girl who cared for the institutionally blind. She’d stayed with the pair in Australia a month before Simone was killed. She’d observed them to be happy and in love, and she refused—her head rattling and lips clamped tight—even to consider that Tobias could be responsible.

‘She can’t go there,’ K said. ‘She has to live here.’

I went further—I suspected she was slightly in love with him.

I met a middle-aged teacher, a friend of Tobias’s who lectured in new-age treatments at his former tertiary institute—he’d stayed with her on his return from Australia, to recuperate. During this time, she’d avoided asking him about what had happened to Simone, although she’d known Simone well too. She’d sensed he didn’t want to talk, she told me, and she hadn’t wanted to interfere with ‘his healing’. She had her own theory about how Simone had died: a stranger had come across her during those six days she was lost, and, overcome by her beauty, had accidentally suffocated her with a prolonged and forceful kiss. If only the police had taken Tobias more seriously, she lamented, they could have found her alive!

Did she not know that the evidence indicated Simone had been killed the night she disappeared, and shortly after a heated argument with Tobias? I told her so. I told them all.

I left feeling exasperated and vaguely unseemly for having asked questions about him, and even worse for having taken great care to correct their misconceptions. Was it me? Or was there something wrong with them? I had gone to Germany wanting to solve this case, but it was almost as though no one there wanted to know what happened to Simone, and the subject of murder was too forbidden.
As we sped back home from Brisbane airport on a sparkling morning, the grey motorway looked steely, the trees and cars bright like pop art after the crepuscular light of Germany. I began to tell Rodd what had happened, but the facts seemed inadequate. He focused on the road, responding in a controlled voice. Finally I understood. What I wanted to say wasn’t about the details, but rather the way things were unfolding.

‘I’m not just an observer, I’m inside the story,’ I said. ‘Do you know what I mean?’

He didn’t.

‘I can potentially affect things in this case. But who am I to be doing this? What gives me the right?’

‘You’ve been given access to the evidence. You have every right.’

‘Yes, but was it right to give me access?’ I wanted to know. On top of that, the story seemed to have little to do with writing—it was more about doing things. I wasn’t sure that was how a writer was supposed to act.

I told Rodd about Hugo Suckfuell calling me a spy.

‘He’s right,’ he quipped, and as our laughter petered out, I thought, Maybe I am a sort of spy? Or maybe, faced with these two families, I was being sucked into playing the role of an informer?

‘I’ve got to get back there,’ I told him.

I had to complete whatever it was I’d started. As well, before
leaving Würzburg I’d met one of the German investigators. The Polizei had had a change of heart, and now the head of the investigation, Kommissar Hans-Jürgen Kämmer, wanted to meet me when I returned.

‘I have to finish off reading the evidence and get back there as soon as I can.’ I waited for Rodd to throw cold water on the idea and suggest I was impetuous or a spendthrift, but he didn’t. All our fights with one another, I realised, had been about injustice. We both believed in justice in the way some people believed in religion. This had made us uncompromising in our arguments with one another, but something about the unacceptability of the Strobels’ situation had positioned us on the same side. Rodd just nodded perfunctorily, accepting my new role as an intermediary in an unsolved murder as a sort of civic duty that, having been instigated, now required completion.

I took a few days to settle then called Shane Diehm. We met for coffee and I told him all about the trip and the strange relationship between the Suckfuells and the Strobels—their dependency on one another and their bizarre lack of knowledge about the facts. ‘I reckon you’re going to help solve this case,’ he said.

Really? I wanted to ask how. Instead, I asked when could I get back in to see the files. I wanted to read everything before my next trip.

He explained that the station was moving out of the old house that weekend. All the files for Strikeforce Howea—the name of Simone’s case—were being relocated. What did this mean for me? I’d only recently shifted from the kitchen to the nursery. I liked it there, tucked away, everything within reach. I asked him if I could start taking the files home. He found this funny—‘Definitely not!’ He’d find a spot where I could work.

Later that week, when I arrived at the new station, Shane showed me to a large office with wide windows that overlooked the courthouse. Simone’s files were now being stored in here in a tall
cabinet next to three new conjoined desks—I could spread out and wheel around on a new roller chair. On my way out that day I saw the sign on the door: *Special Operations.*

Whenever I wanted to work I had to be let in by Shane or someone else by prior arrangement, and be escorted along the long strip-lit corridors. I didn’t like feeling so dependent. I didn’t like arriving at the front desk. The uniform staff always looked stern and unfamiliar.

‘Are you sure it’s not a hassle, me coming and going all the time?’ I asked Shane.

‘It’s not a problem,’ he said.

He always made me feel welcome and never questioned what I was up to. ‘Howya going?’ he’d say, sticking his head around the corner of the filing cabinet.

I would look up from my desk, where I’d be furiously scrawling notes. ‘I’m good,’ I’d say. ‘It’s all going good.’ But it wasn’t. I felt out of my depth. I’d gone from writing about small domestic moments, misunderstandings, flirtations and slights, to ascribing sense to thousands of pages of evidence in a murder case. I worried as time went on that police officers trained to ascertain guilt or innocence would soon realise that my whole being radiated a sort of phoniness.

Occasionally, the door from the corridor would open, a sudden force of testosterone behind it. A grunt. ‘Sorry.’

‘That’s okay.’ I’d put my head back down into the files and hide.

One day, a man wandered in like he owned the place, his epaulets encrusted with embroidery. He was Superintendent Bruce Lyons of the Richmond Command; he had defended his officers back in 2005, I recalled, over the delay in finding Simone’s body. He wheeled a roller chair across the floor and slouched back in it, legs wide and arms clasping the back of his head. I noticed his wiry outline beneath the uniform, the boyish buzz cut that covered his head like rust. He wasn’t happy with the media. They’d bought in to Tobias’s story,
given him sympathy and the police a hard time. All they wanted to do was sell newspapers.

‘Why did they think we were saying nothing?’ he asked, rhetorically. I felt his eyes scanning my face, wondering if he could trust me. ‘Well, good luck, m’dear,’ he said, standing. ‘How long will you be here?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I told him. The truth was that reading files and investigating was so interesting, and so much easier than writing, in some ways I dreaded leaving. Growing larger in my mind was the absurd possibility of simply solving the crime, as a compromise, instead of having to make sense of it all in a book.

My mother and I continued to meet at Succulent for coffee most mornings. With my life fuller than it ever had been, I was no longer experimenting with absence and failing to call her. Now I wanted her company more than ever. She’d changed too. Instead of inquiring about the state of my house or what I was making for dinner, she’d become something of a respectful muse to my role as a ‘home-made’ detective. I would talk about the different things that happened in Germany, or mull certain over aspects of the evidence. She would listen attentively, nodding but saying little, in the true spirit of a sounding board.

She wanted to come on my next trip, she said. She would sightsee all day and we could meet at night.

That probably wouldn’t work, I had to explain, as the days were intense and often spilled into the evenings. ‘But one day you will come,’ I said wistfully, sure that the next trip would not be my last. I would take her to the Festung Marienburg, the castle on the hill, and we’d look out over the city and eat those ginger biscuits Wayne Hayes had talked about. ‘When I’m nearer to the end.’

She would go on to tell me about yesterday: the cream sponge she’d made, as light as air with a thin smear of strawberry jam, or the novel she’d got from the library that I might like, despite me being hell-bent
on reality, or the ‘girls’ she met with once a week for morning tea, how they all loved her cream sponge . . . Finally, with mock sternness, she’d flip her head. ‘Oh, you’re not interested in a word I say.’

And I’d smile: ‘Oh, but I am.’

One evening, when Rodd was away, I rang her but she failed to pick up. After a couple of hours trying, I left the children and sped the fifteen minutes down to her house. The closer I got, the more certain I became that she was dead. I envisaged my arrival: pulling into the drive, walking up the path, the sound of her TV blaring, catching sight of her between the slats of her vertical blinds. She would be sitting in her armchair with her dinner on her lap, lifeless, her head slumped on her chest.

And this was, as it happened, exactly how I found her. I rapped hard on the glass with my keys, and her head flung back.

* 

Shane had mentioned there were videos of Tobias’s interview, but since the move they were now stored in the basement. I asked if he could dig them out for me. I wanted to see Tobias, to get a better sense of his character.

One afternoon in February I turned on the video in the Special Operations room and slouched back in my chair with a fork and a plastic box of salad.

At first the camera captured Tobias at a distance, an ethereal figure at the far end of a long white table. It was the interviewing detective I could see best—in profile, his short hair following a perfect curve around a large, clean ear. Then the camera zoomed in and Tobias came to life.

His face was faerie-like in comparison to the big, square head of the detective; he was quite pretty, his hair and skin golden, not at all like the pale, worried photos of him in the Star. He’d combed his
flaxen hair neatly for the interview, sweeping it elegantly over one ear. I noticed a beauty spot not quite covered by his goatee—it made him look impish. I could imagine him pulling a flute from his pocket like a travelling minstrel and surprising the detective with a whimsical tune.

It was ten pm, Saturday, 12 February 2005—the evening after Simone’s disappearance.

‘We had a very, a very nice relationship,’ he told the detective. ‘We not, we not just a couple. We are very, very good friends, so we, we know us six, six and a half years, and our first, our first date and the whole thing was growing like a love story, like a movie that was very romantic.’

A ‘love story’ was overdoing it a bit, I felt, and there was slippage in his use of tense: he was talking of Simone in the past. This was understandable, though, since English was his second language. I kept watching, noticing how his right hand, anchored by the elbow, constantly danced about his face as he spoke—it was a flamboyant movement, and terribly distracting. He pinched his lips and pulled at them as though they were a piece of rubber—after a while I realised I’d become more focused on his hands than on what he was actually saying.

Over the course of the interview, the detective went back to the relationship a couple of times. Was Tobias sure he hadn’t had a fight with Simone?

‘No, I had not,’ he finally shouted. ‘Why you ask me this question five times? I have not had an argument with my girlfriend. I have a, still, nice relation when she left me and walked away. You asked me that five times. What are you trying to get from me?’ This seemed too defensive, particularly as he’d only been asked the question twice.

When the tape clicked off Shane stuck his head around the door. ‘Whaddya think?’

‘I dunno,’ I said. Tobias was evasive, aggressive, and certainly lacking in the humility and neediness you’d expect from someone
desperate for help. With hindsight, it seemed obvious from his demeanour that he was lying about fighting with Simone—but this was something he had finally admitted himself, after Jens ‘caved in’ back in Germany, under pressure from the Polizei.

After the interview the police had taken Tobias back to the caravan. He’d become highly excitable on seeing the others, and, referring to the police, had used the words Führer and Kommandant. A young officer drew the conclusion that he was referring to Adolf Hitler; I later learnt that these words were generally avoided in Germany, especially together, since they were associated with the Nazis. It seemed strange for Tobias to use them. Perhaps he felt unusually threatened.

‘No! Turn it off. You are not taping this,’ Tobias yelled as the officer reached for his tape recorder. Then, turning to Jens and Katrin, he said—mistakenly in English, it seemed—‘Tell them nothing. Don’t speak with them.’ What was going on here? Tobias had said the police hadn’t taken him seriously, but I was getting the opposite impression.

I turned my mind to another question: what had the police done to find Simone? Had they been slack? My impression, from TV shows, was that a person had to be missing for twenty-four hours before any action would be taken. But I was wrong.

Simone, as a foreigner without money or footwear, and having disappeared overnight after a short walk, was thought to be very vulnerable. Checking through statements and logs, I discovered that a search for her had begun straight away—that is, as soon as Tobias returned to the station with Simone’s passport at three-thirty pm. Why, when Tobias had been asked to return immediately with the passport, had he created this four-hour-plus delay? There’d already been nearly four hours lost that day just getting to the station that morning. I wanted to ask him about this.

The first police search had begun within half an hour of Tobias’s arrival back at the station with the passport. Carried out between
four and five pm, this preliminary visual search was conducted by three officers, who had focused on the deep drains that ran along the perimeter of the caravan park.

A second search that day, between six and eight pm, had involved seven State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers and three police officers. They had covered ground within a one-kilometre radius of the caravan park, including a line search of the heavy scrub and creek network.

On Sunday morning a door-knock canvass of the caravan park had been conducted, but nothing of importance came up. Some people were not in, and others—including fellow campers who’d witnessed the fight on Friday evening—had already moved on. Between three and five-thirty pm that same day, a third search had involved fifteen SES volunteers, two constables and an SES duty officer.

_Not a bad effort_, I thought. The police may have tried to placate the Germans with comforting lines about her being in Nimbin, but their actions showed they were more than serious in their attempts to find Simone. True, there had been no sniffer dogs, and I could see why one might think they had been needed, considering the body lay right under their noses. If Tobias had put Simone there, I could imagine the frustration he might have felt, his contempt and incredulity as he watched the searchers skirting the fence of the Continental Club, the most obvious nearby hiding place.

After watching Tobias’s first interview, I realised I was placing far too much importance on the written word—a recording conveyed far more meaning than a transcript. I asked Shane if I could watch Tobias’s second interview, conducted by Sydney Homicide detectives on 20 February, four days after Simone’s body had been found. I had to wait for him to recover the tape from the basement.

A week or so later, I finally sat down to watch it. Having declined consular assistance, Tobias had chosen his brother-in-law, Uwe Klein, to accompany him instead. With Simone’s body having been
found three days earlier, the atmosphere was heavy, the tone deadly serious. I expected deference from Tobias, bewilderment, even fear of these detectives who were speaking like automatons—but no. He was arrogant, aggressive or, conversely, vague and whining; at times he banged his water bottle on the table.

The detectives, now armed with information from witnesses that contradicted Tobias’s version of events, should have had the upper hand, but despite them steadily challenging him, Tobias persisted even harder with his lies. At one stage he scowled at a very polite officer, telling him to ‘put away his slang’.

I didn’t know how to read this objectionable behaviour. Nor did I know what to make of my heart racing with excitement as I watched. I went home that night feeling as though I knew something about this guy I hadn’t before, but I couldn’t pinpoint what that big revelation was. I felt the gaping absence of some sort of essential skill.

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Rodd, like the Suckfuell family, was convinced that Tobias’s request for dogs was a point ‘absolutely’ in his favour when we discussed it that weekend. If he’d murdered Simone, why would he want her body found quickly? Surely, if he’d committed murder, it was in his interests that she not be found.

I argued a contrary scenario. ‘What if he hadn’t intended to kill her, Rodd? What if he didn’t want her lying there, rotting? The wait would have been unbearable—and he was just across the road, forced by delays to wallow and stew in the crime scene. He would have been demented with anxiety. Can’t you see that?’

‘No,’ Rodd said. ‘I totally disagree.’ Now he argued that Tobias would never have stripped Simone of her clothes. ‘A boyfriend wouldn’t do that. If he did, I think he would have to be utterly callous. Imagine that. How could you do that to someone you loved?’
‘Desperation. He wanted it to look like a sexual crime, so he did what he had to do.’

‘I don’t buy it. You’d have to be evil to do that. He stripped her of her dignity.’

‘He panicked.’ I could feel my own pulse pumping now. ‘He did what he had to do. And if it was a stranger, why no sexual assault, Rodd? Why no struggle? What would be the motive for a stranger to kill her? There has to be a reason—and if it’s a purely sadistic one, why the lack of violence? Why the passivity on her part?’

I’d thought all this through, ten, twenty, thirty times before, and each time the thinking felt surprisingly fresh, as though these things had never crossed my mind before. When would it stop, this circling of thoughts? I could feel sweat forming on my chin, along the slopes of my nose as I looked at my husband, waiting for an answer.

‘Let’s talk about something else,’ Rodd said.

‘Okay,’ I told him. ‘Okay, okay, we’ll talk about something else. So, how’s work, Rodd?’

‘Fine.’

‘Good. That’s good,’ I said, feeling ridiculously superficial. All that mattered to me was finding out the truth. I couldn’t stand the puzzle anymore, the ambivalence, the lack of control. What the hell happened that night? I had to know.
Perhaps it was something to do with me and the sort of domestic narrative I was drawn to that was clouding my judgement: a preference for meaning over randomness, a fascination with the flipside of love. Could a seemingly banal argument have left one lover dead and the other a kind of accidental murderer? That possibility, I had to admit, resonated with my sense of paradox, that horrible realisation I had in moments of fury that hate was not really the opposite to love on the spectrum, but rather stood stubbornly beside it. It was a favourite theme of mine in my fiction, and now I had to question if I was going where the story was leading me, or if I was trying to make something fit.

I forced myself to look at the Silver Tent Man, who for me had become ‘STM’, more closely. When I asked Shane why the man hadn’t attended the inquest, he explained that the purpose of an inquiry was to further the investigation—and this suspect had been thoroughly questioned until the lead had dried up. His presence at the inquest wouldn’t have added anything.

When I told him I was nonetheless thinking of contacting STM for an interview, he told me: ‘If you do, let me know when you’re going. He’s got a history of violence.’

I laughed. Tobias was accused of murder in court, but the Silver Tent Man was too dangerous for me to drop in on for a chat? He couldn’t be serious.

At the time of Simone’s murder, STM was bailed to the Lismore
Caravan Park before serving a sentence for domestic violence. His small tent had been situated at the other end of the grass strip where the Germans had set up camp that Friday, closer to the exit. If Simone had left the caravan park that night in the way Tobias said she had, she would have passed within metres of his tent.

STM was a black belt in martial arts and had a lean, hairless body. He shaved his limbs as an ‘athletic thing’, he said in his statement, to show more muscle definition. ‘I know I was in the tent that night with three other people drinking,’ he had told police. ‘And I slept the night with a woman . . . which was an Aboriginal woman. And that’s about all we done. We just slept there.’

STM used money from his social welfare payments to purchase twenty-four cans of premix rum, of which they drank sixteen that night; he had five or six, he thought. They also smoked marijuana. He didn’t know what time he hit the sack: ‘I didn’t actually have any clocks in my tent or any timepieces.’

When they woke, the woman was shocked to find him lying next to her, but there’d been no sex—‘I just cuddled up to her.’ There was another woman at the park he was having sex with. She was a redhead who lived in a caravan with her father, a man who’d changed his name to Wendy after a sex change.

This woman, Wendy’s daughter, was also the last independent witness to see Simone alive. On her way to STM’s tent that night for a brief visit, the redhead came across Katrin, Gun and Simone. She stopped to warn Simone, who was trying to get a noise out of the didgeridoo, that females who played the instrument were cursed.

It was surreal. The caravan park was starting to seem more like a travelling circus, with its hairless man, the potentially bearded Wendy, and, most eerily of all, a redhead daughter predicting misfortune for a young woman who would shortly be murdered.

The day after Simone went missing, STM said he had been approached by two German guys he’d never seen before—Jens and
Tobias. They told him Simone was missing and described her as slim and attractive.

‘I’ve never seen her before,’ he told them, and he opened the flap of his tent, saying they were welcome to look inside. ‘I thought they thought I’d probably cracked on to her or something,’ he said. ‘I was just reassuring them I wasn’t sleeping with her.’

I got a glimpse of STM’s technique when I read that he’d tried his luck with another German woman, a blonde he spotted sitting in a van outside the caravan park that same morning—none other than Katrin Suckfuell. Attracted to her, STM wandered over and invited her to have sex with a practical gesture: he made a circle with one hand, into which he inserted an index finger.

‘Did you really expect her to have sex?’ the officer asked.

‘If she was willing,’ he said.

It seemed comical to me—and indeed, according to STM, Katrin had laughed and shook her head. But when talking to me, her reading of him had been different. She’d spoken of having a bad feeling about him, and had never mentioned his bizarre approach.

STM remembered the day the body was found. He was interested in what was going on over the road. He did shift his tent—not to get a better view, as the detective suggested, but because the grass was dying. Shifting twenty-eight metres seemed a bit much, though.

Then the detective dropped the bomb on him: ‘I’ve been informed that you were heard to say to [two park residents], “The Nazi bitch deserves what she got. I killed her and I will kill all the Nazi bitches. They should stay in their own country.”’

‘Well, I can say that’s a ridiculous allegation by [the residents],’ STM had replied. ‘And I did not say them things.’

One resident, according to the detective, ‘had then said, “Imagine how her poor parents in Germany must be feeling.” I’m told that you [then] put your head in your arms and started to cry. Did you do that?’

‘No.’
I didn’t believe him. But did domestic violence arising from a breakup with a girlfriend correlate with random violence? Later, I discovered that an employee of the Gollan Hotel had come across STM weeks earlier at the bins at the back of the hotel; in a deluded state, he was muttering, ‘I have a machete and I’m looking for someone to carve up.’

As I ploughed on, the evidence got even more confusing. Shady characters kept popping up in statements, one after the other. The area next to the Continental Club was a favourite of drunks, perhaps because of the sculpture: an eerie cluster of low obelisks rising from the grass, which created a sense of spiritual and communal space, and were no doubt useful as leaning posts. A couple of drunks had been seen there earlier the night Simone disappeared, including two brothers with a history of violence.

One had crashed in STM’s tent that night. He recalled having a bit of speed and marijuana that evening, and making his way through a goon sack of moselle. He admitted that at some point he had been near the Continental Club, with his brother and his brother’s woman, who were in the midst of an argument—but he returned to STM’s tent. It was a fact STM confirmed, begrudgingly referring to his tent as the ‘the drop in zone’.

‘What did you do after you learned a body had been found?’ the man was asked.

‘I picked up my bags and got the fuck out of there.’

This man provided his clothing to police for testing. His brother was also interviewed at length.

Two more violent men. I was beginning to feel I had to visit them all. I pictured Rodd waiting for me outside in our family wagon, on the wrong side of town, a baseball bat in the boot. Not likely. He’d already come with me one February night to the Continental Club, around midnight, so I could check the lighting. We stood at the fence line where Simone’s body had been fed through. As I noted
I heard my husband seethe: ‘Don’t you ever bring me to such an evil place again.’

‘I’m not afraid,’ I told him, in a voice I hoped would calm him.

‘Yes—that’s because you’ve dragged me here to protect you.’

There were other strange men. One had contacted a witness to say he needed assistance disposing of Simone’s body. But the police discovered he’d been hospitalised in another town the night Simone disappeared, not for a psychiatric disorder but rectal bleeding.

Another man confessed to raping and killing Simone, along with an accomplice. The facts he offered were not consistent with the crime. He was eventually charged with making ‘false representation resulting in a police investigation’. Why had he lied? He was convinced he was a danger to the community and needed to be incarcerated as a preventative measure.

Lismore was full of them, I realised, the obvious suspects. How perverse it was that out of all of them, the most outwardly normal—an outsider—seemed the most likely killer.

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There were a lot of people with STM’s surname in the phonebook for the small town of Casino, New South Wales. I expected they’d all know one another, but no one knew that one. A few days later I decided to ring all the same numbers again. This time, strangely enough, I got STM himself.

I was surprised when I heard him speak. I’d expected that the image he’d projected—of his sexual magnetism, of his black-belt abilities—would have resulted in a big windpipe, at least. But his voice was thin and reedy, and as reluctant as a girl’s as I squeezed him for a time and place to meet. ‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘It’s really got nothing to do with me, eh.’
‘But you’re part of the story.’

‘Mmm . . . I dunno. I said everything I know. I don’t think I really wanna be in a book.’

‘I don’t have to use your name.’

‘Mmm . . . I dunno.’

This went on for about half an hour, getting me so fed up that I wanted to cut the Mr Nice Guy act and threaten him. But I didn’t. I decided to try again later.

The truth was that all I could think about was that last video interview of Tobias. My instincts told me his behaviour was highly suspicious. But just as the transcript was dependent on words, so was I. How, as a writer, could I communicate what I was sensing when I didn’t understand why I was sensing it? I needed help.

I dropped Shane an email. Could we meet for coffee at La Baracca?

He brought another detective with him, Dave Mackie, a slim, boyish cop, quietly mannered. Dave had worked closely with Shane on the investigation. I told them I didn’t know what to make of the tapes and I was ‘in over my head’. I felt it was time for somebody who knew what they were talking about to get involved.

I proposed a deal: if they gave me the videotapes and the transcripts of the interviews with the three Germans, I’d have the material analysed by forensic psychologists. The police could have copies for their evidence and I’d have the reports for my research. I handed them the biographies of two professors. They looked at the pages, then at one another, their eyebrows raised with interest.

A few days later, after Shane had cleared the request with the coroner, I was given the go-ahead. There was only one stipulation: that the police delivered and collected the tapes. I agreed at once.
I met Professor Paul Wilson and his wife, Assistant Professor Robyn Lincoln, at the Bond University campus in Robina, Queensland. A New Zealander like me, Paul had been awarded the Order of Australia medal for services to the community in social justice. He’d left New Zealand for Australia and later won a Fulbright Scholarship, so his training in criminology had a distinctly American flavour, as did his style, which was preppy, giving him a sharp, fresh look for a man nearing seventy.

Robyn, a very pretty woman, had a similar infectious vitality about her. Criminology was clearly a passion in this marriage, and I was getting the benefit of two trained minds.

Straight up, Robyn said that the videos were not of the best quality. The close-ups were pretty grainy, so in terms of analytic interviewing technique, she didn’t get a lot of opportunity to read the ‘micro-expressions’. But there were some very strange behaviours, she said.

She took a baseline measure. Tobias started off in the first interview relaxed and cool, but also very definite and firm about what he was saying. From that point on, she looked for variations. The first she noticed was small, and was the same thing that caused me to raise my eyebrows. When he was asked about his relationship with Simone, he described it as being ‘like a movie’.

‘This sort of Hollywood romance seemed like a fantasy. It was a contrived and stylised response,’ she said.
She moved on, describing behaviours that we might sense without being able to pinpoint them—such as the hand gestures that had distracted me so much. Robyn called them ‘illustrators’. Tobias was very forward and definite about where he looked for Simone, and used lots of illustrators with his description, but when he was asked whether he’d had a fight with her he leaned back in his chair and held his arms across his chest—no illustrators. You could overanalyse these kinds of behaviours, of course—it could just be that he was tired, or at that point more emotional about what could have happened to Simone, but there were certainly differences. Inappropriate laughter and smiling was another signal, and had occurred in particular around questions related to Simone’s general health and family.

There were also discrepancies in the level of detail offered. Tobias resisted describing the ‘family discussion’ he said he’d had with Katrin the night Simone disappeared, but later in the interview he was animated while describing Simone’s clothing. What was the significance of this? Liars avoided detail in problematic areas and tended to overcompensate when the details were of no threat to them.

When Tobias was asked if he’d had an argument with Simone, he replied, ‘I’m confused right now . . . You asked me that about five times . . . What are you trying to get from me?’ He was deflecting the question and his body language was withdrawn. Equally striking was his aggressive response when asked the critical question in that first interview: ‘Did you harm Simone?’

‘I told you the truth,’ he said. ‘I have nothing else to say . . . I said it ten times today . . . I have enough.’

We moved on to the second interview, eight days later. When asked if what he said in his first interview was ‘true and correct’, he replied, ‘Yeah, absolutely’—but Robyn and Paul noted that he’d shaken his head instead of nodding. Possibly what was happening here was what’s termed ‘leakage’.
He was also asked about the area where Simone was found. Had he visited the park or the playing fields over the road from the camping site before? Never, he said. He’d not noticed that area until ten minutes after Simone had disappeared and they went looking for her. He said this although he’d already stated that he stayed in the van that night and had not been involved in the search for Simone. No science was needed here—it was a simple contradiction.

On the matter of Tobias not searching for Simone, Paul noted how it didn’t square with his usual role as leader of the pack. He made all the decisions. He spoke English. He knew Lismore, having visited the caravan park with Simone a couple of times before; the last time had been only a month earlier, when Simone’s best friend had paid them a visit. It seemed inconsistent that he would choose the passive role of waiting in the van.

In the second interview, they also found problems with his overall content and recall. Tobias had had over a week to think about the events of that Friday night; it would be normal to have a ‘rehearsed’ description, as a result of having gone over and over things in your mind, but he was still very vague. He also offered a combination of hypotheticals and possibilities whenever he was unsure what to say, or he asked questions back. Given that he should have been trying to do everything he could to assist the police in finding out who killed his girlfriend, it was strange that he was engaging in so much deflection.

Another characteristic, or tactic: Tobias raised his voice when he was trying to be more convincing, and his pitch became higher. That both these responses indicated deception was consistently affirmed in the academic literature.

When Tobias did answer questions (as opposed to deflecting them), he had a habit of answering very forcefully; when challenged, his response tended to soften into ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I can’t remember’. It was a pattern of trying to sound authoritative, and, when this failed,
of using his poor memory as a fallback position. As the discussion was nearing the critical moment of Simone’s disappearance, the professors noted, Tobias had snapped and terminated the interview.

I realised that this type of analysis was not admissible as evidence in Australian courts, but what I had now was a breakdown of my own reaction to the videos, an analysis of what I so loosely called my ‘gut instinct’—the racing pulse I’d felt on watching Tobias’s interviews.

Before I left, I asked them why they thought Tobias had lied. Could it be because the police had not taken him seriously, as he had once suggested to the Polizei?

Paul and Robyn smiled. Possibly, they said, but they had their own opinion, and they pointed me to a section of text in their report: ‘Tobias continually denied being involved in an argument with Simone, despite clear evidence to the contrary (e.g. diaries), which suggests that he was minimising any possible motivation that he might have been involved in her death . . .’

They were being careful in their report, I could see, but anecdotally they both felt that the police were looking in the right direction.

‘Work on Jens Martin,’ they told me before I left. They had looked at his testimony and short video interview. ‘Every time he speaks he tells a little more.’

I already wanted to speak to Jens, but so far he’d refused my requests. I went home that day imbued with a sense that information was power—but what was I to do with it?

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A couple of months later I met Professor Mark Kebbell at Griffith University’s Mount Gravatt campus. He was the second expert I’d suggested to the police who could analyse Tobias’s recorded interviews. The sign on the glass door read ‘Centre of Excellence in Security
and Policing’. I pressed a button and waited for the receptionist to buzz me in.

Mark came to greet me at reception, his rosy cheeks shining as he smiled. He ushered me down to an office that looked out to the primary blue sky of Brisbane and several parched gums. He was a long way from home, having just migrated with his family from northern England to take on the role of chief investigator in the criminology department. He’d been recommended to me for his research expertise in police interviews.

Where Professor Wilson used American methods to uncover deception, Mark’s training was English, and based on the research of David Canter in statistical profiling. He spoke in percentages and margins of error, and he wanted to talk first about the crime scene analysis report, not Tobias’s videos. He hadn’t looked at those properly yet, nor at the statements, as he’d run out of time.

Mark had serious reservations about the report. It was like a palmistry reading, he said. It was completely flawed. I squirmed at the analogy. This was the report Wayne Hayes had referred to in his evidence. Personally, I’d been impressed by how the police profiler had made a story out of the evidence: it was linear, perfectly tweaked and written with compelling authority. The problem, according to Mark, was that it had been created after the German police had named Tobias a suspect. It worked backwards to get the facts to fit. It was as though the police had told the profiler their suspicions, and then she had told them what they wanted to hear.

Mark believed the report seemed deliberately set up to rule out people other than Tobias. I pointed out that it had been prepared four months after a thorough investigation which had eliminated those other suspects, but still he felt the report went beyond what the data allowed you to tell.

The report’s assertion that Simone must have known her attacker or else she would have fought him off astounded him. Often, a victim
did not resist an unknown sex offender because of fear. There was no indication Simone had been sexually assaulted, I countered, but he rubbished this too, shaking his head. ‘You often don’t know if sex occurred unless the suspect admits to it. In one case scissors were left sticking out of the vagina, which does suggest a sexual motive—but a lot of the time you just don’t know.’

Scissors sticking out of a vagina—I was stunned by the image. I had to momentarily avoid his lips as they suddenly became too soft and pink inside his beard. ‘But the autopsy for Simone hadn’t shown any evidence of sexual assault,’ I continued. ‘Wouldn’t there have been some sign of it?’

‘Not necessarily. Only if you found someone’s sperm. Not everyone ejaculates. And the problem with penetrative sex is that anyone sexually active can have some sort of bruising to the vagina, whether it’s from consensual sex or rape. And some people, unless they’re fair-skinned, don’t bruise very much anyway. The other thing is you don’t have to have intercourse with someone. You can masturbate over them after you’ve killed them.’

Right—I was getting the picture. Mark really didn’t like the report. We turned to the matter of the videos.

‘He did look quite guilty,’ Mark said, ‘but it’s impossible to tell if that was a function of him having killed Simone, or if his anger was over the quality of the investigation and the fact that resources were being used on him. Even though he was lying on a number of points, it’s reasonable for someone who’s not being taken seriously by the police to withhold the fact that there’d been a fight and excessive drinking prior to the missing person’s departure.’

‘Yes, but what if it was pre-emptive behaviour?’

Mark looked puzzled.

I told him how Jens had testified that Tobias briefed him and Katrin on what lies to tell before they went to the police station. And how he told them to say they saw Simone walking in the
direction of the exit that night, effectively removing her from his location.’

‘Well, if that’s true and he did say that, it’s a very significant point.’

‘In what way significant?’ I pressed.

‘It makes him look guilty.’

I felt vindicated, less culpable of wanting to see things only my way. But what if it wasn’t true? What would be Jens’s reason for lying? He’d been as stubborn as a mule on this point, but at the same time very defensive of his friend. What had stopped Jens from pointing the finger? It didn’t add up.

‘Keep an open mind,’ Mark said. ‘Don’t close doors. Look to open them.’

It had to be good advice. He’d given me more to think about, but I was feeling close to panic as I drove away. I’d gone there wanting certainty and come away with doubt—not so much about Tobias, but about my own diminishing objectivity.

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I was leaving for Germany in two days, armed with more information to give the Strobels. But it was complicated. Should I tell them everything I’d found out, and potentially overwhelm them with detail? Or should I give them my opinion based on the two meetings?

Mark hadn’t had time to formulate a report yet; his was an initial view, one that I felt was driven by his experience working for the defence. Before I left him that day, I’d asked him if he thought my suspicions were warranted. ‘Yes,’ he had said. ‘It looks like it looks. But you must take a scientific approach.’

He wanted me to consider the statistically rare possibility of a random attacker. Emphasising this aspect with the family would effectively put doubt in their mind about Tobias’s involvement. I, on
the other hand, wanted the Strobels to start doubting their confidence in him.

I sensed there was something else at stake here, something to do with social contracts. Having relied on the right to remain silent, and the right not to incriminate themselves at the inquest, the Suckfuell children and their parents should never have befriended the Strobels in the aftermath, I felt.

During the six years of their children’s relationship, the families had only met twice, at group functions. They lived about twenty-five minutes apart, and with Tobias away studying in Karlsruhe, Simone was restricted to seeing him on weekends. Mostly, on those occasions, she chose to stay over with the family in Altbessingen. So the Strobels were not only unfamiliar with the Suckfuell family, but also, to a degree, with Tobias himself. The Suckfuells could have easily stayed away.

Instead, it appeared that the siblings—perhaps with the help of their parents—had purposefully cemented a friendship with the Strobels in the aftermath of Simone’s death, while at the same time concealing that they’d lied to the police about her last day. I firmly believed that when you entered someone’s house, you should bring truth and openness with you, not silence, and certainly not secrets.

As for me entering the Strobels’ home with my newly acquired report—there was something manipulative about that, too, I recognised. But I was beginning to sense that justice could operate at two levels, the legal and the domestic, and it was the Suckfuells who’d chosen the lounge-room sofa over the witness box. They’d crossed a social boundary, and here, beyond the realm of the law, there was no right to silence. Here it was open slather.
There was to be a memorial service for Simone in three days’ time, and K and I were invited. So were the Suckfuells. Having a meeting with the family beforehand would put them in a very awkward situation, so I put my plan to show them the report on hold. I also had no idea how the Strobelts would react to an expert opinion. I had a feeling that Gustl would be more receptive than Gabi, but when I dropped in to see him on my first day back in Bavaria, even he gave me some cause for concern.

We sat at the kitchen table, bathed in the yellow light of the low pendant. In shadow, from the walls above our heads, the blissfully happy faces of Simone and Tobias looked on. Gustl was teary. He said he really didn't know who was worse off, them or the Suckfuells.

I wanted to shake him. Your daughter is dead! Their son is surfing in South Africa! Please, don’t tell me they’ve got it as bad as you. Maybe sharing the burden helped him cope.

While they still did not know the truth, he said, both families’ lives had become impossible. Gabi couldn’t even bear to be in the room when Herr Kämmer from the Polizei visited, he added. I sensed that her and Hiltrude’s loss had got wound together in a ball—they couldn’t unravel it without Gabi falling apart. Gustl said Alexander had tried to talk to Katrin since my last visit, but she’d told him there was nothing to talk about, then walked away.

I raised my eyebrows at Gustl and he clamped his lips. So much unspoken—it was like running on the spot. I could feel a lump...
expanding in the well of my throat. If they weren’t pressing for answers, maybe they really didn’t want to know?

Had they ever asked any questions of the siblings when they visited them, I asked gently, hiding my rising sense of panic.

‘We didn't like to upset them,’ he said.

‘Did they ever mention there’d been a fight?’

‘That was the first question I asked Tobias when he called to say Simone was missing. I asked him, “Did you have a fight?”’ He said, “No.” I think I even asked him twice.’ Gustl looked at me sideways.

‘But what about back here?’ I pressed. ‘Did you ask them questions when they came back here?’

‘Yes. But they only ever talked about how picture-perfect it had been,’ he almost whispered. ‘Much later, Tobias mentioned to me he’d had a discussion with Katrin about farm work that night. But he reassured me it wasn’t an argument. That they always discuss things in a loud voice.’

I nodded. It was the same story Tobias had fed to the press that first week.

Gustl’s face was hangdog. I tried to look empathic but I felt a shot of fury. This couldn’t go on. I couldn’t stand it—how could they? It was like a malaise had beset them, a paralysing concoction of confusion and grief. As we sat there in the half-light, my expert’s report was feeling more and more vulgar, like an electric prod in my briefcase. I wanted to break the spell, invigorate them, make them be as demanding of the truth as I was. But they were different people, and vulnerable and grieving. Who the hell was I to feel even a speck of frustration?

With three days to spare before the memorial mass, I decided I would first tell Gabi’s brother, Hermann Zeissner, about Professor Wilson’s report. Hermann was not attending the memorial, and he struck me as someone who had sound judgement. He was a quiet, intelligent man; being especially close to Simone, he’d accompanied
her brother, Alexander, to Australia to help look for her. I would test the impact of the report on him.

There was another reason I wanted to meet him. On my last trip, he’d been so interested in my access to evidence that I’d suggested he apply to the coroner for himself. He had no idea he could do this; Germany was not so transparent in its processes. As he had limited English and no knowledge of our legal system, I had offered to help.

With the Strobels’ agreement, I’d arranged for Rodd’s law firm to make the application on Hermann’s behalf. To do this, the firm required a letter from Gabi and Gustl, nominating Hermann as the recipient. Months later, that letter had still not been sent; once again, the family appeared to be dragging their feet.

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Margit, Hermann’s wife, was tall, blonde and attractive—a physiotherapist and Pilates instructor who had just given birth to her third child. Hermann, who worked in health insurance, was dark and handsome, with a warm personality. Their stylish home in Muhr Am See was built on ergonomic and environmental principles, and complemented their deep religiousness. When I praised the design of his dining table, Hermann told me he had made it himself, then added, as an afterthought, ‘Jesus was a carpenter.’ I did not construe this as ego. Hermann was one of those rare souls who had humility—he believed in the goodness of man.

I imagined Simone had been a little like him. He was Gabi’s youngest brother, and said they’d been more like brother and sister than uncle and niece. Before leaving for Australia, Simone had brought Tobias to stay at Hermann and Margit’s for several days. She was no doubt seeking her uncle’s approval of her boyfriend, and Hermann had given it, calling Gabi to tell her she could trust this young man.
He’d noticed only one small thing, he said, and it was that Tobias did not share Simone’s socialist views about state healthcare—in fact, he seemed rather to resent the idea of having to contribute to the welfare of the aged. He and Simone had strongly debated this, but in a ‘healthy’ way. Other than this, they appeared smitten; sensing this, Hermann’s children had adopted their houseguest as ‘Uncle Toby’.

As we sat in the Zeissners’ pretty garden, with glasses of sparkling water, and kaffee and kuchen, a neighbour’s piano accordion chugged along merrily in the distance. Margit sat next to Hermann with their new baby on her lap. Something about the loveliness of the setting made me feel that they were like figures in a Norman Rockwell painting; K and I were the incongruous addition, black crows perched on the edge of the scene, waiting to peck them.

I told Hermann that Rodd’s firm had not made the application to the coroner, as they were still waiting on the Strobels’ letter.

He looked surprised. ‘Gabi told me three weeks ago she’d emailed it.’

‘She told me yesterday that her email had bounced back,’ I said.

‘Perhaps one of the children could check the details of the address?’

I nodded, but it seemed strange that Gabi, a secretary, would get an email address wrong.

Perhaps noticing my slight frown, Hermann admitted he’d found it difficult to talk to Gabi about acquiring the evidence. She was evasive. Every time they spoke on the phone about it, there would be a little break in the conversation and she’d cry. ‘It would probably have been easier for her if her daughter had died in a car crash,’ he said. ‘Murder is difficult to deal with.’

I asked Hermann where he was at with it now. He didn’t know what I meant, so I cut to the chase: ‘The Suckfuells—how are things going with them?’

‘The parents like us a lot, and we like them. Several times, however, I’ve asked Gabi and Gustl if I can have a frank talk with them,
but Gabi, especially, has asked me to wait a little longer. She doesn’t want to put tension between her and Hiltrude. She’s asked for my understanding.’

It was patently clear that Gabi was stalling. Perhaps she felt that the one good thing to come out of this nightmare was her friendship with Hiltrude, and she didn’t want to lose it. Was she better off this way? Maybe the truth wasn’t all it was cracked it up to be.

I began speaking with a heavy heart: ‘I’ve done more research on the case since my last trip.’ I told them how I’d engaged a forensic psychologist to analyse Tobias’s interviews.

Hermann stood up—one of his children was pulling him away by the arm. With a gentle expression, he excused himself. This was the sort of father he was, never unavailable, never able to say, ‘Not now, for God’s sake!’

Margit took the opportunity to question me. ‘Why are you doing this? Do you want to solve this?’

It was a fair question, but I disliked its slightly accusatory tone.

‘I’d like to help Gabi and Gustl, but it’s more than that,’ I said. ‘Every day I think of Simone. I’ve sifted through the evidence just as the police have. Once you’ve done that and the pieces don’t fit, it becomes a basic human drive: the desire for truth, to put things right.’

She was nodding slowly. But you’re not the police, I sensed her thinking. Who do you think you are?

By now Hermann was back. He was all smiles, before I returned him to the unpleasant topic: ‘In the opinion of this forensic psychologist, it’s unlikely that a stranger killed Simone. The analysis suggests it was Tobias.’

It shocked me how I could just say these things. The piano accordion was still playing across the way, the baby was sucking on a piece of apple, and behind me the pretty trickle of a water feature sluiced over a stone ball.
‘Do you want me to go through the points? I don’t know how much information you want,’ I said, suddenly feeling awkward. K relayed this to Hermann while I swished water around my dry mouth.

Hermann replied at length. After what seemed an eternity, K held up her hand to make him pause.

‘This has been haunting me for a long time,’ he said. ‘Especially in peaceful moments, like when I’m lying in the bathtub. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering what happened. Firstly, I think we deserve the truth, even if it’s painful for the families, even if it tears down friendships. I want to do something to bring things forward.

‘Hugo is insecure. Every time I see him at Simone’s grave I see that he has tears in his eyes. He once told me that if his children were involved, he had to know, and they would have to take the consequences. But I know that if I finally get the chance to talk to Hugo, Uwe Klein will probably be there and it will become confrontational . . . But I want it to end. So it’s a clear yes from me. I want to know what the psychologist says.’

‘Good,’ I said, and K began translating from the report by professors Wilson and Lincoln.

Given the nature of Simone’s wounds, the manner of death being most likely suffocation, no signs of sexual assault, few injuries, the body found hidden four days later in a place of easy access, and yet concealed, it appeared her attacker was known to her. The covering up of her body suggested some sort of respect for the victim, a gentle killing rather than a violent or blitz attack by a stranger. It was difficult to discern the motivation of a stranger, given that there was no sign of violence or sexual assault, but rather a singular lack of violence in overcoming and killing her.
Tobias lied, in particular about his aggression towards Simone and the bar staff that night, in all likelihood to minimise any possible motivation that he may have had for being involved in her death. This was underscored by his behaviour in instructing Katrin and Jens in what they should say to the police. His aim appeared to be concentrated on diverting attention from himself.

He never looked for Simone, and given he was the leader of the group, had the best command of English and was the only one to know the area, this passive role seemed uncharacteristic.

Next, K read out the professors’ analysis of the videotapes. I sat still, watching the afternoon light cooling on the Zeissners’ faces.

When she had finished, Hermann looked at me. ‘Knowing Tobias as a person, it was impossible for me to believe he could do it,’ he said. ‘In Australia I tried to comfort them—they were crying in my arms. Was that real?’

‘Probably,’ I told him. ‘Feeling guilt doesn’t mean you can’t experience grief at the same time.’

It was getting cold, and Hermann suggested we go inside for supper. They were quiet for the next ten minutes, preparing things in the kitchen. When he came out he was ready to talk again.

‘You know, Tobias had sounded “put out” when I called to tell him I was coming to Australia. He said, “What do you want to do that for?” “To help you find her, of course,” I said. I put it down to anxiety, but now things look different. I don’t know how Uwe Klein found out I was going, but next thing, Uwe was booked on the same plane. This bothers me. I wonder if Tobias asked Uwe to come, to keep some distance between him and me. They stuck together all the time in Australia. I feel they may have used me.

‘Uwe’s English was impressive,’ Hermann continued. ‘He’d just completed a course and was quite fluent. I remember he and Tobias
were so rude to Wayne Hayes. I never understood that because he was so good and kind to us. He even shopped for our groceries. All the pieces of the puzzle are starting to fit together. They made a threesome. I never got near Tobias or Katrin without Uwe being present. He was always there.

‘At one point I told Uwe I was incredulous that Tobias had not looked for Simone. I would have looked everywhere, I told him. I would have shouted so loudly people at the camp would have woken. “If Anja”—Uwe’s wife—“went missing,” I asked him, “what would you have done?” Uwe tried to talk me down, and when I persisted, he said, “So, go ask Tobias.” Since then, whenever I’ve questioned Tobias in emails, he doesn’t answer. Instead, he makes me feel bad for asking. “You don’t trust me anymore,” he says. But if he did do it, how could he live with it?’ Hermann was mystified.

I told him something Professor Kebbell had told me: that guilt dissipated quickly, sometimes as rapidly as within the first hour. In that time the perpetrator could become convinced he was in fact the victim.

Hermann nodded, his face weary with disappointment.

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K started to cry when we reached the motorway, great heaving sobs over the steering wheel as we scooted along at high speed. ‘She’s never coming home. She’s my age. That poor girl. All the things I experience, she never will. And I’ve just realised it—I actually know it—it was him. All the pieces fit.’

‘You only know what I’ve told you,’ I said. ‘Jesus, K. Maybe I’ve got it wrong.’

We arrived at Luigi’s. I ate there every night. It was now just before midnight and they were packing up, but we must have looked like we needed alcohol. Toni, the owner, insisted the signoras sit
down and have a drink. He put a smile on our faces with some pizza twists on the house, and Danny, K’s boyfriend, came and joined us.

The subject of discussion: if we killed someone, would we be tempted to cover our tracks? We instantly thought not—but then, as we began to dig deeper and introduce variables, none of us seemed quite as sure anymore. It came down to intention. If we hadn’t meant for it to happen, then it would be tempting to try to avoid responsibility. What if the death was a genuine accident, but one for which we could be wrongly blamed? We couldn’t predict how we’d react, we decided.

Later that night, as I lay in bed, I recalled with a fright the theory of Foucault from my first-year cultural studies: information is power. Power! If the Strobels were receptive to the information I planned to give them tomorrow, then what exactly was I was empowering them to do?

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The country church was cavernous. Towering window arches, a baroque ceiling, frescoes fading on the walls—a veritable castle surrounded by humble fields. Behind the altar a spectacular gold-leaf frame exploded like lava around a tiny picture of Jesus. A staircase to the right led to a circular landing where a priest must once have stood, beneath a turret fashioned into a crown. Remembering the uninspiring barn of a church that I’d attended as a child, I wondered if I’d been architecturally deprived in matters of religion; Simone as a little girl must surely have imagined she was a princess, and God her king.

I had no idea what was being said; as it turned out, the service for Simone amounted to no more than a mention in an offering ‘to the souls of the departed’. It was probably all they could bear anyway,
for when I turned to clasp hands with Gustl and offer peace, I saw his eyes were brimming. Afterwards, we broke into small groups in the sunny courtyard.

In the distance, I saw a figure cutting across the church steps. It was Hugo Suckfuell. He was making a beeline for us. I was surprised when he stopped at me first. Thrusting out his hand, he looked me in the eye. ‘Frau Peters.’

‘Hello, Hugo,’ I replied. ‘Nice to see you. How’s it going?’

‘Gut,’ he nodded.

He seemed less imposing outside his home, despite his padded flak jacket. His big dark mop had been trimmed, as had his moustache. As he moved on to greet K, Hiltrude appeared from behind him. She looked bitterly into my eyes as her hand slipped from between my fingers. The deed done, the Suckfuells hugged Gabi and Gustl next, then vanished.

Back in the Strobel’s lounge room, I asked Gabi, Gustl and Alexander if they would sit together, explaining that it made translation easier. They rearranged themselves on the other side of the coffee table, all in a row. How agreeable they were. I felt a spike of self-importance, quickly followed by self-loathing. They were so vulnerable—was I manipulating them? Or was I just helping them to understand the evidence? Nothing was simple in this, and nothing clear—except that in the three years that had now passed since Simone’s death, I’d somehow emerged as the one person who could help them. When my mind stopped swinging, I took a breath and decided that what I was about to say seemed less wrong than good.

‘As you know, I have been doing research since I left you last,’ I started. ‘I’ve done this because all of you have intimated in some way that you’re disturbed by the possibility that Tobias may have been involved in Simone’s death.’

Gabi jolted.

‘You’ve had questions too, Gabi.’
She said nothing. Nor did anyone else. So I went a little further, telling them I’d seen Tobias’s interview videos.

Now Gabi was rocking slightly and gripping her hands. I asked if she was all right.

‘Yes, I do have doubts,’ she said. ‘But somehow I still can’t imagine him being involved, because I still recall images. When the accusations started and he was already in South Africa, he came back for the interrogations. So it seems to me he did everything to support . . . it seems impossible to me that a person can do that and still lie to all of us. And when I remember that whole week when Simone was missing, he was talking on the phone to Christina . . . if all that was fake, I don’t know how to deal with that.’ She was crying now, her voice getting higher and higher.

‘I asked his father several times if there was something that happened— you know, accidentally. “You have to tell us and we will find a way to cope.” Maybe she tumbled, or maybe she fell, but if he really took her away and covered her up—how can be do that to me? How can be do something like that to us? If he told the police that something terrible had happened, we could have seen her face one last time.’

‘We don’t know if he did it, Gabi,’ I replied. ‘But if he did, I’m sure it was a terrible mistake and he was too scared to tell anyone.’ I said this firmly, and a silence followed before Gustl gave a heavy sigh. I took it as a signal to continue.

‘I was granted permission to have the video interviews analysed by a forensic psychologist. I did that because I wanted to know if my suspicions about Tobias were warranted. And because I think you also need some clarity, so . . . I hope you don’t mind.’

‘I need clarity,’ Gabi cried. ‘I can’t stand this state anymore. I probably haven’t expressed it like this, but when I see Katrin . . . she is only here for a very short amount of time. She is always very stressed out and nervous. Admittedly, she brings flowers to Simone’s grave, but she’s a wreck, and sometimes I ask myself: How do you feel
when you're here with us? How do you feel hugging us? Why don't you just tell us something?’ Gabi turned to Gustl, real fear in her eyes. ‘What does the video show?’

He cut her off gently. ‘Let her talk about that.’

I realised a part of Gabi would rather be anywhere else rather than in that room, but I asked K to begin. The sleepy light of Sunday morning limped through the sheers behind them as they hunched forward in their low chairs, hands gripped in their laps. For the next fifteen minutes they listened to K attentively as she read Professor Wilson’s report. Occasionally they stopped her to ask me to clarify something, but mostly they remained silent and grim.

When K had finished, Alexander spoke up. ‘But how could the other two not notice anything if he did kill her?’ he asked.

‘Good question,’ I said. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps they know more than they have said. One of the most striking things about Katrin’s statements is that, while Tobias and Jens have finally admitted to the Polizei that they lied, she still hasn’t. She’s never corrected her statements. And from what you’ve told me, she hasn’t even told you about Simone’s last day.’

‘We hadn’t wanted to upset her,’ Gabi said. ‘She seemed so disturbed by her experiences in Australia. And when Alexander tried to talk to her recently, she ran from him.’

‘She mentioned you,’ Alexander added. ‘She said she was too upset about Virginia coming.’

Me? How had I become an excuse?

They were all talking now: ‘Why doesn’t he come back and face us? . . . I just can’t comprehend that it’s been three years . . . I would like to see him in jail . . .’

During a lull, Gustl spoke. ‘There’s one thing I want to tell you. I find it really awesome what you’ve done. It’s the one thing that I needed.’

I lowered my head to control a sudden urge to cry.
‘It’s a support for me,’ he added. ‘And it’s strengthened the suspicions I’ve had. It also supports what we have recently been told about by Herr Kämmer. The fact she died is one thing, but what has followed—the covering up, the lying—that is the thing that makes it completely terrible for me. Hiding her. Doing that on purpose . . . That is so terrible.’

‘We don’t know for sure he did that,’ I reminded him. This was the problem with talking about it—the constant need to talk hypothetically. Trying to remember to add the little disclaimers: ‘perhaps’, ‘might have’, ‘maybe’, ‘possibly’. I suspect that possibly he might . . . In the end you just get lazy and it all becomes ‘I think, I think, I think’.

Perhaps it was all too quick, too soon. They’d gone from putting their hands in the fire for him to thinking it was likely he was involved. I wondered if they would go back to disbelief. K didn’t think so. She explained later to me that the opinion of a professor had impressed them. I wondered, too, if it was because I’d uttered something that up until now had felt forbidden. Whatever the reason, I did not want to waste the opportunity to talk openly while they were feeling strong. I suggested that, after three years, it was time for them to talk to the Suckfuell siblings about the night Simone disappeared—in detail.

‘It’s difficult,’ Gustl said. ‘Tobias is not here. But if Katrin says she’s available, then maybe.’

‘Don’t you think Katrin has a duty to talk to you?’

He gave a chuckle. ‘Ja. Well, I’m in. No doubt. I’m in favour of a meeting.’

‘It’s a conversation, not a cross-examination,’ I cautioned. ‘All you need from her is a proper account of what happened that night.’

‘But if we do it now, they might point the finger at you and say, “Oh, see, Virginia’s the investigator.” Hugo is always saying you’re police staff.’
‘He’s deflecting. Besides, you won’t be talking about me. You’ll be saying, “Katrin, tell us what happened that night.” It’s a perfectly reasonable request.’

‘Even if the meeting doesn’t take place, asking might move the stone a bit.’

Gustl’s attitude surprised me—how could he even consider that the meeting might not take place? But I ignored my reaction and ploughed on, suggesting that Hermann should attend with him. Hugo trusted Hermann, I said, and he would also be a good support for Gustl. They would need to be empathic but firm as they took Katrin back to that night, before she’d ever heard of Kämmer, the Silver Tent Man—or of her latest excuse, Virginia. I warned him she would call out these names as she had done with me, but this was a classic deflection technique. ‘None of those names existed for her on that night—remember that,’ I said. ‘Keep taking her back, and get her to give you a free recall of what happened.’

Gustl nodded.

Gabi did too. It was all coming out, releasing. ‘On my birthday Katrin couldn’t look me in the eye,’ she cried. ‘I always think: Katrin, talk to me, tell me something. I’ve always felt terrible going there. I have to go there, for Hiltrude’s sake, but nobody knows how terrible it is for me every time I go there.’

Gustl turned to her. ‘Why haven’t you told me you feel this way?’

‘I can’t. I can’t. I can’t talk to anybody about it. We just have to put the pressure on them. I can’t continue my life like this. I can’t take it anymore. Whenever I tried to talk about what happened, Hiltrude would scowl and say, “I don’t want to talk about that shit in Australia.” Our child was murdered,’ she whispered, staring into her lap.

Poor Gabi. I looked at Gustl. He nodded, his expression of disgust intimating that he’d heard the same from Hiltrude. I was starting to get the picture of a female friendship that was pathological, where one woman’s antidote was another’s toxin. They’d been
jammed together like a negative and a positive for the last three years. Perhaps Gabi had sought the cold comfort of a woman who could guarantee she would not have to face what she feared most: the possibility that she had waved Simone off with her killer.

Gabi had feared, as any mother would, that something bad might happen to her daughter, and had extracted a solemn promise from Tobias that he would take good care of her. Other than that, what more could she have done to secure Simone’s safety, except pray and have faith in God, and in Tobias? Gabi was a woman of faith. I didn’t know a lot about the mystery of faith, but knowing that she and Hiltrude went on religious pilgrimages regularly, I was getting the sense that her faith in God and her faith in Tobias had been interconnected.

She looked up at me, bewildered. ‘Did she really just suffocate?’

‘Through a process of elimination,’ I said, repeating the inane words, ‘that’s the only cause of death the police can come up with.’

‘Did he cover her mouth? Surely she would’ve reacted?’

I found it hard to imagine too. Was it really so easy to die? How much force did it take? Did she know she was dying? Why was it that we found it so impossible to imagine?

*

We were back at the Strobels’ the next day at seven am.

It was one of the last things Simone had spoken to her father about from Australia. Hey, Daddy, when I get home, we’ll go kill a pig. She loved to eat the raw meat, straight after the kill. She would slice a piece of liver as the halves lay open and chew it raw. I was not going to chew raw pig, but when Gustl told me what they had planned for the next day, I wanted to follow through with one of Simone’s last wishes. Maybe I also sensed the need for a bit of blood-letting after the upheaval of the day before.
As we entered the kitchen, K pointed at the wall, which looked somehow bare. Simone was still there, but Tobias was gone, I realised. They would no longer sit here every mealtime with his face smiling down at them.

‘Die Fotos von Tobias?’ K said, pointing to the wall.

‘Ja.’ Gabi’s lips formed a thin line of resolve. She told us Alexander had removed the pictures the night before.

Out in the courtyard, Gustl and his brother were visions in white in full-length aprons and white rubber boots. K and I watched silently as they set up a long steel table close to a drain hole—too like a mortuary table, it seemed to me. A line of instruments was laid along its edge, different shapes and sizes. Some were objects I’d never seen before, but most were knives.

Gustl gave me a nod and I followed the men into the stables. The pig snorted on seeing Gustl, and happily nuzzled its nose against his leg as he rubbed the spot between its ears. The necessity of this deception and the gullibility of the pig made me feel sad, but my heart was also pumping with anticipation.

The bang of the bolt being released against the pig’s head was deadened by the clunk of lead hitting bone, a hit between the eyes. The pig’s back legs bucked madly against the wall of the pen, and Gustl slid a blade cleanly across its throat. The neck fell open like a gaping handbag and blood poured out, slurping warmly into a bucket slipped under its throat just in time by the uncle—not a drip lost for the black sausage.

‘How could you watch that?’ K breathed as I returned to the courtyard, which was now filled with sunshine.

How could I not? I had a need to be exposed. Confronted. Wasn’t it just more of the same? Seeing life—or death—for what it really was.

The animal’s rear legs were strung together by the Achilles, and we watched it being levered up by a pulley. With its chest and
underbelly laid bare it looked sacrificial. Below, a large cauldron which Gabi had filled from the boiler steamed like a sauna. Down went the pulley, plunging the pig into its scalding bath, and up again, the water yawning and then sluicing down the gleaming body.

Before we could marvel too long, Gustl took a knife and ran it down the pig’s centre so that it opened like a dress splitting its seam. We gasped; packed tightly inside was a bed of neatly bound snakes with an intestinal blue-grey bloom. Gustl began the process of unpacking them. After sawing through the tailbone, he came over holding something white and squiggly in his palm. A womb, he said. We nodded, but could think of nothing to say.

Back in the laundry I watched Gabi as she washed the brains under the tap, her fingers feathering off the sinew and slime, and dropped them into a bowl of kidneys that sat next to a shoe rack. She turned to me, clutching a plastic bag of lungs—she held them beneath her own, at the solar plexus. ‘Everything is different now,’ she said. ‘Things look different.’

K translated, and as I nodded to encourage her, the contents of my head shifted and ached with the movement. Too much drink from the night before.

With something close to terror in her eyes, Gabi said, ‘Hiltrude had such emotional outbursts about the potential murderer. If she were to find out it was not an anonymous person but her son, I don’t know how she would react.’

‘Don’t you think she knows her children well enough to suspect something?’

Gabi looked astounded. ‘She’s never expressed suspicion.’

_But you wouldn’t, would you_, I was thinking.

She continued, saying she realised she was the only one in the family not to have known any information about Simone’s murder, for she had never attended the meetings with Herr Kämmer. How hard it must have been for Gustl when, at her insistence, they kept
visiting the Suckfuells. K mimicked her disbelief, her whispery intensity rising in the confined space as the boiler still bubbled.

I felt a flash of sweat break on my brow. I turned to K. ‘We should let Gabi fix up those organs. I don’t want to hold her up.’

‘Are you serious?’ K said.

I looked at her, befuddled for a moment, not sure if I was about to faint or be sick. This sort of side-conversation between interpreter and client was not meant to happen. I’d lost the plot. I’d planned everything right up to yesterday, and now, in the aftermath, I was keeling, exhausted by it all. Gabi’s knucklebones were pressing white against her skin as she clutched the bag of lungs. I needed to step back, turn away, press my hands up against a wall and groan from the pit of my stomach.

Instead, I said, robotically, ‘Gabi, I think you were right to forge a friendship with the Suckfuells. It will help you in the coming weeks. If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t be in a position to approach them now.’

It was too late. I could see the hurt in her eyes.

‘I can’t function,’ I told K in the car.

‘She was opening up to you, telling you you’ve changed her,’ K cried, her voice rising like a siren.

Poor Gabi. I’d nothing left to give her. I felt so bad.
A long, white conference table filled the narrow room and was set with around twenty chairs. Kommissar Kämmer and Kommissarin Grimm walked all the way around to the far side and sat in the dead centre, leaving K and me to sit opposite. I noticed ceiling cameras pointing at us from either end. In the centre of the table a tray of biscuits and filter coffee divided us.

Grimm leaned over to the pour coffee just as another man entered the room. He had a large nose and was sporting a broom moustache reminiscent of Kaiser Wilhelm. They introduced him as Herr Fertig. His name translated to ‘ready’ in English, K added. Mr Ready was the big cheese, the head of major crimes division in Würzburg.

‘Nice to meet you, Mr Ready,’ I said, and they chuckled for about a second, then returned to their former group expression: deadly serious.

Mr Ready, I noticed, had positioned himself at the head of the table, below a camera. Too far away to be included, he sat watching us in profile as we talked. I couldn’t keep up the formality of calling them Herr and Frau, so quickly slipped into first names. Hans and Susanne. This caused havoc with social protocols K told me later, but where the officers were clearly willing to make cultural allowances for me, as a German with an entrenched respect for authority, she wouldn’t dare take the same liberty.
Hans-Jürgen Kämmer, normally just Jürgen to his friends, I would learn a lot later, would happily remain Hans for me. He looked like the French detective Poirot, but a German version. Although he had the grand-sounding title of Kriminalhauptkommissar, he was softly spoken, with a drooping moustache and slightly hooded eyes. I knew from Wayne Hayes that he ran the Homicide department for the region. He’d travelled to Australia with the state attorney of Würzburg to investigate Simone’s case. Susanne Grimm had accompanied him as an interpreter and co-investigator. She was an attractive blonde in her early forties, softly spoken yet tightly composed.

Apart from visiting a number of states in Australia, Hans, Susanne and the state attorney, Ohlenschlager, had also travelled to England to reinterview witnesses from the caravan park. More than two years later, they had gone to Japan. Simone’s case represented a big investment of time and money but, as Susanne explained when I enquired, it was procedure. When a German national becomes a victim overseas, German criminal law dictates that the crime has to be investigated by the nation’s authorities.

Unlike investigations in Australia, in which the police build a case and present it to their jurisdiction’s department of public prosecutions, in Germany the Polizei worked directly for the state attorney. The word from Wayne Hayes was that the Polizei were to have no contact with me. But I gathered they’d had a change of heart when Susanne, who I’d met briefly at her office one day during my last trip, called K’s mobile to say we should come in to headquarters to meet Herr Kämmer.

I had assumed this was because he knew what I’d been up to, but his eyes popped open when I told him. ‘You have been to see the Suckfuells?’ He’d had no idea.

‘I’ve had two meetings. And a lot of their chocolate biscuits.’

‘You ate the chocolate biscuits?’
HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE?

We laughed unkindly. In fairness to the Suckfuells, it was understandable that they wanted to protect their children, and I’m sure I’d have felt the same lioness determination as Hiltrude if placed in similar circumstances. But there was something about her efforts to indulge her children’s detractors with chocolate biscuits that instantly brought to mind other sweet offerings made in German lore, such as the poisoned apple in Snow White, or the fattening up of Hansel and Gretel.

Hans apologised, saying he wouldn’t be able answer any questions about the specifics of their investigation. I told him I hadn’t come to ask questions but because I wanted him to know what I was doing. I told him about the application I was making on the Strobels’ behalf for access to the Australian evidence, and that I’d recommended a meeting between the two families, to enable the Strobels to ask Katrin questions about Simone’s last day—a courtesy that had never been offered them. I also mentioned the analysis I’d commissioned of the video of Tobias’s interviews.

Susanne furrowed her brow. ‘What video was that?’
‘The video of his interviews with Sydney Homicide.’

Hans looked at Susanne. At the end of the table, Mr Ready stroked the edge of his moustache. He said something in German.

‘They don’t know about these videos,’ K murmured.
‘Interviews are generally not recorded in Germany,’ Susanne explained. ‘We didn’t expect to see any.’

‘Could I have a copy of the report?’ Hans asked.

I explained I would happily send him one, but in the meantime K could go through Professor Wilson’s points with them. They agreed, and over the next forty-five minutes or so I watched Susanne scribble notes furiously on her pad. Occasionally Hans interrupted with questions.

Later, as we walked together down an endless grey corridor absent of windows, Hans said he wanted to show me something.
'This is my office,' he said, opening a door.

We’d stepped into a surprisingly bright room with a single desk and several chairs around it, otherwise fairly unremarkable. Unsure what to say, I told him politely it was a very nice office, then I realised the real reason he’d brought me. He was pointing to a large green poster facing his desk.

‘That is an aerial map of Lismore. And that,’ he said, pointing to a tall filing cabinet, ‘contains the Strobel files. We’ve not forgotten her. I work on many, many murder cases, but this one is very important to me. I want you to know that.’

*  

We met Hans and Susanne after they finished work for an early dinner at the Würzburger Hofbräukeller. The evening was silky with the languor of late summer, so we sat outside in the gravel courtyard amidst a grove of chestnut trees. They said they both had fond memories of their time in Australia and wanted to reciprocate the hospitality they’d received. But we were drawn to talking about one thing. I gave them all my thoughts about the case and they listened avidly, as though I was an expert. And although they could not talk to me about the specifics of their investigation, there were related aspects they talked about that interested me.

I learnt it had been Hans’s decision to name the three young Germans suspects. He hated having to do it, but he’d got to a point in the investigation where, if he continued to question the three without giving them suspect status, he would have been abusing their rights—specifically, their right to remain silent if they so chose.

‘Do you ever think you’ve got it wrong?’ I asked.

‘Yes. All the time.’

So did I, but I was shocked that he admitted it. ‘Does that bother you?’
'No. I’ve thought about this often. Even if Tobias is innocent, he has brought this situation upon himself by telling so many lies. They all did.’

I nodded. For a moment it seemed like a solution for me, also, as I struggled with the ethics of writing about them. A waiter in lederhosen arrived balancing a tray heavy with golden beers, and a glass of Silvaner wine for me.

Hans wanted me to know something: this was not the norm. Never before had they been in a situation where a writer became involved in an investigation. But it was good that I was here, he thought, good for the Strobels that someone was helping them to realise the possibility of what might have happened. He was longing for the day when it would finally be over and he could drop in on them and show them some affection. For now, he had to keep his distance. His job was to deal only with the facts, but I could help them emotionally.

I wanted to talk percentages. What were the chances the case would be solved? Hans said sixty/forty. Susanne thought fifty/fifty.

‘Can’t you be more positive?’ I egged them.

‘No, we can’t get our hopes up,’ Susanne said, in an appropriate monotone. ‘We have to keep our emotions level, to do the job, or we’ll suffer the highs and lows.’

I understood something of what she was saying. K and I were constantly peaking and plummeting, drowning ourselves in wine every night at Luigi’s.

My three companions ate pork hocks with dumplings and gravy. Unaccustomed to such heavy fare, and off pork since witnessing the slaughter, I had salad and fried potatoes. Slowly the light faded into a sort of blue-tinted night. I noticed no one was feeling any need to leave.

Later, out on the street, Hans took both my hands and looked at me with limpid eyes. ‘You have shown us today you deserve our trust. I want you to know I consider you a co-investigator.’
‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘that means a lot to me.’ It really did. I felt my own eyes, after a couple of blinks, wash themselves clean. After all my confusion, and my doubt bordering on guilt, the suggestion that I was adding something, and not just taking, in that parasitic writer’s way, made me feel that I’d earned my place in Simone’s story.

Hans and Susanne conferred for a moment. ‘Would you be able to drop in at the station tomorrow?’ Susanne asked. ‘We would like to meet again before you fly out.’

I told them I’d be there.

*

Simone’s headstone stood in a garden bed, a little way in front of a larger tombstone that was filled with the names of other Strobels. Hers was a modern piece of stonemasonry, made by an uncle: a series of stone steps led into the interior of an upright clam, representing the various strides she had taken in life. The last step, a pale, translucent stone, symbolised her desire—significant in someone young—for openness and spiritual enlightenment. The clam, I supposed, represented Australia, the seashell into which she’d disappeared.

K and I had come here with Christina before lunch, leaving Gabi free to cook, so I could touch base with Simone before I departed Germany. Christina bent to light a new candle—they went through three slow burners a week, she told us. Next she took a little white brush from a dish and flicked droplets of holy water across Simone’s photo, which was fading behind its perspex block.

Christina didn’t like the grave. She preferred the room she’d inherited from her sister. Three years on, it was still crammed with Simone’s things—Christina’s pet name for her. Even Tobias’s photos remained on the bedroom walls, locked in that exhilarating time before they left, as was Christina. To peel him off would be to shed
the last happy memories of time spent with her sister, as she counted
down the days till she left for Australia.

Leaving the graveyard, we passed the large cross at which Alex-
ander had hurled snowballs when he first heard Simone was missing.
The hopelessness of it all made my heart ache.

Back at the house we ate rice soup and pizza around the kitchen
table. Gabi was buoyant, I think from having a house topped up with
girls, laughing and teasing one another. At one point K turned to me
and said that Gabi had just invited her to come watch Christina’s
play, and she’d invited K’s boyfriend, Danny, too. ‘I told her that
would be great. We’d love to go. That’s nice, isn’t it?’

‘That’s great,’ I said, but with less enthusiasm. I didn’t know what
to think. What did she think she was up to, meeting the Strobels
without me? She was my interpreter.

I ate faster than everyone else. This pleased Gabi enormously,
and she leapt up to refill my plate with more pizza. It was nice being
mothered, and nourished. I heard myself telling her I was now so
tired—it was the good food, I complained, too much of it.

‘Well, you must have a sleep,’ Gabi said.

‘I could really do with one too,’ K said, putting her hand over her
mouth to yawn.

‘This is ridiculous,’ I told K as we each took a side of the L-shaped
sofa, our feet meeting, bodies covered in blankets. Simone’s large
photo crowned the scene like a figurehead.

‘You will wake us up in an hour, won’t you?’ I reminded Gabi. ‘I
have a plane to catch.’ I also had to drop into to see Hans and
Susanne, although I didn’t want to tell her that. This was her day,
happily domesticated, and she didn’t need to feel the undercurrents
of the criminal investigation.

I remained aware of sounds as I tried to sleep: cupboards closing
and opening, the whir of Gabi’s electric mixer, and later the deep
vibration of Gustl’s voice, the faint din-din of his knife against a plate.
How lovely it was, the routine and warmth of it, the wholesomeness. Pigs resting in the stables, cats with half-closed eyes warming themselves on the concrete outside, K and I stuck between sleep and wakefulness, dreamlike. More ‘once upon a time’ than in the present. But the whirring hadn’t stopped—if it was a cake being mixed, by now it would be turning into rubber. I began to come to, realising slowly that it was K doing the whirring, her soft palate vibrating with each breath.

‘K, wake up—what time is it?’

She picked up her phone. ‘Shit, she didn’t wake us.’

Like all mothers, I suspected Gabi liked her charges, no matter how old they were, being captive to sleep—but I had a plane to catch.

‘She snores,’ I said to Gabi, pointing at K. ‘I thought you were mixing up another a cake with the beater.’

K’s voice bristled with the translation, causing Gabi to laugh loudly and Gustl’s shoulders to bounce.

‘Oh, you’re not offended,’ I told K, as she regarded me coolly.

Teasing the hell out of her was really the only way to get her back. I hadn’t quite figured out why I was getting her back, but that would come later, when I had time to think.

We kissed Gabi and Gustl goodbye. I found it hard leaving, I guess because we were that much closer, but it was also that, this time, I was leaving them with a plan to carry out, but without me. Would they make the appointment to see Katrin? Or would the pull to ‘let things be’ prove too strong? I couldn’t be sure.

*

‘You have my permission to put your foot down,’ I told K.

‘Jesus. Campervans—unbelievable,’ she said, shaking her head as we sat behind a trail of them on the motorway back to Würzburg.

‘Go round them.’

‘Man, you’re pushy today.’
We were already an hour late. Germans were sticklers for time, and I imagined that Hans and Susanne, being cops, would not be exceptions. Luckily for us, they were still waiting. They led us into an office.

‘Virginia, I feel very bad about the percentage I gave you last night,’ Hans said. ‘I want you to know I have a lot of hope.’ He looked so concerned.

I smiled at him. ‘I know you do, Hans.’

‘We have something for you,’ Susanne said.

They’d prepared a bag filled with gifts: two bottles of the Silvaner wine I liked, and a range of Polizei paraphernalia—a keyring that resembled a police badge, flashing lights to stop traffic, pens. The only thing missing were handcuffs. These were some of the tools, I gathered, of a co-investigator.

They came to see us off in the car park. We hugged. As I pulled away from Hans, he took my hands for the second time in two days. Shaking them like paws he said something, in halting English: ‘I believe she sent you.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

He said it again.

It was a bit of a shock. I’d occasionally considered something similar myself, when I’d thought about the odds of me becoming involved and the prediction of the fortune teller all those years ago, but I was a fantasist. Hans, albeit a little religious, was a man who believed in evidence and facts. It took a while for me to realise that I’d solved a huge problem for him. He knew that holding back information about Simone’s death and the inquiry had not helped the Strobes come to terms with what had happened. He hated doing it, but he couldn’t trust them when they were so close to the suspects. From his point of view, I saw, I had kind of dropped out of the sky and helped him out.

But now it all came down to the family. I hoped they would find
the voice they needed to ask the Suckfuell siblings questions, and that the Suckfuells would soon learn that the rights afforded them by the law didn't cut it amongst friends.

At the airport a little while later, K and I dragged my bags towards the terminal. K's heels were hitting hard as she stalked the concrete. She was telling me how difficult my leaving was on her. Wasn't there anything she could do? 'You go on with your work but I'm left with nothing,' she complained. 'It's very hard for me to go back to normal life, as though none of this ever happened.' It drained her. It left a gaping hole.

'I understand,' I told her, panting as we scissored along, 'but I can't have you continuing on in my absence. All communication has to be directed through me.'

'Aha,' she pounced, as though she'd caught me out. 'Everything must go through you, Mrs Peters! Hmm.'

'Of course.' What was she playing at? She was my interpreter and she couldn't go on interpreting without me.

She kissed my cheek, I kissed hers, and we parted sadly, with real regret. Our ears and mouths had become so connected by speech that the splitting apart felt sinewy. We walked away—tellingly, in the same direction.

'Oh, this is ridiculous—you go this way, and I'll go this way,' I said, making arrows with my hand.

'But I have to go in this direction,' she said defiantly.

'Well, so do I.'

So we continued to walk along, then we stopped after a moment and hugged again, and this time I told her I'd really miss her, my eyes filling with tears.

'Now you made me cry,' she said as she backed away.

I held up my hand.

I think she even said, 'I love you.' I'm quite sure she did, but it was too late and I was already turning away.
I spent much of the first flight, to Singapore, writing her a stern letter, reminding her she was the direct line of communication between the Strobels and me; consequently, I needed her to remain impartial. She was not to attend a dog-training exercise with the Polizei, or a village play with the Strobels in my absence. Although this felt like real life, it wasn’t, I wrote. It was artificial. People didn’t just walk into strangers’ living rooms and become part of their lives. She had to stay within her role, and that was as my ears and voice, until the very end.

She accepted this in an apologetic email soon after, reminding me in a flattering manner that I was, indeed, the boss.

* 

Like K, I had to return to normality—to domesticity, to be exact—but my head never stopped juggling the various components of the evidence. Simone’s face, that quizzical expression, that slight shadow of worry on her brow, was always playing on my mind, whether I was cutting school lunches, vacuuming or making the dinner. I could have been writing about what had happened so far, but I found I had little interest in tapping the keys. I was more drawn to pushing the story forward in real life rather than on paper. Something had to happen, I kept telling my mother. For me, the world was out of kilter, and it would keep spinning with a slight wobble until Simone’s story was resolved.

My mother continued helping me with the washing; now we’d upgraded to rubbish bags filled with clothes. Exchanges were made in the car park after our morning coffee. I’d kiss the top of her head, and she’d look up at me with a conspiratorial look in her eye and murmur her refrain: ‘Nothing gives me greater pleasure.’ As I saw it, the bags were also the proverbial dirty linen: evidence that although I was trying to escape my mother’s domestic blueprint, I was still
completely tied to her, like a child that had never quite flown the coop. But perhaps it was this arrangement that kept me from being her.

‘Do you think I’ll ever be able to make sense of all this?’ I asked her once, worried that I’d bitten off more than I could chew.

‘I have every faith in you,’ she said, with uncharacteristic conviction.

Despite my mother’s help, my home was not running with the precision of a Swiss clock, but Rodd had little interest in complaining these days. He was just as consumed with his work as I now was with the case. He had a big job on, the sale of a large international company. If he could pull it all together, at the end he wanted to take me and the kids overseas, to live somewhere else for a couple of years.

‘But I’ll miss you,’ my mother said.

I reassured her that she would be coming too—‘Otherwise, who would do the washing?’ But the corners of her smile were dinted with sadness.

‘Please don’t leave me,’ she said.

‘I never will,’ I told her.

But we both felt it, an air of change that was slowly rolling towards us.
There were five of us sitting around the table in Hermann and Margit’s garden. We sat in silence, watching Gustl, who sat at the head, his chin pulled in to his chest so that we could not see his face. His forearms and hands were on the table, palms flat. We waited for him to look up and continue talking, but he didn’t.

He’d been in the midst of saying that no matter where the statements were from—England, Japan, Australia, or from Jens in Germany—they told a completely different story about Simone’s last day, compared to the scant one offered to him by Tobias and Katrin. Reading how Simone had been treated shortly before she disappeared had nearly killed him. This was when his head had dropped, and now I noticed his shoulders had begun to shake. He was sobbing soundlessly.

There was something overwhelming about seeing him like this. I looked to Hermann, but he looked at me, just as uncertain. I realised we were afraid—though of what, I didn’t know. Perhaps we sensed the magnitude of Gustl’s struggle to keep it all in, and feared that with the slightest touch, and against his will, we might cause him to explode.

I’d always held back from comforting the family. I didn’t want to compromise them emotionally, and it was an effective way of reminding them I was doing a job. But now, not knowing where to look, I found myself staring at the hairs on Gustl’s big forearms—they looked
surprisingly soft, like the fine hairs on a young boy’s. I reached across and ran my fingers down them. Hermann followed my lead, and together we stroked Gustl’s arms, and still any sound he might have made remained locked inside him.

Finally he stopped shaking. He lifted his head after a while and looked at me. ‘You know, we never really get the chance to talk. Because when you’re here Gabi is too.’

I nodded. He wanted to protect her. I understood.

‘Nobody in my house read the statements. Gabi couldn’t. Alexander didn’t want to. I talked to Christina a bit. She wanted to know some facts, but she didn’t want the papers either. Hermann was away. Herr Kämmer was on holidays. When he finally came back, he called me and came over, because I didn’t know how to handle it. I knew that you would come soon, and that was very good for me to know, because then I would have a chance to start over with it again.’

‘I’m really glad I’m here,’ I told him, as gently as I could, but in that moment I felt so frustrated that I could have put my fist through a wall. Far from being power, knowledge was becoming a millstone around his neck, and it was becoming progressively heavier with each visit I made. This was my third in two years. Why was nothing changing? I couldn’t bear it.

Hermann took over. ‘We had that meeting with the Suckfuells since you were here last. Now we don’t see them. But it was good to get that burden off our shoulders, because we had this fake relationship. We went along with the game because we didn’t want to expose them. I think we did a good job. We were fair. Totally neutral. We gave them an introduction on why we were there. But you could see them shut down straight away, especially Hugo—he did the same thing as Katrin and brought up the Silver Tent Man.’

Hermann was referring to what I’d established with the psychologists was probably a deflection technique, distracting the listener by pointing them in a different direction.
‘When we told them that Jens’s statements contradicted their children’s, Hiltrude and Hugo just said he just went to Australia to take the suspicion off himself. They called him a coward. When we asked them about the fight that took place between Tobias and Simone, they still acted as though they knew nothing about it, even though it’s been all over the papers. Hugo kept saying, “I don’t know what you want. My children have said everything, and there’s nothing new to add.” Of course, if we’d had the evidence back then, we would have said so much more.’

‘As frustrating as it is, it’s best you didn’t,’ I told him.

‘Ja, ja.’

Gustl spoke up. ‘If we knew how significant the lies were—for example, how Tobias told Jens and Katrin to say what direction Simone walked in . . .’ He blew a shot of air over his lip.

‘But it was enough for a first meeting,’ Hermann said. ‘As it was, Katrin couldn’t cope. We could never have questioned her. She was beyond it. And after she left the room, Hiltrude said Katrin’s health had been so bad in the last week, she’d almost died. I asked her why, and she said probably because she knows Virginia is coming again.’

I raised my eyebrows. Why did I pose such a threat?

‘I can best describe Katrin as a sick animal,’ Gustl said. ‘The look on her face, the way she behaved: very intense, very loud from the beginning. There was no real conversation possible with her. And when we asked her about meeting Jens on their return to Germany, she told us she’d never met him. Then she shouted at us: “I’m not saying anything anymore! You can torture me but I’m not saying anything anymore about that night!” She was really quite hysterical. Then she left the room. We assumed she was going to the toilet, but she never came back.’

There was a pause, then Gustl continued. ‘I saw her statement,’ he said. ‘It’s not even the same as Tobias’s. He finally admits to the Polizei he lied about the four points, but she still admits to nothing.’
I remembered her last statement too. She’d not just told four simple lies. She’d ducked and weaved, concealing the row between her brother and Simone, all the way through to the end of her statement. It was actually very sad to read, especially as she’d stated at the beginning of her statement, like a badge of honour, that Simone was her best friend. I supposed her loyalties had been truly tested, split between a dead friend and her only brother, and she’d chosen to stubbornly continue with the charade. Meanwhile, her brother, once caught out, had had the fluidity of mind to change tack.

Gustl said Gabi had also wanted to confront the situation, and had made her own appointment to see the Suckfuells. It was a disagreeable visit, Gustl explained. As Gabi left, Hiltrude had pressed a basket of eggs upon her. Gabi said she didn’t want them but Hiltrude followed her out and insisted she take them.

_Eggs—how bizarre_, I thought. In the end, poor Gabi had acknowledged defeat and accepted them.

*Wayne Hayes had given me permission to bring the interview tapes of Tobias this time. After this, Simone’s family would have seen everything for themselves and could make their own assessments.

We arranged ourselves on the Zeissners’ deep, modern sofas, wriggling to get comfortable. Hermann sat back with his legs stretched out straight, like a teenager, hand-knitted socks on his feet. Add some popcorn and we could have been a bunch of friends anticipating a blockbuster as we stared at the blank TV. Finally, a series of lines zapped across the screen, then Tobias appeared, sitting at the far end of a table in an interview room at the Lismore police station. I had a moment’s appreciation for the wonders of technology. Here he was, the night after Simone’s murder. I’d brought him here to Muhr Am See—to face her family—and he didn’t even know it.
We planned to stop and start, with K translating in the pauses. After about a minute she held up her hand for Hermann to stop the tape. She did this several times, giving a rapid precis of what has been said. It was a memory game, speed being the key.

The older children wandered in and looked worriedly at Uncle Toby on the television, and the baby shrieked; K in mid-translation lost her thread. She looked at me, her expression leaden. ‘I’m sorry, I can’t do this with the children in the room. There are too many distractions. Can you please say something?’

Now I felt like the translator, but it worked well. I felt none of K’s anxiety as I asked Hermann if he minded asking the children to leave the room. Now K translated what I’d said to him, back into German. It was like pass-the-parcel.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said to Margit as she gathered up her children, and I worried I’d offended her when, half an hour later, she still hadn’t come back.

K took a break after a while. ‘What do you think?’ I asked Gustl, who was sitting on the edge of his seat, his back curved over his knees like a boulder.

‘I realise I don’t know him that well,’ he said. ‘I met him several times and had lunch with him, but I never had a real talk with him, so seeing him like this is new for me.’

‘I realise I don’t really know him that well either, although he stayed here,’ Hermann added. ‘And that face he pulls on the video.’ Hermann lowered his chin and looked up at me, demurely. ‘I remember he was doing that face in Australia. We always avoided the subject of Simone and what happened, but whenever we did talk about it, he would lower his chin and get that very concentrated look.’

We had been placing so much importance on words, but I was coming to see that this other language—of the body—was just as expressive. We sense it but we don’t trust it in the way we do words—a
strange preference, considering that words are so easily manipulated.

They watched Tobias’s second interview as well, conducted four days after Simone’s body was found. We finished at ten pm. Two hours of interviews had been converted into five hours of translation. The scenes of Tobias moaning and behaving arrogantly had not shocked them as they had me, but rather seemed to leave them resentfully silent.

Hermann said something.

‘I beg your pardon?’ I said.

‘We didn’t know him,’ Gustl replied gruffly, shaking his head.

I didn’t know what to say. I looked to K and tried to smile my appreciation—in terms of translation, she’d just run a marathon. I, on the other hand, felt responsible for the heavy mood pervading the room. Had I actually asked them if they wanted to see the tapes? Or had I just assumed? I couldn’t remember.

‘I’m sorry it took so long,’ I said to Margit, who’d returned to watch the last half-hour.

‘No. It was important,’ she replied.

No one had eaten. I wanted to leave them to their thoughts, and to drown myself in a bottle of Silvaner at Luigi’s, but Hermann grimly offered us supper. How could we refuse?

He gave Gustl a beer. ‘Would you like spritzer?’ he asked me.

Under the circumstances I could have downed several whiskeys, but I reluctantly accepted a lime-flavoured beer.

During the course of the videos, Hermann had been throwing questions at me, his eyes inky and darting. My responses had been vague: ‘I’m not sure . . . Maybe . . . Probably.’ I’d forgotten things. It’d been eighteen months since I’d first sieved though the evidence, and a year since I’d watched the videos. It was impossible to keep all the facts in my head.

The table was down-lit in a darkened room. We passed plates of bread, cheese and cold meats between us with quiet murmurs of
thanks. There was the odd sigh as we chewed in awkward silence, the sudden clearing of a throat. Finally, Margit, sitting opposite K, looked up and said something. K, next to me, turned and said, ‘Virginia, have you written a book before?’

I was stunned. How had my credentials suddenly become relevant? We’d just watched the questioning of someone who was suspected of murdering Simone, but now I felt the guilty one.

(K told me later that Margit had actually said, ‘Has she written a book before?’ I was glad I didn’t know this. Some people do this, K explained. They’re not completely at ease with the translation process, so they introduce the third person.)

‘No, I haven’t written a book,’ I said, deliberately addressing Margit, who was still looking at K. ‘I’ve written short stories up until now.’ I could feel my chest knocking against the light fabric of my top.

Margit spoke again to K.

‘You think you can publish these recordings?’ K said, turning to me, in her usual exacting way—except now, ridiculously, I was beginning to feel like she was taking sides.

‘Yes.’ I was suddenly breathless. ‘I’ve been awarded a scholarship,’ I managed to force out moments later. My project had been accepted into a PhD program in creative writing.

Margit looked questioningly at K. ‘What is the criteria for being awarded this scholarship?’

She was suspicious of me—and she had every right to be, I realised, because even I was suspicious of me. Why the hell had I come here? I muttered something about the worthiness of my project, but with little conviction.

That night, I left the Zeissner family as the bearer of bad tidings, a narrator forcing a story on her protagonists, people who’d probably just have preferred to get on with their lives. We travelled along the autobahn, our faces bathed in the green glow of the car’s dashboard.
Gustl was quiet. So was K. I could have cried but was too grim with self-doubt.

After we dropped an exhausted Gustl off, we found Luigi’s shut, but Toni was still moving about inside. He took one look at us and quietly set out two glasses and a bottle of wine. Ten minutes later a plate of garlic twists arrived.

‘She’s suspicious of you,’ K said. ‘It’s always the ones on the periphery.’

K was remembering a letter we’d seen from the director of the kindergarten where Simone had worked. This woman had written to the Strobels after I’d interviewed her and accused me of asking scandalous questions. ‘This book will be for her, not you,’ she’d warned the family. Maybe she was right.

*

Before I left Germany, I decided I needed to take some photos of Altbessingen so that I could properly describe Tobias’s village. K wasn’t happy about the camera. She wasn’t happy with the way I had tried to barter with the camera salesman that morning to give me a better price, and now she wasn’t happy that I was walking through the streets of a medieval village with the damn thing. ‘The people won’t like it,’ she said. It felt cold and dangerous in my hand, like a small revolver, as a toothless old woman, no taller than a dwarf, stood watching me in the empty street.

In spite of her, I took a photograph of a jagged rock that declared the village had been settled in 804, around the time Christianity finally won over paganism and devil worship. I took more pictures: steep, gingery roofs sloping in different directions; a farm scene painted on the side of the house; a pile of wood stacked in a back yard with mathematical precision; a statuette of the Virgin Mary sheltering in a wall cavity, her crucified son draped over her knee.
HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE?

Back on Neutorstrasse, I peered over the Suckfuells’ fence at their frilly rows of vegetables, a garden swing, and, above, at the white lace squares of curtain in their kitchen window. The garden scene was idyllic, so soft and pretty that I felt grotesque standing there. I imagined Hiltrude watching me from her sink. I turned away, too ashamed to lift my camera.

An old BMW was parked outside Katrin Suckfuell’s, a small cottage just across the lane from the stables and the main house. In the corner of the car’s windshield was the sunflower sticker—*In Memory of Simone*—surely now a case of stubbornness rather than sentiment?

Some reckless compulsion made me want to knock on her door. I wanted one last look at her, to see if there was something I’d missed. Was she a woman carrying the burden of a secret, or a Diana hounded by the press, the police and now me? I didn’t expect her to be there. It was a weekday, and she was meant to be at work.

The woman who opened the door looked heavier than the Katrin I’d last seen two years before. Red-rimmed eyes suggested she’d already been crying that morning. Her shock at seeing me, as palpable as heat, now blew her eyes and mouth open. ‘What are you doing here?’ she said, her body wedged between the door handle and the jamb.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I was in the village taking photos. I wanted to let you know I was here.’

I thought she’d slam the door—but she didn’t. Instead, somewhat extraordinarily, she picked up from where she’d left off two years ago, as though there’d only been a small break in the conversation. The jasmine-infused quiet of the sunny village seemed struck even dumber by her hoarse roar. It was all about sniffer dogs, Herr Kämmer, the Silver Tent Man . . . ‘And ever since you showed up, things have only got worse.’

K translated robotically. She needn’t have bothered: I knew Katrin’s protests verbatim, a barricade of justifications, accusations,
defences, reflexes. They were not designed to communicate anything or make sense, but simply to block me out. It was wearisome and I soon wanted to get out of there. After a good ten minutes she must have finally noticed the light dying in my eyes, for she paused.

I sighed. ‘Can we have a normal, calm conversation about the night Simone disappeared?’ I asked. ‘Then you can complain all you like about the police, and I promise I’ll include it in my book.’

She shook her head, and stepped out, shutting the door behind her. She was going for lunch at the main house, she said. She took our hands in turn, as though the tirade we had just witnessed was a figment, and we were now executives concluding a business meeting with a polite triple shake. I saw a flicker of recognition as our eyes met. She was a Diana, I suspected, hounded not so much by the press and the police as by her own conscience. I had an urge to hug her but instead turned with K and walked away.

*  

After lunch, as we drove back to Würzburg, I raised the subject of World War Two and its impact on the current generation in Germany. I expressed a fascination with its formative effects, and I wondered out loud whether I’d have been so drawn to Simone’s story if she’d been from somewhere else. K and I knew each other well enough to talk about these things, I felt, and I was really tired of trying to guess at why Katrin would not, or could not, talk to me.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ K said. ‘I find it hard to understand your fascination with the war. This really bothers me.’

I was stunned. I told her how the war meant everything to us. We were Anzac. We drank in RSLs and marched to honour our dead at any opportunity. The war was a huge part of our national identity—which perhaps was not so surprising, given that our documented history was just over two hundred years old.
‘Jesus,’ she said. ‘Why do people automatically think of the war when they think of Germany?’

Now I was uncomfortable, and resentful for feeling so. ‘The Holocaust was the most bloodless, industrialised form of killing the bourgeois world has ever seen,’ I said in a quiet voice.

After a moment, she said, ‘True.’ She put her foot down and I looked at her, the trees outside slashing past her now squared jaw.

I wanted to ask her to slow down but instead continued, tentatively. ‘Just because you don’t talk about something, it doesn’t mean it’s not there. The silence becomes part of you. Even absence can have a presence.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘Growing up, we didn’t raise the flag or sing our anthem in school, or wear a uniform. I remember that when we won the soccer, someone in the crowd said, “At last we can be proud as a nation.”’

I twisted in my seat to look at her properly. ‘I’m sorry, K. I really am. You know why we’re so tense, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘It’s Katrin. The stress of it. She’s stirred us up.’

She agreed again, and I apologised again, but I hardly slept that night. I could hear both her and Katrin’s voices protesting my intrusions. What was I doing? What was I trying to uncover? I didn’t know. The whole reason for me being here was to find ways to talk about things that could not be easily spoken about, so I’d strayed quite naturally into this other area of war crime and its implications. But I think K felt that, having stood at Katrin’s door, I was now standing at hers, demanding she reveal to me her feelings, which, it seemed, ran a lot deeper than she was suggesting.

This time, I left Germany feeling I was losing the fight. Whose fight was it anyway? Why had I come here, to the other side of the world, to rattle people’s cages? As it was, this time I’d achieved nothing.
Although I’d tried several times to set up a meeting with Jens, he wouldn’t agree. Tobias was still in South Africa, so it seemed the only way I would get to meet him was to fly there—and still it’d be a long shot that he’d agree to an interview. The Strobels had met the Suckfuells and had been stonewalled—for good now, it seemed. I’d got Hermann and Gustl the evidence, shown them Tobias on video. They were engaged, fully informed, but where did any of it get them? They were no better off, just disappointed, frustrated—as I was—and far less trusting.

*Go home,* I told myself. *Stop doing this. Get on with your own life.*
PART III
Rodd, the kids and I moved from the studio (a converted tractor shed) into the new house next door that we’d slowly been building for the last five years. After living in one room for so long, this was a place where we could stretch out and let our proper lives begin. Rodd, when he wasn’t rushing out the door to catch a plane to Sydney, was working around the clock in his office downstairs, and I was usually upstairs attempting to write, in a loft accessible only by a vertical ladder. I had no excuses now, but I felt trapped up there.

I arranged to see my psychic, the woman who’d told me I’d give up short stories and write a book about violence involving two countries. I wanted to know if it was still on the cards.

‘You will do it,’ she said, ‘believe it or not. But not for a while. You’ve got a busy year ahead. Your mother’s going to need an operation and I can see you driving back and forth to Lismore to see doctors. It’s stressful.’

Later in the reading, almost as an afterthought, she told me there would be a death in September. It would be the head of a family. I went home that night and told Rodd the bad news about his father. I never considered that it might mean my mother, possibly because I didn’t see her as the head of anything.

I’d taken to picking my mother up for coffee each morning—a new habit ever since Basil, her cat, had gone missing. Basil was black and white, with markings suggestive of a dinner suit. He was also
portly and irascible, as one might expect of a pompous, ageing male married to a doormat. My mother had always merrily complained she was ruled by him, and now that he’d gone, she’d become something of a widow, for the second time round. Four weeks after he went missing, and becoming increasingly forlorn, she stuck posters picturing Basil to palm trees in the streets, on the off chance someone might have some information as to how he met his end.

One morning, as we walked across her front lawn to my car, she said, ‘You know, I was thinking, I might die this year.’ She was looking at me quizzically, as though seeking my permission.

When I asked her why she’d say such a thing, she said, ‘Oh, I don’t know. I just have a feeling.’

She got a call a couple of days after the poster appeared on the palm trees. Basil was alive. He was living at a retirement home less than a mile away. It seemed he’d left her of his own accord.

‘It’s because he senses I’m dying,’ she told me. She believed he’d ruthlessly re-established himself to avoid his pending loss. I wondered if there was some truth in that, and if in a way I had been doing the same.

The only sign I could see that something was wrong with my mother was when her hand would reach to comfort her upper abdomen each morning after drinking coffee. After several visits to specialists over the next couple of months, on April Fool’s Day she was cut open in a pancreatectomy, then rapidly stitched up again. The pancreatic surgeon, in her zeal to cure the oldest patient she’d ever operated on, had overlooked an X-ray showing large tumours on both my mother’s lungs. When she came to, it was my brother, who’d flown over from New Zealand, who was there to tell her the bad news—which was effectively ‘You’re going to die very soon’—but she was still groggy with anaesthetic and forgot this. ‘What happened?’ she kept asking over the next two days, and I had to keep telling her over and over, each time as intensely sad as the first.
‘The book’, as I referred to my thirty or forty pages of attempts, was now on hold, I told the police and the Strobels. Gabi wrote back to say she was lighting candles for us. I passed this on to my mother, who had once been a woman of faith. ‘I don’t want any of that holy business,’ she scowled.

We made the predicted trips back and forth to Lismore—to an oncologist to check on her ‘progress’. She didn’t ask him how long she had; she asked me instead. What did my psychic say, my mother wanted to know. I told her she hadn’t say anything. I distracted her instead with a trip with me, Rodd, my sister and the kids to Paris, where she hadn’t been since 1951, and then London.

In Sydney during the latter stages of my pregnancies, I recalled, my mother and I had recommenced our old habit of attending the odd trial—to see justice be done, as she used to say when I was a child. The serial killer Ivan Milat’s trial was the last we’d watched. Now, in London, for old times’ sake we climbed over a hundred and thirty steps to watch a manslaughter case at the Old Bailey. My mother’s stomach was heavily pregnant this time, with tumour, and she needed me to hold her arm to stop her from toppling.

‘What did you think?’ I asked her when we descended several hours later. Nothing—she said she’d not heard a thing. I guessed that other people’s tragedies held little interest for her, now that she was facing her own. She’d climbed the stairs for me.

As we approached September, and back in Australia, I began to think about writing again, and my disquiet about my mother dying began to manifest itself as a new kind of anxiety—about Simone. Without my mother, what did she really mean to me?

‘I’m writing an essay about you . . . and murder,’ I told her in her last few weeks.

‘Oh, really?’ she said, vaguely.

We got talking about how her boredom as a housewife and her ghastly interest in crime might become something more productive
in my hands, if I ever managed to write this book.

‘That’s wonderful, darling,’ she said, her interest feigned—and although she was patronising me, I still felt a surge of childish satisfaction.

She could help me, I told her. Was there anything in her past she could remember that had inspired her fascination with crime?

She thought for a moment. There is, in fact, she said. When she was a little girl, the youngest and only daughter after three boys, she would sit on the hearth next to the fire every night after dinner and read articles from the newspaper aloud to her parents. Some were quite horrendous recounts of violence, yet the content did not stop her from reading loudly and fluently, and in her best elocution, much to the delight of her parents.

There was one crime that involved a boy who chopped up his father and stuffed his parts in a suitcase. My mother, twelve years old at the time, had set off with pennies in her pocket to find the house where the atrocity had been committed. She had to catch not one tram but two. When she arrived, she was amazed to find a normal suburban house, the gate shut tight and all the blinds down. She’d told me this story in a particular rhythm and tone, like a mother reading a fairy story to a young child.

I offered her one back, reminding her that I’d also ‘investigated’ a murder when I was twelve. I’d started a gang called Police Five, loosely based on Enid Blyton’s Famous Five. Each weekend my friends and I would follow shoplifters for the in-house detective at the Coastlands shopping mall. More ambitiously, we once decided to assist the police in a missing persons case—the mysterious disappearance of a young woman who’d never returned from a day at the beach. We arrived at the area of last sighting after a two-hour trek along the sand, only to find that it looked nothing like a crime scene at all. People were swimming, hordes of them being tossed about like sticks in a rolling surf. There was nothing for us to do but join them.
Two days later, after a news flash on the kitchen radio, my mother—at my insistence—drove me back to the site. I discovered that the exact place where I’d changed into my swimsuit in the bushy sand dunes was now bare, in its place a hole where a body had been buried in a shallow grave.

‘I’d been standing on top of her,’ I’d gasped at my mother that day in the car. I’d had the sand covering a murdered woman between my toes.

It was becoming clearer. Although my mother was separate from Simone, their stories had, over time and through some strange alchemy, combined within me. So continuing with the investigation after my mother was gone was perhaps not a matter of choice, but rather the preternatural.

* *

In mid-September my mother and Basil moved into my house, where she and I had decided she would carry out this last, curious task of dying. ‘I really don’t want to die,’ she’d tell me every so often. ‘I love life so much.’

We’d been having the best time. I’d suggested she go out in style, so at eighty-six years of age she’d been buying hipster clothes, and had taken to wearing a shark’s tooth on leather around her neck, not dissimilar to the talisman Simone wore during her travels. My mother and I were slipping into St Elmo’s wine bar several times a week, and hanging out at the Top Shop, a new cafe we’d moved to—then it all began to change.

One morning at the cafe, her coffee almost made her black out. I later discovered this was a sign she was no longer digesting. This meant that her pills, the only thing between her and agony, were also no longer being absorbed. We had to wait two days for some injectable morphine to arrive, as it was the weekend.
As I walked her to the toilet that night, she begged me, quite desperately, ‘When will it be over? Oh, darling, please, when will it be over?’

I looked across and saw our two figures in the bathroom mirror, stooped awkwardly over her enormous tumour, our heads resting in the hollow of each other’s neck, an apex teetering on collapse. Up until then we’d been treating dying as a new and slightly macabre adventure on which we were both embarking. But now we were at that point of no return. One had to let go of the other. Not only did she have to head off alone over the cliff, she first had to claw her way to the edge.

It seemed wrong, inhumane, a serious breach of human rights, and I woke up that night wondering who I could call to reverse this injustice. What lawyer, judge, politician could I lobby? There was no one. It seemed totally bizarre, in my state of half-sleep, that despite all the rights that we imagine we have, and for which we sometimes have to stand up and fight, we were inevitably reduced to this: dying animals.

‘Do you want a suicide or a stillborn? Or do you want a woman dying of cancer?’ I was reading her short stories from a book called Death and Dying. She was more relaxed now. We had a dish in the fridge filled with little syringes of morphine.

‘She likes the stories,’ I told Rodd later when he questioned whether such reading material was wise. He began to read one at her bedside that afternoon. It was a story about a logging accident, where a nylon rope had snapped. He stopped a few lines in and frowned. ‘Are you sure she really wants to hear this?’

My mother, her eyes and mouth set in a grim line, nodded.

He sighed and returned to the sentence. ‘His head had been severed.’ He looked up from the book to me, mystified.

A head being severed was not so astounding to my mother and me. My cousin lost his head on a motorbike, lopped off by a truck carrying
a long plank as it turned a corner. There’d been other gruesome deaths, on my father’s side, as well as murders and what they once called ‘self-murders’. I had an uncle who’d cut his throat with a bread knife, a grandmother who’d swum out to sea, a cousin who had suffocated her two children before jumping in front of a train. Nobody except my mother and me talked much about these relatives.

I’d nearly died once, as a baby from whooping cough. And in some ways I always felt I should have died when I was ten—but I didn’t. My best friend had invited a new girl to stay that weekend instead of me. As I remember it, I’d just finished telling another child that I hated that girl for taking my place and wished she’d go back to wherever she’d come from, when my father, driving by the turnstile where we stood, slowed, wound down his window and told me the girl had drowned. I skipped the funeral our parish school hosted for her and spent a week confined to bed. I’d heard that only the good died young, and, having been spared, I deduced that I must have been bad, and that through the power of thought I’d psychically murdered her.

‘You do realise that should have been me who drowned,’ I told my mother years later. ‘I went there every weekend.’

She looked intrigued. ‘You know, the thought never crossed my mind.’

We had a nurse who came every weekday morning to check on my mother’s care. She was earthy: ‘Nah, mate, you can’t overdose her,’ she told me as she explained how to use the morphine driver. Still, I’m pretty damn sure I killed my mother. A couple of days later, having lost the power of speech, she had a sad expression, which I worked out indicated pain. To head it off at the post, I decided that night to set an alarm and dose her every two hours. She was sound asleep when I gave her the last syringe.

I don’t know why I woke twenty minutes later, but I did, in time to watch her take two last sips of breath. It was two-thirty am.
The psychic who'd predicted the month of her death was proved right, by a hair's breadth—it was the thirtieth, the last day of September.

*

A neighbour told me about a woman called Nicky who did readings at a Mudgeeraba beauty salon. I'd only seen my regular psychic the week before, but ever since my mother's death I was feeling pathetic, and something about the vacuous setting of the salon appealed to my sense of desperation. My psychic readings were all sounding the same anyway. *You will sit down and write this book. You will.* I couldn't tell if she was reading the future or just losing her patience with me.

I did try sitting down at my computer and tapping at the keys, but every half-hour or so I stopped to look at my email. I came to realise I was expecting a message to appear—from someone in cyberspace or even the spirit world. It would solve Simone's murder and cure my intense anxiety over my mother's death, all at the same time.

It had been nearly six weeks and I was sick of her being dead. The kids were busy. Rodd was busy. When he was home, he spent all his time downstairs with his phone on loudspeaker, talking to people in Europe. He had a habit of shouting into the phone, in order to make his voice carry across the great landmasses and seas, I supposed. The other days, he was away. I didn't like sleeping alone anymore, one floor up from the kids and at the far end of the house. I had a fear that my mother would appear at my bedside in the dark and attempt to console me. If I couldn't persuade one of the kids to sleep with me, I'd call the dog—but even she was skirting me, sensing my desperation.

I reasoned that there was no harm in seeing a second psychic. I liked the idea of getting in touch with the dead. Since my mother's funeral, normal life was beginning to feel trivial. I left a message on
Nicky the psychic’s answering machine and waited impatiently for a response. Two days passed before she called back. We made a time. I would not be visiting the beauty salon but her newly rented accommodation in Nerang, an hour and a half away.

Nicky lived in a humble brick house in a steep cul-de-sac that was sparsely populated with skinny palm trees. Psychics never seemed to be able to use their gifts to improve their financial circumstances, and Nicky was no exception. She told me on the phone that she charged eighty dollars for a reading—could I bring cash?

She met me at the flyscreen door. She was breathless and bosomy, with a shiny Cleopatra hairdo. She smelled of apple shampoo. Could she leave me to sit in her reading room with Freddie for five minutes so she could clear her head? Sure, I said. Freddie, a hefty fox terrier, knew the drill—he had a look of exploitative delight as he sprinted into the room and took a flying leap, digging his nails into my knees.

The room had once been a garage. The bricks were now painted white, and paraphernalia and trinkets suggestive of goddesses and fairies were lying around. Compared to my other psychic’s dark and moody den, this was a bit like a little girl’s bedroom. What was I doing here? I felt a wave of desperation.

Nicky came back in and, with a flounce, sat down on the other side of a rickety card table. Arranging her hair over her shoulders, she breathed a cigarette-scented apology for having kept me waiting; then, noticing Freddie, she admonished him for still being on my knee.

‘Now, have I ever done a reading for you before, Virginia. No? Well, I only ask that because you’ll find that if I have, I’ll be telling you things I’ve told you previously.’

Yeah, yeah. I’d heard all this before, and it always sounded dodgy. Wouldn’t it be a good sign if she told me things I’d already heard?

She held out her palms like cups. ‘Could you rest your hands in mine?’

I’d not done this before. Her hands were soft and warm, and I
could feel her breath on my face. She was breathing so deeply that her mouth turned down with the effort and her lids sealed over her eyeballs. Our hands were getting sweaty.

‘You’ve just lost someone, Virginia,’ she said. ‘You’re very sad. I would say the last year has probably been the hardest you’ve ever experienced in your life. And you’ve been lonely, too. I sense your partner is away a lot. It’s almost like he lives in two places and he’s moving back and forth. Does he live in two places?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, it’s all about to change. Something he’s been working on for years is about to complete and you’ll be together at long last.’

_She’s good_, I thought. Rodd and I had decided that, all going well, we would still move to England for a year or two at the end of February. He’d look at setting up an office there, leaving his partner to run things in Sydney. It would be a chance for the kids to see the world before they left home, and we could live together seven days a week, instead of four. It would also be an escape, a way for me to erase the memories of losing my mother.

Nicky, knowing none of this, was breathing in deeply again, tilting her head as though she’d just picked up a scent. ‘There’s a man standing next to you. He has a very strong presence. About sixty, I’d say. Long, grey hair. He has an outstretched hand. He’s offering it to you, to help you with a transition you’re about to make. A big move. Do you know who this man is?’

I told her it might be my father, who was sixty-two when he died and had lamb chops and biblical hair. I was glad her eyes were shut as mine started to prickle with tears.

‘Oh, he’s telling me to tell you he’s very proud of you.’

‘Is he?’ I swallowed hard. ‘Can you see my mother?’

She shook her head. ‘No. She’s only just passed, hasn’t she? In the first couple of weeks they’re usually still around, but then they retreat for about six months, to get used to their new state.’
‘Oh.’ This sounded so mundane, practical, as if my mother was busy setting up house in a new location.

She handed me some cards. I shuffled, then Nicky set six out in a spread. She looked at them, then shut her eyes again. My work, she began. It wasn’t a job but rather a ‘project’. After a moment, she confessed that she couldn’t see what this project was, so I told her I was writing about the murder of a German girl. She nodded and breathed deeply again. I watched her eyeballs flickering beneath the lids. She shook her head, screwed up her nose—something was up.

‘I can’t breathe.’ She frowned. ‘But it doesn’t feel bad. You know, it’s almost as though I don’t know I’m dying. Yes, she’s telling me she didn’t really know. She was in some altered state. There were drugs and alcohol involved, weren’t there?’

It was three and a half years since the details from Simone’s inquest had been aired, and five and a half years since she died. I supposed Nicky could’ve remembered the case, although Queenslanders didn’t get the main news source, the Star. What were the chances she’d followed this case? And what were the chances I was writing about that German girl?

Nicky’s eyes remained closed, but her expression became sharp. ‘There was a sexual assault involved.’ It was more a statement than a question.

Damn. I was disappointed. ‘No, there wasn’t,’ I told her.

Two lines forked above her nose and her head shook. ‘No, there was. She’s telling me there definitely was.’

‘She was found naked,’ I persevered. ‘But there was no indication of assault.’

She looked disapproving. ‘Stripping the body is sexual assault. She’s telling me she didn’t like that. She didn’t like that at all.’

If Simone was dead when that happened, then it seemed to fall under the category of ‘interference with a corpse’, in police terminology, rather than assault—the law didn’t provide for the possibility
that a dead body might still have feelings. But we were in the psychic world now, and there was a presumption that consciousness was on a continuum. And in any case, the word ‘assault’ felt more apt than the sterile ‘interference’. I liked Nicky’s confidence in challenging me. In particular, I liked that she’d done so with her eyes shut, not peeping at me to gauge her effect.

‘She’s saying thank you to you,’ she continued, resuming a gentler voice, but her brow kept flexing as though she was straining to hear Simone’s faint voice. ‘You’ve helped her family. She’s saying you’ve given them a voice. Does that make sense?’

‘Yes, it does. Can you see who did it? Was it the boyfriend?’

She breathed again, her face crumpling on the exhale. ‘No, it’s not him she’s angry with. She’s saying he’s just ignorant.’ She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. ‘He’s immature,’ she said tersely. ‘He’s a boy, not a man in any real sense. Stupid, stupid. It’s the dark one she’s angry with. He’s the clever one of the two. He’s older, with dark hair and skin my colour,’ she said, pinching her arm. ‘He’s a shadowy sort of person. Very shrewd. Smart.’

The dark one? ‘Shadowy’ was the word I’d been using to describe Jens. Originally, it arose from his initial appearance as a silhouette in the Star, but ‘shadowy’ had suited him even more after his enigmatic performance at the inquest. But it couldn’t have been him—why would Jens have killed Simone?

‘It’s him, she’s saying,’ Nicky continued. ‘She’s saying it’s him.’

‘Are you saying the dark man killed her?’

‘I’m saying he’s far more involved than anyone’s realised. He helped. He took over, like a . . . like a . . .’ She couldn’t find the word, then, with a look of puzzlement, came up with ‘soldier’.

Something about the term seemed interesting. But was Jens soldier material? It was too hard to tell, he was so elusive. But maybe his silence derived from strength, not ignorance or a lack of observational skills. Maybe he was strategic and had taken over in the crisis,
as a soldier might during a military exercise. Maybe, like a soldier, he would never crack under interrogation. Maybe he was Tobias’s soldier in that he obeyed orders.

Nicky, who’d given the general impression of being serene, was starting to look moody. She shook her head. ‘I’ve had enough. I have to leave this topic alone now, or it will ruin my day. It’s too dark.’

‘Of course,’ I told her, fighting my desire to draw more from her. I was not too disappointed, though. In fact, I was already busily entertaining the possibilities she’d thrown up.

I couldn’t wait to get home to the witness statements and put Nicky’s suggestion through its paces. Over the last three years, I realised, I must have said it a hundred times: *I don’t understand Jens*. To me, he personified the three wise monkeys, devoid of normal senses in assessing what was happening around him, or even to him, in the days around Simone’s death. Whether Nicky was psychic or not, what was stunning me was that I’d not been lateral enough to have considered him a possible accessory. *Why not?* At the inquest the police had speculated that Katrin was the more likely one to assist Tobias in disposing of Simone’s body, given that he might have struggled to carry her alone. But probably I’d not considered Jens in this role because he’d attended the inquest, I decided. He was the star witness. The demeanour he had projected was that of a withdrawn, unobservant man, easily led. Could he actually be assiduous and cunning—*like a soldier*?

The other thing I liked about Nicky’s approach was that she’d looked through Simone’s eyes, as though she were still alive. A person’s sense of self is in large part grounded in the physical—and, some would argue, a woman’s more so. The body is no simple carapace. We even give thought to our appearance after death. A few days before my mother died, she had asked me: ‘Would you do my makeup? After?’

To be alive when stripped and humiliated was a horrifying prospect, but to be left to become distorted and inhuman adds a
dimension that is beyond imagining. Now I had cause to remem-
ber what Gustl had expressed: the act of concealment disturbed
him more than the crime of murder. Nicky’s focus on the sinister
aftermath was completely in keeping with this thinking.

*

I knew some cops used psychics when a case they were working on
hit a wall, but I suspected Wayne Hayes was strictly an evidence
man. I was embarrassed to tell him that a woman who looked like
Cleopatra—and who, up until last week, had provided her services
via a Mudgeeraba beauty salon—had provided an interesting new
angle on the case. I was worried it might also cast me in a new light:
the unstable housewife.

Before contacting him, I did my homework. I reread all the sus-
pect statements, as well as Jens’s court testimony. Now that I was
considering Jens as a superlative accomplice, the facts started to
come together, a bit like one of my short stories nearing completion.

I sent an email to Wayne, who responded in his usual laconic
style:

Virginia,

Unfortunately psychic opinions are not evidence.

We (Oz and German police) have always kept an open mind
regarding how many people were involved but at this stage there
is no evidence to support the contention that Tobias acted in
concert with other/s.

Have you sent your email to Shane DIEHM?

Regards Wayne

Defiant, I wrote back.
No, I haven't told Shane, but now that you mention it I will.

I know it's not evidence but it does help in creating a different perspective, which can't be a bad thing.

Wayne was thinking evidence, suspects. I was thinking storyline, character, plot. In an investigation a cop was looking for at least three significant points of evidence, one of those being 'concrete' as opposed to circumstantial—concrete being a piece of physical evidence that puts the suspect at the crime scene. Wayne was not interested in nuance or complication.

I decided to refine my thoughts on Jens down to a list of points. I wanted the points to read well and not reflect the laboriousness of my thinking, the plodding, obsessive circling. Four days before Christmas I sent a translation of my points to Hans-Jürgen Kämmer and Susanne Grimm. It would be something for them both to mull over during the long Christmas break. I received a reply from Susanne:

Dear Virginia,

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. I personally agree on a lot of points.

Unfortunately Hans is on sick leave and will not return until January. But he asked me to forward your mail to him. You'll hear from us when he is back at work.

We wish you and your family Merry Christmas and a wonderful New Year.

Hans was sick? My mother was dead. It was nearly Christmas. Nothing was happening on the case. Probably nothing ever would. I started to panic. The next day I wandered the aisles of the supermarket, listless, with no interest in buying food for dinner. Then, driving back home, I reached some sort of crisis point and howled loudly for five minutes at fifty kilometres an hour, with cars I'd normally race up the
hill overtaking me. After that, my tears became silent and tropical-sized, like the drenching fall from leaves after a rainstorm has passed. *Now you know,* I told myself. *This is what grief is.*

My son took me out onto the verandah later that night so we could look at the cloudless night sky. ‘Look at the stars, Mum. Just look at them. They’re just amazing.’ I agreed, but in truth I thought they looked no more exciting than holes poked in black cloth.

I went to bed and picked up a book, staring at it with no interest—*A Life of One’s Own* by Marion Milner. Big deal. It began with a quote from Joseph Conrad: ‘In the destructive element immerse.’ So fucking what. But then I thought about that. It seemed to suggest that the only way to expunge yourself of anything was to dwell on it. What did I have to lose? I got out my notebook and began to write.

I wrote about my mother, about the moment after her last breath when I’d had to steel myself to wash her body, that old body I’d looked often upon with such disappointment for its brown spots and loose, scaly skin, its obstinate belly packed tight with disease, and how in that quiet time together it had transformed and become astonishingly beautiful, and all I had left of her. Once I’d washed it, I spent a lot of time massaging her skin with a balm of mandarin rind and rosemary, a scent that I now rub into my own skin to remember her by. She was still warm. Afterwards, I clothed her in a silk dress we’d euphemistically bought shortly before her death, for her to attend ‘the theatre’. This was what she would have wanted for her body, I felt, for it to be cared for by someone who loved her. It was what any woman would want for the body she herself had spent a lifetime learning to accept and love.

Christmas came and went quietly, and by the time New Year was over and the fish shop stopped selling bucketloads of prawns and families went their separate ways and businesses reopened, I was emerging from my flat, robotic state, still thinking about Jens.
In mid January I received an email from K. She told me that Gustl had called her to say he’d been contacted by an Australian television program. They wanted to do a story on Simone—could I check them out and see if it was a good idea?

Channel Seven’s *Sunday Night* had strong ratings but it was not the ABC. They ran attention-grabbing stories rather than in-depth investigations—but maybe a bit of attention was not a bad thing? It might put Simone’s case back on the agenda.

I picked up the phone and called Mick O’Donnell, the producer. He was attentive and sounded very smooth. I told him I knew the case inside and out and could help him. He started to offer a fee but I stopped him short: I wasn’t trying to sell him anything.

‘What about you telling your story, Virginia?’ he asked. ‘You’re the thread that holds all this together.’ I wasn’t interested in that either. ‘Well, we can talk about that later,’ he said.

*Sunday Night* had a special format they had to follow. There had to be a confrontation with Tobias Suckfuell on camera, and O’Donnell was prepared to fly a crew to South Africa to do it. As it happened, that week I’d just received some staggering information from a source in Germany. ‘You don’t have to go to South Africa,’ I told O’Donnell. ‘He’s here.’

Tobias had fallen in love with a girl from a very well-to-do family in Perth. She apparently looked a lot like Simone, according to my source. I had her name: Cassandra Brennan. And, after some
digging around, I had her address too.

Mick asked if I could meet him and his reporter, Ross Coulehart, in Sydney. They were prepared to fly me there, but I said no. I'd fly myself. I wanted to keep my independence.

When I hung up I had a territorial feeling about this new development, and I didn’t like it: a sense of proprietorship and self-interest. It felt like a personal flaw. Suppress it and be guided by one principle only, I counselled myself. Do whatever you can to help the Strobels find some form of resolution. Drawing attention to Simone’s case was definitely in their interest.

The following week I went to meet Mick at Sydney airport instead of at Channel Seven’s offices. A sudden change of plans, he’d told me over the phone. Parts of Queensland were underwater and it was a disaster of epic proportions. He was ‘going in’, he said, as though it was a warzone, so I had to meet him in transit.

I paged Mick and a slight man dashed out from behind the frosted glass of the Qantas business lounge, decked out in that sort of safari-wear favoured by film and TV people working on location. His hand was outstretched. ‘Virginia,’ he smiled.

He was exotic. His silver hair had been cut to fall in an arty fop, an accent to his cantilevered cheekbones, while his eyes, icy-blue, made his florid complexion almost sizzle. I had a quick glass of wine on an empty stomach to settle my nerves, and quickly became loquacious. Mick asked questions in a cultured and curious tone, as though there was already a TV audience watching. I was trying to give him a short summary of what was a rather long story when Ross Coulehart arrived. He looked more like a regular member of the population, despite being the presenter of the show.

I explained to them both that I was worried about their plans. I would be moving to England at the end of the month and wasn’t convinced that, once I’d helped them, they wouldn’t just flit off with the story.
'This is absolutely your story, Virginia,’ said Ross. ‘We can’t do this story without you. You are the story.’

Though flattered, I had the feeling Ross had said this hundreds of times before, to convince people to abandon their stories to his better care. It was all moving too fast.

Ross and Mick were excitable, fast-talking, glib—and I felt myself rising to the occasion, and becoming the same. While Ross showed off his trained lawyer’s skills by testing me on my facts, Mick was the creative: ‘You’ve got to think in pictures, Virginia. Pictures. Have another glass of wine.’

‘I’ll help you make your story,’ I told them eventually, ‘and I’ll tell you where Tobias is, but there are two things I want.’ Firstly, Ross could have the dubious honour of chasing Tobias down the street with a camera, I said, so long as I could watch, but I would stay well out of camera range, and preferably behind a tree. Secondly, they were to make me a co-producer. This was going to take up time and energy, and I wanted some control over the content.

Yes, yes, no, I was told. ‘We will have final control over the content,’ Mick said, and I completely rolled over.

*

I contacted Professor Paul Wilson about Jens. He said he would be delighted to help me again, and very kindly agreed to meet me at a cafe on Australia Day; our pending departure for England meant I was running out of time.

It was hot. Paul wore shorts and long socks and I wore a strappy sundress. Our casual holiday wear made me feel we’d moved on from our roles as professor and student-client to being friends. I told him I had a new train of thought, and how I didn’t think it really mattered where you got your inspiration if it caused you to look at things differently. He agreed, so I ventured further: what did he
think about psychics? I couldn’t understand how they knew what they did. They kept amazing me.

Paul looked contemplative for a moment and then, in his deep voice, said, ‘I do believe some individuals have extraordinary power.’

I told him what Nicky had said, and reminded him how he and his wife, Robyn, had themselves stated in their report that Jens was the one I should focus on. He’d kept drip-feeding information to the *Polizei*, releasing a little more with each subsequent interview.

But why, then, Paul asked, did I think Jens went to the inquest?

I ran through my various points. One, he’d been pressured to attend by the *Polizei*. Two, he wanted to differentiate himself from the Suckfuell siblings, who were centre-stage as suspects. Three, he saw the inquest as a way to promote himself as the good guy who’d gone to search for Simone. Four, attending the inquest allowed him to atone in some way for having initially—and repetitively—lied about what had happened that Friday night. Five, he knew he’d have the benefit of speaking through an interpreter—which would give him more time to think and a bit more control.

Paul remembered Jens saying that when he returned from each search, Tobias was lying in the same position in the van, not ever appearing to have moved—that had never made sense. Did I have any theory about it?

Yes, I said. Jens had wanted to create a picture of Tobias being tucked up in bed, and out of action with regards to Simone. The problem with this solution, however, was that while resting in the van might work as an alibi, it also made Tobias appear ruthlessly indifferent to Simone’s safety.

My theory was that *no* searches had taken place. This would explain why no CCTV cameras and no people had seen Jens and Katrin searching that night, in areas that were lit by street lighting. There had been people about, such as shift workers and taxi drivers. It would also explain why no one had heard voices crying out
Simone’s name, yet many that night had heard the arguments. The searches were two propositions we’d been fed by the Germans that, once fixed in our minds, broke up the night into small compartments of time. We’d been trying to imagine how Tobias could neatly slip in a murder during one of the searches—or, even less likely, before or after—without Jens and Katrin being aware something was wrong. But what if the searches were just red herrings?

Paul nodded thoughtfully.

I put my A4 yellow envelope on the table. It contained the transcript of Jens’s two-day testimony. I wanted to know if he was telling the truth at the inquest. Could Paul analyse it?

*

The next day, the kids and I flew to Sydney. On top of everything else, we were squeezing in an adenoid operation for our youngest before we left the country. I’d also arranged to meet Wayne Hayes at a cafe down from the courts in Sydney, to say goodbye. Shane Diehm had taken a promotion up the coast and seemed to be under a lot of stress, so for the last year Wayne had been my main point of contact with the Australian police, hearing out my theories and answering my questions.

We sat outside on Elizabeth Street, with the leafy trees of Hyde Park on the other side, the heavy traffic of screeching buses and cabs in between. Noise was good, Wayne said. People wouldn’t hear what we were saying.

The last time I’d sat here was with my mother. The branches over the road had been bare. I remembered an ambulance going by, its thrilling siren splitting the chilled air, and, after it had passed, my mother’s wistful smile as she declared, achingly, ‘Oh, how I love life.’

Wayne, leaning back to look at the trees, told me he was meeting with the commissioner the next day to discuss his resignation.
Nearing sixty, he was due to retire the following year and couldn’t bear sticking it out in the Gangs Squad till then. I was disappointed; I felt losing him might harm Simone’s case. He gave me his children’s telephone numbers—they’d know where he was if I needed him for the Channel Seven documentary.

We moved on to the psychic. Regardless of her input, Wayne thought it was plausible that Jens was involved. But the problem was you couldn’t use uncorroborated evidence from a co-accused: there had to be something else to back it up. Like the hair found on the chicken-wire fence, which was still yet to be tested.

I told him I was getting Paul Wilson to do an analysis of Jens’s testimony—it would be a combination of a Statement Validity Analysis and Criteria-Based Content Analysis, I said, hoping to impress him.

‘We can’t use it as evidence,’ he said straight away.

I knew that, but Paul believed it was accepted by some European courts, so maybe the Germans could use it. Besides, I wanted it for me. Even if there was never a trial, I still needed to understand what might have happened. ‘And now that Tobias is back in Australia,’ I continued, ‘can’t you find a way to reopen the inquest?’

‘We’d have to have good cause to do it.’

‘What about getting a warrant?’

‘We’d need additional evidence to get a warrant.’

It was frustrating. We sat there for a couple of hours, neither of us in a mood to leave. Wayne was contemplating his future with the force, as I was my move to England, but I kept going back to Simone’s case. Something had to happen. I couldn’t accept that it wouldn’t.

‘We’ve basically given up,’ Wayne admitted, as he waved for the check. ‘And as for the Germans, Hans is sick. He’s got a serious heart condition. If they’d not operated on him urgently, he would have died. On top of that, Ohlenschlager’s gone. There’s a new prosecutor, so he’d have to be persuaded to pursue the case. Frankly, you’re really our only hope of solving it.’
'Me?' I checked to see he was serious.
'Yup.'
'Right.' I was astounded, and flattered. But what was I supposed to do?
Wayne offered his hand as he prepared to leave, but I leaned in and kissed him. His cheek felt surprisingly soft and smooth.

* 

I hadn't heard from Mick at Channel Seven for more than a week, so I wrote him an email. Was he still interested? 'Yes. Sorry, Virginia. Got caught up in the floods. Very emotional stuff.' Emotional stuff?
I was heartened. Beneath the slick veneer, he was obviously a sensitive guy. A few days later, another email arrived. This time he was caught up in a cyclone. I was leaving for England before the end of the month, I reminded him dully in my response.
Then the weather calmed and an email addressed to a private investigator arrived in my inbox, with a covering note to me. Mick had commissioned surveillance of the Brennan house, where Tobias's girlfriend, Cassandra, lived with her parents. The PI had taken some footage of a male, but was it Tobias? 'He has a mole on his right cheek,' he wrote. 'Maybe he had the others removed?'
I opened the attachment. This man was about six moles short and looked nothing like Tobias. I wrote back: 'Not him.'
I googled the Brennan family while I cooked dinner. Nothing. I looked up their beachside address and scanned an aerial map. Then I noticed the house had come up on a real estate website and I clicked the link. The hypebole in the ad promising a 'spectacular lifestyle' and 'luxury' was, for once, not at odds with the photographs. The house was a veritable fortress: encircled by high sandstone walls, it looked out not to the street but to the sea. This aspect, and its curved verandahs, enclosed tennis court and pool, made the house seem
more like a cruise liner than a stationary building.

So this was where Tobias was staying. Bizarrely, I now even had a map and a photographic tour of the house. I found myself poring over the decor as though it was encoded with the persona of the people who lived there. Did they know he was a murder suspect? And, if so, what did the ambiguity in those words mean to them? Why on earth would Tobias come back to Australia? Mick had asked me this during our first phone call. He’d thought it a point in Tobias’s favour, as had Rodd, but now I could see things were not that simple. People with money could give you a false sense of security and increase your confidence. Mick put it more simply when I sent him the link: ‘Wow. He’s fallen on his feet.’

The next day, another email arrived informing me that the private investigator was still watching the house. ‘There were people there last night,’ Mick wrote. ‘We have a flight at 8am tomorrow as below. Is that OK for you?’

No, it wasn’t okay. Rodd was in London. It was mid-morning. The only way I could be in Sydney by eight am the next morning was to fly down that evening and stay overnight in a hotel, but I had no one to look after the kids. This had never been a consideration before as my mother had always looked after them when we needed it. Our elder daughter was now sixteen and a half, and our son a week off fifteen. Our younger daughter was still in Sydney with Rodd’s parents, unable to fly after her adenoid operation. Were the other two still too young to leave alone?

Mick had booked the flights to Perth without even asking me—the message was clear: like it or lump it. I should have been furious, but all I could focus on at that moment was last-minute flights online, and the possibility I was compromising my role as a mother.

I called Mick. ‘I’m not sure what to do.’ I was hoping he might offer a compromise.

Instead, he laughed. ‘Welcome to the life of a producer.’
The children argued that they were not children anymore and could take care of themselves. I repeated their assurances to Rodd on my way to my hotel in Sydney late that night in a taxi, while he sat in his hotel in London.
‘You left our children alone?’
‘Yes. You’re not there either,’ I added.
‘I’m making a living for this family.’
‘Fuck you,’ I said, and hung up.
Ater a tour of Perth in the rental car, Mick took me to Cottesloe Beach for lunch. ‘Ah, the Indian Ocean,’ he sighed as we pulled up.

I’d never been to this side of Australia before, and the mention of India threw me. It did look different to the Pacific, more an amethyst blue, the froth a sharper white. People were floating about, rising up in the curl of a wave before it crashed over their shoulders like a luxurious mink-trimmed cape.

‘Who are these people?’ Mick said. ‘Why aren’t they at work?’

It was the sort of thing Rodd would say. I couldn’t tell if it was resentment or too great a sense of his own productivity.

The colonial-styled restaurant jutted out over the ocean, and we sat in a bay window and stared out to the waves below. Having lunch in such a beautiful setting was completely at odds with the situation. I felt as if Mick and I should have been in love as I sat opposite him and smiled—but I didn’t know him at all. In fact, I was sensing something quite cool and distracted about him. When we were side by side in the car, he’d seemed happier. I got the feeling he liked being in a state of transience, being nimble and leprechaun-quick. In comparison, I felt sluggish with relief. It was the satisfaction at being here in Perth, sitting in this nice restaurant over a glistening ocean, when only yesterday I’d been crippled with guilt. I was a fugitive who’d successfully pulled off her escape.

Mick was worried. He had a camera crew on standby in Sydney
but we had to confirm Tobias’s location before they’d make the five-hour flight to join us. And all we had on for the rest of the day was a meeting with the private investigator.

We met him at a cafe in the main street of Perth. He had bad news. He’d called the house and spoken to Kerry Brennan, the mother, that morning. Tobias and Cass—short for Cassandra—had gone surfing down south for the week. Kerry said she’d take his number and pass it on to Toby, as she called him. Subsequently, a message had been left on his phone—by Cass, he thought—confirming they were away, and saying that if it was about booking a surf lesson with Toby, he could call back and leave a message.

I was stunned—a surf lesson? Tobias, from landlocked Bavaria, was teaching Australians how to surf? It seemed farcical.

After the PI left, Mick trained his weary gaze back on me. ‘Right,’ he said, ‘it’s time for plan B.’ He would drive me back to the Brennans’ house, and I would ring the doorbell and introduce myself to Kerry. How did I feel about that?

Not very good, I was thinking as we carved the bends along Perth’s north coast. I’d come here expecting to watch what unfolded from a distance, and now the story had landed back in my lap.

Although the Brennan home was on the waterfront, you couldn’t actually see the Indian Ocean from the road. White banks of dune covered in salt scrub stood between the houses and the sea, creating a sense of desert aridness. Adding to this was the strange absence of people, either on foot or in cars, although it was late afternoon. So I didn’t expect to see someone standing in the Brennans’ double driveway—but there she was, a woman with bare feet and a red bucket, rubbing circles into the side of a car. A sandy mop fell from her crown, bobbing with the movement.

‘Bloody hell!’ I said as we sailed past. ‘That must be her.’

Mick took the next left and pulled over. He turned the engine off and we had a fit of giggles. Nerves—but if someone had said,
‘Don’t do it, leave her be;’ I’m sure I’d have said ‘It’s too late!’ Instinct had taken over.

‘Come on, then,’ Mick said.

‘Hang on a minute.’ I looked inside my bag and took a few deep breaths, as though the bag was sealed to my lips and made of paper. ‘Okay. I’m ready.’

We crunched across the dry grass to Mick’s quicker step, back to the house.

‘Hello,’ he called out cheerily, as though the woman was expecting us.

Still not quite erect, she looked ready to smile, then reconsidered as we stepped onto her drive. Mormons? Hawkers? I could see questions flickering over her face. Kerry’s hair looked slightly wild from being upturned, and blended with her makeup-free complexion.

‘Kerry Brennan?’ I asked. I’d intended to offer a firm smile but it ended up a simper. ‘I’m Virginia Peters. I’m a university researcher from the University of Newcastle.’

She raised her chin.

‘Do you know who I am?’

‘Yes, I know who you are,’ she whispered. She took my hand and let it slip.

‘I’m writing a book about Simone Strobel, and I was hoping to get in touch with Tobias Suckfuell.’

She put her cloth back in her bucket, then, as she slowly rose, she found a deeper, more threatening voice: ‘How did you find this house?’

‘Through my contacts.’

‘Don’t you tell anyone where it is. Don’t you dare!’

I felt precariously tall in my high heels as she came closer to me, and ready to topple over, but then Mick jumped in. He’d been standing to the side, watching us in profile; I’d forgotten he was with me.

‘I’m Mick O’Donnell,’ he said, offering his hand. The distraction diffused her anger. ‘I’m a documentary filmmaker, and I’m helping
Virginia with her research.’ He smiled warmly, but she turned her attention back to me.

‘You’re the person who really upset the Suckfuells.’

‘Yes, they were very upset with me.’ It was true, and I felt terrible. I’d upset the Suckfuells, and now I was upsetting this woman. Why? Why did I feel the need to keep doing this? There must be something wrong with me.

‘But really,’ Mick interrupted, ‘in fairness to Virginia, I think it was more the situation than it was anything to do with her.’

‘I’ve only come here because, before I finish this book, I feel it would be negligent of me not to include Tobias’s voice,’ I continued robotically. She continued to scrutinise me superciliously, hand on hip. ‘I want a chance to talk to him. I have so many versions of what happened, but not his, and I want a chance to talk to him about what happened. I want to be fair to him.’

Did I mean that? No, I decided, the emphasis was wrong. I thought he should have come to the inquest. I thought he was gutless and cowardly and didn’t know the first bloody thing about the word ‘fair’.

‘Well, they’re not here.’

‘I know.’

Something in her head clicked into place. ‘Someone called for him. A guy . . .’

‘Yes, I’m sorry about that. He was a private investigator.’

She raised her chin again.

‘It’s so important that I get in touch with him. I was hoping you might be able to speak to him for me.’

She appeared to think about this, and in the pause I asked her if she knew any of the circumstances around Simone’s death.

‘Yes, I do, as a matter of fact,’ she said. ‘Tobias wrote a hundred-page document about what happened over there and he gave it to me to read.’
‘Really?’ One hundred pages was quite an effort. ‘Is he a good writer?’

‘He did it with Cassandra’s help. Cassandra’s a trained lawyer, although not practising. She’s working as a ski instructor. They gave it to me after Paul finally told me.’ She shook her head and smiled at the memory of it. ‘It took Paul a year to explain the situation.’ She was still smiling, as though this sort of marital dissonance was an affectionate quirk of their relationship. ‘He kept it from me all that time, and finally, after a skiing trip, he told me.’

What could be amusing about her husband concealing from her that their daughter was dating a murder suspect?

‘That’s when Cass came to me with Tobias’s account.’

How did she feel about Tobias not attending Simone’s inquest?

‘Oh, I don’t blame him for not coming back. I wouldn’t have come.’

I was astounded. ‘Why not?’

She answered in a long spiel: ‘It was the police . . . a poor investigation . . . so many mistakes were made . . . the media . . . the hounding poor Tobias got . . .’ Her voice had taken on the strained tones of a conspiracy theorist. ‘The terrible way organisations operate . . . ordinary people are made victims . . .’ She knew all about that from her research, she said. Somehow, as though it was all part of the same discussion, we’d slid into the area of her PhD.

‘Oh, you’re doing a PhD too? Well, you’ll have lots in common with Virginia,’ Mick said, lubriciously. ‘You can compare notes.’

I didn’t think so. Reluctantly, I asked her what her research was about.

She was coy now, flirting with the idea and at the same time dismissing it. She asked me a question instead. What department was I in?

‘English. Creative writing.’

‘Oh, I know all about narrative and discourse analysis,’ she said in a veiled way.
I swallowed. ‘In literature?’

No—her background was medical. She was a psych nurse. Her research was something to do with children with ADHD. Now she was off again, talking about how things got twisted, how power was misused against the vulnerable. Mick was murmuring and sighing as though he knew exactly what she was talking about. Was I stupid? I must be stupid. Her voice was fibrillating in the same low way it had when she’d spoken about Tobias’s treatment in Australia, full of implied secrets rather than content, bordering on hypnosis rather than conversation. I’d had enough.

‘Would you be prepared to speak to Tobias for me?’ I tried again. ‘I really don’t want to write a book about a subject that concerns him personally without his actual participation. It doesn’t seem right.’

She sighed. ‘Let me go and get my address book.’

Mick looked at me sideways, a gleam in his eye, as she padded up the drive in her bare feet.

When she returned, I asked, ‘Now that Tobias is back, do you think there’s any chance he might try to resolve things?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He’s talked about going back to thank the people of Lismore. He wants to do that.’

A social call was not what I’d had in mind. Later, I thought a lot more about Kerry and wondered what in her makeup was so different to mine. Her research suggested an attraction to victims, but I sensed that her loyalty to Tobias had more to do with her own daughter. In fact, I was beginning to notice that this entire story was becoming about other people, not him, and the reason was his continuing absence. Where was he in all this?

There was one last thing Kerry wanted to tell me before I left. She’d spoken with Hiltrude Suckfuell on the phone. ‘And I gave her my word,’ she told me, ‘that I would protect Tobias as though he were my own child.’ It was a warning. Then, narrowing her eyes, she
added, ‘Do no harm,’ spacing out the words for emphasis. I resisted the temptation to point out the harm had already been done. Her words reverberated in my mind as we walked away. Tobias was thirty, wasn’t he? Didn’t that make him a man?

Mick took me to his favourite Chinese restaurant that night. I had a heavy heart. I’d been waiting three years to meet Tobias, and now that he was right under my nose, I had to up and leave. We were flying out of Perth the following afternoon. I was also regretting not having given Kerry Brennan a copy of the inquest findings, in which the deputy coroner stated he had a ‘very strong suspicion that Tobias Suckfuell, and maybe Katrin Suckfuell, had an involvement in the circumstances that lead to Simone’s death’. It seemed like a missed opportunity, but to go back to see Kerry felt close to harassment. That’s when I thought of Paul Brennan.

*

Cass Brennan’s father’s surgery was brown clinker-brick, a grandmotherly house on the corner of a main road in suburbia, with an eccentric array of small potted succulents outside. Mick and I arrived there at ten am the next morning.

‘Paul,’ the receptionist hollered over her shoulder. ‘Vuh-gin-ya Peters here to see you about a book project!’

‘Huh? Oh, yeah, righto.’ The voice came down the short hallway, through a crack in the door. A couple of squirting noises followed, then what sounded like a drill or a polishing head. A faint but pleasant smell of mint drifted towards us.

As Mick and I sat there flicking through magazines, another patient slid open the door. I felt like telling him: *Come back later. He’s too busy.* Then a woman arrived. The former front living room, with its net curtains and pastel prints, was starting to look messy with a row of legs sticking out from the wall.
Moments later, Paul appeared in his dentist’s tunic. His fringe was cut straight across his eyebrows like a schoolboy’s, but silvery sable.

‘Paul,’ I said, and leapt up to offer him my hand. Mick grabbed it next, then Paul held his big clean palm sideways, signalling us to come through the sliding door. ‘I really am sorry to drop in on you like this,’ I said as it slid it shut.

And I was sorry, but equally certain that it was a necessity. The further I went into this story, the more I believed that no one’s privacy or sensitivities should take precedence over finding out what happened to Simone. Rightly or wrongly, that was my creed. By giving Paul the inquest findings, I hoped somehow to encourage Tobias to explain the inconsistencies in the evidence, either to the police or to me.

‘I’ve heard your name mentioned before,’ Paul said. ‘You spoke to a journalist about Katrin Suckfuell’s behaviour. I’ve seen your name reported in a German newspaper.’ He was trying to look grave, but one leg jiggled nervously.

‘Although I know Manfred Schweidler, I have never spoken to him for publication,’ I stated, as though under oath. ‘I’ve never offered any interviews to the media.’

I handed him the inquest findings. Could I come back a bit later to discuss them with him? He didn’t think that would be appropriate, at least not before he’d talked about it with Cass and Tobias.

‘I really need to talk to Tobias myself,’ I told him. ‘I’m leaving for London for a couple of years, but I’ll fly back if I have to. Can you talk to him for me?’

He nodded. ‘I’ll read this,’ he said, with a slightly wily look in his eye, then he lifted the document and tapped it on his palm to flag the end of the conversation.

I liked him. If he was disturbed he hid it well, but then again it was important in his profession to make people feel completely at
ease. I left feeling that the father in Paul would have to appreciate the opportunity to read those findings.

Back in the car, Mick laughed at my comment about having nothing to do with the media. ‘Who do you think I am?’ he asked with Faustian glee. ‘I was standing right next to you!’

‘Oh my God, you’re right.’ Although I had no intention of giving Mick an interview, his very presence made me look like a liar.

Again I had the sensation that things were moving too fast. How I saw myself in the story was changing, and I’d been too slow to notice. I felt bad. Then not so bad. I’d probably have no more to do with Mick now—I was heading back to Byron to pack up my life. Everything I’d said to persuade Kerry and Paul to get Tobias to talk to me felt like nothing more than quickly uttered words, squeezed in before the door slammed in my face. It was all over.

There was one last thing Mick wanted to do before we headed off for the airport, and that was return to the Brennans’ street. He wanted to check the view of the house from the sand dunes.

‘What for?’ I wanted to know.
‘A possible position for a camera.’
‘You’re not going to film them inside?’
‘Oh, no, no,’ he laughed. ‘The verandahs. In case they come out.’
‘Oh.’ It seemed better, but not that much better, I thought dismally.

He parked the car in a parking lot opposite the beach, just down from the house. The sunlight was glaring. It was too hot to stay in the car, so I sat on the long, yawning beach while Mick scampered up and down the dunes.

I decided to call Rodd. ‘Hi,’ I said.
‘Hi. Where are you?’ His voice was as limp as mine.
‘On the beach in Perth.’
‘Oh.’
‘We’re about to leave for the airport.’
'Oh,’ he said again. He seemed further away than England. ‘What’s wrong?’ ‘I can’t believe you’ve left our children on their own for three nights.’ ‘They didn’t want to stay with friends—Kit’s nearly seventeen.’ ‘You’ve got stars in your eyes.’ ‘Stars in my eyes. Oh, please, that really makes me feel sick.’ ‘Well, I’m going to have a swim,’ a voice said behind me. ‘Going to join me?’ ‘No, thanks.’ I pressed the button, cutting my husband off, and watched Mick strip down to his underpants. He approached the beach in a self-conscious trot, his breath held in, probably in an effort to expand his chest and narrow his waist. Depressed, I slumped down on to the sand with my jacket over my head, protecting myself from middle-aged melasma. Later, and almost fondly, Mick told me I looked like Daisy Bates on the shoreline with my jacket hanging over my head like a lampshade. ‘Who?’ ‘An English adventuress from the early nineteen-hundreds.’ It seemed sweet of him and made me feel more charming than I felt.

* 

‘You think you’re better than me.’ Mick had turned, awkwardly, in the centre row seat of the plane to look at me. One beer in the lounge, another in the air, and somehow the conversation had caught fire. Was he really furious? He couldn’t be. I laughed. ‘No, I don’t think I’m better than you.’ ‘Yes, you do.’ ‘All I’m saying is, how can you do a re-enactment of Simone’s death if the cause is unknown?’ It seemed so tacky. And I couldn’t
imagine how the Strobels would feel about being confronted with such a scenario.

‘You think your form of storytelling is superior to mine.’

‘No, that’s what your wife thinks,’ I said, referring to his earlier complaint that she didn’t like commercial TV. ‘I actually feel very, very small and quite insignificant as a writer. In television you have the power to make so much impact.’

‘So do you.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Oh, I disagree.’

‘I just think when you’ve got such a big audience you need to be very careful about the type of impact you make.’

‘You do think you’re better.’

‘I don’t.’

We were overtired, I saw, and frustrated by our lack of success. But we parted at the baggage carousel as friends, and he apologised for his overreactions on the flight.

‘Forget it,’ I said. ‘Call me as soon as you hear anything.’

He told me he would as he kissed my cheek, and I thought, How odd. I’d spent two days tracking down a murder suspect with a stranger. It felt surreal, and a bit like a movie. Perhaps Rodd was right and I did have had stars in my eyes.

If that had been true, though, the last two days had caused them to lose any sparkle. My nerves were shot, and the story that I’d been living with for so long had now, I was sure, slipped through my fingers.
I stayed overnight at my in-laws in Saint Ives, sharing a bed with my daughter, who by now was medically fit to travel. In the morning, we took the train into the city, as I had a haircut booked. We left the Paddington salon around midday, and hauled our suitcases down Underwood Street, heading for lunch at Alimentari, an atmospheric little cafe-cum-deli on William.

‘That’s Channel Seven’s offices,’ I said to my little girl as we passed some high gates amongst the terrace houses. ‘They have no sign because they don’t want angry people to know that’s where they are.’

‘Big deal,’ she said. Two hours of looking at Vogue magazines had turned her nasty.

‘Stop,’ I said. ‘My phone’s ringing.’ Usually I missed the call before finding it, but this time my hand slid right onto its smooth surface. It was an unknown number.

‘Hi, Virginia?’
‘Yes?’
‘It’s Toby.’
‘Toby?’ I didn’t know anyone called Toby.
‘Yeah, Toby.’
‘Tobias?’ It was the way he said ‘yeah’—it sounded South African.
‘Yeah,’ he said again.
‘Oh, Tobias.’ My heart seized. I took out a writing pad and rested it on the roof of a parked car.
‘Where are you?’ he said.
‘I beg your pardon?’ I looked up at the Channel Seven gates. Of all the places I could be in a city of four and a half million people . . . Mick was only metres away.

‘You’re in Perth?’ he asked.

‘No, I left yesterday.’

‘Oh, I was going to meet you,’ he said, as though this were no longer possible.

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘I’m coming back.’

‘Hmm, okay. But when? You see, we want to go back surfing. I came back for this meeting.’

‘I’ll check the flights,’ I said. Keep it short and sharp, I was thinking. ‘Hmm, okay. I don’t want to wait around too long. You know, you come at this time, it’s difficult for me. Today—you know what this day is?’

Of course I did. It was the anniversary of Simone’s death. ‘I’m sorry,’ I told him. ‘It must be tough for you.’

Silence.

‘As I say,’ I carried on, ‘I’ll check the flights and get back to you.’

‘Hmm, okay. Well, this is how it will work.’ I could hear a South African accent kicking in now as he instructed me. ‘There will be three people in the room: you, me, and my girlfriend, Cassandra.’

‘Hmm.’

‘And we will meet in the house. Yes.’

‘Sure.’

‘No guy.’

‘Sure, no guy.’ This meant Mick, I assumed. ‘Give me your number and I’ll call you back.’

‘No, I will call you back,’ he said, sounding a little too aggressive for my liking.

‘Okay. Then give me till evening. I need some time.’

*
My daughter was angry: Toni Collette, the Hollywood actress, was sitting near us at Alimentari and I was not excited about it. I’m in shock, I told her. Tobias Suckfuell had just called me—and on the anniversary of Simone’s death. The chances of that happening were so remote it made being in the same café as Toni Collette no big deal. My mind was racing.

With Rodd still away, how was I going to swing another trip to Perth? And what about Mick? He’d paid for the Sydney to Perth leg of my flight. My first instinct was to call him and share the news. But I’d given Tobias my word: no guy. Ethics—I needed to start thinking about ethics. Where was Rodd when I needed him?

‘Big bloody deal he called you,’ my daughter said. ‘You’re such a bad mother.’

It was as though she could read my mind. At that moment, all I could think was: *What am I going to do with three children?*

I rang my mother-in-law. Could I fly her to Byron for a couple of days? No. She had lunch planned at a friend’s house on Sunday. The children could fly down to her if I wanted.

That would mean three adult fares. What about if we made it Monday or Tuesday? No. Tuesday was her grandson’s birthday. ‘And you do realise it’s your son’s birthday the day before?’ she asked me. I imagined I heard the word ‘checkmate’ whispered in the silence that followed.

My mother-in-law surprised me by calling back later that afternoon as we boarded the flight back to Byron. She and my father-in-law had been discussing my pending trip to Perth.

*Perhaps she’s reconsidered,* I thought.

‘How about saving yourself going *all* that way again,’ she said, ‘and doing a conference call with Tobias?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You know, when you all sit around on separate telephones—that way you can stay at home.’
‘She doesn’t understand,’ Rodd said when I told him that evening. I was angry. I allowed him room to say more, but he didn’t and I bit my tongue. We decided I should go on the Tuesday.

‘But what if Tobias won’t wait till then?’ I was afraid he’d cancel.

‘Tell him it’s your son’s birthday. He can bloody wait.’

I was glad Rodd’s anger was no longer directed at me. It also had the effect of stiffening me up for my call with Tobias later that night.

‘No, I can’t come earlier,’ I told him coldly. ‘And I’ve already booked the flight for Tuesday.’

‘So I have to stay a couple more days,’ he complained.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. Monday is my son’s birthday.’

‘Hmm, okay then,’ he said. I found his acceptance slightly touching.

‘So I’ll arrive at three pm and catch a cab to the house.’

‘No, I will call you at three. By then you will be through baggage.’

‘Yeah. And then I’ll just catch a cab to the house,’ I repeated.

‘No, I will call you at three.’

I didn’t like it. Now he was sounding vaguely like a character in a Tarantino movie.

‘He’s trying to control you,’ Wayne Hayes told me when I decided to tell him, for my own safety, where I was going. He wanted to know if I was going to record our talk.

‘I’ll ask.’

‘Don’t ask, just sit down and put the recorder on the table.’

‘Right.’ I was getting it. Male power relations—dominate or be dominated.

I called Professor Wilson too. He thought that the fact Tobias was meeting me indicated he might be feeling cocky. Neither he nor Wayne thought I was putting myself in a dangerous situation. As Shane Diehm had said during our first meeting at La Baracca, Tobias was not a killer.
So what was he? An innocent victim of a one-eyed police investigation? Or perhaps he was following a utilitarian principle: don’t tell those with whom you have to live something they really don’t want to hear. Such a position would be easier to justify if he hadn’t intended to kill Simone, as Shane had said. Owning up under those circumstances required maturity, and a lot of faith that the system would deal with you accordingly.

There was also the possibility that he hadn’t killed her at all, and had instead tried to cover up a natural accident for which he thought he might be forced to pay, in a jurisdiction that was bewilderingly foreign to him. Then we were back to the beginning, with the possibility he’d done nothing to Simone at all.

* 

What sort of questions did you ask someone suspected of murder? I remembered that Professor Mark Kebbell had given me an academic paper on investigative interviewing techniques, and I dug it out. The first paragraph described the interview process not as a series of provocative questions designed to elicit interesting, personal responses, but rather as ‘the root of achieving justice in society’.

I was in an interesting position, I realised. The German and Australian police were powerless to interview Tobias without first acquiring new evidence. They hadn’t been able to question him since 2005, even though the inquest in 2007 had unearthed inconsistencies in his and Jens’s evidence. But somehow, under the title of writer, I’d slipped between the cracks—I had the interview, the only chance of getting him to talk on our soil. I had to make good use of it. I wanted to walk out of that interview knowing whether Tobias did or didn’t kill Simone, and to be able to prove it.

Included in some documents Professor Kebbell had given me was an academic paper on investigative interviewing techniques,
prepared on behalf of the British Home Office. Studying this carefully, I learnt that lying should actually be encouraged. Committing a subject to an untruthful version of events could be very useful during a later cross-examination in court. The general idea was to avoid doing too much of the talking, and to ask open-ended questions. These began with ‘Tell . . .’ or ‘Describe . . .’ or ‘Explain . . .’ Probing questions, on the other hand, began with ‘Wh–’ and should only be used to obtain detail not already retrieved via open-ended questions. ‘Forced-choice questions’—leading to answers of yes or no—should not be used unless absolutely necessary. Ideally, I wanted a free report from the subject, inspired primarily by his memory.

Around midday, my mobile rang. Mick O’Donnell’s name came up on the screen. Although I’d decided to halt all contact with him, oddly I’d not thought about the possibility of him calling me.

‘We’ve had surveillance over the weekend,’ he said. ‘The PI’s identified them. They dropped a couple of people off at the airport and came back to the house, so we’re going back in with the crew.’

I felt the top of my throat turn dry. ‘Ah, actually, I have to tell you something,’ I said. I felt bad, as if I’d let him down. ‘I’m going to interview Tobias. But he asked that it be private. His words were “just you, me and Cassandra, no guy”—which I took to mean you. Sorry.’

‘So when are you meeting him?’

‘Tuesday. I get in at two-thirty pm.’

‘Will you give us the transcript?’

‘I would have to ask Tobias’s permission at the beginning for that, and I don’t think he’d agree. In fact, it would probably stop the interview. I don’t want to know what you’re doing,’ I added.

‘You don’t have to,’ he said. ‘We’re doing our own thing. You go in and do yours. Would you give him a letter for me, though?’

‘Yes, I could do that.’

‘Good.’
‘Actually,’ I said, ‘let me think about whether that’s appropriate. Do you guarantee you won’t go in before I get there?’
‘Yes.’
‘And you won’t film me arriving or leaving?’
‘We won’t ambush you.’
‘And can you leave a breath between my departure and your arrival? I don’t want them to feel they’ve been stitched up.’
‘Sure.’
I hung up. I was surprised Mick wasn’t hopping mad. I guessed he still needed me. His formula required not just a confrontation with Tobias, but also an interview with the Strobel family. Without me, he wouldn’t get that.

There was something about his involvement, however, that continued to make me uneasy. I had genuine hopes that Tobias would talk to the police, and I planned to use all my powers to convince him that was the right thing to do. Mick arriving with cameras straight after me would no doubt be counterproductive to that.

By the afternoon, I had decided to call Mick’s bluff. I rang him and told him there’d been a development in the last few hours. The Strobels were writing a letter to request that the inquest be reopened, and I had hopes that the police would persuade Tobias to attend.

‘Could you please not go straight in after me with your cameras?’ I asked. ‘It might cause him to flee.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ Mick said. ‘You think you can ring me and tell me what to do?’

‘I’m asking you to leave a gap between me being there and you arriving. He’ll bolt if you ambush him. The police need to be given an opportunity to see him first.’

‘You have no right to ask that.’

Clearly, my role as co-producer was meaningless, and only an offer to flatter my ego. I couldn’t believe it. I’d been pushing for the truth for years, and now, at the critical point, I’d lost control. ‘This is
a chance for justice. You could stuff this up for the Strobels,' I said, trying to control the fury in my voice.

‘It’s not for you to act as an agent for the Strobels. You’re a writer. You’re no different to me. You can’t affect what’s going to happen.’

‘You’re wrong,’ I shouted. ‘I can affect things. I’m representing their interests. They come first for me.’

‘You’re a fantasist!’

I shouted goodbye and hung up.

I could handle being called a fantasist, I thought, as I sat back down to work, my hands shaking. It was ‘writer’ that had sounded more like an accusation, as though Mick knew I’d forgotten that documenting part of the process. But what was the point of this story if the production of it became more important than the subject that was driving it—and that was Simone’s family’s need for accountability before the courts? To hell with being a writer, I decided. Justice was one of the few good things left in this world, and I knew I would throw any book in the bin for that. I went back to work, fiercely focused on developing my interview plan, but noting that, completely independent of my thoughts, fat teardrops were falling from one or other of my eyes like a leak every so often.

My mobile rang again a few hours later. It was Tobias. I thought he was calling to cancel, but it was to complain that page six was missing from the deputy coroner’s findings which I’d given Kerry and Paul. He wanted it. ‘It’s a taking and a giving on our part,’ he informed me.

His phrasing sounded portentous, as though he and Cassandra were planning on asking the questions on Tuesday, not me. He passed the phone to her so she could organise my sending a fax. She sounded friendly, more girlish than I expected, but smart. She also wanted to read my university research proposal.

Cass, as she called herself, rang back later—and I was sure that this time it was to cancel the interview—but no, page six still hadn’t come through. I asked if they’d read the proposal yet.
‘Yes, we have. It sounds good,’ she enthused. ‘It seems you’re trying to be fair and present both sides of the story.’

Had she read the right document? To me, my PhD proposal was highly ambiguous and full of ethical dilemmas. What are the moral obligations for a writer dealing with untested evidence—should he or she fill the role of mediator or arbitrator? I had asked. Does a writer correct misinformation and drive the course of the narrative, affect the outcomes, or do they simply observe? . . . Am I attempting to solve a crime, and perhaps in the process compromise the work and the subjects of the narrative?

Cass, I later realised, was assuming that the ambiguities in these and other questions would swing in Tobias’s favour. She believed in him. I, on the other hand, was swinging the other way.
They stood in the doorway, far apart, Tobias in board shorts, Cass in tiny ones. They looked like children playing house. Except he was nervous, arms swinging, shoulders a little hunched. He’d been prettier in the videos, I thought as I shook his hand. A peroxide blond back then, his hair and skin were browner now, although his pink-beige T-shirt gave him a slight look of jaundice.

Cass was smiling broadly, as though this were a social visit. She was slim, with rich brown hair and honey skin—her physique more a teenager than a woman in her early twenties. I’d heard she looked like Simone, and now I saw there were certain similarities: her attractiveness, her colouring, as well as her warmth and brightness, I imagined. Again, he’d done well. Nice girls liked him.

‘How was your flight?’ Cass enquired. Tobias had folded his arms to stop them from swinging.

‘It’s a long journey from Byron Bay,’ I said. ‘But I’m glad to be here.’ The truth was I didn’t know if I was up or down—I’d had a can of Red Bull to keep me awake, and a tab for my nerves.

Tobias darted forward to take my case. We moved across the marble floor, up a short stairway, to an equally gleaming timber floor in an open-plan kitchen and dining area.

‘It’s a lovely home,’ I said.

Cass twisted around to say thank you. Her hair, which she kept straight and trained over her shoulders in that senior prefect way,
wobbled and gleamed.

We were all very uncomfortable.

‘Do you want water, Virginia?’ Cass said opening the fridge.

Tobias answered: ‘I’ve already poured Virginia’s water.’

I looked where they were looking, to a round table surrounded by four steel chairs that were upholstered in a silvery, plush fabric. On the highly polished surface of the table was a single glass of water. It was sitting on a coaster, sharp slivers of ice floating on the surface. For a moment we all stared at it.

*I don’t want that glass of water,* I thought as I sat down in the chair before it. *Jesus. Why pour my glass of water before I get here? Why just mine and nobody else’s?* Then Tobias sat down next to me—in profile—and the reason became clear. The seating plan had been carefully arranged, and he did not want to face me head-on.

I looked sideways at him. A thin film of sweat had surfaced on his face, the same sort of greasy sweat I could feel secreting in the fold of my armpits. I felt for him—and his nerves were adding to my nerves. I’d expected someone cocky and arrogant, like the guy in the videos, like the guy I’d spoken to on the phone. This was not the same guy. He even looked different. His face was smaller than I expected, and I could swear he had more moles. Or maybe there was just an unexpected ordinariness about him.

I realised a little sadly that it was only the possibility he’d murdered Simone that had made him appear so interesting. He’d been in love with her, and they’d been predominantly happy up until a few days before her death, and now he seemed to personify that potential in all of us—either to kill or to be wrongly accused. As I sat there beside him now, at long last, I felt disappointment. I saw that my anti-hero looked too real, and too frightened, to play the antagonist I’d imagined him to be, and I was filled with self-doubt.

I removed my dictaphone from its pouch, and Cass took out her iPhone and pressed ‘record’. Next, she slid a stapled document across
the shiny table. She'd had it written up by a friend who was a lawyer, she said, 'because we just want to protect Toby'.

'Sure,' I said. 'I understand.' I flicked through its four pages. 'I can't read this. I'm too stressed,' I told her. 'I'd need a lawyer to look at it.'

'It’s a very standard confidentiality agreement,’ she said.

I held my ground: there was no way I was going to sign four pages of legalese. In the end, I gave an oral undertaking that I would not pass my interview on to the media, and that Tobias would have an opportunity to check the section for inaccuracies or misrepresentation before publication of my book.

I told him upfront that there were inconsistencies in the evidence that required his explanation, things that really bothered me. We had a lot to get through, so I had prepared an interview structure that I wanted to keep to.

'Before we start this,’ he said, ‘I want to mention that if you ask questions that lead to certain answers, I won’t answer those questions.’ He was afraid I might trick him into saying something—the police had done that to him.

‘Well, I’m not clever enough to do that,’ I smiled. ‘But if I stumble onto a leading question, I apologise in advance.’

I began, noticing that his hands were shaking; even his fingers quivered minutely. Sometimes when speaking, he held his hands up before his face as though to shake something the size of a soccer ball. It was distressing to watch. His responses to my questions involved disjointed sentences, and I pictured lengthy, meandering paragraphs on the page. After half an hour I was miserable at the thought of all the editing.

If high anxiety was his baseline, he thoroughly relaxed when talking about his life growing up in a German village. He remembered wearing lederhosen and playing the horn at carnival time, and being an altar boy. He remembered how he had to sweep away the
snow and dirt outside his home. But Simone, he acknowledged, was in a different category to him when it came to duty. She was ‘super-reliable’. Cleaning day was Saturday, and, as Gabi worked all week, Simmi liked to get as many chores done as possible to spare her mother on her day off. Saturday was also grieving day, he added, the day when the women cut fresh flowers and took them to the graves. ‘Yeah, they actually grieve every Saturday afternoon,’ he noted.

How did he feel about the Strobels now?

He said he hadn’t seen them for quite some time, because he’d been living in South Africa. ‘But [the relationship is] not very good at the moment, I’ve gotta say . . . It got a bit sour . . . They became more accusative.’

‘It must be unbearable living with their accusations?’

‘You tried,’ Cass interrupted. ‘You wrote an email . . .’

‘But how does it feel having them think you’re involved?’ I persisted.

‘Oh, obviously it was quite a shock when I found this out, but at the same time it’s understandable in a way . . . All I want is closure . . . It wouldn’t bring Simmi back but it . . . You can sort of start to leave that shit behind.’

‘What do you mean by “shit”?’

‘The whole thing what happened to her . . .’ And on he went, another meander.

We’d wasted enough time. It was time to go back to Thursday, 10 February 2005, the day before Simone disappeared.

It was the day things began to sour. ‘It started off on that rainy, rainy morning,’ he said. ‘And, I mean, travelling in a group in such a small space, you know, when the weather’s shit, what do you do?’ Tobias admitted he’d been a ‘selfish prick’. He should have packed up the bed and let the girls into the van during the downpour, he knew, but it was different with the other two there—it had caused them to split into pairs. So he and Simmi hadn’t made up that Thursday—but
it wasn’t really that bad a fight, they were just sulking. It was only later on the Friday night, at the Gollan Hotel, that he finally had a chance to sit alone and talk with Simone. Tobias paused, waiting for me to lead him on.

He admitted he hadn’t been able to resolve his difference with Simmi at the bar that night. Why? He was still defending his decision to not fold up the bed the previous morning and let the girls in from the rain, saying things like: ‘Katie’s here. She visits us. It’s our bus, you know?’

Was this really all the argument was about with Simone? It seemed too trivial. I’d had enough arguments myself to suspect that this one lacked proper substance. The disagreement over the van was surely only a catalyst—there was only so much you could say about that. How had this argument gathered so much energy that it became irresolvable? According to Gun, the Japanese tourist, it had become so distressing that Tobias at one point had tried to calm him down. I tried to put this to Tobias. But his recollection of any other details to do with the argument was non-existent.

What about the incident with the beer glasses outside the Gollan Hotel?

Tobias didn’t know what I was talking about. Then he lifted a finger and gasped a little breath, vaguely recalling that one of the bar staff had grabbed his arm.

Did he remember shouting and swearing and refusing to hand back his beer glass?

No.

Did he remember a second altercation with another bouncer, minutes later up the road?

No.

‘You don’t remember calling this man a “fucking security guard” and a “cunt”?’

He stroked his chin. ‘No, I don’t remember,’ he said quietly.
But he did remember, only minutes later again, walking with Simmi back to the caravan park—although I knew the security footage showed how she had in fact pulled away from him and walked alone. They’d stopped along the way to get cigarettes—from the Ampol, he said.

Surely he could see this selective memory was illogical? Cass was looking at him, puzzled, not flicking through the one-hundred-page document she’d brought as a memory prompt. I gathered that Tobias’s temper flare-ups at the two pubs had not been included in the version of events she knew.

He remembered the redhead warning Simmi that white women shouldn’t play the didgeridoo, or they’d be cursed. She’d also called them ‘fucking Nazis’—he was indignant about that.

What other noise was going on?

The noise of the fight. He remembered the people in the English caravan complaining. His sister Katrin had made a comment that fired him up, then he and Simmi pretty much took up the argument from there. ‘I’m not a fucking tour guide! I’m not responsible for you having fun!’ These were the sorts of things he was saying to Simone.

‘But what sort of things were they saying to you?’

He looked stumped. There was a pattern forming: all his memory blanks occurred during times of high tension, at moments when he looked bad.

‘They were ganging up on you,’ Cass murmured gently. He leaned his head in with hers to look at the document. Cass was sure what they’d said to him was in there somewhere, but Tobias was murmuring, ‘It’s not.’ There was a long silence.

‘She said you were selfish,’ Cass tried, but Tobias ignored her. He wanted to tell me what Simmi had said just before she left: “This is so fucking stupid. This is supposed to be a holiday. We’re supposed to be having a good time,” or something. And then she was crying and stuff, and she walked away.'
I recognised this line, minus the reference to crying, from his police statement, taken the Saturday morning after Simone disappeared—a statement in which, he later freely admitted to police, he was lying. I was coming to the conclusion that he either wouldn't talk about the true nature of the fight because it made him look too bad, or he couldn't remember it because he'd been too distressed.

‘And I might have said, “Stop bitching around,”’ he added, anticlimactically. ‘Yeah, “Walk away, you silly cow.” That doesn’t change anything.’

‘How do you feel about saying that now?’

‘Aw, very, very bad. If I’d known what was going to happen, I would have grabbed her on the arm. I would not have let her walk down this path. This was the last time I saw Simmi, and this is really horrible.’

‘So you waited a while for her to return, and then what happened?’

‘Ah, Katie and Jens sort of said, maybe after fifteen or twenty minutes, “She’s gone for a while. I think we should go looking for it”—for her,’ he corrected himself. ‘And I said, “Aw, she’s an adult. I’m sure she’s fine.” Still, I’m pissed off with the whole situation.’

‘So before you went back to sleep that night, how were you feeling?’

‘I passed out, Virginia. I didn’t brush my teeth, get my pyjamas on . . . I kept on passing out. I was obviously sitting there, going over it and, you know, and stuff.’

‘Did you panic?’

‘No. I only panicked when I woke up the next day. When I found her shoes on the ground. When I woke up I was like, “Fuck! What’s going on?”’

‘So you panicked?’

‘No, I didn’t panic straight away. Obviously I woke up, sort of like, a bit hung-over. A bit dozy. Just woke up, and then, and then, I’m wondering where Simmi is, because she wasn’t there. So it was like, “Fuck! She didn’t come back last night.”’ Then, in that very first
moment, I had to go to the toilet. So I went. I go to the toilet, I go to the toilet. I brush my teeth. I have a shower and I come back. Now I am wide awake.

‘And I come back and I’m seeing her shoes being, sort of like, half under the van, and I start thinking to myself—like, consciously—What’s going on here, eh? Simmi went away yesterday and she’s not back yet. And I realised she had no shoes with her, and I was like—you know, I mean, you can’t go anywhere. Where do you go with no shoes? You can walk the streets, but you can’t go back to some place. I was trying to look for a plausible explanation. I know I upset her. I pissed her off. This is why she walked away, but this is also now when I thought of her character. This is, like, really, like, this is really weird now, ‘cos she would never stay away overnight. Simmi’s not the kind of person who climbs in a car, you know, and goes with some guy to Byron Bay, like the police said all the time to me. She’s not that kind of person who goes back to the pub, speaks ten minutes to a guy, or half an hour even to a girl and then goes home with her—she wouldn’t do that, you know?’

‘And, and then I got a bit worried: God, God, what’s going on?’ His hands were wide and shaking the air in front of him. ‘But at the same time I had that, that panic and calm-myself-down kind of stage. I had a thought, like, Fuck!’ He stopped for a moment, put one hand on his abdomen and the other over his mouth to restrain a burp. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered before continuing.

‘And the next thing I was, like, saying to myself, Calm down—maybe she went away, walked off to that park down there. Maybe she fell asleep on the park bench. You know? But at the same time I think, Man, it’s seven-thirty already. The sun would be in her face. She’d already be awake. You know, you know? This is how the whole thing went down.

‘And then my last bit of hope I had was, the last group agreement we had made was: “We’re leaving here at ten o’clock. We’ve paid.” We paid the campsite already—the night before, I think. And the
last group agreement was, “We’re leaving ten o’clock here, or earlier.” Simmi knew we had to leave at ten o’clock. That’s the check-out time at the campsite, and we wanted to go to the Channon market, you know. And I knew, I said to myself, *We came here for the market.* If she was still pissed off at me, she would still come back, because she wanted to show Katie and Jens that market, you know.’

His responses continued like this, a stream of explanations and thought processes, his hands shaking and chopping to emphasise his points. I felt frustrated, even bored, and dulled now that the Red Bull had worn off. I’d been sitting here and listening to him for two and a half hours. *I panicked, I didn’t panic*—which was it? I almost felt like giving up. Did it really matter anymore? Simone was dead, long gone. Six years had passed. Maybe he didn’t do it. Maybe it was just *me* banging my head against a wall.

I already knew the answer, but I asked anyway: ‘Did you look for her?’

‘No, I was just sitting. I’m going: up and down, up and down, this and that,’ he said, his palms moving like weighing scales. ‘I still have that, that last bit of hope, that string of faith she would come back . . . I freak out a bit, then I try to calm myself down.’

‘I find that difficult to understand,’ I said wearily. ‘You told me that the night before, if you’d known she was going to disappear, you would have gone around and knocked on all the caravan doors and woken people up. But in the morning you’re telling me you had a shower, you made breakfast, you made a cup of coffee. Why did you not look now? You’ve got daylight on your side.’

‘I was just sitting there and hoping that she will be back by ten o’clock. Where should I have gone?’

‘I don’t get it,’ I said. ‘I just don’t get it.’ Did he not think that, being drunk, she might have fallen into one of the deep drains on the park’s perimeter and knocked herself out? Did he not think to check the park benches, which he’d already suggested as a possible
sleeping place for her that night? And what about snakes—she could have been bitten by a snake. Did he think about any of these plausible scenarios?

‘I was confused. My thoughts are going like this and this and this,’ he said, weighing his hands again. ‘And I didn’t know what to do, mate.’ He reminded me that they’d taken a good forty-five minutes to pack up their things that morning. ‘When she wasn’t back by ten o’clock, I seriously knew already that something, something was wrong. That’s why I went to the police.’

‘But before you went to the police, you went to check out. Do you remember going to the campsite office to check out?’

He was silent, his focus concentrated on the surface of the table. He rubbed his chin. ‘I don’t even know that I went into the office that morning. I thought I paid the night before?’ It was a question.

‘No,’ I told him. ‘You went that morning.’

Another long silence.

‘When the man in the office told you there had been complaints about the noise, you told him it couldn’t have been you, because you’d not got back till three am.’

‘I don’t remember saying anything at all. I don’t even remember speaking to that guy.’

‘You can see how that looks, can’t you?’

‘Mmm.’

‘I’m having problems with this.’

‘Fair enough,’ he said.

He’d been caught out. At the moment when he said he knew something was seriously wrong, rather than telling the man in the office that Simone was missing and asking his assistance to arrange a search, or at least to leave some details should Simone return, he was instead telling the first of his many lies that day. I felt like some sort of gong should clang, to point out the significance of this to Cass. But there was only silence.
I moved on. Did he remember the gist of the conversation he had with Jens and Katrin before checking out and going to the police station that day?

‘Yeah, but we didn’t have a chat. Not then. Only after I went to the police.’

Of course, Jens had told the inquest that they did chat and they did agree upon a story before attending the police station. This had been headline news during the inquest, and I got the feeling from Tobias’s hesitancy that he knew exactly where I was heading. I asked the question again.

Cass prompted him: ‘What did you say before you went to the police?’ Her voice was soft and coaxing.

‘I dunno. We were packing up, sort of like. I think. We checked out. Drove out, and then we went to the police station.’

‘So there was no chat,’ Cass said. ‘You just said, “Let’s go to the cops.”’

‘Look!’ Tobias came back to life. ‘We obviously talked. We were there all morning . . . I’m pretty sure I didn’t have a conversation about what I’m going to say to the police. I didn’t even know what I’m going to say to the police.’

‘Jens said you had a discussion where you decided what to say to the police,’ I announced.

‘So what did Jens say he said?’ Cass asked me. ‘You obviously know.’ She was getting impatient.

I didn’t want to tell her what I knew. ‘This is very uncomfortable for me,’ I said, avoiding her question.

‘It’s a lot harder for him,’ she snapped back—then we all started talking over each other.

Finally, Tobias broke us up with an explanation. ‘I did obviously have a chat with Jens and Katie the next day. I said, “Jens, please, please, please don’t say we had several beers. Please don’t say marijuana got smoked. Please don’t say I had an argument with my
girlfriend, ’cos the cops just told me when I walk in after three slaps on my shoulder’—and here he put on an Australian accent—”A few beers, some weed, a bit of an argument, she goes away for two to four days. We have that every weekend, mate. Don’t you worry.” This is why I come back and beg Jens not to support this theory, even though this is exactly what happened. But I begged him not to say this ’cos it took them six days to get a sniffer dog. Even on Monday, Virginia, and they’ve found her top there, I said to him [the detective sergeant], “Are you telling me she’s walking around Byron Bay or Nimbin topless in a skirt? You’re fucking kidding me!”’ He was yelling now.

We’d arrived at everything being the fault of the police, who had been too slow to find Simone. Although we were now off the subject of Tobias’s lies, I noted that his justification for asking Jens to lie—whether on the Saturday or the Sunday—relied completely on events that happened days later.

Referring to Simone’s top was also problematic. Tobias could not have harangued the police about Simone walking around topless on the Monday. He couldn’t have done so on the Tuesday or the Wednesday either, or on any other day, for that matter, since Simone’s top had been found after her body was discovered. I felt sure he was lying, and my heart was getting heavier.

I headed in a new direction. ’After you made the report, you were told to come back with Simone’s passport.’ The police log showed he hadn’t returned till three-thirty that afternoon, four and a half hours later. ’What did you do before you returned to the station? Did you go looking for her?’

’Oh, we probably did go up to the kiosk, a place near the Gollan that sold papers and coffee.’

’Anywhere else?’

’Dunno. Don’t think I walked that much around. I went back to the police after midday.’
‘Did you think about searching park areas or hospitals or anything like that?’

‘I dunno.’

‘It was quite some time before you returned to the police station.’

‘I just explained to you, I went to the kiosk. And then I went back to the police . . . I could be mistaken.’

‘Refresh yourself,’ Cass offered, nudging the document towards him.

He frowned and pushed the pages away. ‘I do know I went back to the police. The hospital? Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t.’

According to Jens’s and Tobias’s statements, they left Katrin sitting in the van outside the caravan park that day, in case Simone should return, and set off on foot to look for her. It would have made far more sense to take the van. The hospital was a thirty-minute round trip, heading out of town through suburbia. Quite a trek on a hot summer’s day.

‘You’re confusing me,’ he said finally. ‘It’s so long ago. Did I go to the hospital?’

‘I don’t know. I’m asking you that.’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. No.’

‘Okay,’ I said, and left it. It was another of those problem areas. I could almost hear him thinking, Where the hell did Jens say we went?

In fact, Jens had told the inquest that they had searched the town that day for nearly four hours, including local cafes and the supermarket. He also said they’d made the thirty-minute round trip up to the hospital and asked if anyone of Simone’s description had been admitted. Although he told the inquest they only went once that day, he had earlier told the Polizei that they had made two trips to the hospital in those four hours.

Not happy, Tobias asked for a break. I sat on my own while he went to the verandah with Cass to have a cigarette.
I sat there, staring at the large, bronze centrepiece in an atrium to my right: a naked woman, her chest in full bloom and long tresses clinging wetly to her body, she was riding on the back of a dolphin. A surfer woman. I had to smile. That’s what Simone had called herself in her diary, embellishing the corners of her page with drawings of the sun, waves and flying fish. Simmi the Surfer Woman.

* 

It was so bard for Tobias, Cass said when she came back. Going into it so deeply had brought up a lot of emotion for him. ‘He’s just a beautiful, young-minded person, Virginia. He’s just a really beautiful person,’ she was saying as he walked back into the room, sighing heavily. He asked that I speed things up.

I was full of apologies. Perhaps he was a beautiful person and I was the ugly one here. He didn’t have to do this interview. I should be more appreciative of him. Even though I didn’t believe much of what he was saying, it was me that was feeling fake—my fake little laugh, my fake crescent smile, the thing I’m doing with my eyebrows to show my concern for him, the slightly nasal Are you okay? I’m sorry. Are you alright? I felt like a creep.

He was acting differently now—as though he’d built up a head of steam on his cigarette break. “Don’t worry, mate.” He’d returned to his broad Aussie accent, imitating the policemen. “She’ll show up.” They said that after her top was found on the Monday. Who did this cop think he was? he cried. ‘I’d begged for sniffer dogs that Monday.’ Because it took till Thursday morning to find her, he was arguing, decomposition meant that evidence had been lost—vital evidence that would have cleared him.

He was so shrill and insistent that I actually began to doubt myself. Maybe the top was found on the Monday? I couldn’t drum up the nerve to challenge him in case I had it wrong; I wish I had. ‘By not
coming to the inquest,’ I continued, ‘you drew more suspicion on yourself.’

‘Yes, I agree, but I have little faith in the Australian police.’

‘Some people might think you wanted a sniffer dog because you couldn’t bear sitting in that caravan park knowing that Simone was lying across the road.’

He smiled wryly and gave a little snort. Silence followed, then: ‘Phew, so this is why I begged for a sniffer dog? So I can ease my mind?’

‘Mmm.’ I waited.

‘Look, in hindsight you can twist and turn this thing whatever way you want.’

An air of hostility had entered the room.

I now told him I knew how easy it was for someone to suffocate when intoxicated—it could even happen accidentally, just by resting a pillow over the face.

No, he told me. I was wrong. He was adamant: did I not know that the body’s resources caused you to fight for your life? Simone had not fought, and her lack of defence was possibly due to her consuming GHB, the date-rape drug. He described a scenario in which Simone could have sat with the Silver Tent Man that night, just metres away from their van; possibly he gave it to her. Did I understand how that drug worked? I didn’t, but I was about to find out—in a lot of detail.

When he’d finished, I said I didn’t think that had happened because the pathologists hadn’t found GHB in her system.

‘Because you can’t find it,’ he shrieked at me. ‘Did you not just listen? Talk about a blind eye! I just explained it to you.’

I flinched while Cassandra told him to calm down.

He thrust out his hand. ‘I just explained it to you very clearly, Virginia.’

‘I know,’ I assured him. ‘It breaks down quickly and it’s untraceable in your system.’ My nerves were shattered.
‘This is *why,*’ he continued, ‘there is no cause of death. There is no sign of suffocation. No sign of strangulation.’

‘There *is* a mark on her body, actually,’ I interrupted. I waited for him to ask me where it was, and what it indicated about the cause of Simone’s death. But he just said, ‘Ah, okay,’ and we were moving on.

‘I’m innocent. I haven’t done it, and all the papers say it’s me. Where are my rights as a human being?’ he cried. ‘Where’s our justice system? Someone is innocent until proven otherwise. Where’s any major evidence?’

His words rang true. Everyone was making judgements, including me. I was now feeling very out of my depth, and I wanted to end the interview and leave, but he’d starting complaining about the police again: their assumptions, their accusations at the inquest. Then he went quiet. I could tell he had nothing left. To my surprise, I felt only pity for him.

I told him he should contact the New South Wales police and ask for the inquest to be reopened. He should get good representation, clear his name. Then he could get on with his life with Cass, and his family in Germany could be free of all the speculation. And most importantly, the Strobels, who were unable to get over the loss of Simone, could get some form of resolution. ‘I think you owe everyone that,’ I concluded. ‘You were a boy when this happened, and now I think you have to stand up and be a man.’

‘Mmm,’ he said, looking at the table top. ‘Thanks for the advice.’

‘Are you offended by what I’ve said?’

‘What must I say? I said thanks for the advice. The rest you leave up to me.’

* Why the hell am I doing this? I thought as I drove away in the back of a cab. She’d been dead six years, and I was still shooting around the
country as though she was something to do with me. Was he lying? I thought so, but the sad little face he’d shown as I left made me want to hug him.

It wasn’t even a particularly heinous murder. I’d been reading a lot about murderers lately, savage, brutal, sadistic murderers, and if there was a defining characteristic of Simone’s murder, it was its distinct lack of violence—a gentle killing, as Professor Wilson had described it. If Tobias was guilty of it, a confession might have gained him pity. If this could happen to such an ordinary guy, it could happen to anyone given a confluence of circumstances—or so a jury might have thought.

When the police had named Tobias a suspect, I’d asked Rodd what we’d do if our son came to us and confessed that he’d killed his girlfriend. We’d take him to the police, he said, without even stopping to think. We were curled up on either end of a sofa, our feet meeting in the middle, and I recall the spark of fury I felt when he said this, my impulse to shove him away from me with my heels.

In the back of the cab I dialled Rodd in London. ‘How’d you go?’ he asked.

‘I reckon he’s lying through his teeth,’ I heard myself say. But it was on the small points, I explained, the finer details, things that created a background of implausibility. For instance, his begging the police to use dogs on the basis that Simone was wandering around topless was pure confabulation. If I had pointed out that the top was found after the discovery of the body, what would he have said? Probably he would have just shrugged and said, *So I got it wrong.*

His memory certainly wasn’t perfect. He couldn’t remember anything about his moments of fury with the bar staff or the bouncer. Apart from a few lame comments, he couldn’t even remember the content of his argument with Simone on the night she disappeared. He couldn’t remember checking out the next morning, nor telling the manager that the fight could not have been them because
they’d arrived back at three am. Tobias couldn’t remember what he was thinking or doing in the unaccounted-for hours before he went to the police station; nor could he remember what he was thinking or doing—apart from popping in to the kiosk—in the unaccounted-for hours it took him to return with Simone’s passport.

He couldn’t remember whether he had trekked in the heat to the hospital that afternoon. In fact, I felt that he was telling the truth in this, and that they probably hadn’t made any trips to the hospital—but of course Jens was vacillating between one and two. Fair enough; shock can have a stunning effect, and our memories can fail us. It was all a long time ago.

But I noticed there was one thing he was absolutely certain he did remember, and that was when he’d briefed Jens and Katrin on what story they should tell the police: it had not been on the Saturday before they went to the police, as Jens had confidently stated at the inquest. Definitely on the Sunday. Undisputedly. It was this unfailing recollection that I didn’t trust in this incredibly forgetful man.

The following day, back in Sydney, I put a call through to Wayne Hayes. ‘Aha,’ he exclaimed. ‘I was wondering when I was going to hear from you.’ I could hear the smile in his voice—clearly he’d had no concerns for my safety, and I felt slightly irritated.

I told him Tobias and I had talked for nearly five hours, and how incredibly nervous he’d been. I told him how I’d used Shepherd’s examination of Jens at the inquest as a template for my questions. There were inconsistencies.

He laughed. ‘Matey, you might just have struck gold.’ He sounded like a pirate.

‘Um, I don’t think so, Wayne. I found it really hard. I was really tired too. Exhausted, actually, ’cos I haven’t been sleeping well lately.
Then there was the time difference—’

‘Don’t worry about all that,’ he said. ‘Now, listen here. This is what I want you to do. Copy your recording onto a disc and get it over to me. Got a pen?’

I laughed. ‘I’m embarrassed about you listening to me.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Just get it over to me,’ he snapped.

I took down his address. It was only when I hung up the phone that I got a whiff of something else other than my own self-consciousness. Ethics. Was it unethical for me to share my recording with the police? I thought back to my agreement with Tobias. How would he feel? Did I owe him? He’d said I was not to share the interview with the media, but we hadn’t spoken about the police. It’s a bloody murder investigation, for God’s sake, and he’s the prime suspect, I told myself. Of course you hand over the bloody tapes.

Now my mobile was ringing: Mick O’Donnell. He’d already called four times that day but he was the last person I wanted to talk to. Getting involved with Channel Seven was my one and only regret in this story. I picked up. He wanted a copy of the interview too. I told him no, I had an agreement. But hadn’t I obtained the interview with Tobias only as a result of my visit with him to Perth? Would I admit that? Did I agree? Would I please answer him?

I’d had enough. I told him goodbye and hung up.

Two days later I called Cass Brennan. Mick had slipped a letter under the door the morning after I left, she told me, requesting an interview with Tobias. Three hours later, as the pair was walking out of a lawyer’s office in Perth’s city centre, they were chased to their car by a cameraman and a reporter. When they arrived back home, more cameras.

‘There was even one in the sand dunes, pointing at my bedroom. You were right, Virginia.’

I felt a bit guilty, but I had been straight with them before I left that night. I’d told them who the man was I’d originally come to
Perth with. I told them I didn’t like his style, and to keep their heads
down and talk to the police before he got to them first.

Since Channel Seven hadn’t got their interview, Cass supposed
aloud, nothing would likely happen. I didn’t want to give her the bad
news but I asked her if Tobias had decided to talk to the police.

‘We’re discussing it with friends and family,’ she replied. Some-
thing about the way she said this made me realise I hadn’t raised any
questions in her mind at all. In fact, I’d probably helped jam her a bit
closer to Tobias.

‘There’s something I wanted to ask you,’ I said before she hung
up. ‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-six.’

‘And Tobias?’

‘Thirty.’

‘You referred to him as a boy the other night. This might sound
funny,’ I laughed, ‘but, um, isn’t he a man?’

‘No, he’s not, Virginia. He’s really not. Toby’s just a kid. He’s just a
really, really beautiful kid. He just wants to have fun . . . and so do I.’

What did she mean? She spoke with such aching affection, even
admiration, as though Tobias was pulling off some scientific feat by
remaining immature. Did this infantilising of him mean that he had
a diminished sense of responsibility too? To me, the passage to man-
hood seemed worthier of a girl’s wonder: a passing of tests, moral,
emotional, intellectual and sometimes physical. Being asked grown-
up questions at a serious inquest clearly didn’t fall under such a care-
free heading as Fun. So Toby had gone to South Africa and enjoyed
the sun and the sand instead.
The house in Oxford had five floors and was completely empty. Our feet boomed on the bare boards as we moved around, the sounds accentuating the hollowness of the place. It was for sale, so we had a cheap lease that could end at any moment. We bought a few chairs from IKEA—they huddled in corners of large rooms with high ceilings, looking pale and inappropriately dressed in cream ticking.

We were inappropriately dressed too. We needed heavy coats to put over our light, cotton clothes. We were in shock from the cold, and from the suddenness of the move. The children and I were, that is—not Rodd. He was invigorated. He thrived on change, challenge, chill factor, and most of all on being with his family seven days a week instead of the three or four it had been for the last seven years.

He set up a trestle with a cold steel chair in one of the empty rooms, and placed my battered suitcase next to it. ‘There you go, you’re set.’

The case was my mother’s, green with a broken wheel and a bedraggled red ribbon tied to its handle. It had once disappeared in a Ukraine airport for a couple of months, leaving my mother stranded without clothes. Now the green case had new responsibilities. It was a murder case, crammed full of old newspaper cuttings, the innards of my journals (which I’d torn up to lighten our luggage for the flight), police statements, crime analysis reports, autopsy results and,
more mysteriously, a box of Persil washing powder—perhaps courtesy of my mother’s ghost.

The case weighed thirty kilos, more than half my weight. I’d effectively been lugging this weight around with me for six years, I realised. It’s hard to explain the exact nature of the weight, but it was made even heavier by the burden of proof. You have to be pretty brave to cast stones. I could see why crime writers mostly wrote in the third person. I could also see why people who dealt with murder for a living wore uniforms and wigs and gowns, and why an ordinary person’s nerves might begin to fray.

Cass Brennan had been keeping in touch with me since the interview in Perth. In one email, she suggested that it was an ‘implied term’ of our agreement that I would be objective. Facts interpreted through a veil of innocence could look very different to facts interpreted through a veil of guilt, despite being the same. She hoped I had the training and sense of ethical duty to see through others’ ‘assumptions, beliefs and hearsay’. She wanted me to look at ‘ALL’ the facts, she said, objectively and not through any ‘veil of influence’.

Objectivity: I worried about it most days, about what it actually was, and whether I did or did not possess it. It seemed a very elusive concept. I worried that, in the absence of conclusive proof, I had formed my own biased opinion. This idea made me edgy, preoccupied; it made me drink an extra glass of wine each night.

There’s a name for the type of story I was writing—or, rather, for the style of writing I’d unwittingly adopted. It’s called ‘immersion’—a phrase suggestive of an all-consuming experience. Professor Robin Hemley warns that immersion isn’t for the fainthearted; ‘one way or another, you’re going to get pummelled emotionally, psychologically or physically.’

‘Aha,’ I can hear a friend sighing in agreement. ‘You don’t write non-fiction—it writes you.’ Both were suggesting high degrees of
susceptibility. No wonder that, as I sat down to write, I was feeling a little worried about objectivity, and concerned about how I could write my way out of this story. It didn't help that my PhD supervisor had written me an email suggesting, as Cass Brennan had, that I might be writing my book through a veil of guilt, even though he'd not yet read anything I'd written.

Strangely, I’d chosen a poet of all people to supervise my work. Based in the coalmining area of Newcastle, he’d be a sort of canary, I fancied, someone who could help me through the subterranean murk of crime with his lucid eye and lyricism. But communication between the poet and me had been generally scant, and non-existent over the past year. When we had been meeting, I’d arrive after six hours of car, plane, train and taxi travel, only to be told he didn’t have time to see me. Instead, we’d have a chat in his car as he made his way home, and I to the train station. He was a tired poet, he’d remind me on the way, overworked and unable to devote anytime to his creativity. I would tell him I wasn’t doing any writing either, because I couldn’t write the story even if I wanted to—I had to do it first. In a way, we were both stuck, worried and anxious.

But after the year’s hiatus, I wrote him a long email to tell him things had changed. I was now in Oxford. He shouldn’t worry, I assured him. I’d make two trips back that year, so I’d still comply with the rules of supervision. I also told him about all the new developments in the story, the unexpected opportunities that had arisen out of my fieldwork in the last month: my interview with Tobias; the TV producer who was also chasing the story; Wayne Hayes demanding my tapes. I told him I’d had to juggle my role as a writer and a participant in the story, but I was now ready to write, as I’d got to the crux of my research question: whether a writer in such circumstances should mediate or arbitrate, or even try to solve the crime. I felt my project had become very complex, so I needed his help now more than ever.
His email reply reached me in Oxford on a grim, cool morning. He described the developments as ‘totally unexpected’, and seemed to have forgotten my long-talked-about plan to interview Tobias. He wasn’t sure such an interview was covered by my ethics approval. The developments with Channel Seven and the police were a concern as well, and not at all the positive addition to the complexity of the project I’d thought they were. He was sure the university would not want to be ‘dragged into all this’. He was arranging to meet with the head of research to discuss my candidature. I couldn’t believe it. He’d always known about my hopes for an interview with Tobias.

Now his emails came with regularity. They always arrived first thing in the morning; it was like waking up to a punch in the head. Rodd, who'd long complained about the one-track nature of my conversation over the last six years, was, much to my amazement, carefully analysing their content while I looked over his shoulder in a stupor. One email expressed his worry that I appeared to be convinced Tobias was guilty. What if he wasn’t? Had I considered the harmful effect on him and his family? The aim of the project had never been about solving the case or achieving justice, he wrote, and such matters should be left in the hands of the police and experts. ‘A writer’s role should not be to judge,’ he wrote, apparently quoting Chekhov.

Chekhov? What the hell did a long-dead Russian writer of short fiction have to do with contemporary true crime? His sanctimony was making me sick.

Meanwhile, Rodd was swearing. ‘That bloody poet has just knifed you in the back.’ He was reading a passage that referred to a personal email from me which the poet had sent on to the Human Research Ethics Committee. This was a twenty-person committee whose job it was to ensure that all research at the university involving humans was conducted in an ethical manner. They followed guidelines set out in
the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, a set of non-mandatory rules, principles and recommendations for best practice.

I’d not followed one of the National Statement’s recommendations: I hadn’t supplied Tobias with a form, provided by the university, in which he could consent to an interview—a form that would have enabled him to withdraw his interview from this book at any time, without reason or notice. I’d volunteered this information to my supervisor and the committee, explaining that I wasn’t prepared to give Tobias an opportunity to withdraw from my book when he’d already avoided an inquest. As an alternative, I’d offered him the chance to review his interview, which was the norm in non-fiction, and he’d accepted this.

The Human Research Ethics Committee, on this other hand, didn’t accept it. They wrote to me several days before the deadline they’d given me to respond: ‘Ethics approval withdrawn.’ I was stunned. Effectively, I had to stop writing. The project I’d been working on for so many years was over. Even as a commercial project, I would not be able to publish.

*

Not fulfilling a university requirement didn’t seem to me like a ‘crime’ worthy of terminating this project. It didn’t even rank immoral or unethical, to my mind. According to the law, Tobias was a consenting adult. He’d chosen to break his silence after six years, and _he_ had called _me_ for the interview. It was ridiculous that I should now have to invite him to withdraw.

After several months, and the involvement of lawyers on both sides, my ethics approval was reinstated on a technicality: the entire twenty-member committee should have convened to discuss my failure to offer a consent form, and it hadn’t. Until it did so, however,
I was to cease all my research activity, which meant abandoning my most recent plan: to track down and speak to Jens Martin.

I still got up everyday and sat at my desk to write, but by now I was feeling like something of criminal. Was I objective? No—how could I be? Was I judging people and ruining their lives? I wasn't sure. I'd always assumed I was decent and fair, but now, having been forced to see myself from someone else's perspective, I was beginning to question what sort of person I was.

When I wasn't writing and wringing my hands over all these issues, I was making enquiries to new universities in the United Kingdom. I couldn't quite believe it when all four potential supervisors responded quickly, and with interest. As soon as I could, I terminated my candidature in Australia and shifted to a British university that had a wealth of experience in creative research and life writing.

My new supervisor seemed to appreciate that ethical challenges in writing were not to be avoided, but were the very territory most worthy of attention. Our move to England, which at times had felt like an aberration, now felt meant to be. Now I could get back to my investigation.
London to Frankfurt, a one-hour flight. I missed the twenty-four it usually took to travel from Australia, the twilight of airport lounges and the unaccountable moments of sleep. I felt dumped on the tarmac; the partition between my domestic world and my work was lifting. Instead of worrying if I was doing the right thing, I was feeling utterly pragmatic, deadly serious.

I’d buried the hatchet with Mick O’Donnell and was here to introduce him to the Strobels. I would accompany him and his crew for two days of filming. My other reason: I’d come to find Jens Martin.

I now had a sixteen-page Criteria-Based Content Analysis of the transcript of Jens’s testimony, provided by Professor Wilson. There were caveats: Jens’s testimony had been mediated by an interpreter, and it had been analysed in text form, so non-verbal signs could not be read. Despite these, in Paul’s opinion Jens had been deceiving the inquest. As he told me over the phone, ‘The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question still remains: Why?’ I wanted to find Jens and ask him why.

It was now seven years since Simone’s death, and the Strobels had still never met Jens. Tobias had told them that Jens preferred to have no contact, and Jens’s failure to seek them out to pay his respects at Simone’s funeral seemed to confirm this.

As an outsider, I found this bizarre. Jens was present the day Simone was killed. He attended her inquest. He lived under an hour
away from the Strobels. Why did he not knock on their door? Why did the Strobels not damn his elusiveness and knock on his?

I assumed that they were sensitive about Simone’s death and stung by Jens’s rejection. They bad talked about approaching him, but had not taken the idea any further. Privacy was also an issue. In Australia we were happy to ‘drop in’ unannounced, but in Bavarian villages you didn’t arrive at someone’s house unless you called first, or had been invited. Mutual consent was a prerequisite. Under the circumstances, however, my dropping in on Jens seemed a warranted exception. But I had to find him first.

The address Jens had given on his statements was his parents’ home. I’d visited them on an earlier trip and informed his mother of the Strobels’ desire to meet him. She had been sympathetic and offered to speak to her son. ‘But he’s never even talked to us about what happened there,’ she cautioned. She’d worried aloud whether this was not healthy, and that it was a consequence of him being deeply affected by Simone’s murder. She wouldn’t, however, give me his address.

K and I set off on a reconnaissance trip to the small grey hamlet of Oberthulba, where we believed he was still living since leaving home. It was an orphan of a village, absent of trees. Probably a Protestant town, K thought, as I noted the many garden beds filled in with concrete or quarry stones. After worming around roads, impatiently and not very sleuth-like, I asked K to wind down her window and ask a woman getting out of her car if she’d ever heard of Jens Martin.

‘Of course I have. He lives here,’ she said pointing across the road. She laughed at K’s astonishment. We were parked directly outside a townhouse, and Jens occupied the top floor. The gods were with us. I told K to drive on.

Out of the direct sight of his windows, we sat in the cul-de-sac looking at the building. Seconds later, the tall figure of a man
walked along the side of the house. He had a black hood pulled up over his head. We couldn’t see his face as he mounted the steps to the front door, but as he turned the handle he looked over his shoulder, and his eyes instantly locked on our little parked car. In the crook of his arm was a neat bundle of sticks. He looked like the woodsman in ‘Little Red Riding Hood’. It was Jens Martin.

Now he was staring at us. Could he have recognised me from the inquest? I doubted it. That had been five years ago, and ten thousand miles away. But I did remember how he had turned in the witness box and stared quizzically at my mother and me the first day of the inquest, a look that now seemed filled with portent. The temptation to knock on his door right now was incredibly strong, but that was not the plan.

The next day, early in the evening, K and I went to Rieden to pick up Gustl. He’d finished his day’s work in the fields, showered and splashed himself with cologne. Gabi and Christina kissed him and wished him luck, and both stood in the doorway to wave him off. It was an unusually quiet drive to Oberthulba.

Gustl was to knock first, then K and I would join him.

‘Are you okay, Gustl?’ I asked.

‘Ja,’ he said, then he jumped out of the car. We watched him walk briskly up the steps, his shoulders square, back so ramrod-straight that his arms barely moved.

‘Just look at him,’ K said, on the verge of tears.

He pressed the bell. He tried again. After waiting some more, he turned and shook his head at us.

I was so disappointed for him, and also suspicious. There were two cars in the garage. On my suggestion, Gustl agreed to go next door and ask the neighbour where Jens might be.

‘They’ve gone to a birthday party,’ he told us as he climbed back into the car. ‘Jens and his girlfriend. On pushbikes.’ It was an insight into the village, how everyone knew what others were doing. We’d
have to come back the next night, knowing now Jens would be forewarned.

Dragging Gustl along on a wild goose chase was not my plan, and I apologised to him. He reassured me with a smile. ‘I’ve waited this long. I can be patient.’

We went to dinner instead. I think we all felt a strange sort of relief. We ended up teasing one another: slapstick humour about our cultural differences, body shapes, appetites. Who was boss—K or me? At one point, after laughing hard, Gustl’s eyes became silky, and he told us in a whisper how lucky he felt. I had to hold back my tears.

The next night, we all stood in a row at Jens’s door.

A woman’s voice answered the intercom. ‘Hallo?’

‘Herr Strobel here to see Jens Marten,’ Gustl said.

As we listened to the sounds of someone descending a stair, K whispered in my ear that her butt was shaking. I noticed mine was too. So this was what it was like without Alprax.

I recognised her from the inquest: Jens’s girlfriend. She stepped back and held the door wide for us to enter—to take us out of the neighbours’ view, I imagined. We squeezed together at the foot of a marble stairway, up against a line of coats hooked to the wall.

After we introduced ourselves, she looked apologetically at Gustl. ‘You didn’t call. He’s asleep. You should arrange to come back another day.’

Asleep? Jens had been asleep since 2005, nearly seven years. I stepped in. ‘I’m sorry, That’s not possible. This is important. We’re here because there are developments in Simone Strobel’s murder investigation, developments Jens should know about.’ I was holding a yellow envelope filled with notes; they were irrelevant, but I found them reassuringly weighty.

She winced. ‘Wait. I will talk to him.’ Minutes later, we were being ushered up the stairs.

We walked into a modern kitchen, where Jens stood looking
wide awake. The plait that he'd once worn halfway down his back had been snipped into a conventional style, but the undergrowth of a beard still darkened his face. He whispered hello to each of us as we filed past towards the dining room, and we shook his moist hand. With much scraping of heavy chairs, we arranged ourselves around a solid dining table while Jens filled three glasses of water at the kitchen sink. He placed one in front of each of us, like a ration.

It was a nice apartment, dark but with bright, modern furnishings. Unlike Tobias, Jens had worked hard to build something for himself, with his own hands. He was no longer a draughtsman but a construction site manager. He sat, slouching at a right angle on an upright chair, his arms folded high across his chest, his thighs capaciously wide. From what I knew about body language, this was a defensive pose. Who could blame him? He didn't shift his pose over the course of half an hour, but his left hand frequently slipped from its fold to wipe his mouth and brow.

His girlfriend sat on a high stool at the end of the dining table, looking down on the scene, as though to say, I'm really not part of this.

We had a plan. I was to open before handing over to Gustl, and then he would hand back to me. So, with K translating, I told Jens briefly about the book.

'So, as you're part of the story,' I said, 'I want to include your voice too. As well as Tobias's. Actually, I was very fortunate to be able to interview him recently in Perth.' I paused so K could translate my words.

Later, we would all comment on Jens's reaction. Did you see the way his eyes started flickering? His heart started to pound against his t-shirt. Jens was visibly distressed.

'The interview lasted five hours,' I added.

'His lips parted as he breathed through his mouth. 'Was his girlfriend there?'' he finally managed to ask.

'Yes, I met Cass too.' Then I reassured him: 'You don't have to
worry. Tobias’s story was pretty much the same as yours at the inquest.’

He nodded slowly.

Not exactly the truth, but it was best not to have him feeling threatened before we’d even begun.

‘There are just a few differences between Tobias’s recollection and your testimony at the inquest. I want to take the opportunity to clarify those with you.’

‘I’ve said it a hundred times and I will not talk about this anymore.’ He shot me an angry look then stared fixedly at the table.

‘Can you confirm where you and Tobias searched for Simone after you reported her missing.’

‘I already said this at the inquest.’

‘Well, could you confirm that again?’

‘No.’

‘Did you and Tobias go to the hospital?’

‘Yes. What I said at the inquest was correct.’

‘Could you confirm what day it was that Tobias briefed you on the lies to tell the police?’

‘I said this at the inquest.’

‘I know what you said, but are absolutely sure this conversation with Tobias occurred prior to visiting the police station on Saturday morning, or could you be mistaken?’

‘I am a hundred per cent certain it was before we went to the police station. I have nothing to add to this.’

I handed over to Gustl. His voice was low and trembling. I motioned to K to take interpreter’s notes rather than interrupt his flow. So much was conveyed without the words anyway.

Gustl’s eyes homed in on Jens, never deviating from his face. The contrast was stark as Jens’s eyes kept flickering away. ‘I would have come sooner,’ Gustl began. ‘We talked about it . . . but somehow did not find the courage.’

‘I thought about it too,’ Jens replied, ‘but when I returned from
Australia I asked Tobias if I should visit you and he told me to not do anything.’

Gustl told him he had also been told by Tobias to keep away, and the younger man sniffed and jerked his head in cynical acknowledgement. ‘We’re still desperate,’ Gustl continued. ‘We limp through life like sick animals. When you open your eyes in the morning, it’s there. When you close them, it’s there. We are sick of the lies, the excuses, the lame points.’

‘Well, it’s true they’d been fighting for three or four days,’ Jens said. ‘I tried to talk to Tobias about it, to patch things up between the pair, but it continued. I still can’t explain any of the details of the fight, or what might have caused it.’

‘So why did Tobias instruct you and Katrin to say you last saw Simone walking in the direction of the campsite exit?’

‘Good question. I don’t know what Tobias’s motives were for saying that, and I don’t want to denounce anyone. I looked everywhere for Simone that night. And if I’d noticed anything, I would have said something long ago. I could not hide it.’

‘And the next day—you don’t look for her, you pack up, you arrange a story to tell the police? You explain that to me now.’

‘I said everything. And if I knew something I would tell you.’

Gustl’s fist hit the table. ‘Man! Simone is dead. We’re not talking about a lost suitcase here. When you found out she was dead, you still didn’t go to the police and say, “Hang on a minute, this is way too serious, I need to tell you the truth.”’

‘Well, that’s how it was.’

‘You can’t fob it off like that. As long as I can breathe I will try to find out the truth, by whatever means, at whatever cost.’

‘I went through a lot. It’s not easy.’

Gustl shook his head. ‘Katrin and Tobias always say the same thing.’

‘Well, maybe it’s the truth,’ Jens’s girlfriend cried out. ‘We went
to Australia. We went there to help. You don't do that if you have something to hide. And I paid for my flight myself. We went through a lot and I would be glad if this was all over too.'

‘You should let Jens and Gustl speak,’ I interrupted. ‘I understand you’re upset, but this is between them. You were about to say something, Jens?’

‘I was not going to say anything.’

Gustl hung his head in despair.

I decided it was the moment to hit Jens with my report. ‘I’ve taken your testimony from the inquest and had it examined by a forensic psychologist.’ I looked down at my notes. ‘In summary, he describes your testimony as being full of contradictions, significant omissions, evasive and equivocal answers. Your recollection of events, contrary to your complaints about memory decay, are in fact so similar to your initial accounts that the professor suggests your answers are rehearsed.’

Still slouching, Jens snorted and smiled, his eyes fixed to the table top.

‘Your recollection of non-critical information was very good, but—tellingly—you performed badly when recalling critical information. All of this suggests you were lying at the inquest when you gave your evidence.’

He snorted again and smiled.

‘So what do you have to say about that?’

‘If I knew anything more, why do you think I wouldn’t have said it by now?’

‘I don’t know. That’s the question I’m asking you.’

A quick smile again, then he shook his head and wiped his mouth.

I decided to tell him about the psychic, too. I increased her status, making her a regular consultant to the police. I had nothing to lose now. ‘She says it was your idea to dispose of the body, and that you
violated Simone and stripped her of her dignity.’

The snort, the maddening smile. It was probably from nerves rather than amusement, but I felt for poor Gustl as K made the translation.

‘Why did you lie for him?’ Gustl interrupted. ‘One lie after the other.’

Jens gave no response.

‘I think it’s impossible you didn’t notice anything,’ I said.

‘What did I not notice?’ Jens asked Gustl, ignoring me.

‘I don’t think you told us everything,’ Gustl cried.

‘I did,’ Jens said, quietly.

‘I don’t believe you. Can you not help us? Do you not want to help us?’ Gustl implored. ‘Please.’

Jens could not look at him. ‘I have said all I can say.’

We left his apartment quietly, with a nod rather than shaking hands. His girlfriend followed us down the stairs. ‘I know it’s not the same, but I lost my father recently,’ she told Gustl, her eyes pooling.

‘He’s innocent. I really don’t think he knows anything.’ Then, to me: ‘This book you’re writing—please don’t mention my name.’

I told her I wouldn’t.

We got in the car and, with heavy sighs, drove off. What had we hoped for? I don’t know. The only revelation was Jens’s palpable fear when I told him Tobias had broken his silence. I can only think he was alarmed that Tobias’s version of events might clash with his, or that Tobias’s cast-iron resolve had weakened. At least we’d seen him. And Gustl said it had been good for him to have his say.

Gustl’s pleas and my attempts at goading Jens might have failed, but they had shown we were dealing with a resolute character, not a feeble-minded one who would agree to fabricate a story without being deeply suspicious of his friend. Nor was Jens a simpleton who had little concept of what was going on around him.

‘What did you think?’ I asked Gustl.
'He couldn’t look me in the eye.’

What was this terrible shame? What could be so bad that Jens would prefer to live with his eyes cast sideways?

I did believe he was telling the truth where he could. He seemed unwavering about the timing of Tobias’s briefing on what to say to the police, restating from the inquest that it had happened on the Saturday morning, _before_ they visited the police station. Tobias was adamant the story was agreed upon on the Sunday, the day _after_, as a result of police inaction. When I went through the files thoroughly, I saw that the fabrication was in fact recorded at the police station, in the presence of Jens, at the time the missing person’s report was lodged, on Saturday, 12 February 2005—that is, before even a scintilla of a response could be registered from the police.

The police record of the Saturday morning report also fitted with Jens’s account at the inquest: that on Tobias’s instruction, the three had agreed to tell the police ‘that Simone had gone out of the front of the caravan park towards Dawson Street’, although Jens himself said at the inquest that he had only seen her go as far as the toilet, which was close to the van and nowhere near the distance of Dawson Street. Refusing to offer Gustl an explanation as to why he would lie about such a critical point, Jens remained silent. The implication, as both forensic experts pointed out, is that Tobias may have wanted Simone’s whereabouts, at the time of her disappearance, to appear to differ from his own—and that Jens may have agreed to cover for him.

Interestingly, when Gabi had questioned Tobias in her letter as to why he let Simone leave the campsite on her own, and in a ‘state’, Tobias had changed his story, telling Gabi: ‘. . . then Simone walked away down the path to the toilets’. He had gone on to say that he shouldn’t be blamed for letting her walk away, because she could have just been using the toilet. It was one story for the police, and another for Gabi.

Before we left Jens, I asked him one more question: when had the
group checked out at the caravan park’s office? Was it Saturday morning or the night before, as Tobias told me?

A weight lifted from him and he looked almost pleased—a simple, unloaded question at last. Saturday, he said. He remembered it distinctly because they’d had to hand in the toilet key. Tobias had gone to the office.

‘Did you go too?’ I asked, thinking about their apparent failure to mention that Simone was missing.

Jens thought so—then the shadow of concern reappeared on his face. ‘But I wouldn’t have known what they said. They would have been speaking in English.’
During a visit to Australia, I arranged to meet Detective Sergeant Dave Mackie in Lismore. He had taken over the Strobel case, as Shane Diehm had left the police force.

Cass Brennan had raised some questions I wanted to clear up with the new officer in charge. The legal training she’d received at university was being put to use defending her man, and I admired her doggedness. I’d promised her I would follow up all her queries, but drew the line when she asked me to report back to her, like a hired investigator.

I met Dave Mackie at La Baracca, just down from the police station. I’d met him a few times before, and I recalled him telling me that whenever he drove down Uralba Street, past the crime scene, he always thought of Simone. That hadn’t changed, he told me today. He had a gentle demeanour, and, being slim and boyish, he didn’t look like a cop. When it came to talking about the case, though, it became apparent that he was not only very astute but had a mind like a filing cabinet. It was always satisfying to find someone who was as interested in the case as me.

We talked nonstop for an hour and a half, then he took me up to the station and cleared me a desk next to Shane’s old office. He had plenty to do but was happy to spend the afternoon printing off statements and reports for me, and answering my questions as they arose.
Cass had read a pathology report, most likely acquired through Tobias’s German lawyer. She wrote to me saying she could find no evidence that Simone had died by suffocation. It was simply a guess, and I was ‘fitting facts to [my] belief’, in the absence of evidence. She pointed out that there were no broken capillaries in Simone’s eyes or burst alveoli in her lungs, nor any signs of a struggle. Cass expected that a rush of adrenaline would have caused Simone to fight vigorously for her life, regardless of whether she knew her attacker or not. Why, then, she asked, did Toby have no physical marks on him, and why did ‘Simmi’ have no ‘pre-mortem injuries’, other than the cut to her forehead from her fall at the pub?

Her points were valid. I’d also never been able to envisage how Simone came to die. Cass wanted me to investigate Tobias’s theory that the Silver Tent Man, or some other person, had slipped the party drug GHB into her drink.

I asked Dave if Simone had been tested for GHB. He wasn’t sure, but thought it unlikely. In the twelve years he’d been in the Lismore area, he knew of no seizure of this particular drug. It was a Sydney party drug. He later checked with a Drug Unit officer, who confirmed there had been no seizures.

But this didn’t mean the scenario was impossible, and I felt I should explore the theory further. Dave put me in touch with the toxicologist from Forensic Services in Sydney, and I requested her opinion. She replied that GHB is produced naturally by the human body so it is expected to be present. Ingested GHB, however, did disappear rapidly from the blood, just as Tobias and Cass were suggesting. From its peak level, fifty per cent could disappear within twenty minutes to an hour. If a fatal amount of GHB was ingested, though, she expected that it should still be detectable in a body, assuming it was tested for. But even in this scenario it would be impossible to say if the level at the time of death was present due to ingestion before death or if it was formed after death, especially in
Simone’s case, where there had been some putrification.

Simone’s remains had in fact been tested for GHB, I discovered later, but only in Germany. I understood that the drug had been ruled out as a possible cause of death due to the complete absence of it in her system. The Australian expert I spoke to, however, was more equivocal, saying that in cases of putrification she preferred to take a more cautious view. She stated that a complete absence of GHB made it a ‘highly unlikely’ cause of death.

Discounting GHB as a possible cause of death went some way to answering Cass, but there were still questions that remained unexplained. How could there be no signs of a struggle? No physical indications of trauma? Dave said he couldn’t answer these questions; I would need to talk to a pathologist.

I also wanted to check the balances of Simone’s and Tobias’s bank accounts. There was nothing in Simone’s diary about their financial affairs, and, as they were backpackers, their finances had never struck me as a potentially important issue between them. Ten minutes later Dave was back—I loved his efficiency. There was no record of Tobias’s account but Simone had withdrawn $200 the morning she disappeared. This had left a balance of $1682 in her account—not a lot to get by on for the remaining ten months of their planned travel.

I remembered that her parents had told me she had a trust account too—pin money, I imagined, put away since she was a child. She’d been given access to this account on her twenty-fifth birthday, 20 September 2004, a month into her travels. I’d never asked Gabi how much was in the account—I’d felt uncomfortable raising the subject of the money. Did Dave know what the balance was?

As it happened, the total was listed on the same sheet as her daily banking: twenty-five thousand euros, about $42,000, he said. I nearly fell off my chair.
HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE?

Tobias and I had talked about their finances. He’d told me that, ‘give or take a couple of hundred’, he had equal funds to Simone. The fact was, including her personal savings, she had $44,000 in total, as well as ownership of a $4000 van. In comparison, Tobias had next to nothing. He couldn’t even raise $1700 for an airfare home.

How had I overlooked the importance of money? I felt I was coming closer, recognising the faint outline of something I hadn’t seen at all before.

I went back through his statements. Tobias told the Polizei that they had planned even more travel in July 2005. Simone had written something similar in a resignation letter to her employers at the kindergarten three weeks before she disappeared. She and Tobias planned to go to New Zealand and Thailand—‘depending on what our financial situation is,’ she added, a little less confidently.

But Tobias didn’t seem to have any lack of confidence. To the Polizei, weeks after Simone’s body had been found, he said: ‘[O]ur holiday kitty was still fairly full, enabling us to make such [travel] plans.’ Was he referring to his debatable $2000 share in the van? He told me he’d reimbursed Simone for his half of the van by paying living expenses. If so, this amount was nowhere near enough to cover air tickets to New Zealand and Asia, and the nightly accommodation they would have needed once the van was sold.

According to Jens at the inquest, Katrin had told him that Simone once mentioned she might go to Sydney alone. Since Katrin had never cooperated with the investigations, there was no way we could confirm this—but what if it was true, and Simone was considering leaving Tobias?

‘Then I can think of forty-two thousand reasons why he wouldn’t kill her,’ Rodd said that evening, when I told him about the trust money.
I strongly disagreed. That was a rational and pragmatic man’s thinking about money. Tobias wasn’t like that—from what I’d seen, he was highly emotional. I didn’t think he was greedy. In fact, he appeared to have a rather lackadaisical attitude towards money, happy to scrimp and scrape by, to live cheaply—even dishonestly, if need be: Simone had noted in her diary that he often had them flee from the ranger to avoid paying camping fees. He was into experiences: he dreamed of championing the German soccer team, surfing the most beautiful beaches in the world. Later, he would ski through winters in the Austrian Alps with Cass. Money was only a means to maintaining his lifestyle, an easy lifestyle that was about simple pleasures—fun.

‘So what are you saying?’ Rodd asked.

I had to think about this. ‘He was co-dependent,’ I said eventually. ‘If Simone was threatening to carry on her travels alone, where would that leave him? Nowhere.’

And if the pair had climbed into the van that night—which was no longer their home but a contested space—I could imagine Tobias having a desire to forcibly take hold of all that he felt he’d just lost. She would have been sensible and shown him her back.

But we couldn’t know for sure. There were too many lies and a paucity of detail. The evidence was not there, and even trying to construct what I had so far felt like conjuring. What if she had just walked away after the fight, as Tobias said, and by some incredible coincidence she intersected the path of a passing opportunist who used a statistically rare modus operandi? It was so unlikely but it couldn’t be excluded.

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Before I left Australia, I arranged to meet Wayne Hayes at the Falconer, a seedy old diner around the corner from the central police
station in Sydney. We sat in a small booth with our heads huddled over cups of tea.

I couldn’t help but notice that I looked more like the detective this evening in my long trench coat. Wayne was wearing a sports T-shirt and joggers, not his usual suit. He was working a cold case, he explained, pre-computer systems, and had just returned from making an arrest in Madagascar. He was hunting down old statements in the basement and seemed to be on the run. ‘So, why did you want to see me?’

Mostly for sentimental reasons, because by the time I returned to Australia to live he’d be retired, but I didn’t tell him that. I also wanted to discuss the latest news: I’d learnt from a German source that week that the forensic testing of the hair had finally taken place, and failed—but the scientists had found something else.
hen the test on the rootless hair failed to produce any DNA, the German geneticist had asked the Polizei for everything they were holding in evidence. Included in these items were the palm branches that had covered Simone’s body. Although they and everything else had been tested for nuclear DNA back in 2005, recent advances in molecular biology meant it was now possible to find something they previously couldn’t: mitochondrial DNA.

Biology, a subject that had only mildly interested me as a teenager, suddenly became fascinating. There are only two copies of nuclear DNA in each human cell. This ‘nucDNA’, which is made up of chromosomes inherited equally from each parent (forty-six in total), contains the unique code of an individual. The mitochondrial DNA, or mtDNA, is found outside the nucleus of the cell, in the cytoplasm. It plays a more industrial role in the body, using oxygen to produce energy, and it only has a mini-chromosome at its centre, so it is minuscule in comparison to nucDNA. On average, however, there are thousands of copies of mtDNA in a single cell.

The relative abundance of mtDNA in each cell has recently become a great source of information for forensic scientists who are studying degraded specimens. Techniques in amplifying mtDNA fragments have also enabled the analysis of minute quantities of mtDNA. This more common DNA is now regularly being relied upon as biological evidence in criminal cases in America.
The problem with it, however, is that mtDNA is not a unique marker of identity. Passed down the maternal line from the point of fertilisation, it’s like a fossil inside us, a living artefact that stretches back for generations, from mother to grandmother to great-grandmother and so on. This meant that all Hiltrude Suckfuell’s children shared her sequence of mtDNA.

Now, the German geneticist had discovered mtDNA that matched the Suckfuells’ sequence on the branches of the palm that had covered Simone’s body. The roughness of the plant, its folds and crevasses, had provided a good surface on which mtDNA could be shed. It seemed remarkable to me that, almost seven years later, a positive reading had been produced. This was just what everyone had been waiting for—a breakthrough.

There were many caveats, however. My source said although the German geneticist had been able to confirm that somebody with exactly the same pattern of mtDNA as the Suckfuell children had been present at the body disposal site, it could have been either Katrin or Tobias. And it was possible, although less likely, that it had been someone else related by a maternal link to Hiltrude, from however far back. In other words, there was potentially a family tree of suspects.

The best way to strengthen the evidence, Wayne explained that evening, was by narrowing down the number of individuals who had possibly been present at the scene and then eliminating them as donors of the mtDNA. This meant testing all the police officers, forensic workers and anyone else who’d come in contact with the palm fronds. It also meant testing other potential suspects. In Wayne’s opinion, although eliminating others would make the results very compelling, mtDNA could still only ever become part of the circumstantial evidence, since it wasn’t a unique identifier like nucDNA.

In the meantime, the Polizei reinterviewed Katrin and Jens in Würzburg. A psychologist who watched the interviews came to the
conclusion that, short of torture, Jens would not break. As for Katrin, she was clearly shaken when informed about the discovery of the mtDNA. She was asked to provide a fresh genetic sample. Later, Tobias, on his return to Germany, was also brought in for retesting. I found it eerie that Hiltrude Suckfuell, the mother who would not have a word said against her son, had apparently pointed her genetic finger.

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Some months later, it was confirmed that all the mtDNA at the body disposal site had been accounted for—that is, it either matched with persons who shared the Suckfuell mtDNA sequence, or that of the professionals engaged in gathering and testing the evidence. I noted that even the Silver Tent Man, the Suckfuells’ regular fall guy, had been tested and subsequently eliminated as a potential donor to the body disposal site. What these results indicated was that there were no inexplicable strands of mtDNA present at the scene that could hint at an unknown offender, unless that perpetrator was prepared and gloved. Nothing about the crime had indicated a carefully planned attack.

The findings strongly indicated that the police were on the right track. It seemed they were a step closer to making an arrest; at the very least, they now had a good reason to reopen the inquest. But still nothing happened—and no one could properly explain to me why.

There were murmurings that the lack of mtDNA testing in Australia meant that the police couldn’t be sure how many other people in the Lismore area shared the Suckfuell sequence. The possibility that an unknown perpetrator might even share the mtDNA of the officers involved in the forensic process also couldn’t be ruled out. All the material I could find on the subject, however, seemed to suggest that although mtDNA was not a unique marker of identity, the
I made an appointment to meet with a geneticist in Sydney to try to answer some of the questions I had. The professor of forensic science was also, I discovered when we met, a former employee of forensic services with the police and had experience in mtDNA extraction.

My first question was: what were the chances that someone unknown had been at the body disposal site and happened to share the Suckfuell mtDNA sequence?

To answer that, the professor first explained that, across the world, efforts to collect mtDNA through various means were resulting in healthy genetic databanks. But here in Australia, although we had large databases for nucDNA, there was presently no mitochondrial program that would create a population profile. Having said that, in New South Wales, offenders convicted of crimes carrying sentences of five years or more do provide mtDNA samples. These profiles are recorded and stored, and if mitochondrial evidence is collected from a crime scene, it can be matched back; such a ‘hit’ it provides a very strong link for a case. (The Suckfuell sequence, I knew, had already been checked through this database, and there’d been no hit.)

Despite the lack of Australian data, though, there was enough research taking place across the world to indicate statistical trends in mtDNA. Based on those trends, the professor agreed with my hunch: it was ‘highly unlikely’, he said, that an unknown offender would share the same mtDNA sequence as someone already accounted for at the body disposal site.

To his mind, the commonness of the sequences wasn’t what weakened the palm frond evidence; it was the ubiquitous quality of mtDNA that cast some doubt. How the mtDNA came to be on the exhibits was the more pertinent question. Could it have been
through innocent contact? MtDNA is very easily passed between people and objects, shedding from our skin like dust particles. This gives rise to the problem known in forensic science as ‘secondary transfer’: someone other than the suspect transfers the suspect’s mtDNA onto the object. Although rare in the controlled environment of scientific testing, it does occur.

A defence lawyer might argue that officers who’d had contact with the Suckfuell siblings during an interview could later have touched the exhibits, inadvertently transferring Suckfuell mtDNA onto them. They might also cast doubt over the storage of the exhibits—for example, if objects were bagged around or stored near personal items from Simone and Tobias’s van. This is the sort of scientific contamination officers are trained to guard against, but a crime scene is nevertheless an ‘uncontrolled’ environment.

The prosecution would undoubtedly attempt to combat the argument of secondary transfer by pointing out that no other mtDNA from an unidentified person had been found on the exhibits, which limited whatever had happened at the scene to Strobel, the Suckfuell siblings and members of the investigative team. Also, bearing in mind that Tobias and Katrin had sworn they were never at the body site, any innocent contact with the fronds could only have occurred if their mtDNA had somehow been transported there—via Simone’s body, for instance. Secondary transfer occurring in this way, according to the professor, was unlikely but not impossible.

In his words, finding a match for the Suckfuell mtDNA ‘confirms suspicions that these people have more to answer for’. The palm matter was directly associated with the crime—literally covering it up—and it was in the secreted, rough areas of such a surface that a forensic scientist would expect to find the revealing mtDNA of an offender.

But the shadow of doubt, it seemed, could be cast both ways.
Every time the name of Cass Brennan—or Cassandra, as I more sternly addressed her these days—popped up in my inbox, my chest tightened. ‘Your role is so confusing,’ she wrote to me in May 2012. When they agreed to speak to me they believed I was writing a ‘serious’ PhD. Now they had the impression I was concocting a mix of fact and fiction, which I was then presenting as fact. ‘This is not right,’ she wrote.

She’d come across an essay I’d written for *Griffith Review* called ‘My Mother and Murder’. It was an intimate piece that explored Simone’s and my mother’s deaths, as well as my mother’s and my curious interest in crime. I got the feeling Cassandra found my intimate narration of crime pretty bizarre. She came to some fairly harsh conclusions. She accused me of having ‘meddled’: I’d ‘misled’ the Strobels, and in the process turned them against the Suckfuells. This, she thought, was for the sole purpose of creating a ‘juicy and convincing tale’. The two innocent families were in fact my victims, and the ‘healing bond’ they’d developed had been destroyed by my actions. Why was I doing this, she wanted to know. Didn’t I realise these were real people?

In a postscript, she asked why, if I really was assisting the police and wanted to see the case resolved, I wasn’t requesting that mitochondrial DNA testing be done on the hair found snagged on the fence. This form of testing had been around for a while, she pointed out. To her, it seemed obvious that the hair wasn’t Toby’s—‘but it
must be someone’s hair!’ She suggested that everybody on the camp-site should be tested for mtDNA, and she demanded to know why this hadn’t already been done.

Over time, Cassandra’s emails to me had established her position. She had always written passionately and with conviction, and I believed she had no doubts about Tobias’s innocence. She relied on her gut instinct, she said, and ‘this never fails me’. Tobias had ‘frankly and honestly’ answered my questions and corrected his statements with the Polizei—what was my problem? She did not see a need for him to clear up the inconsistencies at another inquest.

According to Cassandra, Tobias had ‘savagely and publicly humiliated’ the Australian police, and in her mind this now made them invalid as investigators, for he’d given them a motive to ‘target’ him as their main suspect. Whoever had killed Simone was ‘an animal’, and only a sociopath, she believed, could have remained in the vicinity of the crime scene; since Tobias was neither an animal nor a sociopath, it couldn’t have been him. She’d always presented the Silver Tent Man—whom I’d still not been able to meet, despite making repeated requests—as the prime suspect. He had become a type of insurance for her against Tobias’s involvement.

I usually felt sympathetic towards Cassandra, and uncomfortably aware of my potential to seem to her a sort of torturer, but in this latest email she was asking the very same question I constantly asked myself: Why are you doing this? There never was a simple answer, other than that I couldn’t help myself. I felt driven.

Then something dawned on me: Cassandra kept asking me about the DNA testing of the hair, but this was old news—surely she knew the latest, that the Suckfuell mtDNA had been found on the palm fronds? She was still speaking about DNA testing as a way of eliminating Tobias and Katrin as suspects.

I gave Rodd the email to read. ‘Hmm. She’s being very bombastic.’ ‘Forget that,’ I said. ‘She doesn’t know about the palm fronds.’
He looked at the letter again. ‘Maybe she’s fishing to see if you know?’

To me, it seemed a genuine example of Cassandra continuing to fight tooth and nail for the siblings, a fight against a perceived injustice. I recognised this because, essentially, she was like me. I respected her for fighting, which is why I now felt a surge of anger at the possibility Tobias had not told her about the mtDNA. In less than three weeks Cassandra was going to marry him.

I had learnt from Gustl that a big wedding was planned for May 2012 in Altbessingen. The news came months after the damning Channel Seven documentary, in which Detective Inspector Wayne Hayes, looking down the camera, had said on national TV: ‘If you look at the evidence, I believe, even though it’s not enough to actually charge him, I believe it’s compelling to indicate that he is the murderer.’ The wedding seemed like a response: love conquers all.

I wrote back to Cassandra, acknowledging her disappointment with me, then added: ‘Just in relation to your query about mtDNA, you seem to place great importance on this. Are you saying that the absence or presence of mtDNA at the crime scene is important to your way of thinking about all this?’

I was again imposing assumptions on others, she wrote back, and ‘putting words in other people’s mouths’. She had written to me to complain about me and my behaviour with the Strobels, not to discuss DNA. But on that subject, yes, she believed testing everybody on the campsite was a necessary step in solving the case. When the police cast their investigation wider, they would discover what she already knew: that Tobias and Katrin were innocent. They weren’t involved, she said, ‘but somebody was’ – and that person needed to be revealed, for the sake of the Strobels and the Suckfuells.

I didn’t know how to reply. The Silver Tent Man had been eliminated from the pool of suspects. The results pointed only at Tobias and Katrin. I wanted to tell her to ask the siblings to update her on
the latest news, but I didn’t feel any suggestion should come from me. I wrote a letter to the Polizei, explaining the situation. Morally, since Cassandra was about to marry Tobias and was asking me about DNA evidence, shouldn’t someone should tell her about the latest finding?

The response was swift: this information is confidential. I wasn’t even supposed to know it. Cassandra should know it, but the fact she didn’t was no one’s fault but the Suckfuells’. Without making an arrest, no one was at liberty to tell Cassandra what was going on behind the scenes.

I got K to call Hans-Jürgen Kämmer. Was he sure Tobias knew about the mtDNA findings?

‘I am absolutely certain he does,’ he told her.

Cassandra’s questions weighed heavily on me, but the reality, as Susanne Grimm said, was that even if someone told her about the mtDNA evidence, she probably wouldn’t believe them.

Cassandra sent a couple more emails before her wedding, gallant and pious emails expressing her disapproval of me. I gathered she was in Altbessingen, making wedding preparations, and that being with the family was stirring things up for her. I answered her as best I could, until ten days before the wedding she tried to set new terms regarding my interview with Tobias. I told her she couldn’t do that. We had an agreement. I wouldn’t misrepresent his interview, and would send him the relevant parts of the book in due course.

I never let on I knew she was marrying him, but several days before her big day I was in Würzburg. I had some loose ends to tie up, but mostly I’d come to see the Strobels, who were suffering at the thought of not one but two celebrations taking place that week: a registry wedding (a legal requirement in Germany) and then, several days later, a big wedding party at the Suckfuell home.

‘He has never faced me, after all his lies,’ Gustl told me. He looked astonished. ‘How can he not come here and clear his conscience before he marries? He’s only twenty minutes away.’
But why would he come now? He’d never contacted the Strobels to explain himself since his lies had been exposed.

While we sat there in the kitchen, the phone rang. It was a German television producer calling to say he would be attending the wedding for Bayern TV. I told the Strobels that Manfred Schweidler from the *Main Post* was going as well. Now Gustl wondered out loud if he should go too—just to stand there and look Tobias in the eye. He didn’t trust how he might feel, though, or even what he might do.

‘Protect yourself,’ I said. It would be torture.

He nodded. Then, forcefully, he asked, ‘Who is this girl?’

I realised it was not so much Tobias whom Gustl wanted to face, it was Cassandra. He must have been thinking that it could have been him standing there, giving Simone away. But in a cloud of obfuscation his daughter had been replaced.

‘How can she marry him?’ he demanded.

‘She believes in him,’ I said.

He shook his head and stared into his lap.

We sat there for a long time, in the kind of social stupor that precedes weddings, a lull of anticipation. I decided to take the opportunity to admit that, after all this time, there was something still bothering me. I was coming to the end of my book but I still felt I needed them to spell it out for me. Why had they not asked more questions of the siblings in the beginning? It was as though I kept forgetting. I understood why Gabi hadn’t, but not the other family members.

Christina answered me. It had begun the very day the siblings arrived back from Australia with Simone’s body, she said. The Suckfuells were driven by a friend from Frankfurt airport to the Strobel home. Tobias had insisted that Christina travel in the van with them rather than in the other car with her brother.

‘We drove in complete silence for over an hour and a half,’ she said.
‘There were seven of us. The silence was oppressive. No one uttered a single word. I felt so uncomfortable.’

Gustl described the atmosphere when they arrived as ‘sterile’ and ‘tense’. He had hugged Tobias firmly, and he remembered how he hadn’t reciprocated, how his arms had just hung at his sides. Katrin was the same. ‘It was clear from that moment that they were the victims,’ he said. ‘We couldn’t say anything. Their lack of intimacy with us made them strangers.’

I nodded. Now I finally got it. In the victim stakes, the Strobels had been shoved aside to make room for the Suckfuell siblings’ greater need: to remain silent.

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The next evening, ahead of my departure from Germany, Gustl, Gabi, Christina, K and I went to a monastery in a wine district half an hour from Rieden. We sat outside and looked down the valley at the Main River below, and a cluster of red roofs that gathered at the edge of a steep vineyard. Everything was so restful; even the river looked as still as a bath, and the light soft and saline. *Maybe this will be the last time*, I thought. Who knew what would happen? We remained in limbo.

It had always been limbo in this case, I realised, and although I wouldn’t say it, I didn’t expect anything to change. In my memory we would remain suspended here, looking down over the valley, eating thick white asparagus, the flesh soft and warm in a blanket of hollandaise, and soft yellow potatoes. Comfort food. It felt like the never-ending end, life holding perfectly still that early evening before dusk, like a painting.

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Later that week Manfred Schweidler wrote me an email, describing the first wedding. ‘It was a curious act. They came in an old VW Käfer Cabrio for a wedding at a romantic place: the old castle of Saaleck on a green, woody hill over the Saale river. But they feared we would be there.’

Manfred and the TV cameraman were pushed by guests and prevented from getting their shots of the bride and groom. They waited all day, hoping to photograph the couple as they left the castle.

At six in the evening the whole society came out drop by drop—but not Toby and his young woman. They went away secretly through a cellar and a backdoor, ran to a path in the wood, which brought them two kilometres down the hill. We heard later a car was waiting for them there.

Running through a cellar and down through the woods—how romantische. How like Hansel and Gretel, except for the bit with the getaway car. Or did they feel more like hounded movie stars, I wondered, being chased back to Altbessingen by the paparazzi? Who knew, but it felt like an ending to this tale.

But it wasn’t quite the end: there was a twist. The day before the second wedding party, in Altbessingen, Tobias went to Schweinfurt’s main station to meet a guest travelling from Berlin. At nine-thirty am, detectives watched as the guest alighted the train and was greeted by Tobias. As the two men carried the bags along the platform, the officers swooped. Hours later, under pressure, the pair admitted to the state prosecutor that the drugs in the bags—three hundred grams of cannabis—were for Tobias’s wedding, by special order. Eight homes were subsequently searched in the Main-Spessart area that day, which uncovered a further fifty grams and 2000 euros, allegedly drug money.

Tobias was photographed by a media contingent as he left the offices of the state prosecutor with two drug detectives. He looked
heavier and more like a thirty-two-year-old in the face, but his fists childishly clutched a piece of paper to his nether regions as he took in the cameras. They were always there, at every critical moment in his life, ever since he had refused to stand up and speak on behalf of his lover at her inquest. He looked haunted.

After surrendering his passport, Tobias was permitted to attend his wedding party. He also undertook to report weekly at the police station until his hearing, which was at least four months away.

I wondered what it was about him that caused him to take such risks. Once again, he was drawing attention to his family—this time with what was thought by villagers to be an immodest and insensitively large wedding. A documentary critical of him had only just aired in Germany, and now a bucket of pitch was being poured over Hiltrude, Hugo and Katrin, not to mention his staunch defender and bride, Cassandra, who deserved more on her wedding day.

For a few days I had the feeling that some form of justice had been administered. It took Wayne Hayes to point out the obvious to me in an email: ‘It’s not much consolation.’
Why had Simone not fought for her life? After all this time, the question still lacked a plausible answer.

A couple of weeks after Tobias’s wedding I called the Royal College of Pathologists in London. ‘Send me your details and I’ll see if I can find someone to talk to you,’ said a woman in public relations. A few days later I contacted the college again. Yes, they had found someone: the Deputy Chief Forensic Pathologist for the East Midlands.

Several days later, Rodd drove me to the Royal Leicester Infirmary. It was a grey, wet day—utterly grim for a meeting in the morgue. But instead of meeting in the bowels of the hospital, as I had imagined, I was led upstairs by a security guard, into to a claustrophobic office crammed with chairs, computers, a microscope and piles of papers. I was told to wait so sat checking my notes, until a young man entered the room.

He looked slightly agitated as he shook my hand. He’d been stuck in a meeting, he said in a northern accent. He had a ruddy complexion and baby-fine fair hair. In a black T-shirt, sneakers and jeans, he could have passed for a muso in a pub band. He sat down and surveyed his desk, then rearranged it with stern precision. Now, any casualness I’d perceived from his dress felt mistaken. One of only thirty-five forensic pathologists registered with the Home Office, Dr Stuart Hamilton dealt with five suspicious deaths a week, with
two invariably turning out to be murder.

‘Right,’ he said, his chair swinging in my direction.

I knew to keep it brief. After swiftly introducing the purpose of my project, I handed him the pathology notes. He turned back to his desk to read them. After several minutes he looked up. ‘How old was the poor girl?’ His voice had softened and become almost fatherly in its warmth.

‘Twenty-five,’ I said.

He made a small sighing sound and went back to the notes.

Another five minutes passed before he turned back to me. ‘Straight up, the fact the hyoid bone—the horseshoe bone that protects the larynx—and the larynx itself were intact doesn’t mean anything,’ he said. ‘The area is very elastic, and just because neither was broken doesn’t mean Simone wasn’t strangled. With significant pressure applied to this area, however, you’d expect to see some bruising in the strap muscles of the neck—and there was mention of diffusion beneath the left mandible, which would be consistent with strangulation. But, as the report correctly concluded, this could possibly be a post-mortem bruise.’

I pushed my dictaphone closer to capture his voice, which had lowered to almost a whisper, imbued with scientific fascination.

‘You see, a pathologist is always looking for surface bruising. When you strip the skin off, you see bruising that’s not on the surface in the underlying tissue—that is, deeper bruising. The pathologists would have gone all the way through her arms and the back looking for it. So she’s not got any particular surface bruising—although this could be masked by the effects of decomposition.’

I mentioned that Simone had been quite black by the time she was found.

In this case, Dr Hamilton explained, it would have been very difficult to identify what was bruising and what was decomposition. Decomposition was similar to bruising, so some of her actual bruises
may have disappeared in the decomposition process. Bruising was the result of red blood cells escaping damaged blood vessels—but, unfortunately, the process of decomposition also weakens blood vessels and allows red blood cells to escape. But even a fresh body sometimes showed no injuries at all—in the case of suffocation, for example.

‘Pathologists are, by nature, very, very cautious people,’ he continued. ‘We don’t like to over-interpret. In a case like Simone’s, we have to accept there is a range of possibilities as to how she died. But what we don’t do is draw a positive conclusion from the absence of something. So I can’t say, because I haven’t found anything, that it’s probably asphyxia. I’d be hammered from hell to breakfast by the defence for saying that.’

The conclusion drawn by the police that Simone was suffocated was not an unreasonable one, he said. But from a pathologist’s point of view, there was nothing that pinpointed the cause of death. Only the circumstances of her death pointed to foul play.

I explained that my main purpose in visiting him was to explore theories as to why Simone might not have fought back. Would the level of alcohol in her system have been enough to make her incapable of resisting her attacker?

‘No,’ Dr Hamilton said. In his opinion, Simone’s alcohol level—even taking post-mortem production into account—was consistent with that of a typical English girl on a Friday night out. Certainly it was nowhere near high enough to reduce the effectiveness of respiration.

There were things in the pathology findings that did jump out at him—for instance, the insect activity on the top of the head, the side of the neck and the outer aspects of the arm. As he hadn’t seen the photos, though, he cautioned that this could be purely insect activity. Insects and maggots were more likely to colonise a part of the body that was moist, such as the mouth and eyes—but they were also particularly drawn to injuries. There was therefore a possibility that these areas were injuries and had been modified by insect activity.
What he was getting at was that a hit to the head could have stunned Simone and prevented her from fighting back. If, after being stunned, she was left lying face-down and was unable to breathe, this could certainly have killed her.

Also interesting was an area of pallor on the back of her chest—an L-shape measuring thirty-five by fifteen millimetres, and three roughly parallel lines that measured twenty-five to thirty millimetres. This was what he would describe, prosaically, as ‘something’. Human biology didn’t produce straight lines. The lines suggested Simone had either been lying on something with an odd shape, or possibly the bars were a footwear impression—although, once again, there didn’t appear to be any sign of bruising on the back. I couldn’t imagine her not fighting back if she was lying on the ground with a foot pressed onto her back.

Could Dr Hamilton think of any other reasons, apart from ‘stunning’, that might have prevented Simone from defending herself?

He could. ‘A blanket is a very effective way to contain someone. If she was straddled, with a blanket over her body, and thrashing around, it’s likely she wouldn’t be able to release her arms—and her legs would be hitting against something soft like a mattress, hence no bruising. The blanket or duvet takes some of the direct force and diffuses the focal pressure. And even if there was some bruising, it could be lost through decomposition.

‘And remember,’ he emphasised, ‘you don’t need to stop someone resisting until they’re dead. You only need to stop them resisting until they’re unconscious.’

A pillow covering Simone’s face could have rendered her unconscious in around a minute, and if her airway remained obstructed she would have needed someone to save her. If she was face-down in a pillow, the moisture from her breathing would have formed a very effective seal.

‘We call this a self-sustaining mechanism. Someone has to reverse
the situation for the victim, and, if they don’t, within another three minutes death will occur.’

A plastic bag renders a victim unconscious even more quickly—but we agreed that this was a very deliberate, sinister method, whereas asphyxia with a pillow was more likely the result of an argument gone wrong.

I asked Dr Hamilton about GHB, the date-rape drug Tobias continued to suggest the Silver Tent Man had provided Simone that night, metres away at the other end of the campsite.

‘If it’s not there after death,’ he said, ‘you can be certain it never was there.’ He kept referring back to the notes. ‘Fascinating,’ he kept saying, shaking his head.

I’d now been with Dr Hamilton nearly two hours. During that time, eight folders had been delivered—his public case load for the week, I imagined—but he remained focused on Simone. I felt that he cared about what had happened to her as much as I did.

‘It’s one of those cases,’ he sighed in the end. ‘We’ll never know how she died until someone talks. You see, the best way to cover up what happened,’ he said, leaning over and speaking in an exaggerated whisper, ‘is to leave the body out in the heat for days.’

Rodd and I drove out into Leicester’s dismal daylight. People were rushing through the rain like a disturbed nest of insect life responding to unpleasant stimuli—not individuals, but life forms who, I now knew, had a twenty-two per cent chance of being autopsied on expiration. ‘She can’t tell us how she died,’ I told Rodd.

Of course, I’d known that for the last five and half years, but for some reason now it wasn’t so easy to take. I kept saying it on the trip home: ‘She can’t tell us how she died.’ Each time, I noticed, my eyes automatically sprouted tears.

It was Monday. The next day I couldn’t write. I didn’t want to read either, or even eat. This went on for the rest of the week. I noticed my refrain had changed. ‘I didn’t even know her,’ I kept saying as I moped
around, or sat with my head in my hands. ‘I didn’t even know her.’

Five days later, still dressed in that day’s clothes and buried under a duvet, I woke, quite sharply, at two am. Two words were in my head: She’s dead. I finally knew it. It was over.

I went into the bathroom and wrote it down on a piece of paper. ‘She’s dead.’ I looked at it as though it was documented proof. ‘She can’t tell us why,’ I scribbled beneath. I’d not found out what happened to her, and I now accepted, in the middle of the night, somewhere deep in my conscious mind, that there was a distinct possibility I never would.
Tobias was given a twenty-two-month suspended sentence for the illegal purchase of narcotics on 25 October 2012. His lawyer said the thirty-one-year-old hadn’t understood the full consequences of what he’d done. Tobias was apparently on the verge of tears when the judge refused to give him a lesser sentence that would allow him to re-enter Australia forthwith.

Cassandra was unable to be in court to support her new husband. She was apparently back in Australia, having been separated from him shortly after their wedding—although not by choice. I heard there had been a problem with her visa, and she’d left the country. Five months had passed, and it appeared that still they were forced to remain apart.

These days, Gabi and Gustl are entering a new phase of life, with their children having left their home. Christina qualified as a teacher in maths and religion; she received a placement near the fairytale castle, Neuschwanstein, and is living in the area. Alexander, an engineer, had left home over three years before, having married Claudia, his girlfriend at the time of Simone’s death; they now live in a suburb of Würzburg. Not even Gustl’s pigs remain in the barn at Rieden. He slaughtered the last one in October, and sold the rest.

Gabi has retired from her work as an assistant to the professor of forensic psychiatry. Now that the house feels empty, she and Gustl want to spend more time together and enjoy being grandparents to
their first grandchild, Alexander’s son, David. The last time Gabi wrote to me, just before Christmas 2013, she said she was finding it hard to look at Simone’s picture without feeling a stunning new bout of pain. They both still long for the day when the Suckfuell siblings will be persuaded to give, publicly, their version of the events that took place on 11 February 2005, and be tested in court.

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I’ve learnt through writing this book that we are compelled to believe in people, even against the odds. We derive faith and hope from the very practice of belief, and a good conscience—better than the conscience we must live with when casting stones, for none of us is free of guilt. I understand why the Strobels had wanted to protect the Suckfuell siblings. In a way, they were protecting themselves, and the only place of safety and solace they knew—their world—to which the Suckfuells also belonged.

The Brennans are like the Strobels in this regard. For now, they are the true believers, perhaps motivated less by religion than by their belief in social justice, the protection of the innocent, and the wrongness of vilification and trial by media—all noble causes. But they do this without full knowledge of the case gathered against Tobias so far. He has their support, their sympathy, and their protection. Since he married their daughter, he even has their name; he’s no longer a Suckfuell.

It’s been easy to forget when writing this book that the siblings and Jens have a right not to incriminate themselves, and therefore an implicit right not to relate the full story of what happened that night to Simone. I have no doubt—and nor do the Strobels now, having read the evidence—that Tobias, Katrin and Jens have behaved in a manner which suggests they have something to hide. But what that might be, we cannot know. The reality, as the jurist Abe Fortas once
said, is that ‘mea culpa’ belongs to a man and his God; the alternative takes us back to the injustices of the Dark Ages and torture.

In medieval times in Franconia, sometimes it was not the accused who was weighted down and drowned in a river as punishment, but members of his or her family—perhaps the aim was to encourage the policing of one’s kin. When I read this I thought of the Suckfuell parents and their suffering. Some might feel this book is a form of medieval punishment—at times I’ve wondered that myself—but then I’m reminded that Tobias and Katrin repeatedly chose to avoid the legal options they had to clear their names. The right not to incriminate yourself does not transform into a right to lie to the police and your friends.

There is always the possibility that shock might account for some of the bizarre behaviour by the three. They were foreigners living outside their culture and language and facing the most stressful of situations, and it’s not hard to come up with reasons that innocent people might be tempted to tell a few lies. And once you make up a story, as two of the three have admitted, you’re on the wrong train, and every stop from then on takes you further from the truth. There is a point, however, where the only way to make things right is to get off, go back to the beginning and start all over again. The deputy coroner, Paul McMahon, back in 2007 issued an invitation for the siblings to attend another inquest to clear their names, and I know the offer still stands.

Often I’ve looked at the picture I first saw of Simone in the cafe called Succulent, and wondered what it is about it that still intrigues me; it’s as if the image holds a subtle key to this mystery. One moment I see a happy young woman, and the next she’s vanished and been replaced by someone puzzled and vulnerable. I’ve since learnt that the brain is not good at receiving mixed signals from the retina, and one channel tends to win out over the other, depending on whether we’re using central or peripheral vision. This might explain the enigmatic effect I always feel when I look at her face.
The sensation also seems connected to my interest in the paradox of relationships, that shaky effect I’ve experienced myself in the past, when everything feels wonderful one moment then turns ugly the next, all in the blink of an eye. Those are the days when things are not quite in focus, when your inner eye can’t quite see what lies before it, and your daily routine suddenly takes on an edge of alarming precariousness. Then the next day, you wake up and wonder what came over you.

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The day before I left to live in England, I went to say goodbye to a friend. As we parted, I told her how I felt I was deserting my mother. Don’t leave me, my mother had said, like a little girl, before she died. And now I was doing exactly that. I knew what she meant: she didn’t want her grave to grow over with weeds, and for my life to carry on in a foreign place where there would be no sign of her, not even a gap in the landscape that she’d previously occupied.

My friend reassured me: ‘All any parent wants for their child is that they move on and become independent, and that’s what your mother would want.’

In a stunning moment of clarity, I realised how wrong her proposition sounded. I was pretty sure that was precisely not what my mother wanted.

Before Simone left Bavaria and came to Australia, she wrote a letter to her parents, to be opened a couple of months later, on her twenty-fifth birthday. In it she quoted a old proverb: When children are little give them roots; when children are grown give them wings. On the subject of wings, she added wryly, ‘I had to help myself along a bit there.’ I guess this is what a child wants: to stand alone in the world, unprotected. In the twilight of the airport transit lounge in Asia, that midway point, I’ve often thought of our planes passing along
the same corridor, like ships in the night, Simone’s heading in the
direction of Brisbane, and mine, several years later, making the trip
back to Bavaria, only because she couldn’t. It all seems twisted.

While I witnessed a mother surviving the devastating loss of her
daughter, I myself became a daughter who lost her mother, as I sus-
ppected I might. Perhaps I was trying to distract myself from my own
experience of death by peering into a much greater abyss. Certainly,
the garden-variety death of my mother and the tragedy of Simone’s
murder have now merged in mind. They can’t be pulled apart.

I’m often reminded how entwining the act of murder is. It gath-
ers us all in its grasp, no matter who we are, and binds us in unex-
pected ways. One day Gabi was tending the flowers on Simone’s
grave when she looked up to see a middle-aged couple wandering
among the headstones. She thought they looked lost. When she was
about to ask them if they needed help, they stopped several graves
away, appearing to have found what they were looking for.

Later that day, Gabi was up at the grave again and found a bunch
of flowers and a card next to Simone’s headstone. The German was
poorly written. Maybe they were some people from Lismore, Gabi
suggested to K on the phone. The card was signed ‘The Brennan
family’.

When K told her that the couple must have been Cassandra’s
parents, Gabi gasped and fell into a chair, handing the phone to
Gustl. Clearly, Kerry and Paul were in Franconia for their only
daughter’s wedding. The card was dated the second of June, the day
before the wedding in Altbessingen—the same day Tobias was
arrested, in fact—but it was delivered nearly a week later.

It was a compassionate gesture. I pictured yet another set of par-
ents, this time from the other side of the world, being drawn to join
the pool that widens at the edge of this grave. In a sense, you are now
standing there too.

The story seems to have no end.
Postscript

The following is a translation of the letter Simone wrote to her parents on 1 July 2004, just before she left for Australia, with instructions to open it on her twenty-fifth birthday.

Hey you two!

Today’s date, September 20th, 2004, is a day where I am turning a quarter of a century old, far, far away but surely also very, very close to you in spirit.

It is a reason for me to say thank you to you, Mama and Papa, with all my heart:

—For the love and affection that you have given me
—For your efforts and the trouble you took with me
—For the many, many, many boxes of beer and ‘non-sparkling water’
—For all the stressful situations and ‘12.00 lunchtime’ with me
—For the Friday-cleaning-sessions of mine (I will miss them a lot)
—For the wonderful siblings
—For my education (it was a tough time!)
—For the strength and confidence in me, and within me, that you have given me
—For the very, very many happy hours with you
—For the many discussions and arguments
—For your appreciation of me as a person, and for letting me be the person that I really am
—For your ‘love of life’ that you’ve given me
—For the blessing that you let me take part in this life—thank you for my birth
—For the security that you give me: thank you for a home, for a spiritual home
Thank you for your love!

There is a wonderful saying for a . . . well, let’s say . . . ideal, educational relationship between parents and their children. It goes like this . . .

*When children are little, give them roots,*

*When children are grown give them wings!*

As I said, it would be perfect if it all worked out that way, but we are humans and humans make mistakes (thank God).

Because, I have to admit, the thing about giving children roots, you did a wonderful job there!

Talking about wings—well, I mean giving someone wings in order to leave the nest untroubled, which is definitely not easy for parents—for you—I had to help myself along a little bit there.

Nevertheless, I thank you for my roots. For it is not easy for me having to spend this episode of my life—which has started for me in Australia a couple of weeks ago—with a little less time for you, and most of all without you!

(But some day that moment had to come!)

But now, enough of all the corny words!
DON’T FORGET ME

Have a drink to me, and to you, today at 6.00 in the morning (ha, ha, ha) (that’s when I have lunch break)
I just wanted to say this!
I LOVE YOU!
Love, Simmi Surfer Woman

P.s. Hey Mum and Dad, one more thing!
If you really live what you practice every Sunday in church, then you really don’t have to be worried about me/us. God will take care of us, nothing will happen to us, because everyone of us is wanted by God. And I promise to you, we will thank God everyday for everything that he gives us + most of all for his guidance.

... defenseless I will be and vulnerable, I know,
on the open sea and only protected by love.’ (Your love!)
‘Departure’, Lothar Zenetti

I LOVE YOU! THANK YOU + CHEERS to Simmi

For the avoidance of doubt, this thesis does not and cannot say who is guilty of murdering Simone Strobel. Readers must not read anything in this thesis as concluding or even inferring that any individual mentioned in this book is guilty of murder.

This thesis presents facts taken from discussions with those who were present in the locality when Simone disappeared and with members of the investigating authorities, and from evidence presented at, as well as the findings of, the coronial inquest into her death.

The circumstantial evidence and facts set out in this thesis do, of course, mean that there is a suspicion (one shared by the New South Wales Police Force) about who may have murdered Simone, but the author does not state anything further than this.
HAVE YOU SEEN SIMONE?
Commentary
The Choice of Genre: Traditions, Problems and Perspectives

*Have You Seen Simone?* is a true crime narrative and factual investigation into the suspicious death of Simone Strobel which took place in Lismore, Australia, 2005. Similarly to the colloquially named ‘Whodunit’ in detective fiction, the narrative is driven by the question of *who* murdered Simone. However, *Simone* (title abbreviated) is a first person narrative that also incorporates elements of memoir, essay, and reportage; in addition, the narration utilises storytelling techniques for mimetic effect in the (re)creation of setting, character and tone.

More broadly, two strands of writing intersect within the project, namely ‘true crime’ and narrative nonfiction. As the purpose of this chapter is to place *Simone* on the genre ‘map’, I will explore the origins of true crime from which early roots my text arises. Beginning with the early modern period, I will discuss true crime in its earliest forms, from the ballad, street literature, and published bulletins to longer length works by authors such as Defoe (a reporter who wrote about possible and probable, but imaginary crimes), before delving into a discussion on the more contemporary issues of the wider genre of narrative nonfiction in the last fifty years. As the debate around narrative nonfiction is extensive, I am confining my discussion to the specific concerns of my project *Simone* which justify an overview of related issues and trends occurring in modern Australia. Finally, I will refer to the more recent approaches of various writers to true crime book-length works in Australia and America with reference to my search for a narrative template.

Genre is used as a term for a ‘type, species, or class of composition’,¹ whereas the term ‘true crime’ registers a theme that typically overlaps with a range of particular genres through certain periods of history. For the purposes of this discussion, the phrase ‘true crime’ will refer to a theme (1), ‘true crime stories’ will be used as an umbrella term for a range of pertinent text types (2), and ‘genres of true crime stories’ will refer to various text types (3), which include ballads, traditional journalistic reportage, new journalism, nonfiction novels, and so on.

In *Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories*, Anita Biressi traces real life crime as a source of narrative entertainment back to at least the early modern

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period. Quoting Walker, Biressi states the prerequisite back then, despite any derived entertainment, was ‘a strong, moral framework’.

> Whatever the sensationalist intent and appeal of rehearsing shocking doings, the central organizing theme of the genre was not disquieting titillation or violence, but the restorative and comforting trilogy of sin, divine providence and redemption.²

Referring to Davis’ *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (1983), Biressi notes that although there were claims to facticity in criminal, biographical ballads and the early crime novel, a clear distinction between fact and fiction was yet to emerge: ‘Histories, stories and news were all important for the lessons they taught and the interpretations they offered, not because of their avowed proximity or distance from the “truth”’ (Biressi, p. 57).

Biressi identifies early true crime arising as a theme in the form of the ballad. Trial pamphlets and line drawings taking the form of strip cartoons were also popular. The pamphlets, it is believed, were distributed as street literature (often written by clergymen), and covered the crime, capture, trial, confession and/or a scaffold speech (Biressi, p. 45). The stories did not shy away from horrific details, but rather attempted to be as gory in impact as any horror film of the present day—the text and material displayed the inevitable punishment a transgressor would suffer should they choose to deviate from ‘Christian values’ and ‘honest labour’. I would suggest that, although these early examples for the true crime theme were didactic and charged with religious concerns and values, they are perhaps the precursor to the present day saturation of true crime in our media, demonstrating an inherent human fascination for violence and deliverance. On a very basic level, these elements trouble the text in *Simone*, but are implied rather than explicit concepts, with the suggestion of violence around Simone’s worrying death and the possibility of closure through the administration of justice.

*The Newgate Calendar* (first published in 1773), bound editions covering the details of crimes, perhaps indicates the increasing concern with the developing genre of true crime stories. Although the focus in the *Calendar* was still on ‘moral edification’, ‘the stories resembled reportage, recording events and making judgment without any obvious authorial voice’ (Biressi, p. 48); however, it seems an element of

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idle reading pleasure was now entering into the form: ‘[Editors] are happy to concede the Calendar’s role as a source of diversion, useful to pass the time on long sea journeys, as well as to instruct families morally’ (Biressi, p. 50). Still absent at this point was any exploration of motive or social cause in the genre, aspects that are very much the concern of Simone.

In the eighteenth century, ‘[m]utual and continuous surveillance could not easily accommodate the social changes engendered by plague, poverty, vagrancy and a rising population’ (Biressi, p. 53). Foucault notes a shift in criminality towards theft, and resultant discourses suggest the emergence of the criminal type and criminal underworld, this concept of the economically motivated ‘criminal’ indicating a development away from the religious concept of the ‘sinner’ (Biressi, p. 56). This cultural period also saw the interest in true crime trigger and partially motivate the writing of novels, where the lives and trials of moral reprobates were described in such works as Daniel Defoe’s. As Defoe was a crime reporter, his novels were ‘all essentially biographical in construction’ (Biressi, p. 54), and they indicate an interest in the motivations for crime. However, despite the shift towards thievery, the murderous criminal (who also preoccupies Simone) still remained of intense fascination to publishers and the reading public.

Around the early nineteenth century, the Memoires (1828-29) of Eugène François Vidocq were published and became the impetus for a significant new development in true crime stories. Having originally started out as a criminal, Vidocq used his knowledge ‘of the social folkways of crime’ to become a most famous French detective. It was through documenting his memoirs, that is, ‘providing the raw material out of which much literature is made’, 3 that Vidocq became the real life inspiration for Poe’s investigator C. Auguste Dupin, and thus a shift in focus from criminal to detective was made in the true crime genre. This indicates a new concern with methodical approaches to the investigation of crime. The detective figure is modified in Simone to become the citizen and investigative protagonist.

Literary essays about crime and punishment (an earlier variety of nonfiction crime narratives, in the tradition of which I am working) were also being written in the first half of the nineteenth century by major writers such as Dickens and Thackeray, but in terms of literary evolution towards a precursor to New Journalism,
perhaps the beginnings of the trend that combined true crime with stories that held aesthetic possibilities in narrative style and form was begun by De Quincey. He wrote two connected essays in *Blackwoods Magazine* entitled *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* where he ‘reconstructed vividly the psychology of the murderer, the victims, and the witnesses’ of a true crime (Richter, p. 4). This kind of sensitivity De Quincey displays for the motivations and effects of crime is very much the concern of the text in *Simone*.

Foucault also discerns a general shift around this time (early 19th century) towards the psychiatrisation of crime (Biressi, p. 64). The courts were no longer just interested in a confession, but also wanted an explanation of the character of the dangerous individual. *Simone* is similar in that it is also preoccupied with speculating about the psychology of suspects, although it must be mentioned there is a difference in psychiatry (which is concerned with the pathological from a medical point of view) and psychology (which may be concerned with non-pathological deviance). This early interest in psychiatry combined with true crime saw the fictional exploration of the criminal maniac in Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1886 novel, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. It is thought to have provided the psychological model for the real-life ‘Jack the Ripper’ who, perhaps in a mimetic act, committed the horrific Whitechapel murders two years after publication of Louis Stevenson’s book. This was the first ‘sex killer’ to enter the public imagination, the idea of a madman who can present as normal and respectable amongst the populace, thus disguised. The case of Jack the Ripper, never having been solved, has served as an inexhaustible source of speculation. Consequently the case and the enigma named somewhat familiarly as Jack, has entered our mythology and psychology as the archetype of evil, one who murders for pleasure. Stevenson’s work raises the possibility that fiction can provide a template for true crime (and as a model fiction can potentially help solve crimes). As the primary data is so inconclusive in *Simone*, I am not searching for patterns which could help form interpretations, and therefore I will not be making a fuller exploration of the fiction genre.

Biressi describes the Moors murder case of 1957 as the modern equivalent of the Ripper’s sexualized violence. By this time the modern media machine was in full operation, and in keeping with the interest in violence traceable to the early modern period, the newspapers were somewhat dependent on true crime to fill pages. The
author Pamela Hansford Johnson, who wrote about the Moors case, theorised that the media was now not just reporting on crime but rather creating it by feeding the imagination, her reasoning being that a ‘semi-literate reading public’ could not cope with the ‘full liberties’ of a mass media (Biressi, p. 69). Whether Hansford Johnson is right in claiming that true crime narrative begets actual crime, one thing is certain, crime narrative was more closely linked to actual events before it became fictionalised (although it should be noted its life-likeness was at some stage less important than the exemplary moral content), and it has over the centuries captured the human imagination resulting in the propagation of stories about perpetration, punishment, and later—stories about motivation, psychology and detection of crime. As mentioned above, although crime fiction is potentially pertinent in the context of real crime, this thesis is primarily concerned with questions of inconclusive evidence in a real case, and the specific kind of ambiguity I explore is not normally a suitable theme for crime fiction.

The widest genre into which Simone falls is creative nonfiction. Australian academic Sue Joseph in an essay on creative nonfiction states:

> There are many labels attributed to the type of writing this paper considers, nearly all of the nomenclature emanating from the USA and the UK. Some of them include: literary journalism, documentary journalism, literary non-fiction, art journalism, non fiction novel, immersion journalism, factual fiction, non fiction reporting, long form narrative, narrative journalism, intimate journalism, New Journalism, the New New Journalism, literature of reality, and the art of fact, literature of fact. Again, the list goes on.4

Joseph identifies creative nonfiction sub-genres as true crime, memoir, essay and more, to name a few that directly relate to the Simone project. There is not a lot of creative nonfiction being written in Australia, and its identifiable history belongs to Britain and America. This essay focuses on Australia as the story is set there and is chiefly written for an Australian public. According to journalist and Australian academic Matthew Ricketson, creative nonfiction takes a large investment of time and money, and Australia’s vast landscape and small population make it impractical for it to produce publications such as The New Yorker, Esquire (US) and Granta (UK), the publications that enable this genre to thrive overseas (Joseph, p. 33). What debate

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there is around creative nonfiction in Australia (and elsewhere) includes contentions over nomenclature. The name *creative nonfiction* itself is considered an oxymoronic phrase; even nonfiction is considered unsatisfactory by some for its attempt to define the genre by what it is not; many describe creative nonfiction as *Journalism*, attaching the noun to its various adjuncts, *Literary*, *Narrative*, and further back, *New*—but calling it *journalism* seems to make the genre an extension or attenuation of its most basic origin, namely, news reporting, thus a novelist turning her hand to nonfiction may find the term alienating despite her use of reportage methods in creating ‘scenes’.

Although creative nonfiction is being taught in the academies, there is a surprisingly high level of resistance in Australia by practitioners to categorise their work, let alone find an appropriate double-barrel to name the genre. A handful of successful practitioners randomly selected by Joseph for her aforementioned article replied variously to the idea that they be grouped together as creative nonfiction writers:

You know I’m just living in Byron and trying to work out how to write this bloody book and going through the agony of that […] And wondering what you should do has nothing to do with seeing yourself as part of a category or classification. David Leser

I don’t know why there would be such a group. There isn’t one in fiction that I’m aware of […] Helen Garner

The term [creative non-fiction] is silly and I’d never say that is what I am doing. I write fiction and non-fiction. Chloe Hooper

I’m not saying [the term creative non-fiction is] invalid or illegitimate or whatever but it bears no relationship to the act of writing. Margaret Simons (Joseph, pp. 40-48)

This resistance to being grouped or categorised has perhaps resulted in a lack of discourse on the canon in Australia, suggests Joseph; this lack certainly stands out in comparison to the ‘gravitas’ accorded discussions in the USA and UK. The resistance also suggests a certain type of national manifestation in creative writing in Australia, a hostility to classifying hybridity perhaps, deriving from a ‘larrikin element’ that in its individualism refuses to be defined (Joseph, p. 49). In terms of writing *Simone*, perhaps the effect of this was that I could not discern any ready template or movement I could be guided by. In this hiatus, I was concerned that the story I wanted to tell
was perhaps not legitimate for a book-length treatment, and I worried that the first person voice of a non-journalist was inappropriate. Discovering the discussion around the canon after the event of writing seems worthy of mention, as it resulted in my methodology being one of lengthy trial and error. The Australian writer Simons’ comment that reflecting on the categorising of literary form ‘bears no relationship to the act of writing’ is perhaps accurate to a degree, but it would be too strong to suggest writers are not, subconsciously or otherwise, relying on some genre specific templates and influences even when being innovative. In hindsight I can see a creative work is never creatio ex nihilo; it is the result of problem solving behaviour that involves trial and error and partly also follows patterns set by former works, whether a writer knows it or not.

Matthew Ricketson is one of the few critics and practitioners in Australia who is talking about genre. In his thesis exploring the ethics of creative nonfiction, he coins the pragmatic term Book-length Journalism for longer creative nonfiction works. Ricketson defines book-length journalism as ‘an area of writing where practitioners take a narrative or storytelling approach to presenting their accounts of people, events and issues’. By comparison, hard news journalism is, he says, expository, formal, ‘tethered to the institutional voice’ with facts written in ‘descending level of importance’. He disagrees with the concept of ‘fictional techniques’ being applied to nonfiction, arguing that these techniques, in fact, belong to storytelling in general, not fiction, and that using the term ‘fictional techniques’ implies, quoting the Oxford Dictionary, that something has been ‘feigned or invented’ (Ricketson, ‘Not muddying’, para. 10). Also, a tendency to describe book-length journalism as a ‘novel’ concerns him. He points out that novels are plotted, and that practitioners of book-length journalism should never impose a plot on their raw material in order to make a nonfiction work read more like a novel. Quoting Walt Harrington, an American author and academic, Ricketson agrees that if a writer becomes too obsessed with the shape of a story, producing ‘something out of the mess’, they will ‘inevitably fall back on well-worn themes and observations—interpretative clichés’. It’s the conflation of fiction and nonfiction in ‘book-length journalism’ (to use his preferred term) that concerns Ricketson, the importance of

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distinguishing between the different types of truth in literature.

Turning to the worldwide landscape of creative nonfiction, there are clearly marked milestones. Although said to be new in its methodology, Truman Capote’s self-described nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, released in 1966, is perhaps more accurately described as a revival of fictionalising true crime. While the texts are not comparable, this general practice of fictionalising facts so that they read like a story rather than a news report was taking place in the seventeen and eighteenth centuries with works from Daniel Defoe. Both Capote and Defoe use material from the experiential world in order to create an imaginary slice of life. However, Defoe used the technique to imagine a possible experiential world of fictitious facts and events. The world imagined by Capote in *In Cold Blood*, on the other hand, is supposed to represent actual facts and events from the perspective of a fictitious observer of pertinent scenes. Capote was not supposed to invent anything which distorted the actual facts and events, whereas Defoe could invent facts and events, so long as they were in line with his idea of a possible reality.

Capote believed journalism was ‘[…] “the most underestimated, the least explored of literary mediums”’ and he aimed to create a work of art by reporting actual events’.6 In the context of his time, he assisted in breaking down an attitude towards fact and fiction at a point when novelists were perceived the true artists for inventing stories from their imagination, and factual stories were considered to be the lesser form. It was ‘unbecoming to the serious writer’s artistic dignity’ to even bother with journalism, claimed Capote in a personal interview, ‘except as a sideline, “hackwork”, something to be done when the creative spirit is lacking.’7 Driven by a need to escape his ‘self-created world’, Capote took his tool kit of fictional techniques and used them to construct an immersive world in *In Cold Blood*, a true crime narrative that as a result reads like crime fiction. At the same time he learnt new skills, he told Plimpton in his 1966 interview, skills more aligned with journalism such as training himself in developing an eidetic memory for dialogue, and what he calls a ‘20/20 eye for visual detail’ (Plimpton interview, para. 6). Remembering the slipperiness of practising ‘fictional techniques’ in Ricketson’s caution, it is interesting to note that Ricketson

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points to Capote as a writer who had a ‘habitual impulse towards fiction’, suggesting that Capote did not entirely escape the ‘self-created world’ of which he said he’d tired (Ricketson, ‘Truman Capote’, para. 32). Ricketson is referring to claims of inaccuracy by witnesses privy to testimony in the Clutter case or witnesses present at the events later described in In Cold Blood—even Capote himself, in a published letter to his subject Marie Dewey, admits he has no problem ‘inventing details’ should her memory fail to provide him material for his book (Ricketson, ‘Truman Capote’, para. 32). His depictions of Perry Smith are also factually contested, and it appears Capote set about making Smith a more sympathetic character, and maybe more deliberately a great character of American literature. So perhaps Capote did not always go where the facts led him, rather choosing to privilege his art over accuracy. This is the very concern Ricketson alerts us to in complaining about descriptions such as ‘fictional technique’ and calling nonfiction a ‘novel’. Creating an immersive experience for the reader, a seamless fiction-like narrative, where the narrator is invisible in third person narration, was not an option in Simone, as my very presence during the fieldwork phase before writing had a direct impact on the unfolding of the future narrative, or ‘plot’.

Tom Wolfe, like Capote, also set about dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre. Wolfe’s particular emphasis was on creating the illusion that the reader was eyewitness to the events on the page, and in order to do this, in the words of Wolfe, he attempted to capture ‘the subjective and emotional life of the characters’. He described how his subjects felt using the technique of interior monologues, thus, making up the thoughts and feelings of his subjects. Rather than sounding like individuals, however, it is said the characters often ended up being ‘a form of impersonation [Wolfe] does for the reader and, with this in mind, the reader is not perhaps expected to take these passages as a literal attempt to render a person’s […] thoughts.’ This step away from factual accuracy was not an option in Simone where questions of truth and veracity trouble the text.

More and more fiction writers entered the area of journalism in America as the
demand for short fiction decreased in the postwar years, among them Norman Mailer (Freeman and Le Rossignol, para. 5). He wrote *The Executioner’s Song* using a distinctive focalising technique where the third person narrator constantly modified voice to reflect the character who occupied that section of the text. Finally (after Wolfe and Capote, both of whom wrote almost exclusively in third person using multiple points of view), Hunter S. Thompson ‘—using his particular style of Gonzo journalism—projected the narrator into his stories’ with a first person voice (Freeman and Le Rossignol, para. 6). Now the author was acknowledging his presence, and with no pretence of objectivity, Gonzo journalism (first named Gonzo by Thompson’s friend, the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* editor Bill Cardoso after the word appeared in Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and it was then reclaimed by Thompson to describe his style) was an immersive journalistic experience with a ‘raw, un-edited quality’ in which Thompson used his trademark sarcasm, humour and profanities in the text.\(^{10}\) Joan Didion, also using first person, gained attention for her 1968 collection of essays titled *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, describing her experiences of California in the Sixties. She gave the trend in first person narration a swing towards the personal essay. It is in this form of nonfiction—the essay—that I see the origins for the methodology I would finally come to use in writing my project, *Simone*. I was not just going to acknowledge my presence in the text, but expose my subjectivity and elements of my identity in order to establish, in the most transparent way possible, a personal point of view.

‘*Essais*’ is derived from the French *essayer* meaning ‘to trial’, ‘to test’, ‘to attempt’; Joseph Epstein in his preface to *The Norton Book of Personal Essays* ‘writes of the personal essay as a way of reasoning’ (Epstein, quoted in Freeman and Le Rossignol, para. 9).

‘What one discovers in writing such essays is where one stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects. In writing the essay, one tests one’s feelings, instincts, thoughts, in a crucible of composition’ […] The essay, he suggests, becomes ‘a distinct way of viewing the world rather than the assemblage of a range of opinions.’ (Epstein, quoted in Freeman and Le Rossignol, para. 9)

Epstein’s definition resonates with the reflective and questing approach I took in writing *Simone*. Essaying, however, also has distinct links to other trends in nonfiction. One of these trends is called Immersion Writing. Professor Robin Hemley in his 2012 ‘field guide’ describes immersion as a type of writing that ‘engages the writer in the here and now in a journalistic sense, shaping and creating a story happening in the present while unabashedly lugging along all that baggage that makes up the writer’s personality: his or her memories, culture and opinions’.

The form mixes memoir and journalism, and Hemley distinguishes a slant in emphasis and purpose: namely, in immersion memoir, ‘the writer writes about the world in order to examine the self’, whereas in immersion journalism, ‘the writer includes the self in order to write about the world’ (Hemley, p. 9).

Unlike the essay, immersion writing requires some sort of activity on the part of the writer in the form of a reenactment, an experiment, infiltration, investigation, quest, or journey (as in the case of travel writing). It is arguable that journalism and memoir are enmeshed in the *Simone* project, that is, I write about the uncertain self to illuminate the ambiguous world, and in writing about that ambiguous world, I also go some way to illuminating the self. Both strands lead to different insights, the former focusing on the complexity of society, the latter on what it is to be me—a condition that might resound with others. Although there are elements of memoir very present in *Simone*, personal reflection is mostly used to augment and facilitate the main journalistic narrative, namely the strand that illuminates the particularly difficult circumstances around Simone’s death, and through the process raises legal, social and cultural issues. Although immersion journalism seems best to describe the practical form in which *Simone* was written, as a narrator I do at least attempt also to illuminate the ambiguous self as much as the world we live in, so it would be remiss not to note a political trend currently taking place in essaying that perhaps best describes the

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spirit in which *Simone* was written.

The Canadian and Australian form of writing fictocriticism is a practice of genre transgression, and technically far removed from the book-length journalism Ricketson prescribes for writers engaged in presenting accounts of people, events and issues. ‘[Fictocriticism] is a way of writing suited to speculative thinking and to modes or research in which the researcher is implicated in what is investigated,’ says Australian academic Anna Gibbs. I am not suggesting *Simone* is necessarily an example of fictocritical writing, as the text is not engaging in academic discourse and theory that fictocriticism aims to challenge, but rather I am suggesting that the trend towards hybridity and the boundary crossing of genres and academic disciplines that fictocriticism promotes is reflected in my methodology; my narrator, a surrogate for myself, is a fiction writer who transgresses boundaries by immersing herself in a criminal investigation that results in a commentary on a case that would under different circumstances be heard in a law court. Something more of a movement than a genre, fictocriticism is considered to have originated in response to the constraints and authority of academic writing. Fictocritical voices are said to arise from the margins of academia, typically blurring the defining lines between creative and critical texts in an effort to express new ways of knowing. Founded in Canada and Australia, the movement is considered linked to Feminism and Post-Colonialism. Fictocriticism, says Flavell, has ‘an awareness of the body’, reminding us at times what it is to be ‘human’ through moments of ‘weakness’, ‘failure’ and ‘doubt’ (Flavell, p. 23). While theory is often present in a fictocritical text, it is not privileged over ‘life and experience’; and often ‘experience’ can arise in fictocritical works as a commentary on the process of writing and researching the text, that is, the very experience of writing. This sort of self-conscious awareness of writing technique often leads to the criticism that the writer’s subjectivity is located at the centre of the work (a concern of my own when writing *Simone*), but, says Flavell, this is only ‘a failing if measured against a standard [the writer] was not wishing to emulate’ (Flavell, p. 26).

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As I mentioned earlier, at no point am I engaging in the academic discourses of criticism and theory that fictocriticism aims to challenge, yet still the thesis or argument behind the (non)-genre seems inherent in my work, considering I am writing about the law. The purpose of the law, as with science, is to attempt to ‘eliminate ambiguity and uncertainty’, to reduce what is known to one credible theoretical account.\textsuperscript{14} Literature on the other hand is ‘inherently ambiguous and unconstrained’.\textsuperscript{15} In my search for meaning I use the naïve and sometimes vulnerable self to explore the social reality of uncertainty and ambiguity. In the text I also reflect on questions that are firmly theoretical and critical, such as: how should writers/narrators conduct themselves when speculating about a legally unresolvable case? Should they be mediator or arbitrator? Can a speculative argument illuminate a legal situation that largely remains opaque? The running theme of uncertainty and sometimes vulnerability is a similar seam that is being mined in academia by fictocritical practitioners.

Within the genre of true crime there are certain narrative models set by the available texts in the canon, templates that are suggestive of how the ethically sensitive story can (or perhaps should be) approached by an author. In Australia, I initially identified four examples in this category that I considered were exemplar texts: John Bryson’s \textit{Evil Angels} (Lindy Chamberlain/infanticide case), Helen Garner’s \textit{The First Stone} (sexual assault), Joe Cinque’s \textit{Consolation} (Anu Singh/murder reduced to manslaughter), and John Dale’s \textit{Huckstepp} (unsolved murder). Outside of Australia, I looked at three American texts: Anne Rule’s \textit{The Stranger Beside Me} (Ted Bundy/serial murderer), Janet Malcolm’s \textit{Iphigenia in Forest Hills} (murder case/custody case), and James Ellroy’s \textit{My Dark Places} (unsolved murder).

I decided Garner’s two works were exceptional for their style. She writes like the fictocritical writer Flavell describes, mixing factual evidence with the personal, in a voice that is driven with polemic intensity. (It should be noted, however, that Garner is providing her commonsensical views rather than conscientiously engaging

with academic issues.) In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, she writes: ‘I understand now that I went to Canberra [to watch the Singh murder trial] because the break-up of my marriage had left me humiliated and angry’.\(^\text{16}\) Her status: ‘unemployed’; she is slightly marginalised but nonetheless readying to write a fierce, emotional book that probes the gap between the ethics and the law. Her voice is so intimate and uniquely ‘Garner’ that I initially (and mistakenly) decide her dominant “I” sets her aside as inimitable. The only reason she could get away with this sort of methodology, it seemed, was because she *is* Garner, a provocative Australian literary icon. On reflection, however, her template—bringing subjectivity to a case that has nothing to do with her—most resembles the approach I take in *Simone*, using my own particular narrative voice.

With the exception of James Ellroy, whose true crime work is memoir, the other works struck me as being written by ‘professional’ true crime writers, mostly journalists who wrote in the style of an expert addressing an auditorium of detectives, usually beginning with an evidence-based, dramatic reconstruction of a crime or crime-like scene. The genre seemed distinctly linked to the authoritative journalistic voice. As news reports disseminate fact and attribute comment like an omniscient narrator, true crime writers trying to make sense of the crime facts through dramatization seemed to be telling the story from the same side of the lens, in the voice of the third person, or when writing in first person, they occasionally glimpsed like a private eye peering around a corner. This made sense, as storytelling based on *evidence*, I was sure, required a tone that implied clarity and distance and impartiality on the part of the writer. The crime writer’s motive should be, it seemed, to provide no more than a faithfully rendered account of what happened. The author/first person narrator *reacting* to the crime as an *inexpert* journalist or novice writer (the most truthful perspective I felt inclined to write from) appeared a subversive tactic in true crime, one that was undoubtedly counterproductive to the objective account that other authors strove for in the name of journalistic balance—in fact, contrary to the generic rule, my approach would be drawing attention to the implied author’s subjectivity, and perhaps therefore too, a lack of balance on the serious subject of unsolved crime.

James Ellroy was markedly different to the other writers. He wrote with vulnerability and intimacy about crime. Ellroy explores his mother’s murder in *My

Dark Places, a part memoir, part reportage investigation. After thirty-six years ‘running from her ghost’, he attempts to ‘exorcise it through crime fiction’. In 1994, he goes back to L.A. ‘to find out the truth about his mother—and himself,’ reads the back cover. His stylistic and intense narrative often comes in urgent bursts—short sentences, short paragraphs—exposing the psychological effects of his mother’s murder on his erratic inner world.

She pointed me towards her secrets. Her lead was a taunt and a dare. She challenged me to discover how she lived and died [...] [...] She was dead. She was insensate. It was ridiculous to wonder if she’d understand or not. I had a crass show and tell side. She was the heart of my story. The issue troubled me. I respected her privacy and was setting out to destroy it.17

The sense of a supernatural world affected in the prose—suggestive of ghostliness, yet at the same time questioning such notions—creates an ambiguity that appealed to me at a time I was struggling with my own relationship to ‘my’ subject/victim, Simone. Like Ellroy, I also felt a need to work through something personal in my book, but the obvious difference was that Ellroy was writing about his mother; inserting himself in the narrative as an emotionally raw protagonist was justifiable. It didn’t seem so in my case. I could find no other ready-to-hand text at the time that could explain why it was I should want to write a partial memoir about a complete stranger’s murder.

Even in The Stranger Beside Me (1980), Rule, when discovering the serial killer she is investigating at the time for her book is Ted Bundy, her work colleague and friend, she remains remarkably remote in the tone of her narrative. Like me, Rule had gained the trust of the police. She had been a policewoman, had studied psychology, police science and creative writing, and at the point of writing her book had written up over 800 cases (mostly homicide) as a crime reporter for the True Detective Magazine.18 Written predominantly in the third person, Rule’s text draws on her professional training as a crime reporter and policewoman, skillfully reconstructing Bundy’s background and crimes through a myriad of perspectives and sources. Although she also brings a personal perspective to the crime, interjecting in

first person to reveal something of her own life and relationship with Bundy, she firmly positions herself as primarily omniscient, the consummate novelist, a writer completely in charge of her material.

In *Huckstepp - A dangerous life*, Australian writer John Dale approaches his narrative solutions in a similar way to Rule. The only encouraging link to my preferred intimate approach that I could see in this work was that Dale spied his subject in a bar (the prostitute and murder victim Sally Huckstepp) and obliquely suggests he was almost ‘chosen’ then to write her story: ‘I felt then Sally was an actress, rehearsing for some kind of role, that she needed an audience to appreciate her moves, and that I had been selected purely by chance.’ All Huckstepp had done was throw Dale a smile as she passed by the bar he worked behind. I notice Dale moves beyond this fateful encounter, himself, and the bar to develop narrative expertise, reconstructing a mostly omniscient narrative through accumulating multiple perspectives from interviews and other source material such as evidence, statements and court transcripts. More and more, my wanting to discover what had happened to Simone, as much as what was happening to me through a first person narrative, seemed to be developing into some sort of narrative flaw, playing havoc with my point of view and more pointedly, the objectivity I deemed necessary for the typical methodology of crime writing. I worried too that my preferred approach demonstrated a narcissistic impulse that would affect the tone and expose me as an unreliable narrator, but at the same time I sensed for a number of years that although I had no real place in Simone’s story, I’d somehow been worked over, reeled into her story as though I was a victim of something myself. But according to Professor Robin Hemley, this altered sense of reality is a normal feeling for writers who have become immersed, especially for one who is engaged in some sort of infiltration exercise (and I would suggest interviewing a suspect contains elements of subterfuge in that the interviewer may be required to feign belief):

> Not all spies get caught in their own schemes and machinations, but all are in some ways implicated. As an immersion journalist, it’s impossible to stay above the fray. That’s not to say that you necessarily will suffer a mental or spiritual collapse, but you’ll likely encounter some version of a dark night of the soul. (Hemley, p. 86)

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Ultimately, I would discover my place on the historic ‘map’ of traditions governing true crime narratives and varieties of creative nonfiction, or rather, as certain problems related to transparency, subjectivity, limited point of view, gaps in the story and ethics arose, the options for a narrative method narrowed. It was through the heuristic solving of these problems a way forward organically evolved, one that would encompass not any one genre but an integration of many under what has become for some the catch-all umbrella of narrative or creative nonfiction; the personal essay which, for its constellation of ideas, uses the subjectivity of self as a central filter to analyse larger issues that affect us all; similarly, immersion writing for its narrative set up, that is, for the rendition of the ticket (quest, investigation, infiltration etc) it provides the writer to explore the self while simultaneously engaging with the outside world; the spirit of fictocriticism for its appreciation of the importance of crossing of boundaries, transgressing not just those genre boundaries but also disciplines of thinking by allowing, for example, a creative writer to cross over into matters normally associated with law; true crime for its double vision in providing a reflective mirror for the author to explore the self, and its narrative drive for psychological and moral knowledge; storytelling techniques in creating narrative tension, structure, and through mimetic description of character, and setting; journalism for the techniques it provides in order to gather facts via interviews and source materials, and in part, the technique of delivering facts through exposition or reportage.
The Narrator

I once told my supervisor I was not writing a true crime story. He assured me I was. But I had no interest in true crime. I pictured those books on the paperback stand with lurid covers and blood-splattered titles; prurient and macabre, they represented the crime leisure industry, the carnival-ride-reading experience of inducing fear for pleasure. To be frank, I had discovered by then there were many literary true crime narratives that stood apart from the sensationalist type, but they struck me as being written by ‘professional’ crime writers, mostly journalists who wrote in the authoritative style of an expert addressing an auditorium of readers, that is, without intimacy. I was not a journalist. I was a newspaper reader, and I knew that somehow the voice of this book had to reflect the receiver of journalism rather than the sender, in a reversal of the usual roles.

This chapter sets out to build a case for the newspaper reader as a relatively new voice in true crime. With the field of publishing widening via the internet and globalisation, and boundaries between different forms of writing becoming porous, I will explore the effects of the cultural theorist Seltzer’s concept of the so-called ‘media machine’ on the newspaper reader, the latter who, by slipping between the lines of a news report, has come to inhabit the newspaper story. Firstly, I will define what Seltzer means by the media machine and what he perceives its effects are on an individual’s sense of reality. Throughout the chapter I will be testing the merit of his model and how this delivery system of true crime may have led Garner and myself to engage in personal narratives beyond the news report. I will also look at how such an amateur detective/narrator (on the receiving end of journalism) in practice differs from the journalist in style and voice (and eventually method in the following chapter). This discussion will cover these questions by examining criticisms of Garner’s work, which is provocative and personal, and which thus manages to divide the journalism and humanities academies. This will further lead to a discussion on the effectiveness and pitfalls of using the personal narrator as a miniature tool with which to explore a complex and large social subject such as crime, and how the problems and advantages apply to my own work.

Seltzer’s premise in True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity is that we are all true crime readers living in what in what he describes as a ‘wound
culture’ generated by the media machine.\textsuperscript{20} We gather in an imaginary cluster each day to read, watch, and listen to stories of terror and trauma, and we are constantly reminded of our individual corporeality, that is, the statistical risk of finding ourselves not the reader of tomorrow’s news article but rather the subject matter, the daily offering of victim—but for now we become (for as long as we can) one of ‘those that walk away’ (Seltzer, p. 125). On this reading, true crime is not so much about the bizarre freak show of the cheap paperback as the reality of our world. This resonated with me as I sat down to write, suggesting I was not so much a writer of Simone’s story as a newspaper reader churned out by the media machine. According to Seltzer’s model, from the facts made available by the news, I had, to a degree ‘witnessed’ Simone’s murder synthetically via a variety of news delivery methods, on which I will shortly elaborate. The normality of my world was being altered by ‘stranger intimacy’ and a sense of ‘vicarious violation’ (Seltzer, p. 2).

One would think from Seltzer’s dramatic phrasing that we as readers are passive recipients of the media, without the faculties to filter what we are exposed to. I would suggest Seltzer’s delivery is deliberately stylized and provocatively Orwellian in tone in order to make an alarming point about the impact of a media represented reality on our sense of the world, the mass media being a fairly new concept since the nineteenth century and a cultural product we have become reliant upon as market consumers. Seltzer’s ideas do not necessarily fit the whole, but they have gone some way to illuminating my personal experience of the media and eventual interest in writing Simone, and therefore I would like to examine his thoughts a little further.

Seltzer argues that the daily reports of true crime give us our sense of the real world, and whatever the real world is, it’s becoming indissociable from the media through the doubling of the act (for example: representations of the aftermath, return to the scene of the crime, reenactment etc) and observation, that is, daily witnessing of the act: further examples include observing footage of traumatic events in live feeds, eye witness interviews, reconstructions, victim statements, and repetitive coverage. We even observe the media as it observes itself in meta-footage. By selecting and framing what it observes, the media in its doubling of the event constructs our sense of reality. With particular reference to the CNN effect (Cable News Network), since the Eighties new technologies have allowed the flow of real time news. The most

famous and early example of the CNN effect is the coverage of the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square. Saturated, 24-hour global news coverage of violent events may give the illusion of direct visual access to an event’s presence (as compared to earlier forms of journalism, in which it was evident that someone informed us about an event), but the observer is not present, and the act is only a representation. If our sense of the real is indissociable from the media as Seltzer says, one might ask how can any of us truly discern its full effects when such knowledge requires a retrospective comparison with a world prior to the existence of contemporary televised media. A variance in attitudes to media imagery and text may be tested through social research, however.

Seltzer calls the consumer of the news the ‘synthetic witness’; a witness of witnesses, the synthetic witness observes a doubling of the real world held in place by the media. In the process, we (the readers) become ‘professional mourners’. He describes a parasitic relationship where the reader feeds on true crime, likening it to the ‘surrogate sensualities’ of the novel (Seltzer, p. 25). Again, prone to stylistic violence himself, he even questions whether the media itself is not a form of crime against humanity, a mass ‘murder’ of our own reality, assuming we no longer develop our concept of reality through firsthand experience but through a market driven, often violent ‘reality’ that has already passed through many hands (Seltzer, p. 162). I would argue that Seltzer, for the purpose of making his point, overlooks journalism that is particularly dedicated to detailed, investigative reporting rather than the dramatic ‘sensation’.

Occasions of public outrage towards the media, however, indicate there is some evidence that consumers do feel victimized at times, and that their ability to cope with the synthetic real is sometimes stretched too far. A recent example: Thanks to you I have lost all faith in humanity tweets a newspaper reader in response to the New York Post’s (Dec 4, 2012) front-page coverage of a subway murder. The story carried a photograph shown under the headline: DOOMED...this man is about to die. The reader sees the back of the victim’s head, his abject shoulders rounding as he stares at an approaching train—his elbow and a pale white hand rest flat on a platform where he should be standing; too high for him to climb, his feet remain on the tracks. In some ways observers of photography enter a ghostly realm to witness moments that

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21 Identified as: jaX, tweet comment on online article, The Guardian, Tuesday, 4 December, 2012 (no more information available).
have effectively ‘passed away’, but in the New York Times shot we are literally forced into a moment of ‘presence’ as we also face down a train, suspended in perpetuity, awaiting imminent death. The photograph is as shocking as it is mesmerizing. Straight away, the news item became as referential as a hall of mirrors with journalists also protesting use of the shot through their own news outlets, and blogs and tweets showed high levels of public distress.

As much as we may resent the impact of the media on our sense of what is real, the popularity of the media indicates the masses have an attraction to a product that has a predominant offering of true crime. Seltzer suggests the appeal of crime, in part, can be blamed on the crime news story’s close relationship to fiction.

 [...] true crime looks like crime fact that looks like crime fiction, it marks or irritates the distinction between real and fictional reality, holding steadily visible that vague and shifting region between truth and falsity where belief resides […] (Seltzer, p. 2)

This relationship Seltzer suggests exists between crime fact and crime fiction (or true crime and detective fiction) is perhaps also enhanced by the intertextual nature of storytelling in crime where, for the purpose of reconstructing a crime, references can be made to other crime narratives as models. The Routledge Encyclopedia, although only referring to fiction, seems to support this view when it states the self-reflexivity present in detective fiction (‘[c]haracters, for example, discuss[ing] the crime at hand by comparing it to cases from detective fiction’) causes literary theorists to use the genre as an example of a form that encapsulates the basic principles of narrativity (Routledge Encyclopedia, p. 103). In further explanation:

By emphasizing narrative sequence, suspense, and closure; by making the hierarchical organization of narrative levels visible; by illustrating the operations of intertextuality; and by reflecting reading, writing, and interpretation, detective fiction represents narrativity in its basic form. (Routledge Encyclopedia, p. 104)

Similarly, I would argue that readers, like writers, are also imbued in the narrative principles of true crime and can enter into the familiar narrative mode whereby they interpret or look for ‘clues’ in order to make sense of a mystery provided by the news report. This search may involve trying out narratives about earlier cases that may fit
the current one, and in this process fact and purely hypothetical constructs merge indistinguishably. And this is what senders and receivers of the media machine share with crime fiction—all three engage in speculation, and the process is thematized in the product.

Interestingly, in the opening chapters of *Simone*, as the investigative protagonist I find myself in the liminal space between fiction (a short story I am trying to write) and nonfiction (the engrossing news report). I drift off, cogitating on the gaps in the news report like a reader of crime fiction, conjecturing, fantasizing and theorising about where Simone might be. Crime reports represent conflict and complication, the necessary narrative elements for storytelling. Apart from appealing to our human need for story, Seltzer posits that crime reports also create a sense of community. He says, ‘[i]f we cannot gather in the face of anything other than crime, violence, terror, trauma, and the wound, we can at least commiserate’ (Seltzer, p. 2). His analysis may seem a simplistic account of contemporary social cohesion; we still of course have assemblies of worship, education, culture, and recreation where we interact, but the catastrophic news event is also very successful at binding society through, for example, mass mourning and fundraising. We read independently, but with an awareness of others participating in what is paradoxically a solitary yet highly social act.

Garner’s literary technique exposes this intimacy and responsiveness to the bond between media and readers when she introduces us to her protagonist (who is the first person narrator) in *The First Stone*.

One morning in August 1992 I opened The Age at breakfast time and read that a man I had never heard of, the Master of Ormond College, was up before a magistrate on a charge of indecent assault: a student had accused him of putting his hand on her breast while they were dancing. I still remember the jolt I got from the desolate little item: What has the world come to? All morning I kept thinking about it… [Helen Garner called her friends who’d seen the item too] ’He touched her breast and she went to the cops? […]’ But all that day I experienced repeated rushes of horror. I didn’t stop to analyze these feelings. I just sat down and wrote the man a letter.22

*Wrote the man a letter?* It’s a sympathetic letter, Garner seeing the complaint to the police as an act of ‘warfare’ against the less tame sex. Journalist Janet Malcolm

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describes Garner’s letter in a book review as a naïve move on her part—‘She did what a journalist must never do—she showed her hand too early […]’—, and the next two hundred pages deal with the consequences of this mistake.\(^\text{23}\) Perhaps a ‘synthetic witness’ to the event, Garner is identifying, commiserating, and in a sense identifying with a character in the news report by taking sides. She is not standing back to observe this ‘reality’, rather she is becoming involved in a report that has nothing, prima facie, to do with her. Even Garner’s implied domestic setting in the narrative points to a newsreader sitting at breakfast, not a journalist. In this setting and circumstances it is not so surprising to hear Malcolm acerbically define *The First Stone* as a work of ‘personal journalism which can be likened to a novel with an unreliable narrator’ (‘Women at War’, pp. 73-74).

On hearing Malcolm’s cool, journalistic analysis of Garner, I am reminded of Seltzer’s commentary on the effects of media on the reader of the news: ‘[T]hese small and intense melodramas of the wound acclimatize readers and viewers to take the social conditions personally’ (Seltzer, p. 10). Note that Malcolm in her review seems also to agree that the report has ignited in Garner the reader some sort of personal crisis to the point of rendering her ‘unreliable’, even emotionally unbalanced. She writes: ‘Although [Garner’s] purported role is “balance”, it is as a very unbalanced person that she represents herself’ (‘Women at War’, p. 75). When the sexually harassed women refuse to speak to her, she drops the very misdemeanor she had set out to investigate, and instead pursues the women ‘obsessively’, writes Malcolm:

‘I wanted to find Elizabeth Rosen and Nicole Stewart and shake them till their teeth rattled,’ she writes on receiving another rebuff from the young women…. ‘I gnashed my teeth so hard I saw stars,’ she writes on hearing that they have agreed to give interviews to a writer from Vogue. ‘Vogue!’ These are not the reactions of a seasoned journalist but the ravings of a rejected lover. (‘Women at War’, p. 75)

Malcolm finally draws a correlation between Garner’s book’s argument and her unconscious mind:

Garner’s oscillating identifications with harasser and harassed, her lurchings

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between generations and genders, her alternating states of delusion and perception invite comparison with the coded messages of patients in psychotherapy. In the unconscious we are children and parents, old and young, victim and aggressor, gay and straight all at once. (‘Women at War’, p. 75)

But as academic Brigid Rooney points out, Garner is not a trained journalist like Malcolm, nor is she an academic:

Hers is the career of the freelance writer, the independent amateur, rather than the institutionally disciplined specialist […] [Her] literary autonomy authorizes and produces a specific node of public discourse that articulates everyday values of commonsense and direct experience.24

Perhaps if Garner belonged to an academy she could be criticised for breaking with conventions, but she is unashamedly the maverick, and perhaps for some irritatingly so, as she explores her topic through an emotional lens.

An illuminating emotional approach in principle should be acceptable to readers, but the question of whether specific kinds of alternating feelings and their related viewpoints in The First Stone actually obscure important facets of social life is a concern. Ricketson accuses Garner of misleading the reader when she is blocked from speaking to the young women by their advisor at Ormond College (later found to be Dr Jenna Mead). Garner says she turned Mead into multiple characters, thus disguising her in order to avoid a defamation action. But Ricketson is more doubtful of Garner’s motive. Calling the decision a ‘ruse’, he points out that the effect of a conspiracy of ‘shrill, faceless, punitive feminists on campus’ makes Garner appear reasonable and the feminists representing Mead, up to nine on his count, completely unreasonable.25 ‘How could this Hydra actually be a solitary articulate feminist who offered legitimate arguments when she had decided not to co-operate with Garner’s research’ (Ricketson in bodyjamming, p. 90). Although Garner says she did not want to split up Mead it does appear that obscuring the academic’s identity enabled her to unreasonably magnify and justify her feelings of resentment in the text.

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I too was aware that I was responding emotionally to the news reports that inspired Simone rather than acting as a journalist who might appraise the story for its potential ‘leads’ or news value. With feelings of obsession over a missing person’s photograph, to assume the role of journalist (for which I’m not trained) was not an option if Simone was to be authentically narrated as a ‘true’ account. To counter my dubious entry to the story, I thought it best to reflect in the introductory chapters on my self-doubt and narrative concerns about involving myself in a story that had nothing to do with me, before further on settling into the role of investigator and demonstrating journalistic skills learnt on the job.

Both Garner and I, coming from fiction backgrounds, I would suggest, are highly susceptible to the news report due to its close relationship to crime fiction. I note one of the earlier fictionalised true crime stories written by Edgar Allen Poe in 1842 was inspired by a news report. Upon reading in the newspaper about the unsolved murder of an American woman, Mary Cecelia Rogers, Poe set about trying to solve her murder. He changed the victim’s name to Marie Roget and transposed the events of her death onto a Parisian landscape, and then relying solely on the information contained in newspaper articles he set about attempting to solve the crime via fiction writing, his narrator (a surrogate for himself) a friend of his fictional detective, Auguste Dupin (Seltzer, pp. 72-74). The form allowed Poe, the newspaper reader in actuality, to turn ‘detective’ himself. Lured to the scene of the crime via the news reports, he turns crime fact into crime fiction, trying to make belief out of make-believe. Although Poe’s approach was to stay behind the veil of fiction, this early narrative example is richly suggestive of the half-lit space between crime fiction and crime fact, or as Seltzer describes it, ‘that vague and shifting region between truth and falsity where belief resides’ (Seltzer, p. 2). He uses examples from Poe to Patricia Highsmith to show why, as a theorist, he moves between crime fact and fiction: ‘This is not because there is no distinction between them but because the distinction between them is everywhere in play within them’ (Seltzer, p. 17). And similar to Poe, although Garner and I do not resort to changing the facts, as newspaper readers we too set off on narrative quests, using techniques of fiction (or storytelling in general) to render true crime.

If the media is so influential it can trigger detection narratives, we must consider the possibility it can also inspire criminals. There was an argument in
England around the time of the Moors murder case in 1957, that the media was guilty of generating crime. ‘Johnson, like Q. D. Leavis (1932) before her, felt that the “semi-literate reading public” could not cope with the “full liberties” of the mass media’ (Biressi, p. 69). Not surprisingly, at the same time these arguments regarding media culpability were being made, conversely there was recognition that the media was also helping to develop the moral citizen. ‘[P]ublic fascination with the Moors case turned upon the questions of how to demarcate the boundaries between the criminal subject and its others (the responsible citizen, the bystander, and the reader of true crime)’ (Biressi, p. 70). Garner and I could be regarded as citizens trying to come to terms with what we read, exploring our morality and ethics in an attempt to resolve the gaps in a news report.

Biressi refers to ‘the double-vision of the true crime project: a project that scrutinises the murderer in order to hold a mirror up to the reader’ (Biressi, p. 72). Starting out as readers, Garner’s and my own highly subjective quest narratives are examples of this proposition. We explore our own conscience, beliefs and morality in the reflection of the perpetrator or suspect, and in the process come closer to understanding ourselves. Biressi refers to the practice of self-reflexivity in true crime as a form of ‘confessional writing’, with authors ‘drawing upon [their] own autobiographies to make sense of violent crime.’ She cites Blake Morrison’s As If as an example of the form, although adds that the text still maintains the ‘ontological aims of more “objective” accounts’ (Biressi, p. 203). Morrison elucidates his approach in an interview:

The point about all the more candid and intimate material in the book is to close the gap between Us and Them, and stop the demonising of those two boys. And I didn't feel I could make people think about their childhoods without the example, or incitement, of my own memories and reflections. A degree of personal humiliation - self-disserving though it may be - is a price worth paying if it gets people thinking.26

Morrison is using a confessional technique in order to prise open a wider debate about society’s complex perceptions of children. In contrast, I would say that Garner and I have suffused our own texts with subjectivity in a way that says ‘this is how I see the world’. Garner has been criticised for making herself the centre of her work, and I

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have done the same thing with trepidation, in order to represent myself as accurately as possible—that is, as a non-journalist and inexperienced crime writer. This seemed essential in a nonfiction work that questioned the authenticity of its subjects in an untried case using untested evidence. I did not want to privilege my opinions by asserting objectivity.

I am unable to locate any other texts that use the model of the ‘newspaper reader as narrator’ inserting themselves in a news story in order to become involved in an ongoing crime investigation, as Simone does—but perhaps it is not so surprising nowadays that a citizen intervenes. The police depend upon the moral citizen to assist in achieving justice in a plethora of crime shows such as Crimewatch File, Crimewatch Unlimited, Stop! Police! Action!, In Suspicious Circumstances, or Expert Witness, extensions of the media machine that establish the ‘citizen-viewer’ and the police ‘both […] as monitors of the community space and with the same function—the detection of crime and the pursuit of the guilty’ (Biressi, p. 75). I’m not saying shows such as these, starting as early as the late Sixties in Germany, have inspired Garner, or me, to hanker for a police badge or a citizen’s arrest, but they do indicate a shift towards the citizen as active agent, widening the opening into true crime genre to include types of voices other than the professional journalist’s.

The professional journalist’s approach to true crime is quite different to that of the newspaper reader’s approach. When Janet Malcolm turns up to cover the murder trial of Mazoltuv Borukhova, a Bukharan Jewess accused of murdering her husband in a custody dispute, there is no equivocating in the text as to why she is in court. She does not question her motives. No character asks, But why are you involved? In keeping with her professional confidence in the resulting book Iphigenia in Forest Hills, Malcolm writes omnisciently, occasionally offering wisdoms as universal statements of fact in second person: ‘[…]—but everything one knew about life and about people cried out against the notion that this gentle, cultivated woman was the mastermind of a criminal plot.’

Further on she says: ‘[…] But rooting is in our blood; we take sides as we take breaths’ (Iphigenia, p.22). Only on page 26 does Malcolm introduce herself as ‘I’, and then it is an ‘I’ firmly embedded in the court as a journalist, albeit a journalist who is not as ‘stern’ and opinionated as her ‘crime family’ colleagues, and one who openly speculates on her bias—admitting to it falling

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in favour of the defendant due to her professional qualification: Doctor (*Iphigenia*, p. 29). Malcolm’s readers, her all-encompassing we, are made aware that this is a professional journalist unrolling the facts as she sets herself apart as more rigorous and analytical than her colleagues, a journalist unwilling ‘to pluck the low-hanging fruit of the attorneys’ dire narratives…[or just] sit back and enjoy the show’ (*Iphigenia*, p. 30). The subtitle *Anatomy of a Murder Trial* evokes the use of the surgeon’s scalpel over the amateur’s comparatively blunt pencil, a narrator who slides her emotions into her back pocket. She unpacks complexities using a variety of discourses, from the journalistic, legal, and psychiatric to the fictional.

In comparison, Garner, although willing to fraternize with journalists in *Cinque* (in fact, one tipped her off about the story), presents as a miffed woman, her feisty narrative motored by a bee in her bonnet.

[…] I had recently been forced to acknowledge I was a woman at the end of my tether. I was fifty-five. My third marriage had just collapsed in a welter of desolation. I was living alone in Sydney, in a rented flat, on the fifth floor of a building on the top of the hill. I had no job, and lacked the heart to look for one […] what did I care about these students and their trashy adventures.  

A little later in the narrative, the reader is following her into the newsagents to buy pads and pens, a banal activity that would never find its way into Malcolm’s sharp prose due to complete irrelevance; Garner’s voice, however, has an unashamedly domesticated quality; the intimacy she assumes with the reader is laden with subjectivity and relaxes to include colloquialisms founded on sarcasm and irritation, and it’s this unadulterated tone that’s so unique—her ability to morph from a fairly invisible, grandmotherly-type tutting over her newspaper into a prickly sleuth that dominates the pages, driving narratives with her impatience, her anger, her thirst and angst.

Interestingly, Matthew Ricketson does not differentiate between Garner’s and Malcolm’s work, judging them both as journalists. He points to Garner’s strength as a ‘miniaturist’ and criticises her for lacking the ‘research and rigor of argument’ of Malcolm, and accuses her of ‘plugging prejudices’ instead (Ricketson, *bodyjamming*, p. 98). He also condemns her strong narrative presence in the text: ‘Garner also lacks

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Malcolm’s discipline when introducing herself into the narrative. Malcolm wants to make sure her presence adds to rather than detracts from the issue she is investigating.’ Ricketson describes the effective journalist as a ‘tool’ as opposed to the ‘subject matter’, complaining that ‘[n]ewspapers and magazines are awash with journalists who think, as Tom Stoppard once wrote, that the most important thing about any story is that they’ve arrived to cover it’ (Ricketson, *bodyjamming*, p. 99). I agree there is little comparison in style between Malcolm and Garner, but I also believe Ricketson is wrong to judge Garner’s work as journalism. Similarly, I am mindful that my own starting point in *Simone* is different to that of the arrival of a journalist in a story. The rare circumstance of a writer who is not a journalist turning investigator in an on-going police investigation could not be ignored in *Simone*, especially when that writer was inexperienced as both an investigator and writer. And although it is undoubtedly risky to venture into personal narrative, particularly so if your approach fails to recognise or represent other views through being overly personal or privileging your own experience, I saw no other way of narrating *Simone*. Identity and experience (or lack thereof) as themes became critical elements in the narrative act, enabling me to accurately reflect my immersion in the narrated events; unlike a journalist who is trained to observe, my narrated ‘I’ impacts situations to move the series of events forward; in addition, I note that the facts alone may not have provided enough material for a third-person narrative such as a journalistic book-length work. Garner similarly uses her narrated self’s experiences and reactions to progress the plot in what might otherwise be a slim story.

I also took the view that the subjective ‘I’ was essential in *Simone* to engender the trust of the reader, and to avoid any fictitiousness regarding identity. In addition, as I was going to be questioning the authenticity of my subjects in relation to murder, I felt there was absolutely no room for authorial anonymity. I had to expose *myself*, and my fallibilities, if I was to expose my subjects. This is in keeping with Joan Dideon’s mission to remain faithful to the truest account possible, as quoted in Bloom’s article *Living to Tell the Tale*:

> Writers of creative nonfiction live—and die—by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully, as Joan Didion says in ‘On Keeping a Notebook’, ‘how it felt to be me’ […], their understanding of both the literal and the larger Truth.
That standard, and that alone, is the writer’s ethic of nonfiction.\textsuperscript{29} Didion refers to her ‘I’ as the ‘implacable I’, ‘transparent’ and ‘shameless’ in her viewpoint. Bloom elaborates further, saying that even if the ‘implacable I’ means‘ the author will insist on her own perspective in contrast, even in opposition to others’ interpretations, so be it’ (Bloom, p. 279). Furthermore, Bloom, referring to Dideon, adds, ‘[i]t has to be the author’s [truth], with all other truths filtered through the authorial rendering, a narrative argument that Dideon labels “an aggressive, even a hostile act”’ (Bloom, p. 286).

Passion and personal involvement in a story (which are hallmarks of Garner’s writing) appear to be attributes encouraged by these practitioners, but what of impartiality? How much of one’s self is too much? For example, should narrators expose their prejudice against their subjects as Garner does? A newspaper reader crossing from passive receiver to engage in a hostile and aggressive act, even to my ear, sounds potentially disastrous for serious ethical and legal reasons, especially when an author is writing about an unsolved murder. When writing Simone I was anxiously aware of my own potential to be accused of bias, parasitism, and, worse still, defamation—but these concerns will be looked at more closely in the following chapters.

Apart from the former reasons of accountability and authenticity, there were other good reasons why a first person narrator suited my methodology. The third person voice focalising through various points of view preferred by many true crime authors may have caused an impediment to the bond between writer and reader in Simone. My not knowing German was already an obstacle to my own interpretation of the events in which I was immersed—most of my subjects’ responses in the interview process were spoken in German and therefore filtered through Frau Nagel: ‘No I remember everything, she said. And off [Frau Nagel] went. How could she possibly remember? And how could I trust she was saying exactly what I’d said.’\textsuperscript{30} The tensions in this relationship between interpreter and interviewer became another strand in the narrative that had to be exposed; and rather than seeing the interpretation process as an obstacle to unraveling the story, and a weakness in the writer-subject

relationship, the problem of mediation becomes part of the intimate story, another predicament and tension to be negotiated in the heuristic quest of uncovering what happened to Simone.

Unlike the two cases Garner investigates in *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, the narratological gaps and unresolved legal status of Simone’s story are perhaps other reasons why the author’s accountability became a more critical issue in my work. As touched on earlier, there was no official narrative argued and decided upon by a court in Simone’s case, whereas Garner in her two texts is ultimately reacting against a version of events sanctioned and resolved by the courts. Creating a version of events in my narrative from conflicting sources and testimony was an authoritative role I was uncomfortable with. I recall the ‘aggressive…hostile act’ Dideon speaks of in her defence of the implacable ‘I’; the desire to create clarity and do away with unsettling ambiguity was strong during my immersion process, when emotions were high and before narration took place. I feared that in my future role as a writer of a text I might inflate my speculative views in order to increase their validity, and that I would succumb to the temptation to run with my hunches rather than present a responsible sense of ambiguity. This *would* have been hostile and aggressive, and this fear of how I could construe a reasonable view in the future was one I had to live with during this period of flux and confusion, until the narrating self took control and committed the story to paper. Dideon’s concept of aggression and hostility is perhaps a dramatically expressed view of an internal process, or ‘act’ as she calls it that takes place before giving birth to the final outcome. Ultimately, in *Simone*, the narrating self that articulates the story attempts to create as transparent and egalitarian a process as possible. As I narrate, *I confess* my doubt (including my self-doubt) through my intrusive embodied voice, and I give an *eyewitness* account of my truth, including my scrutiny of written documents and conversations as well. But it is only ever presented as *my* truthfully expressed opinion, and only a speculative version of truth. In a sense, I am saying there can be no truth about the night in question, but I can illuminate how I feel about the facts as they become available. Insofar as I know my view contradicts the view of others, and may be hurtful to some, my personal narrative could be considered by some as a hostile act in its ultimate assertion of a partial view, despite critical self-reflection.

The concern with this confessional accounting is that it can create, paradoxically, too
persuasive a voice, and opinion and speculation can be (con)fused with fact; in addition, the ‘accommodation or acknowledgment of differing truths or perspectives’ can be lost under the spell of the first person narrator (Flavell, p. 27). Flavell questions whether Garner’s reputation as a literary icon lends her voice an implied objectivity and authority it does not deserve in *The First Stone*. She points out that an academic audience understands that use of a first person narrator is a ‘signal for a degree of self-reflection’ and is suggestive of an ‘author’s role in framing the events’, but what about those readers unfamiliar with literary technique? (Flavell, p.26)

Personally, I don’t think Garner could have been more transparent in pointing out through her biases and emotions that hers was a subjective exercise. But can a writer be held accountable for a careless reading, or for the influence their opinion carries? I think to a large degree, yes—if an author is making efforts, unwittingly (due to unreflected prejudice) or knowingly, to tempt a reader into adopting an impatiently under-complex perspective, and if they are providing a context that reinforces culturally established prejudices or distortions, the author must be considered complicit in irresponsible, uncritical ways of reading. (NB. I have argued in agreement with Seltzer that society is overly influenced by violence in the media. This is a comment on the daily bombardment of news and its accumulative effect on society, not a demise of the concept of the individual, critical reader. Having said that, there are specific cases of irresponsible journalism, for example, crime articles promoting racial discrimination through profiling).

There are only two ways to curb freedom of speech, and at the same time irresponsible journalism, in Australia, and that is through legislation (involving laws against discrimination and defamation), and through industry codes of ethics. The Journalism Code of Ethics is probably the most applicable guide for an author writing about private individuals and matters of public interest. The code warns journalists against:

> [... unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability. 
> [...] Do not allow personal interest, or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit, to undermine your accuracy, fairness or independence.]

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‘Personal characteristics’ are the ‘stock in trade’ of a creative nonfiction author, and Garner emphasises much about the appearance, age and gender of Anu Singh in Cinque, going as far as to ridicule rather ‘maliciously’, to use her own adverb, the claim she has a psychological handicap (Cinque, p. 37). ‘Our laughter was slightly shrill. No one said it but we were all thinking. Call that mental illness? She’s exactly like me’ (Cinque, p. 38). Garner’s personal beliefs are undermining her sense of fairness and balance in the text. If she was a journalist engaging in reporting, The Australian Press Council set up to ensure ‘reports are accurate, fair, and balanced’ may uphold a complaint against her, and advise an apology or retraction (the complainant has the courts as an avenue for further redress). But Garner, although working in the territory of journalism, is a storyteller immersing herself in a subjective exercise. There is no code other than her conscience and the restraints of the law to guide her. This does not, however, preclude her from the criticism that some of her polemical methods are morally irresponsible.

Ricketson makes an important point that differentiates Garner’s use of the first person voice from that of the voice of a journalist perhaps engaging in book-length journalism.

[S]ome reader’s felt The First Stone was closer to autobiography than journalism. They were more engaged by the ruminating and candor of the author than the mundane details of the book’s subject, a sexual harassment case at Melbourne University’s Ormond College. […] but what autobiography takes something other than the writer as its starting point? What autobiography covers only a couple of years of the subject’s life, and only a small part of it, at that? If the book is primarily autobiography, then the writer is left open to the charge she is preying on other people’s suffering for her own edification. (Ricketson, bodyjamming, p. 80)

Ricketson seems to be suggesting that the autobiographical account is not a legitimate way to illuminate aspects of a specific case. True, undisguised bias is not conducive to an objective account and could unfairly prejudice subjects, and Garner’s style is to indulge in an unbridled emotional account of her experience. However, others such as McDonald argue that Garner’s autobiographical account, although contravening

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established journalistic standards, is worthy of serious analysis:

Despite, and perhaps even because of, the controversies it has raised, Garner’s literary journalism is still as deserving of serious analysis by the academy as is her fiction. Such attention would benefit our understanding of the practice of writing narrative nonfiction in general, and in particular the challenges faced in its production in a localized environment such as Australia. (McDonald, pp. 272-273)

An analysis may also help to illuminate why Garner is winning national journalism prizes with her particular brand of subjective nonfiction, and widen into a more helpful discussion on the merits and pitfalls of framing social issues in an autobiographical way. For example, autobiographies that are representative for wider trends can provide a helpful frame. Garner’s views on feminism that clash with those typical of a younger generation in *The First Stone* illuminate a generational divide between strands of feminist thinking; the different subjective ways of thinking played out in the text are representative of wider cultural trends, and it is perhaps this comparison that renders Garner’s view relevant beyond the level of monological self-exploration.

The true value of a work lies in its success in illuminating a subject, going beyond the superficial layers to tease out the complexity of and contradictions on matters of public concern. Garner, despite her subjective voice in *Cinque*, does interrogate important questions of responsibility and culpability in a peculiar legal system in Australia. For example, the implications of the legal phrase ‘Duty of Care’ are teased out in the chapters on Madhavi Rao’s defence against the charge of manslaughter. Yes, we observe Rao through Garner’s gimlet and disapproving eye, but at the same time we come to understand the potential for paradox in the law when we learn that not lifting a finger to help someone, an immoral act at face value, can become a defence against manslaughter. An excerpt of court transcript in *Cinque* best describes this anomaly Garner addresses:

‘So’, said Justice Crispin thoughtfully, ‘a Samaritan may walk past the bound and injured person and leave them to their fate with impunity—but if he picks them up and attempts to look after them, he must do it properly or risk a conviction for manslaughter. That is not an altogether reassuring aspect of the law, is it?’ (*Cinque*, p. 249)
Garner’s text elaborates that even though Rao acquired Rohypnol and Heroin for Singh there was no proof that she believed her histrionic friend who was prone to grand statements would use the drugs to kill him—even though she claimed she would (others too had not believed Singh’s claim she wanted to kill him). And when Rao did see Joe Cinque lying on a bed, drugged and unconscious, it was argued by the defence that at this point Rao could not have known Joe had been given a fatal dose of heroin, nor whether he was in peril of a second attack. ‘Duty of care and duty to act are not the same thing’, Garner quotes the defence lawyer Lasry (Cinque, p. 247), and as Rao assumed no responsibility for the dying young man, she walked free from the courts. Through her personal response, Garner manages to explore issues of public relevance by illuminating the disturbing machinations and complexity of legal argument within the Australian system.

This said, the above example does not automatically justify all personal views Garner expresses. When Ricketson dismisses Garner’s work as self-edification, he may still be making a valid point. The implication of such criticism suggests that Garner has preyed on the suffering of others for an indulgent end. But what of the journalist like Ricketson who rejects the personal point of view and strives to be dispassionate? Janet Malcolm includes all practitioners of journalism in her criticism when she states, somewhat provocatively, in an opening paragraph of The Journalist and the Murderer:

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of him to notice what is going on knows what he does is morally indefensible. He is kind of like a confidence man, preying on people’s vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse.33

Certainly, I feared my egocentric focus on becoming a writer was possibly unseemly and not in the subject’s interests:

Her family, in the depths of their grief, would probably have a sort of X-ray ability to see through me. What was there? Inadequacy, I suspected, due to my lack of experience with tragedy. What if I upset them? I flinched at the thought of this as the train hit a tunnel with a thwack. As we plunged into the darkness, we seemed to hurtle even harder towards Würzburg. And would you turn around if you could? I asked myself. No. You just can’t help yourself. (Simone, p. 76)

I could not help myself, but it seems that Malcolm is also unable to help herself, as she remains an investigative journalist; she is either living in defiance, or perhaps after making her bold statement to kick-start an argument she has come to believe some journalism is ‘morally defensible’. Although there may be a predatory element to all kinds of journalistic writing, some ends might justify specific varieties of predatory investigation more than others such as, for example, advocacy journalism that speaks for those who for whatever reason are unable speak for themselves. There is an element of advocacy for the family of the victim in both Simone and Cinque, but the issue is not merely that one speaks for the other, but how it is done; it can be justified only when done in a responsible manner.

Ricketson argues that Garner ‘made the story of not getting the story into a running refrain in The First Stone’. He goes on to say that ‘Garner’s is a dubious strategy because she has shifted the heart of the inquiry from Ormond College and located it inside herself’. Ricketson sees this subjectivity as a cover for inadequate research, and he criticises Garner for not having the ‘intellectual rigor’ of Janet Malcolm and for ‘refracting an argument through [her] own prism’ (bodyjamming, p. 97). I would argue that as a journalistic work written in the third person, The First Stone—a story of the Ormond College’s minor assault case—on its own may not have been very interesting. Through her narrative Garner pumps life into the facts, using them to fire her own memories, experiences and views as a feminist. One could argue that we learn chiefly about her responses to the case rather the case itself, and to a large degree this is so. In terms of popularity, it is Garner’s prose, her intimacy with the reader, her personality and sense of daring that probably best accounts for her success, namely her vehicle and less so the ground she covers. So what do we learn from her that is of public concern? Certainly, we at the very least learn more about Helen’s view of the world. Perhaps McDonald is right, and Garner’s popularity may be the most important matter of public concern arising from her work (rather than revelations about moral or political complexities), on the basis her views may be representative for wider trends in society, and thus provide valuable insights.

In Simone, I begin the narrative with a self-edifying imperative to find my ‘voice’, but this is more a device in the plot that loses significance as the events take over and I bear witness to the Strobel’s experience of Simone’s death and its confusing aftermath. Throughout the text, I do not provide just my personal opinion
on the case, rather, through an immersive investigative experience—and a testing of various methods in order to progress a series of events that lacks resolution—I illuminate, contextualise, and in some way mirror the uncertainty at the heart of the Strobel’s experience. What I bring to the reader is a particular perspective on a story that would otherwise remain untold, particularly as there is no formal means to address the concerns of this case. Having said that, however, the strand of a personal journey is threaded through the text, as I learn more about myself and my place in the story through the circumstances of immersion and later narration. In a sense, in this latter stage of narration, I become who I want to be by bringing the sequence of situations I experience into the form of a story; this occurs by virtue of the act of telling, as well as arriving at insights conveyed in the text. At times during the writing process, I wished for my narrating self to be more opinionated and enraged like Garner so that the prose became more daring and provocative—using myself to make more out of the story by substituting plot for polemic—but in the end my text truthfully reflects my uncertainty, self-doubt, and ethical concerns around writing about people who have not been charged.

Eakin points to narrative as not merely a literary form but ‘a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience’.34 Although it is not entirely clear, I think Eakin is referring to the physical and emotional experience of self-exploration and thinking. I differentiate between the ‘unwritten story’ (which I regularly explored through conversation, journaling and interior monologues with narrative elements during the immersion process) and the ‘written story’ that reflects retrospectively on this process and tries to understand, with hindsight, the significance of the experience. Both the ‘unwritten’ and ‘written’ story contribute to the personal formation of identity. The corresponding selves, however, often become entangled in my mind as, unlike the reader who only has access to the text, the story of Simone for me is a combination of my lived experience as well as the final text. I am inclined to forget I have edited out as much of the judgmental, opinionated self from the text as possible, in order to present a story to the reader that strives to be fair and balanced. The complaints about Garner seem to suggest that too much of this opinionated self is used by the written self to invigorate the story. It would be better perhaps, rather than

censoring oneself, to show how a problematic initial response is gradually modified in light of critical reflection and further experience. Where I have not erased my opinionated view through editing, I have drawn attention to my own flaws. For example, when I meet Tobias and I suspect he is lying to me, I question my own integrity:

I was full of apologies. Perhaps he was a beautiful person and I was the ugly one here. He didn’t have to do this interview. I should be more appreciative of him. Even though I didn’t believe much of what he was saying, it was me that was feeling fake—my fake little laugh, my fake crescent smile, the thing I’m doing with my eyebrows to show my concern for him, the slightly nasal Are you okay? I’m sorry. Are you alright? I felt like a creep. (Simone, p. 245)

From the time we start talking we learn that we are ‘expected to have and to display in a narrative form a set of autobiographical memories’. We learn the rules for talking about ourselves and being accountable (Eakin, p. 115). In a sense, identity without narration seems impossible, and although not all narrative accounts form identities, Garner and I are at least using the exploration of personal identity to turn what began as reports in a newspaper into intimate journeys, weaving into our language ‘a whole background of strong evaluative belief and commitments’ in order to come to some form of understanding of the self and the otherwise unexplained. But how valid and moral is this narrating ‘I’ we brandish as the epistemic tool? ‘The key question is what ought to give way under circumstances of conflict between the claims of self and the claims of the other?’ says Parker when weighing up the opinions of Thomas Nagel (who positions ‘morality’ in the claims of others) to John Finnis. Finnis argues:

[…] [T]here is scope for reasonable self-preference not because my own flourishing is of more value than that of others but because it is mine, and it is only by taking its claims seriously that I can begin to realize any good in my own life. (Parker, p. 63)

The claims of others, he points out, can become ‘vehicles of oppression’ when ‘they afford no moral weight to the claims of self, particularity, or difference’ (Eakin, p. 65). But when does a project of self become ‘merely license for irrational self-preference, self-interest, narcissism, or egotism—not to mention self-absorption and

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344

insouciance towards the needs of others’? (Parker, p. 64). Where identity is at stake, we tend to need to speak from an ethical orientation we take to be right (Parker, p. 70). Both Garner’s books, and my own, run arguments in line with our personal ethics, and at the same time, inquiries into public issues (that have stirred a self-reflective response). I have argued that the pervasive effects of the media have caused our migration from reader of the news into writer, which may explain why our subjective efforts differ so much from that of the trained journalist. The ‘I’ of journalism Malcolm says is a kind of ultra-reliable narrator and extremely rational and disinterested person, whose relationship to the subject more often than not resembles the relationship of a judge pronouncing sentence on a guilty defendant. She argues, ‘[t]his “I” is inhibited in autobiography and therefore unsuited where a more loving, motherly “I” must look upon the self with tenderness and pity’.36 This is why Malcolm feels she is too judgmental and objective as a trained journalist to write about her self, and lacking the intimacy and warmth autobiography requires.

Interestingly, it seems Garner and I have slid though the portal of our newspapers to comfortably combine the judgmental ‘I’ with the autobiographical self. To a degree, perhaps we were both likely to provide intimate narrative accounts of our experiences, if not just to explain who we are, but why in such improbable circumstances we ended up in the middle of a fellow citizen’s story; through the double-vision of the true crime project, which Biressi suggests holds up a mirror to the self, we explore our identities; a touch vigilante, moral citizen, and synthetic witness, we expose—at the very least—our own intimate relationship with a media and its effect on our reality by taking the lines from a broadsheet and turning them into a book that investigates ‘the news’ in relation to the self. The status and validity of these personal works, and the merit in their ‘truth’, however, rests on the execution of the work, in particular the reliability of the narrator and the degree of impartiality achieved, which now leads me to methodology—the subject of the following chapter.

Methodology

*Have You Seen Simone?* is a work that attempts to illuminate a personal experience of an investigative process in which I, the investigative protagonist, try to give the victims a clearer understanding of the evidence, and a voice, while still respecting the suspects’ rights in what is ultimately an irresolvable case. By taking largely one side, I am able to tease out the significance of Strobels’ experience as bereaved relatives of a murder, and the uncertainties that it entails. ‘Not to transmit experience is to betray it,’ says Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust. He says he ‘wrench[es] those victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death.’37 Obviously the historical weight of a mass crime against humanity differs in scale to a story such as Simone’s that focuses on an intimate investigation into a single death, but in both cases, a matter of public concern is judged in the light of moral conscience.

For partly personal reasons described in *Simone* around the struggle to find my own ‘voice’, I bear witness to the Strobel’s experience of Simone’s death and its confusing aftermath. I do not just provide my personal opinion; rather, through an immersive investigative experience—and a testing of various methods in order to progress a story that ultimately proves inconclusive—I illuminate, contextualise, and in some way mirror the uncertainty at the heart of the Strobels’ experience. One might ask what is the point of a narrative that does not solve the question of what happened to Simone? One might even suggest that there is some failure on the part of the methodology in my not finding resolution? I hope, however, that the inconclusive ending in *Simone* gives voice to a particular facet of a case that would otherwise remain unheard due to the limits of society’s processes to air partial evidence. I do not want to suggest a failing on the part of the law in the text; rather, I wish to highlight that there is a gap between ethics and the law that provides no formal means by which to address the concerns raised in this case, other than through storytelling. Ultimately the book attempts to illuminate what it is like to experience the related uncertainty that results when one is unable to obtain justice via the law.

There are three main strands to *Simone*: the story of events which surround an unidentified crime (although the publisher chose a subtitle that suggests murder), the

investigation, and finally the reflexive strand, that is, my telling of my thoughts about the stories. Note, this latter reflexive strand is not organised in a narrative way to become a fully-fledged story, but rather appears as the narrated self’s momentary reflections on the future prospect of writing this book.

In this chapter, I will discuss the investigative and writing methods in light of the aims of the project. The investigative methods will be divided into subcategories involving elicitation and evaluation, and finally I will discuss writing methods, which are partly concerned with recording an investigation, and writing methods concerned with representation in general. I will present the constellation of different methods I use in order to solve the problems of Simone, separating analytically that which otherwise has been fused together in narrative. I will also continue to draw contrasts and similarities between my own work and Helen Garner’s works Joe Cinque’s Consolation and The First Stone.

There is no institutional forum, such as a court, with which to address the particular social issues and concerns around Simone’s murder. So finding an appropriate narrative voice and frame that would justify and legitimise the investigator’s general investigative methods (including elicitation and evaluation of evidence) in an unsolved and ongoing murder investigation was a central design problem that first needed to be solved in Simone. Not only did I have to create a voice in which I could speak about the gap between ethics and the law, but I also had to overcome the impasse of why a newspaper reader should become involved in a tragedy that has nothing to do with her. On a practical level, a defined social role is partially arrived at through my protagonist’s anticipated role as a student and researcher (I enrolled for a PhD in the latter half of 2008, after two trips to Germany). The intention to do research distinguishes me (the author) from my origins as a newspaper reader; and just the prospect of institutional endorsement gives me the personal confidence to access and elicit evidence that might otherwise seem out of my reach. The prospect of study does not justify the work, but simply helps create a practical frame for my involvement with the investigation and the text. On a creative level, prior to the crime story commencing in the actual text, writing methods cause me to reflect on the ‘problem’ of my narrative efforts being ultimately limited by my life experiences:
I knew the theory was that people wrote stories either to make sense of life or to give it some meaning. Something would have to happen to this family for me to make sense of it, I decided, and possibly something catastrophic. But I felt fairly certain that nothing ever would. I had an innate confidence we would remain perfectly comfortable, remote, coddled from the world of misfortune to the point of ignorance. And although this was a blessing, I felt numbed by it, as though this safe world I inhabited was ultimately sterile and insignificant. (Simone, p. 4)

Apart from being captivated and moved by the disappearance of Simone, there are traits of a writer seeking a story, or a methodical way of life, that will allow her to experience certain textures of life she would otherwise not have encountered. The above quote signposts that the narrative is not just an investigation of a murder, but in part, a parallel investigation of the self.

A degree of tension in the narrative is provided by my particular investigative methods, that is, I am not just reporting on what I stumble upon in the immersive experience but rather, my methodology is to create events or situations in order to overcome the stasis reached at particular points in the murder investigation. I go on to intervene systematically in events through my investigative methods. This practice also provides opportunities for eliciting evidence. The story that follows is driven not just by my need to find out what happened to Simone but also by a strong desire to vindicate my involvement in someone else’s tragedy—that is, I feel compelled to advance the events of the investigation and future story to prove my worth as a participant.

Arriving in Germany and observing the Strobels know so little about Simone’s death, I fall into the role of an unlikely emissary. In order to elicit material my investigative methods involve engaging forensic experts. I arrange for the evidence gathered in the Australian police investigation to be delivered to the Strobels. I take the police video-interviews to Germany to show the family, and whilst there acquire information (new material) about the meeting I’d instigated between the Suckfuells from Hermann and Gustl. For a while nothing happens; gaps in the text suggest life goes on. The crime inquiry’s hiatus is broken after my mother’s death with my impromptu visit to Nicky, the psychic. My initial disquiet about Jens’s veracity at the inquest is refreshed when in the ‘reading’ Nicky appears to accuse Jens of assisting Tobias in Simone’s death. As a cognitive method to elucidate a possible crime scenario, using a psychic is unacceptable, but I go on to have the psychic’s
proposition matched by Professor Wilson’s expert analysis of Jens’s testimony. In the context of *this* book, a heuristic endeavour, a dubious source gains some validity; and a subsequent meeting with Jens sheds more doubt on his veracity as a witness.

When my research seems to reach yet another dead end, I advance the story by collaborating with a television producer. This leads to the elicitation of fresh material/evidence for the story, and most significantly a visit to Perth that results in an exclusive interview with Tobias. The interview with Tobias confirms prior circumstantial evidence, that is, for whatever reason, this man is continuing to hide things in a questionable manner, as he avoids addressing some of my questions head-on. After the interview, having no more opportunities to advance the investigation and neatly resolve the story (or vindicate my involvement), I am once again left waiting for life to unfold at its own pace. In this period, I encounter problems with my university that cast doubt over the entire methodology of my project—and this will be discussed in the following chapter on ethics. I also go on to visit a forensic pathologist in order to discuss possible scenarios as to the cause of Simone’s death, thus eliciting more material. Eventually, Tobias’s marriage to Samantha creates a kind of bookend to his planned marriage to Simone that never materialised due to her possible murder.

Journalists do not typically engage in the methods I practice, but in an immersive, personal narrative these activities did help empower subjects who otherwise seemed paralysed to act, while also helping to continue the investigation and advance it to its conclusion.

Many methods for eliciting evidence in *Simone* arose intuitively, and have been made explicit in retrospect. In hindsight, some methods appear questionable, perhaps even problematic, in light of ethical principles and norms; and I wish to discuss dubious methods in this essay in order to convey the experience and the result of their application.

The implied author, according to Lehman, is also the ‘socially implicated’ author in nonfiction.38 Referring to an essay by John J. Pauly, he states:

[...]he decision to engage a nonfictional text triggers a powerful and ongoing dilemma for the author (who implicates himself as creator of, and character in,
the text she fashions) and for the reader (who implicates himself as a character in, and as a consumer of, the text he encounters). (Matters of Fact, p. 7)

The bearing of responsibility implicit in the word *implicated* could not have been more apparent to me in my methodology as I set about introducing unknown details of evidence to ‘unsuspecting’ subjects, that is, information that would cause them to change their minds about people they, at the time, trusted. Causing these situations, witnessing them, and later writing about them, is a risky methodology. It is experimental, and I could not be entirely sure what would transpire as a result of my interference. This was not something I did without exercising moral conscience and concern for those involved. But it seemed I had one of two choices, to either inform subjects about information I had gathered, or conceal it from them. I chose the former. Once again, using the criminology experts helped me to develop and clarify my strategies. For example, providing the Strobels with a report that analysed suspects’ interviews and behaviours would result in the family realising the suspects had concealed information. What if, however, the family acted on the reports with violence? Feeding information to subjects could be considered a volatile method for eliciting potential evidence.

Applying a sincerity principle in my writing process became an important way of explaining to the reader my ethical orientation when circumstances were stressful and a way forward was not clear. An example of such an ethically difficult situation arises when I arrive unannounced at Kerry Brennan’s Perth residence (the mother of Tobias’s then girlfriend/now wife) with Mick O’Donnell. Sensing my method is too provocative I question my ethics: Is it right to turn up on someone’s doorstep? And furthermore, is it ethical to create a written text as a result of the subsequent exchange? Is the reader happy to ‘be involved’ in their role as a third party? They of course have a choice to agree or strongly disagree with the approach that I follow, but in this sense, having engaged in the journey so far, they are now at least voyeuristically ‘involved’ in this true story, particularly so if their curiosity persists. I feel I must justify my actions on the grounds I need to find out what happened to Simone, but I sense I am crossing a boundary by stepping onto the Brennan’s driveway. Rather than turn back, however, in the text I explore my inclination to press on. When Kerry identifies me as the person who really upset the Suckfuells, I say:
'Yes, they were very upset with me.’ It was true, and I felt terrible. I’d upset the Suckfuells, and now I was upsetting this woman. Why? Why did I feel the need to keep doing this? There must be something wrong with me. (*Simone*, p. 215)

Yet, the next day I am doing exactly the same thing, but now pre-meditatively, arriving at Paul Brennan’s dental surgery, ‘door stopping’ another stranger. I feel the need to lay open the unresolved problems of my methods in the text, for myself *and* the reader (and the subject who may also one day read the text):

‘I really am sorry to drop in on you like this,’ I said as it slid [the door] shut. And I was sorry, but equally certain that it was a necessity. The further I went into this story, the more I believed that no one’s privacy or sensitivities should take precedence over finding out what happened to Simone. Rightly or wrongly, that was my creed. By giving Paul the inquest findings, I hoped somehow to encourage Tobias to explain the inconsistencies in the evidence, either to the police or to me. (*Simone*, p. 199)

Rather than accounting for my approach, I admit the limits of my commitment to accountability. Part to my method was to act intuitively, all the while aware I would have to address my methods in the text, and question my judgment. As a writer, being witness to (and instigator of) events as they are unfolding—events that you know will form the themes of a future text—is a paranoid and exhausting existence hinted at by American practitioner of immersion writing, Professor Robin Hemley. Hemley says in his 2012 field guide: ‘Immersion isn’t for the faint hearted. Whether you’re putting yourself in harm’s way emotionally, psychologically, or physically, it’s almost a guarantee that you’re going to get pummeled in one way or another.’

There is a strong sense of implication in *Simone*. It lends the text an equivocating and apprehensive tone. I act intuitively, and at times dubiously when I allow my inclinations to override any doubt. By making my process explicit, the text can at least be regarded as sincere. But confessing to dubious behaviour, of course, does not alleviate me from responsibility for my actions, so there are limits to my principle of transparency. In fact, admitting to overriding my doubts about certain methods in order to continue the investigation some might say, indicates a deliberate failure to act responsibly. So while my honesty in laying open my methods does not

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necessarily prove that I have always acted responsibly, it shows how my preparedness to act in an ethically ambiguous manner was motivated.

The driving force to find out what happened to Simone always won in any internal struggle, and I felt at the time justified my means, but there were activities my methodology also constrained; for instance, although I wished to, I did not attend the Strobel/Suckfuell meeting in the Suckfuell’s home in Altbessingen. I decided my presence would hinder a frank exchange between the families (and therefore hinder progress in finding out what happened to Simone) and so was counteractive to my strategy.

Having no qualifications in evaluating evidence (in circumstances where the facts are contested), I had to find various methods and rules to negotiate meaning in the text. For instance, my methodology does not allow the narrator to create critical scenes she has not witnessed. Reportage, however, is used to recount third party information, that is, information provided by subjects. For example, I report on page 143 that Tobias told Gustl Strobel that he and Simone did not fight on the night Simone died (a lie); this is not a statement of fact, but rather relies on the subject Gustl’s veracity.

Although the subjects are alive, those that are suspects are not willing to provide me with a full and coherent account of the night in question. I have had to take the confusion of individual stories, marred by verifiable inconsistencies, to create a meaningful narrative. Where there is conflicting information in subjects’ accounts, I evaluate the differences and arrive at conclusions with the help of experts in criminology whose methods and opinions, incidentally, contrast. I include both views for the purpose of making sense and creating order, even if that means showing there are ambiguities. This is a very difficult exercise that sometimes requires the writer to be arbiter of the facts. For example, when examining the video interviews I admit, when faced with contradictory expert views, to preferring Professor Wilson’s opinion to Professor Kebbell’s. (Primarily, my justification for this preference relies upon the degree of detailed analysis performed by Professor Wilson and his assistant, compared to Professor Kebbell who had spent less time with the material, and was reluctant to hypothesise—nonetheless I present both views, as the differences I note are not necessarily indicative of qualitative differences concerning the possible validity of the results). As the subject matter brings up questions concerning the guilt
or innocence of the untried, and the human face and truth of those accused remains largely concealed due to their reticence, it is a particularly worrisome exercise I am engaged in. But in the absence of the suspects’ voices providing a coherent account, I simply highlight that the facts are inconsistent or do not make sense, but I do not speculatively reduce ambiguities so as to arrive at a definitive opinion of guilt or innocence.

In both Garner’s texts, key subjects refuse to speak with her, but rather than this becoming an obstacle in her narrative, ironically their silence affords her the artistic freedom to imagine the absent subject, and therefore she is able to invent rather than faithfully describe. Conversely, in Simone all three suspects do agree to meet me. This ‘lucky break’, interestingly enough, presents its own problems. I have to describe what I find, as meagre as the finding may be. In the case of Tobias, what I imagined and what I experienced differed significantly. The narrative makes this dissonance transparent:

I’d expected someone cocky and arrogant, like the guy in the videos, like the guy I’d spoken to on the phone. This was not the same guy. He even looked different. His face was smaller than I expected, and I could swear he had more moles. Or maybe there was just an unexpected ordinariness about him [...] I saw that my anti-hero looked too real, and too frightened, to play the antagonist I’d imagined him to be, and I was filled with self-doubt. (Simone, p. 233)

Malcolm touches on this problem of characterization in nonfiction where the writer’s creativity is limited to the ‘material’ at hand. She points out that in nonfiction, just as in fiction, characters still need to be wonderfully formed, and under such circumstances ‘a murderer should not sound like an accountant’ (The Journalist and the Murderer, p. 70). She writes:

For while the novelist, when casting about for a hero or a heroine, has all of human nature to choose from, the journalist must limit his protagonists to a small group of people of a rare, exhibitionistic, self-fabulizing nature who have already done the work on themselves that the novelist does on his imaginary characters. (The Journalist and the Murderer, p. 71)

She goes on to describe the ideal nonfiction character as an ‘auto-fictionalizer’, one whose presentation allows for an interesting narrative rendition. I discover the
problem of a character who is not ‘self-fabulizing’ firsthand. Tobias is ordinary and perhaps not suitable for a work of nonfiction, rather, he strikes me in the flesh as a minor character, perhaps partly unsubstantial due to his habit of equivocating. Jens’s obfuscation and reticence also make him a flimsy figure in narrative. Only Katrin Suckfuell has the air of a tragic heroine, seeming to have chosen a spinster’s life in the village; while her brother continues to travel the world, she remains aloof and inaccessible and is clearly ailing. So faced with characters that do not naturally ‘auto-fictionalize’, my methodology is to rely on my character’s personal quest as a thread to pull the various parts of the story together. Garner’s method is similar, although she has the opportunity to imagine those who refuse to speak to her, and in their ‘absence’ her doppelgangers have a way of growing larger and more intriguing than perhaps their real life counterparts.

In my early drafts of Simone part of my conscious writing method was to succumb to highly critical descriptions of some of my subjects, but once I had expunged my prejudices I found myself editing out my biases in order to protect subjects from the disproportionate power I wielded over them. Criticising people unnecessarily, especially when they have no easy right of reply, seemed cowardly, and hyperbole and emotive descriptions of subjects negatively reflective of the author even seemed potentially defamatory; in Simone, however, my main and perhaps more calculated concern was that evidence of distorting bias in a text that purported to seek the truth had the power to break trust with the reader, and thereby destroy the credibility of the text.

Helen Garner on the other hand uses cutting wit and bias against the subjects in her narratives to great effect. The cases she writes about have been resolved by a court, so it may be that her bias does not break a reader’s trust in her, in fact quite the opposite, she is typically lauded for her gimlet eye and acerbic assessments. Not by some readers however. She was heavily criticised for her emotive descriptions of her subjects in Joe Cinque’s Consolation. When Garner first sights Anu Singh, the young woman accused of murdering her boyfriend, she describes her hair as ‘firmly bound into a thick club that bulged on the nape of her neck’ (Cinque, p. 26). This ‘thick club’ has the hallmarks of an irresistible description in fiction, setting the reader up for good v. bad as one might in a fairytale, but in nonfiction presenting a simple hairdo as a murder weapon in a book about a trial is clear evidence of bias. On the
opposite page, around Joe Cinque’s parents’ ‘attentive heads glowed an aura of anguish’ (Cinque, p. 27). This image is akin to a halo. (Garner’s biased descriptions have the effect of dividing readers, and her problematic methods were already subject to discussion in chapter two.)

Again, in contrast, where I use experts to help me further the investigation, Garner strips them of their authority when their opinion is contrary to her own. Dr Byrne, appearing for the accused, ‘gets right up my nose’, writes Garner—she is cutting to the chase and becoming familiar with the reader in a single colloquial phrase. She continues:

Was it his debonair stagey demeanor, his habit of addressing the judge man to man, his didactic listing and numbering of points as if to a room full of freshers? Or was it the famous MMPI itself (‘the most widely researched psychological test in the world’), with its bombastic title and claims to omniscience? In my irritation I was tempted to think of the MMPI as an enjoyably wanky life-style quiz of the sorts one fills out to the kill time in a doctor’s waiting room. Maliciously I even permitted myself to imagine Anu Singh whiling away several idle hours, smoking cigarettes and doodling in the margins and ticking the little boxes, in her cell. (Cinque, p. 38)

Garner has stylishly discredited Dr Byrne, mocked the authority of his report, and painted Singh as a vacuous, self-centred adult trapped in adolescence. Wilson describes Garner’s writing as slipping ‘seamlessly from reconstructed dialogue into reportage, hearsay, polemic, speculation and sensual literary description. She shapes the narrative largely through repetition and narrative appeals to the reader to share her commonsense perspective.’ As Singh has been tried and her case resolved, Garner’s text is perhaps more inclined to a rant. For example, if she was genuinely suspicious of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), she could have investigated the merits of the test, but she does not bother in this kind of text. She seems to want to represent the flippant and impatient voice of ‘common sense’, but having not justified her opinions, her methodology is considered by many as unreasonable. Inga Clendinnen recommended in her 2004 Lionel Murphy Memorial Lecture that lawyers read Joe Cinque’s Consolation to understand the common everyman’s view. ‘It exemplifies what you lawyers are up against. It exemplifies the lay person’s way of doing justice […]’. [It’s] utterly impatient of due process and the

cautious accretions of common law.'41 Anecdotally, I find Garner’s works engrossing. I admire her cutting prose and its ability to deflate (although some deflating remarks may come at the price of inflating the counter-position), and rather than be offended by her clearly stated prejudices, I accept that her work is an exercise in saying: *This is what I see.* Having said that, I would not want to be a subject in her nonfiction, to be captured in one shockingly apt sentence, for all time, which suggests there is a strong element of *Schadenfreude* operating in her work.

Subtleties of representation and undue manipulation of the reader raise questions about authorial veracity in this type of personal nonfiction text. On a practical level almost all my conversations with subjects in *Simone* are recorded and verifiable. Readers are supposed to trust that my condensed edited accounts of interviews (or all other sources of evidence such as condensed forensic reports) are reliable. In this way, I slip into the role of an unquestioningly reliable narrator who does not misread reports or mishear what’s on tapes, or fails to pick out the relevant material. Unlike the journalistic ‘I’ described in *The Journalist and the Murderer*, whom Malcolm presents as overly reliable and clearly distinguished from the autobiographical ‘I’ that gives claim to a particular subjective experience, my journalistic ‘I’ in *Simone* is embedded (like Garner’s) in the autobiographical voice. There is no clear-cut distinction between the authoritative and the subjective ‘I’, and this deliberate ‘blurring’ partly works to expose my struggle to provide a reliable and impartial view which shows who did it.

Hesse emphasises that in creative nonfiction where ‘[r]eality is mediated and narrativized’, the ‘particular subjectivities of authors are crucial and should be textually embodied rather than effaced; [and] that language and form must have a surface and texture that remind readers that the work is artificed; […]’42 Having not come from the journalistic discipline where one learns to write in the disembodied, institutional voice, I was intuitively conscious of the need to expose my subjectivity and the constructed nature of the nonfiction text, so as not to inflate my opinions in a story where the ultimate truth cannot be known.

As a result of this self-consciousness in narration, minimal artistic license is used in *Simone* in order to maintain transparency. For example, the ethos of the text does not allow a fictional manipulation of controversial moments such as Simone’s death, as to imagine a scene may result in a persuasive but unreliable suggestion, therefore falling outside the ethical bounds set for the text. Where I cannot know something, I do not cover the gap in knowledge with creative license. On the subject of Simone’s death I do, however, meet with a pathologist who, through scientific supposition, walks me through the possibilities of how someone found in Simone’s deceased state (with no previous condition or obvious signs of injury) may have died. Throughout, my narrator constantly questions the merit of these hypotheses as well as the status of my judgment. In this way, I avoid covert manipulation of the reader. In addition, the character of Rodd, my husband, works well as a negotiating device: a devil’s advocate and sounding board for any suggestion of certainty that could create bias in the text:

Rodd, like the Suckfuell family, was convinced that Tobias’s request for dogs was a point ‘absolutely’ in his favour when we discussed it that weekend. If he’d murdered Simone, why would he want her body found quickly? Surely, if he’d committed murder, it was in his interests that she *not* be found. I argued a contrary scenario. ‘What if he hadn’t intended to kill her, Rodd? What if he didn’t want her lying there, rotting? The wait would have been unbearable—and he was just across the road, forced by delays to wallow and stew in the crime scene. He would have been demented with anxiety. Can’t you see that?’

‘No,’ Rodd said. ‘I totally disagree.’ Now he argued that Tobias would never have stripped Simone of her clothes. ‘A boyfriend wouldn’t do that. If he did, I think he would have to be utterly callous. Imagine that. How could you do that to someone you loved?’ (*Simone*, p. 126)

Through this method, I am also able to hypothesize about possible motivations for what remains unexplained while providing a legitimate counterpoint to my view.

Compression is another technique employed in *Simone* that is potentially contentious—that is, deleting detail that does not advance the plot. Essential for tension, compression does create great gaps in knowledge, although one hopes these gaps are irrelevant in nonfiction, and perhaps even create an indeterminacy that stimulates a reader’s constructive response. Quoting Iser on literary narrative, Bloom explains:
[T]he ‘unwritten’ part of the text stimulates the reader’s creative participation […] stimulat(ing) us to supply what is not there […] Iser concludes that ‘no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader’s eyes. If he does, he will quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader’s imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text’.43

But is some ‘knowledge’ sacrificed in favour of tension? Or is some contextual meaning lost through compression? In the case of the interview with Tobias Suckfuell in Simone, a five-hour meeting is reduced to 12 pages. In the narrative, the point of the interview is to establish if Tobias Suckfuell is telling the truth. In a sea of pauses, utterances and irrelevance, I have used a sieve to highlight the chunks of dialogue that either support Suckfuell’s credibility, or question it. Mostly, the interview highlights gaps and inconsistencies in his story. Obviously, the text will feel substantially foreign to the interviewee due to the compression technique. Suckfuell may feel he has been made to look bad through the highlighting of these critical areas. There are many ethical considerations in research around vulnerable subjects and the ethics of writing about those who expose themselves in the interview process, but these issues will be explored in the next chapter.

To give structure to the text the narrative required an arc of suspense as used in fiction, enabling the text to journey from naivety to knowingness. Although an actual arc was reflected in experiential reality, at the time of writing it is by necessity a condensed rendition that eliminates the tedium of life’s detail in order to create maximum narrative effect. Facts are delivered in scenes embellished with description in an attempt to recreate a personal experience reconstructed from notes and memory. ‘Memory glimmers and hints, but shows nothing sharply or clearly. Memory does not narrate or render characters. Memory has no regard for the reader,’ so one must ‘not be afraid to invent’, says Malcolm.44 In my methodology, however, I strive to make the fictitious elements subservient to the facts, so that the only purpose of fictional techniques is to aid to the reader’s imagination rather than in any way distort the reconstruction of remembered events. But how reliable can an author’s rendering be?

It is neither feasible nor probably even desirable to reproduce actuality. An

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authentic rendition of ‘actuality’ always relies on experience and depends on perspectives that filter and organise the significance of facts, in my case also retrospectively, and also through a filter of literary methods that attempt to evoke the situation experienced. *Simone* selects and sequentialises facts and events in order to represent reality in a life-like and responsible manner.

My methods in eliciting evidence, I have shown, are at times dubious, but have been included in the text as honest renditions of my experience. In these situations, where I consider I have invaded privacy, or implicated individuals who are peripheral, I have purposely de-identified them in the text. On the whole, however, I believe my methodology in this immersion exercise has some merit as it has stimulated a story about a crime that would otherwise remain unheard, predominantly because of the absence of a method in our society to air the particular experience of victims’ suffering from unsolved crime. Operating in this ‘grey zone’ has led to an intimate narrative that illuminates aspects of the victims’ perspective. This is due to methods entailed in the immersion experience, methods that result in the investigator coming into close contact with those subjects and developing a particular understanding of the victim’s circumstances. If I had not stepped onto Kerry Brennan’s driveway that day in Perth, Tobias would never have called me for an interview. Overcoming my social discomfort, I was able to finally add to the narrative Tobias’s version of events. Likewise, if I’d not crossed the social boundaries and insisted on meetings with Jens Martin and the Suckfuells, their reticence in relation to Simone’s death would never have been understood. As a result, the reader hopefully comes to realise the social and cultural nature of the information vacuum in which the Strobels lived.

My biggest concern in this endeavor related to the arbitrariness of artistic license (literary methods) in the writing process, and whether I might form a prejudiced viewpoint. Engaged in a subjective, creative exercise I ask myself, are my renditions of situations as sources of evidence sufficient to back up the judgments I wish to defend? Are my accounts sufficient approximations to experiential reality? Do my judgments successfully avoid inflation or distortion of the evidence that is actually available? It is difficult to judge one’s perceptions and performance, thus the conundrum of immersion, and the ‘pummeling’ Hemley refers to. All I could do in a risky exercise was act in good faith, express my reservations and concerns about my
judgment in the text, test my judgment against others who differ in their viewpoint by presenting their counterview, and write a story that was as true a representation of my actual experience.
Ethics

*Have You Seen Simone?* is a creative nonfiction text and at the same time an exploration of research for a creative project. The fact I have used a university framework is relevant. I believe more doors open to a researcher than they do a journalist, perhaps due to the integrity and commitment research implies, and the absence of commercial drivers. From the writer’s perspective, I can say for myself there is an element of safety in supervision. The strain of working with controversial and ambiguous material, negotiating my written opinions, has been alleviated by the guidance and judgment of interested and experienced academics.

*Have you seen Simone?* is as much an investigation of a murder as an investigation of the self, including a thorough examination of the writer’s conscience. Active in the test is a moral dilemma about making judgments on evidence in its ‘sprawling, undignified state’, as Garner refers in *Cinque* to a file before trial—that is, ‘[…] before the Crown and the defence teams had taken hold of it to smooth away its rough edges and trim off damaging or uncontrollable bits that did not fit their respective “case concepts”’ (*Cinque*, p. 170). Dare the writer form any view? Dare she ‘judge’ untried people? Janet Malcolm says ‘a trial is a contest between competing narratives’ (inside the adversarial system of law), but one cannot contain this duality of argument in a personal narrative other than through a simulation that follows the principles that govern adversarial trials (*Iphigenia*, p. 6). Malcolm also talks about the ‘malleability’ of evidence, and how we as humans ‘take sides as we take breaths’ (*Iphigenia*, p. 22). Slowly, I came to realise my research project was not a trial, and I was not running a case, but as a nonfiction writer I was legally entitled to ask questions, speculate, and progressively modify and justify my opinions about the material I was encountering in an inquisitorial fashion. (I should note that in the adversarial system the prosecution and the defense are pitted against one another, as described by Malcolm, before a judge and possibly jury (who know nothing about the case), whereas in the inquisitorial system a judge is responsible for supervising the gathering of evidence necessary to solve the case, including evidence for and against the accused, and establishing the material truth (as opposed to resolving a conflict between two parties)). Ultimately, in a personal narrative such as *Simone* that aims to interrogate an ambiguous subject such as the ethics of public storytelling about or by
third parties, ironically I would discover that my own ethics in relation to research would, for a while, become the focus for questioning.

This chapter will discuss the ethics governing research with reference to my investigative process. It gives rise to a range of ethical questions, for example: is there a legitimate public interest in a project such as this? Is some of the interview material self-incriminatory? And if so, should self-incriminatory data be withdrawn on request, or by default, in a publically funded research project? Is denying a murder suspect the right to withdraw material justifiable? Are methods involving concealment (or, indeed, deception) justified? In a complex story full of ethical grey zones I endure specific ambiguities, and proceed to write a narrative despite underlying uncertainties. This chapter sketches out those grey zones, and explores my own irresolvable concerns about my practice. The main focus will be the issue of ‘informed consent’ involving research participants’ interviews.

Having conducted this research under the auspices of two different universities on either sides of the world, the possible answers to questions at times come close to being polar opposites. Consequently, this chapter will also look at ethical problems in the institutional context, with regards to different types of ethical approval policies (or lack thereof). Questions of compatibility between academic fieldwork and investigative writing will be addressed in relation to specific consent procedures. The implementation of these procedures as well as their effects will be assessed, and criticised, from a normative point of view.

Nonfiction is naturally fraught with ethical dilemmas. Janet Malcolm boldly states in the opening of *The Journalist and the Murderer*, ‘Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible’ (*Journalist and the Murderer*, p. 3). Malcolm is talking about the inevitable sense of theft a subject feels in discovering that the story that once felt like a collaborative effort has rendered them means to furnish the writer’s fine prose. ‘The more pompous [journalists] talk about the freedom of speech and “the public’s right to know”; the least talented talk about Art; the seemliest murmur about earning a living’ (*Journalist and the Murderer*, p. 3). On the basis of such deception, one might question what writers of nonfiction are doing inside an academy. Malcolm is perhaps exaggerating in order to highlight a moral conundrum around the issue of consent.
What participant in their right might with the power of veto will agree to the publishing of a research data that is personally critical of them? While I have tried to be as fair as I can to all my subjects by being open to persuasion and minimising any element of deception in our interview encounters, it has not always been possible to respect certain behaviours, and sometimes this leads to questions about my own. An excerpt from Simone covering my interview with Tobias best illuminates the moral conundrum I experienced:

‘When the man in the office told you there had been complaints about the noise, you told him it couldn’t have been you, because you’d not got back till three am.’

[...]

He’d been caught out. At the moment when he said he knew something was seriously wrong, rather than telling the man in the office that Simone was missing and asking his assistance to arrange a search, or at least to leave some details should Simone return, he was instead telling the first of his many lies that day. I felt like some sort of gong should clang, to point out the significance of this to Cass. But there was only silence. (Simone, p. 241)

Sensing Tobias was lying, my integrity as an interviewer came into question in the text:

Even though I didn’t believe much of what he was saying, it was me that was feeling fake—my fake little laugh, my fake crescent smile, the thing I’m doing with my eyebrows to show my concern for him, the slightly nasal Are you okay? I’m sorry. Are you alright? I felt like a creep. (Simone, p. 245)

Choosing to faithfully transcribe my experience of the interview, I have drawn attention to a duplicitous subtext, unavoidably compromising my subject, myself, and making the reader complicit in this deception. I do not say, I don’t believe you—I nod and smile and feign compassion, in order to keep the interview going. My justification is: Tobias knows why I am here, and I do not pretend to be his friend. ‘I told him upfront there were inconsistencies in the evidence that required his explanation, things that really bothered me’ (Simone, p. 234). I wanted to hear his story. What resulted? Tobias told me his version of events the day Simone died. There were some inconsistencies that arose in his story that made me feel he was not telling me the truth at times, yet in the interview he continually denied involvement in Simone’s death. Later, when given the opportunity to review the chapter, he did perceive harm had been done to him, and this is a matter before the court that I will
shortly come to in this chapter.

Malcolm was sued for libel in 1984 by her subject Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson who, on reading her portrayal of him in *The New Yorker*, was beyond shock. But a jury perusing the 250,000 words that had been reduced to 12,000 would eventually find that Masson had ultimately defamed himself. I believe Tobias Suckfuell will also come to recognise that any expository observation I have made is underpinned by something he has said in his interview. The text could be considered incriminating, but I do not proffer a reason as to why I think Tobias is not telling the truth, as there could be any number of reasons aside from the most pressing, namely that he may have possibly murdered Simone.

Research exists in a microcosm far from the cut and thrust of journalism, which, despite having its own a code of ethics, is ultimately governed by legal concerns. On the other hand, there are specific issues around conducting such a project as part of a PhD, in particular around the protection of data subjects or participants. Before examining approaches to the protection of data subjects I will give a brief background on research ethics in the humanities.

Research Ethics had always been a field of interest in the humanities, but up until the 1990s, how research was conducted was generally a matter for one’s own conscience, with those decisions being informally scrutinized through peers and the forum of academic debate. Originally, medical research using live subjects in Nazi Germany provided the impetus for what was a heavily regulated medical, science based code when it was realised the moral basis of the Hippocratic Oath was ineffectual in preventing medical atrocities. Later, the Cold War also drew attention to the possibilities of partisanship in the social sciences over a dispassionate search for the truth. During that time, for example, ‘social scientists were urged not to conduct research which would provide raw material for intelligence agencies engaged in the Cold War’.

Since the 1990s, scholars in the humanities have been required to gain ethical clearance for their research.

A new committee-based procedure was introduced to standardize the approach to ethics in research in preference to the former self-reflective approach of individuals

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and their peers. What had been an initial concern about physical harm to human beings in medical research broadened to include all research that may in some way interfere with human dignity. The emphasis was on empowering the participant as described by Australian academic Cribb.

The standard pattern of research in the medical and psychological sciences, which placed experimental subjects more or less at the mercy of powerful researchers, was increasingly felt to be ethically wrong, even if the intentions of the researcher were impeccably benevolent. Instead, the nature of research should be changed to become a partnership. Subjects became participants and they now had to provide informed consent to take part in any research project, not just projects carrying a risk of physical harm. (Cribb, p. 42)

With the rapid expansion of education as a growth area in recent years, research programmes around the world have broadened their ethical guidelines to include research areas such as life writing, narrative nonfiction and journalism. In Australia, The University of Technology’s new Graduate School of Journalism has sought to attract midcareer journalists from industry interested in writing a book or undertaking long-form narrative media projects with a research component. But as Ian Richards writes:

One of the surprises awaiting the journalist who moves from the newsroom to the campus is the discovery that any interview conducted for research purposes requires prior approval from a university ethics committee. In Australia these are known as Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs).46

The National Health and Medical Research Council is the government organisation and central guiding body for ethical conduct in human research in Australia. Each university operates its own Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), a body that is responsible for interpreting and applying the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and is charged with ensuring research complies with the guidelines. The statement is designed, in part, for the purpose of making certain ‘that participants be accorded the respect and protection that is due to them’, as well as ‘fostering […] research that is of benefit to the community’.47

The ‘surprise’ that Richards warns about is specifically related to Informed

Consent, the cornerstone of ethical research around the world. ‘Informed consent implies two activities: participants need first to comprehend and second to agree voluntarily to the nature of their research and their role in it.” In Australia, informed consent is acquired by formal double-signed document. There is much debate about the appropriateness of formal consent in qualitative research. The following example perhaps best illuminated why: a committee in Australia would only sanction research if any participants who are police informants signed forms (Israel & Hay, p. 68). Under such circumstances, one has to question if formal consent had more potential to harm than protect participants. It’s in situations like these that doing ‘the right thing’ in terms of compliance outweighs, in a highly questionable manner, the ethical intention at the heart of informed consent.

Various approaches to ethics are taken by different countries and can be generally divided into a ‘top-down’ or the more friendly sounding ‘bottom-up’ approach. Australia is ‘top-down’ as the above example would suggest, which means committees are there to implement the national guideline. The UK is ‘bottom-up’ with institutions being responsible for developing their own codes in accordance with the general normative principles of the national guidelines (I note that the rules governing the ‘top-down’ approach are called 'guidelines', but that they are note mere recommendations; their general principles are binding and do not give scope for divergent practices) (Israel & Hay, p. 40). Having transferred from Australia to the UK my project has experienced two very different systems. I note that compliance under the Australian system of ethics requires that subjects must be given the right to withdraw consent after engaging in a project. This would have an adverse effect on Simone as the original stated intention of the project involved the possibility of solving her murder; hostile subjects could not be researched or written about under such conditions as it was likely that once the material was gathered, if unfavourable to a subject, in all likelihood the subject would withdraw it.

The interview with Tobias Suckfuell in Simone raises questions about investigative processes in research, processes that could ultimately be used against the data subject.

In the public arena it is generally accepted in cases of serious crime that there

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is legitimate public interest in any evidence coming to light, self-incriminatory or otherwise, that might help to solve a crime. Most famously, in 1977 David Frost’s interview resulted in Nixon admitting to obstructing justice. But Nixon was a figure in public office, not your ‘garden variety’ murder suspect. Is it right to attempt to interview a person who has the official status in Germany of suspect (Beschuldigter) in an ongoing investigation into an unexplained death and gain their story about the ‘night in question’ in academic research? Despite the police suspicions in Australia, and the state prosecutor’s in Germany, in both jurisdictions the presumption of innocence must apply. Should a PhD candidate be able to publish a story about an investigation when the pursuit of truth results in nothing more than open questions that may have the effect of casting suspicion?

Firstly, it is questionable as to whether Tobias Suckfuell offered self-incriminatory evidence in his interview with me. Certainly, the police after reviewing the recording did not feel there was any evidence to warrant charging him with a crime. Whilst I do offer my opinion in the book that I believe Tobias Suckfuell was lying to me in his interview, I do not, and cannot, explain why. Consequently, there is nothing conclusive that can be learnt from the inconsistencies and gaps in his interview that is relevant to the crime investigation alone. So one might ask then, is it therefore justifiable to publish such material, and in the process keep ‘alive’ a suspicion as the media have done, without legal evidence?

I argue publishing inconclusive material is justifiable on the grounds the research is exploring the repercussions of Tobias Suckfuell’s (and the other two suspects’) refusal (or failure) to give a full and consistent picture of what happened the night in question. I suspend judgment on the underlying reason for Tobias’s behaviour (in particular). Any suspicion that does fall on him results largely from his own failure, or refusal, to address the outstanding questions head-on, not from defamatory intent or irresponsible speculation. If there are no conclusive answers, although the questions are still legitimate, the public relevance of these questions needs to be explained—and it is these remaining questions I focus on in my thesis and book, hanging questions that have inexorably altered the lives of the Strobel family. I give voice to their particular experience of uncertainty in a slice of life narrative.

The Australian National Statement categorically states ‘[r]esearch designed to expose
illegal activity should be approved only where the illegal activity bears on the
discharge of a public responsibility or the fitness to hold public office’, thus my above
mention of Richard Nixon. The HREC are obliged to ensure researchers comply,
and there is no element of conditionality around this clause. If the Simone project was
designed to expose illegal activity this clause speaks against its acceptance into any
research programme in Australia.

My original research proposal that resulted in the acceptance of my enrolment
at Newcastle University (Australia) in 2008, and subsequently ethics approval and an
APA scholarship, did not solely set out to solve the crime but gave scope for the
unexpected elicitation of legally relevant evidence. Inter alia, it stated:

To quote the senior investigating officer, ‘I reckon your book is going to help
solve this case.’ Even if this is so, this comment presents another dilemma:
how does a writer deal with untested evidence in an unsolved murder? What
are the moral obligations for a writer—mediate or arbitrate? What is the
purpose of this book? Am I bringing to light the ‘characters’ lost to a filing
cabinet in a police station; the victim, witnesses, suspect, investigators, the
families; exploring and filtering textures of life that I would never have
otherwise encountered? Or am I attempting to solve a crime, and perhaps in
the process compromise the work and the subjects of the narrative?50

Undoubtedly there is an element of ambiguity contained in the above. But it is clear
my research involved exploring contentious questions about a writer’s motivations
and purpose when covering the story of a suspicious death. I submit I have carried
out my research in accordance with the above statement in my proposal. My former
university’s HREC would, however, eventually question the scope of the project to
elicit legally relevant evidence, and as soon as this ‘scope’ (not necessarily evidence
itself) came to their attention via a police request for my interview material, the
university felt they had to act on their belief that my project was now designed to
expose illegal activity. The requirement for ethically approved fieldwork in Australia
was incompatible with the requirements of this project. Given that I did not foresee
this police request, and failed to uncover illegal activity, and had engaged in a
practice of open disclosure with my university, the ethics Chair’s accusation came as
quite a surprise. On reflection, however, from an institutional point of view I can see

49 National Statement On Ethical Conduct In Human Research, The National Statement: A
50 My proposal for PhD candidature.
was operating in a grey zone, and whilst the university’s reaction was disappointing and procedurally clumsy, it was not perhaps as surprising as it seemed at the time. The charge was never resolved as circumstances at the university, described in Simone (pp. 254-57), caused me to transfer rather than continue with this university.

Other incompatibilities between the university’s requirements and the requirements of my project had arisen prior to my interview with Tobias Suckfuell. The university required participants sign consent forms midway through the project (it proved difficult to renegotiate a relationship after the relationship was already established).

Signing consent forms is a standard requirement in accordance with the national statement for ethical research, and would normally occur before the commencement of research, but I had already conducted two trips to Germany prior to enrolling. A clause in the formal consent form offered participants an opportunity to withdraw from the project at any time and have the option of withdrawing data. I strongly agree that a participant in research should be offered the right to withdraw from a project without warning or explanation. Anything less impinges on the basic rights enjoyed by individuals in a free society. But being offered the right to withdraw data already provided (at any point in research) falls into a different category. It does not allow for investigative work as part of university-based research.

The possibility of retrospective withdrawal of data is indicative of an insufficient procedural framework, which leads to inconsistent research requirements in the context of investigative research for life-writing. Well-advanced and independent of the university’s involvement, the project was completely reliant on a small and finite group of participants. They were irreplaceable. It was almost assured that (potential) participants who were suspects would withdraw all data if extended the opportunity. Given that my project entailed writing a publishable book and thesis, how could I want to grant participants the right to withdraw data retrospectively?

Another symptom of inconsistency arose on the subject of confidentiality and privacy in the forms, which include the following passage:

Any information collected by the researcher which might identify you will be stored securely and only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise, except as required by law […]

369
Directly below appears the following clause:

The information will be used for a creative nonfiction text and submitted as a thesis […] and may eventually be published by a commercial book publisher.\(^{51}\)

There is an apparent irreconcilable tension between the two propositions.

Deciding what is right, state Israel and Hay, is ‘a very difficult question because the criteria employed for judging whether an act is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ are variable, and, in some instances, quite contradictory’ (Israel & Hay, p. 13). The University, however, were acting in accordance with the criteria in the National Statement, so it was not for them to question the rights and wrongs, but rather apply the guidelines in accordance with the statement.

Before the academic year 2011 commenced at Newcastle University in Australia, I was contacted by Tobias Suckfuell, and had my interview with him. I chose not to follow my then university’s requirement of providing a consent form as I had asked that they be redesigned after two police officers refused to sign them. One had said he had trusted the informal nature of the relationship but now, ironically, felt he required a lawyer to review the consent documents. The voluntary spirit of informal, informed consent was already under threat.

As the new ethics form had still not been agreed at the time Tobias Suckfuell called me for an interview, I followed an informal ethical process in gaining his consent. Before the meeting I forwarded my research project proposal at Tobias’s request. In the taped interview Tobias and I agreed (with his partner, a practicing lawyer present) he would be able to review his interview for possible misunderstandings or contextual problems before the publication of Simone. No right to withdraw data was requested by them nor was such a right offered. This seemed a reasonable approach, although it was not consistent with the requirement of my university’s initial form which would have allowed Tobias to withdraw his interview at any point prior to publication.

The only specific breach of a regulation was my failure to obtain consent from a participant using the ‘approved documents’. I would soon learn that the university did not allow for a participant to express consent without agreeing to their right to

\(^{51}\) Consent Form, Have You Seen Simone? issued by Newcastle University, September 2008 (subject to revisions).
withdraw data (although, see below, this is not a ‘cast-in-stone’ requirement of the National Guidelines). Perhaps a consent signature could still have been acquired, after the fact, to recover the situation, or data incorrectly obtained could have been excluded from the thesis, but an effective termination of the project was the preferred solution of the university on discovering I had not used the formal consent document. This termination was handled by the Chair of the committee alone. The decision was shortly after overturned by the Vice Chancellor due to a breach of administrative law.

The law required the full committee who issued the ethics approval to reconvene on the matter of termination. Having committed five years of my working life to this project, I consider there is a degree of negligence, on my former university’s part, in their failure to resolve their ambiguous and contradictory stance towards my project.

Tobias and I were two consenting adults in the presence of a trained lawyer, and we mutually agreed to the terms of the interview, one which he called for. Although this has no relevance as to whether the university’s regulations are sound or not, the details give a flavour of the particular circumstances in which I found myself in. My experience of the Australian system of ethics ‘top-down’ approach leads me to conclude that complete reliance on the National Statement when applying it to a broad range of research projects leads to incompatibilities and inconsistencies within the individual approvals. There also appears to be a culture of over-interpretation. Joseph supports this claim with the following quote from academic Angela Romana:

> There is no cast-in-stone requirement by any university ethics committees that interviewees have the right to retract comments at a later date…It’s simply that many journalism researchers aren’t aware that they can argue the case that it is methodologically and ethically sound to do otherwise. (Romana quoted in Joseph, p. 6)

Joseph adds: ‘Close analysis of the National Statement (2.2.26) does not clarify that this is a given’. The National Statement simply states: (g) the participant’s right to withdraw from further participation at any stage, along with any implications of withdrawal, and whether it will be possible to withdraw data [my emphasis]. ‘Clearly’, adds Joseph, ‘it is not an immediate expectation within the National Statement that withdrawing from a project is synonymous with withdrawing data’ (Joseph, p. 6).

Despite there being a facility to negotiate the participants’ right to withdraw...
data retrospectively, ethics committees continue with the default model. This is not a peculiarity of Newcastle University. When Joseph made a submission to the University of Technology ethics committee suggesting an ‘on the record/off the record’ paradigm be included in journalism consent forms, the HREC viewed this as asking for special treatment.

... we cannot privilege one group of professionals over another...In essence what you have proposed is that research involving human subjects be conducted along professional practice guidelines, rather than an approach that is protective of participants in accordance with the National Statement [...] (excerpt from personal correspondence, March 3, 2012). (Joseph, p. 8)

In hindsight, I submit an ethically sound alternative might be to seek consent from a participant to publish data that cannot be retrospectively withdrawn.

Having had the benefit of the ‘bottom-up’ English system, I also submit there are circumstances in which it might be reasonable for a university to insist on a participant’s right to withdraw data supplied so that it cannot find its way into the finished work. Those might foreseeably include circumstances where:

1. the data was used for a different purpose other than that which it was agreed such data could be used, i.e. a lack of informed consent; or
2. the data would be considered irresponsibly defamatory (the claims cannot be substantiated by fact); or
3. the prejudicial value of such data outweighs its probative value (a usual rule applied in courts to determine whether evidence should be excluded); or
4. there was no public interest in such data being published; and
5. publication of such data would lead to harm of that individual or others.

I will address each point:

One could argue supplying Tobias’s interview to police was using his data for a ‘different purpose’. Remembering that the purpose of the interview involved commercial publishing, not the gathering of data supposed to remain undisclosed, the data would have eventually been available to the police. My compliance with a police request to disclose interview material related to a serious crime was a legal obligation that would have resulted in a warrant had I tried to thwart it. It was not a different
‘use’ I could have forewarned Tobias about prior to the interview, as I was not aware of the potential for this to happen, but perhaps as an investigative researcher I should have been aware of the potential for this to happen. The thought Tobias might incriminate himself was a fanciful notion in my mind, but if he had indeed done so, I believe I would have been legally and ethically obligated to disclose such information to the police, even in the absence of their request.

Representing the UK approach, I note Goldsmiths in their ‘Code of Practice On Research Ethics’ state that in cases of investigative journalism ‘covert research or deception might be justifiable, where public interest may override the concerns of the individual’. This suggests that deceiving a participant about the use of data would be acceptable in some circumstances in England. In Australia this facility in national ethics regulations would not normally apply in cases of investigative journalism. An Australian ethicist might say that Tobias was denied the opportunity to withdraw data as a result of my failure to provide consent forms, therefore leaving him open to potential harm. Denying Tobias a right that protected him from possible self-incrimination, a right the university regulations said he was entitled to, amounted to deceptive practice on my part. Although I don’t believe I acted unethically as a person or citizen, from an institutional point of view I accept that even though the form was under review, I failed to follow required procedures.

A counter-argument might be that the University’s rigorist approach in applying the National Statement was fundamentally incompatible with the requirements of the Simone project, and knowingly breaking the rule was justifiable on the grounds the potential for harm to the participant was outweighed by public interest in the case. This thinking requires a balancing act between the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence, that is, the avoidance of doing harm while weighing up the benefit to the community. Perhaps some weightier ends justify non-compliance?

Cribb says the Australian statement’s ethical premise that:

[…] the rights of the individual ought always to be placed before those of society is based on a rather narrow set of presuppositions. Parker et al. have suggested that ‘[t]he source of the ‘harm’ which comes to [a] subject is the result, one could argue, of their own actions, not those of the researcher’. (Cribb, p. 50)
In addition, Richards states: ‘The case for not seeking informed consent from those engaged in the less savory practices which are often the focus of investigative research are obvious’ (Richards, p. 6). One could argue that whatever harm might have resulted from the Tobias interview, it would have been a direct result of the participants’ self-incrimination, not unethical behaviour on the part of the researcher. One may also consider the harm may simply lie in being denied the rights enjoyed in the context of academic fieldwork. I proceeded in the mutually agreed interview with Tobias, tolerating any sense of uncertainty I felt on the basis that the information he could provide was potentially in the public interest, information in respect of unanswered questions in the case of a suspicious death. The University regarded this as institutional disobedience. On reflection, I can see why they came to this conclusion, but at the time I felt I was acting in a practically sound rather than dubious manner. I wrongly understood the guidelines to be negotiable recommendations, allowing room for discretion and modification as issues arose, not regulations set in stone (and as mentioned above, there is an allowance for a committee’s discretion regarding withdrawal of data).

The subject of defamatory data is a legal issue, and it stands to reason that publishing defamatory material that is untrue is illegal and therefore considerably likely to be an unethical practice. I cannot think of any arguable exception to this rule. Tobias eventually considered the material gathered from his interview as defamatory. I am not a lawyer, but I understand whether he is correct or not depends on whether my opinion that Tobias was lying was considered an unreasonable one based on his responses. I have no defamatory intention, but uttering a suspicion that Tobias was lying to me does explore the case’s unresolved ambiguities; as to whether the way in which I uttered my suspicions could be interpreted as unreasonably defamatory (despite my good intentions), however, is still a legal question to be answered. The book was ‘legalled’ (reviewed by a defamation barrister) prior to publication to determine whether the book defamed any character, and if it did, if this was actionable defamation. After being reviewed, while it was considered Simone contained imputations of a suspicion of guilt, it was determined such an imputation would not lead to actionable defamation because the imputation was justified by verifiable facts and circumstances in existence. While it is generally not permissible in law to defame someone’s character and reputation, it is permissible in certain
circumstances prescribed by the law, as a matter of public policy and in particular, protecting the right of free speech. In Australia, for example, a number of defences are made available to an author, and these defences are embodied in Acts of Parliament that restate and/or amend the common law of defamation and defences to defamation. As a result of ‘legalling’ I was not required to withdraw any material from Simone. Ultimately I accumulate points of doubt in order to arrive at pertinent, open questions.

However, further on the subject of defamation, during the writing of this thesis, Tobias through his own lawyers made an application for an urgent interlocutory injunction to restrain publication of Simone. They argued for an injunction on grounds that the ordinary reader would come to the conclusion that the words of the book did in fact carry an imputation against him which went beyond suggesting any level of reasonable suspicion, and that rather the book makes a clear imputation that Suckfuell is in fact guilty of murdering Simone. The matter was heard in the Supreme Court in Western Australia. Justice Kenneth Martin refused to grant the injunction, concluding in his judgment there are reasonable grounds to suspect Tobias of murdering Simone. In his reason, he also points to ‘the importance in free societies of the public interest in freedom of speech.' Referring to Justices Gleeson and Crennan in ABC v. O’Neill he quotes:

First, it is not the fact that allegations of serious criminal conduct usually become known to the public only as a result of charges and subsequent conviction. On the contrary, the process often works in reverse: charges and subsequent conviction often result from the publication of allegations of serious criminal conduct. Subject to the law of contempt (and, of course, the law of defamation) media outlets are free to make, and frequently make, allegations which are directed towards, or which have the effect of, promoting action by the authorities. Condemnations of trial by media sometimes have a sound basis, but they cannot be allowed to obscure the reality that criminal charges are sometimes laid as a response to media exposure of alleged misconduct. The idea that the investigation and exposure of wrongdoing is, or would be, the exclusive province of the police and the criminal justice system, bears little relation to reality in Australia, or any other free society. (Kenneth Martin J, p. 12)

Justice Martin also notes that the defendant has foreshadowed a defence

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52 Kenneth Martin J, Moran v. Schwartz Publishing Pty Ltd, Supreme Court of Western Australia, p. 11, 18 September, 2014.
contention that they will seek to justify only a suspicion of guilt in answer to the plaintiff’s greater complaint that there has been an imputation of outright guilt made against him. Without presaging the outcome of a trial to defamation (which would be a separate matter to an injunction), Justice Martin concluded the following:

I need to record that there are certain facts before me indicating that the contention of the defendant, in terms of it showing reasonable grounds for suspicion as to the plaintiff being the perpetrator of the 2005 murder of Simone Strobel, is a respectable position. (Kenneth Martin J, p. 15)

In terms of what I believe I have written, and my intention to ask open questions rather than arrive at conclusions, I’m encouraged by the judge’s reasons, and am very confident that my book does not impute or even suggest outright guilt, but due to our legal processes this is still a matter to be determined in a trial as the plaintiff still wishes to pursue the question.

Another circumstance in which it might be reasonable for a university to insist on a participant’s right to withdraw data is when the prejudicial value of data outweighs its probative value; this again is based on a legal argument and refers to suggestive data that lacks relevance or a factual basis and may prejudice a reader against the subject. For example, ‘he had a murderous look in his eyes’ is obviously prejudicial and has no factual merit. Some of Garner’s descriptions of Anu Singh could be considered prejudicial in style. I deliberately avoid indulging in negative description of Tobias, in fact I rather reflect on myself negatively, commenting: ‘I was full of apologies. Perhaps he was a beautiful person and I was the ugly one here. He didn’t have to do this interview. I should be more appreciative of him.’ (Simone, p. 245) On the subject of data being withdrawn that is not in the public interest, this clause in my criteria refers to information that is of no relevance to the case, for example: it is highly personal, embarrassing, invades the subject’s privacy and/or has no value other than to entertain. These types of abuses take place on a daily basis in the media, and in research I would submit there is no place for ‘public interest’ to be confused with public curiosity. In the review process, if a subject is offended by their physical portrayal, for example, ‘he was short and fat’, in my opinion, an ethical author should attempt to work with the participant to avoid any gratuitous offence.

Some might argue there should exist an ‘or’ between paragraph 4 and 5 above, that is to say the simple likelihood that publication of the data may lead to harm is
sufficient to invoke a participant’s right to withdraw data. In circumstances where a greater harm is at stake, such as where a murderer is protected from potential conviction, or information of public interest is concealed, I would argue that the benefits outweigh the harm. In the case of Simone I have simply shed further light on the reasons for suspicion, a suspicion that is, Justice Martin says, supported by ‘a significant underlying body of credible factual material, publicly available and widely ventilated since 2007’ (Kenneth Martin J, p. 17). Too restrictive an approach, I would suggest, is impractical in investigative journalism and nonfiction research. The risk of data being withdrawn makes the research unviable, as I was to discover too late in my project. One could take the view that any data harmful to a subject collected in publically funded research should be withdrawn—and certainly this is the premise on which research is carried out in Australia. There is an argument, however, that the heavy regulation of ethics leads not to a focus on ethically sound behaviours but rather ‘creates flashpoints of tensions and misunderstandings between researchers and their various HRECs’ (Joseph, p. 2). Israel quotes Beecher: ‘rather than using rules and government regulations to protect subjects in research … the most reliable protection is the presence of an “informed, conscientious, compassionate, responsible researcher”’.53 Certainly this is my experience of the two ethical paradigms outlined above which leads me to opt for a system in which sufficiently open, state-endorsed principles allow for different, subject-specific approval systems in which the investigative life-writer enjoys an adequate degree of self-responsibility.

Regarding the five principles listed above, I should mention I have carefully justified and tested (with the assistance of appropriately qualified professionals) the opinions expressed in Simone in attempting to apply them. I believe none of the above circumstances existed in relation to the Simone project and the data supplied by Tobias and others.

Goldsmiths’ supervision was more flexible, consultative and supportive, without (in my opinion) any sacrifice of ethical considerations. This university’s regulations acknowledged a distinction between life writing projects and social science projects, and initially ethics approval for this project was not deemed necessary. At the end of the project, however, it was decided a review should be carried out in consideration of the ethical complexity of the project. In this review the

issues around informed consent (verbal and informal in my case due to much of the fieldwork occurring privately and prior to any institutional involvement in Australia or England) were aired. The right to withdraw was also raised, with particular reference to Tobias Suckfuell, who had previously tried to withdraw his interview after my commencement at Goldsmiths, and further, at the time of my filling out the forms had just obtained legal representation after reviewing his section of the text. This was not an unexpected circumstance as the inconsistencies in his interview, and the evidence gathered by the police indicate that he is for some reason concealing information. I am happy to say ethics approval was granted. Although I offered to redact sections of the text in my final submission, the offer was not commented on by the committee. I note in Goldsmiths’ Code of Practice on Research Ethics (Goldsmiths’, p. 1, pt. 4) that there are circumstances in research ‘where public interest may override the rights of the individual’. This is very much in accordance with my own view and in many ways is the principle that lies at the heart of Have You Seen Simone?

Goldsmiths’ approach to ethics duly acknowledges the ethical complexity of fieldwork in the context of investigative life-writing and I would like to conclude this section of the discussion with point 10 from the Goldsmith’s Code of Practice:

10. Researchers should consider the ethical implications of the research in relation to the physiological, psychological, social, political, religious, cultural and economic consequences of the work for the participants. This is not to argue that no work should ever be produced which might be capable of causing offence. However, the range of possible outcomes should be fully considered in advance, and the scope for causing harm must be weighed against the potential benefits in order to assess the justification for proceeding.54

I remain cognizant that Have You Seen Simone? is a partial text, as it undoubtedly privileges the legitimate concerns of the victim’s family. Undoubtedly, someone could write an equally legitimate text that explores a contrasting view. Consequently, I remain willing to admit some personal ambivalence about my research and narrative disclosure of people’s private lives. I don’t believe my reservations invalidate my views in the text, but I feel obliged to lay my concerns open and submit them to the independent judgment of readers who may well arrive at conclusions that are quite

54 Goldsmiths Code of Practice on Research Ethics <http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/research-ethics> [accessed 12 November 2013] (p.2)
different to my own.
Conclusion

Like Garner’s investigations, my inquiry into a public issue in *Have You Seen Simone?* warranted a self-reflective response. I have used a genre and voice akin to Garner’s nonfiction writing, but I have modified and applied this kind of approach to a new subject area, namely an *unresolved* crime case. Particular ethical issues have arisen as a result of this innovation in true crime writing. Ironically, in a narrative that aims to interrogate an ambiguous subject such as the ethics of public storytelling about third parties, I discover that my own ethics in relation to the research would, for a while, become the focus for questioning.

As I mentioned earlier, the purpose of the law is to attempt to ‘eliminate ambiguity and uncertainty’, to reduce what is known to one credible theoretical account; literature on the other hand is ‘inherently ambiguous and unconstrained’.

In its search for meaning it can juggle multiplicities. It is now this ambiguity that is the subject of a legal discussion about what the book really means. An article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, shortly after publication, entitled *True Crime On Trial* describes the situation:

At her recent launch at Byron Bay Writers Festival, Peters was meant to be in conversation with a detective who had helped investigate the unsolved murder of German backpacker Simone Strobel in Lismore in 2005. But he was not there because, as Peters put it, “the story continues beyond the last page” and suddenly the case was a delicate subject. Tobias Suckfuell, who was Strobel’s boyfriend and a police suspect in her murder, lives in Perth with his Australian wife and had tried unsuccessfully to stop the book’s publication, with an injunction heard in the Supreme Court of Western Australia. Now he has brought a defamation suit against Peters and her publisher, Black Inc., which would hang on whether her book claims he is guilty. The catch for Suckfuell is that the hearing next year could involve 30 or more witnesses, including senior police and medical experts, and effectively become a murder trial.

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In some ways this project has been a contest between two ideals. Some of the ‘characters’ (namely, the suspects) in Simone exercised a right to silence, and the issues arising from this silence remain at the core of this thesis, as does the importance of the public interest in freedom of speech.

It has been a difficult territory to traverse. The feedback from reviewers and readers is that the book is full of questions, and not answers as one might expect if a book imputed guilt. Reviewer and writer Steven Carroll describes the book as being ‘[…] held together by the probing voice of the author, questioning the testimony and views of everyone, including herself.’ Reviewer Brigid Mullane writes:

The book spends very little time on the particulars of the crime, as Peters attempts to discover more about Simone and the people that were with her on the night of her disappearance. Witnesses are unreliable, motives are indecipherable and the evidence is inconclusive. Peters handles this lack of a straight narrative deftly. When she is unable to pin down a motive for Simone’s death the focus shifts to the author’s motive, and our motives as readers. Why are we so drawn to tales of death? And why is Peters drawn to Simone as a subject? In that respect the book has much in common with Helen Garner’s Joe Cinque’s Consolation – we learn as much about the writer, and the writing process, as we do about the suspects and the court procedures. As in Joe Cinque, this book does not have a tidy ending, and there is no neat resolution for the crime of Simone’s murder: her death goes unpunished. And so we are left with a more difficult conclusion than in the average ‘whodunit?’ tale. We are forced to confront the reality that sometimes justice isn’t done.

So far, all responses (apart from Suckfuell’s) support my overall expository argument that this is a book about ambiguity and uncertainty. Although fair reporting and defamation defences make room for such books as Have You Seen Simone? to be published, unsolved crime is a risky area to work within. After a letter arrived from Suckfuell’s lawyers requesting a copy of the manuscript and alleging possible defamation, my publisher, Black Inc., just days before printing, sought contractual changes and concessions from me which had significant legal and financial

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consequences. Other authors navigating the publishing world in this regard should tread carefully.
AFTERWORD

Consent and the Ethics of Advocacy in Life Writing: Hostile subjects and vulnerable subjects.

Virginia Peters

When Tobias Suckfuell failed to attend an inquest into his girlfriend Simone Strobel’s suspicious death in Australia, I set off on an investigative journey that took me to the heart of Bavaria. After meeting his and her families, I discovered much that led me to suspect Tobias knew more about Simone’s death. Several years later, with him returning to Australia, not for an inquest but rather to marry, I travelled to Perth to meet him and his new family, the Brennans. Convinced of his innocence the Brennans were more suspicious of me than their son-in-law.

Two years later, on the eve of publication, an urgent injunction to stop my book on the grounds it is defamatory failed. Justice Kenneth Martin cited in his reasons that ‘there is a significant underlying body of credible factual material, publicly available and widely ventilated since 2007, which clearly does, at least assessed at the prima facie level, manifest some reasonable grounds for suspicion as regards this plaintiff in the 2005 crime’. Still, Tobias is pursuing a defamation claim through the Supreme Court in Western Australia on the grounds ‘Have You Seen Simone? imputes guilt as opposed to suspicion of guilt. Claiming impecuniosity he is being funded by ‘friends and family’. As the case is before the court this essay will not discuss defamation but rather exacerbating matters related to the ethics of life writing.

There was a moment during my research that struck me as revelatory, at least to the extent I was left speechless with shame. I was in Germany, sitting in the Strobels living room at the time, keenly elaborating to Gustl about some strategy I’d devised for investigating his daughter Simone’s suspicious death. When I’d finished Gustl smiled at me, and with a twinkle in his eye he said that playing detectives must be a lot of fun. It took moments for me to recover. The thought of me appearing to enjoy myself in the midst of his family’s trauma was mortifying to me, but judging by his expression, Gustl was more than pleased. Perhaps there is such a thing as a fortunate act of appropriation? Philosopher Georgio Agamben, however, sheds doubt on the whole notion of traumatic testimony, saying ‘at its centre it contains something that

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1 Kenneth Martin J, Moran v Schwartz Publishing PTY, West Australian Supreme Court 334 (18 September 2014).
cannot be born witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority’. If truth cannot be represented firsthand, what hope is there that secondhand testimony will provide them with a voice? This makes me question if I was not just taking on the Strobels’ cause to find out what happened to their daughter, but rather I was taking over, and in a way silencing them.

Relational ethics teaches us not what to do, but how to act with our own ‘hearts and minds’. Although I was not conscious of this term I lived by this ethos during my research. It resulted in Have You Seen Simone? being written in an autobiographical voice that embraces this coupling of heart and mind. But usually an autobiographer exposes their own life and intimate relationships in their narrative work. Most of my subjects in my ‘autobiography’ had never met me before I knocked on their door. Many have gone on to become my friends over the years, and have remained so after publication, but in other cases I have made formidable enemies. A news organisation that published an extraordinary accusation of murder managed to avoid a legal challenge, yet despite constantly querying my ethics throughout the book and coming to no view about who or what led to Simone’s death, it is me who is being sued for defamation. This gives me cause to remember McLuhan’s aphorism ‘The medium is the message’. I have begun to wonder if there is an ethics of technique, and if somehow (defamation to one side) my intimate, autobiographical form has exacerbated the anger of some subjects. ‘[T]here are few acts more aggressive than describing someone else’ writes Rosen in The Unwanted Gaze: The Destruction of Privacy in America. He is referring to the ‘danger of being judged, fairly or unfairly, on the basis of isolated bits of personal information that are taken out of context’. But life writing relies on these bits about others being taken out of one context to be disclosed by somebody in another, often without consultation. It’s no wonder Eakin warns that if describing others really is such an extreme act of aggression ‘life writing is heading for trouble’ (Eakin, p. 8). Certainly, this trouble has found me.

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In the essay I will look at two families I encountered in my research. Firstly the Brennans* who, although the least involved (and according to ethical debates, the least vulnerable), may have had greatest cause for grievance on unexpectedly finding themselves ‘characters’ in Have You Seen Simone?. They were not given an opportunity to consent to or decline involvement in the book. There is evidence that suggests they are funding the court action in Western Australia. I will critique my treatment of the Brennans through the lens of Relational Ethics before turning to the Strobels at the opposite end of the spectrum. The Strobels are the major and most vulnerable subjects who agreed from the very beginning to embark on this narrative journey with me. Having obtained from them a moral right to tell this story, I will reflect on the possible flaws in my approach and representation of them.

The first time the Brennans could have known they were appearing in my narrative would have been when their son-in-law (after reviewing the chapter containing his interview) acquired a copy of the entire manuscript through his Perth lawyers. One of the cornerstones of Applied Ethics is Informed Consent, and it is, I would discover, a fairly non-negotiable requirement of Australian research committees. Its effect ‘influences what we can(not) share with others and who we can(not) explicitly include in our texts’ (Adams, p. 184). I did not adhere to this institutional requirement for formal consent in Have You Seen Simone?, initially due to resistance from police officers who refused to sign the forms—and later, because if I had adhered to the requirement, my narrative investigation into Simone’s death would not exist today. I followed my inclinations, and in writing about my experiences in some instances I overrode the discretion of others. These inclinations are suited to a discussion under the umbrella of relational ethics.

Relational ethics, or narrative ethics, according to Kuhse and Singer (1998) ‘is not the development of, or adherence to, a code or set of precepts, but a better understanding of the issues’, particularly in useful in the case of narrative writing (Adams p. 177). Advocates of relational ethics, such as Adams, recognise the validity of informed consent, but he also ‘emphasizes how a seemingly neutral practice can effect the construction and sharing of a narrative and the simultaneous constitution of a life’ (Adams, p. 185). Although the Brennans were not key to the investigation, and their appearances in the text are fleeting, they formed the context in which I discovered Tobias, and in talking to me, without realising, they became part of my autobiographical journey. Ellis, another advocate for relational ethics, recognises that

385
sometimes there is room for deception. When facing her students’ dilemmas around consent she asks herself: “‘Is the well-being of the researcher always less important than the well-being of the other, even others who have behaved badly?’ I answer, ‘No, not always’.” In justifying the potential risk to others, however, Ellis asks her students to think of the ‘greater good’, and ensure they are not confusing this social concept with ‘their own good’ (Ellis, p. 24). I believed there was a ‘good’ at stake in this story that was greater than my own. Although I do not solve the crime in the text, and cannot while the facts remain unclear, Simone’s suspicious death is a public matter and the issues around it worthy of airing; this view is supported by the state coroner’s decision to entrust a writer in an ongoing police investigation with full access to the police files. There are times in the text, however, where my role as an ethical researcher blurs with my investigative pursuit of the truth. I cross personal boundaries.

In the narrative, I walk up to Mrs Brennan (Tobias’s mother-in-law) as she washes her car on her suburban driveway. ‘How did you find this house?’ she says, as soon as I introduce myself. ‘Through my contacts.’ ‘Don’t you tell anyone where it is. Don’t you dare’.

She spoke fiercely. And since she spoke, I haven’t dared tell anyone. But it was already too late. I had a documentary filmmaker standing next to me that day. Against my wishes, he had cameras trained on the Mrs Brennan’s house a week later. The footage was not used in the end, but he published internal and external shots of her home scraped from a real estate brochure on his programme’s website; he also identified the family by their real name. I chose to deidentify the Brennans and their suburb in my narrative. But I describe them and what they said. On reading the text they would at least know who they were, even if others didn’t. This may have led to an emotional sense of betrayal.

Memoirist Nancy K. Miller who once came across her private letters in a thinly disguised autobiographical novel asks whether such a violation is in any way diminished when the letter writer remains anonymous; she says it is not ‘as though the words no longer carried, were no longer attached to, the sender’s emotions’.

Finding one’s dialogue, personal appearance and illustrative descriptions of one’s home

unexpectedly in a book is perhaps just as likely to evoke similar emotions as stolen letters. We in part gain our identity in the reflection of the people we meet. In the hostile environment of a prison where one’s identity is stripped and replaced by a number, prisoner Ruth Wyner had cause to say ‘…I feared that the real me had been destroyed. Would I ever get her back?’.

This is an extreme example, but imagine in lesser circumstances finding your identity plucked from its natural environment and inserted into a creative work, a work that is not consistent your point of view. This would be very destabilising for any person who was accustomed to being in control. We derive our control or autonomy from our ability to make meaningful decisions, the ‘right’ to make them, or circumstances ‘under which an individual is granted the power to do so’ (Couser, p. 18). The Brennans were denied by me that right and power to make a meaningful decision. Couser says that ‘[t]o violate a person’s autonomy is to treat that person merely as a means, that is, in accordance with others’ goals without regard to that person’s own goals’. As the Brennans were of the opinion their son-in-law has no cause to answer questions at an inquest, by then going on to include them in my investigation that is critical of him I am in a sense ‘over-writing their stories’, disregarding their personal ‘goals’, and ‘imposing an alien shape on them’; that shape involved a narrative structure, setting and plot entirely of my making (Couser, p. 19). It is important to remember they are not the ‘Brennans’, that is, their true identity is protected. However, I never considered that they might have a sense of pride in who they are, and that this protective pseudonym has the potential to even further strip them of their sense of identity. Perhaps it did.

Continuing on in the narrative, the next day after meeting Mrs Brennan on her drive I called on Mr Brennan at his dental practice. I delivered the magistrate’s findings that imputed suspicion of their prospective son-in-law’s guilt in relation to Simone’s death. I recall having distinct misgivings about intruding on him, but I overrode these with a front of moral right. Similarly, when it came to writing the narrative I feared including the Brennans in the actual text, but I decided that even though they were secondary and quite minor characters they had made a major decision to protect Tobias as though he were their own ‘child’; this was integral to the

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story, as was their later decision to give him their surname. They also acted as a
narrative counterbalance, reducing the weight of my suspicions about Tobias, and
this, although self-serving, also felt fair to them. By including them I have of course,
however, exposed their valid moral stance on an issue that was for them obviously
deply personal, and I made it public.

This is not ideal and involves a degree of deception, or more aptly,
nondisclosure of information by me, namely that they would be included in my book.
I hoped that on reading the text they might acknowledge that airing the evidence and
the Strobel’s experiences was ultimately in their interests. Psychologist Terri Apter
argues that ‘self-alienation, violation, or appropriation experienced by a subject might
be outweighed by the benefit of enlightenment…life writing can do good for or to its
subjects, whether they seek it or not’ (Couser, p. 20). But on reflection the prospect
of the Brennans being receptive to my narrative was a long shot, especially as the
book was published after their daughter’s marriage to Tobias. Accepting the
legitimacy of my book would come at the cost of accepting unpleasant truths about
their son-in-law having lied to the police and Simone’s parents.

I am not entirely comfortable with my decision not to tell the Brennans they
would be included in my text, and no writer should take such a decision lightly. But I
can see the Brennans, perhaps inadvertently, had taken an interest in this case much as
I had done. And just as making our relationships to others public through publishing
is ethically and sometimes legally problematic, I think our relationships in our private
lives with individuals involved in public matters can also be problematic, and have
social consequences. The complex correlation between the private and the public
relies on our lives being peopled by others. The presumption of innocence is a basic
tenet in criminal law that puts the onus on the crown to prove guilt, and although
culturally ingrained in society it is not a concept that affords one a Teflon-coated
protection from a suspicion of guilt. The Brennans’ son-in-law had given false
information to the police and the Strobel family, and he had refused several
invitations to an inquest to clarify events on the night Simone died, eschewing a much
needed opportunity, as suggested by the coroner at the inquest, for him to clear his
name after being named by police officers as a main suspect. With regard for the
Brennan family, I believe they chose, like me, to use their power to become
complexly involved in the dynamics of a story that was much wider than their
personal domain.
Joseph Slaughter credits the novel, ideally the *Bildungsroman*, as ‘acting as a positivistic cultural surrogate for the missing metaphysical warrant and executive force of human rights law’.\(^{11}\) Although *Have You Seen Simone?* does not have a typical human rights mandate, Slaughter’s premise legitimates the use of narrative as a cultural solution to legal issues, fitting it squarely in the gap between natural and positive law (Slaughter, p. 55). He also claims that ‘narrative theory written contemporaneously with the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights] tended to hail the novel as the literary genre most intensely concerned with the problematics of socialization—with the encounter between the “contingent[social] world and the problematic [but ordinary] individual” as “realities which mutually determine one another’ (Slaughter, p. 92). His theory at the very least supports an argument of our interconnectedness to one another and society, and highlights that in a storytelling culture our actions in our private lives are not necessarily exclusive; one could even argue that the Brennans by becoming involved with someone connected to an ongoing public narrative had already made their choice to become part of their son-in-law’s story, well before I turned up on their driveway; and I would submit that the same applies to their daughter.

Known for her stylistic, insular narratives, Rachel Cusk responded to criticism of her autobiography *A Life’s Work*, by writing an introduction in a new edition that asked her critics not to take her book so ‘seriously’; this book ‘is governed by the subject I, not You … I am not telling you how to live; nor am I bound to advertise your view of the world’.\(^{12}\) Every autobiography is ultimately about an ‘I’, and although *Have You Seen Simone?* uses Simone’s death as a narrative frame, the Strobels’ trauma is perceived by an ‘I’, and I was writing in my own intimate style—a style noted with distaste in a letter of complaint I received from Tobias’s fiancée (now wife) Cassandra Brennan*, who undoubtedly held a different world view. She had come across my storytelling technique for this project in a sample abstract in a literary journal. It was not what she was expecting, she said. She had believed I was doing ‘serious research’ (indicating a scientific bias in her understanding of research), but instead what she read indicated I was writing ‘a mix


between fact and fiction’ (something she may have not properly understood after reading my narrative proposal before meeting me). She was referring to a piece where I write about my mother’s pending death, our mutual and slightly odd interest in murder; in addition, I’d written about my concerns about a citizen becoming involved in an investigation that has nothing to do with them.  

Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism ‘The medium is the message’ relates to the impact of form (Adams, p. 182). Adams quoting Richardson (1990) says: ‘How we are expected to present our writing affects what we can write about’ (Adams, p. 182). Cass Brennan was offended by my writing style, namely the How in my approach which was particularly intimate in tone. But through adopting a confessional style I hoped to help the reader understand why I became involved in another’s tragedy, and that by extension they would listen to my narrator and what she had to say. 

In her research on child trauma narratives, Douglas states that the ‘victim must find an acceptable voice to tell their one sided tale’. She goes on to say that ‘[t]rauma, testimony, and witnessing provide an enduring defense for authors in these instances—providing the survivor the right to speak, which supersedes that of the accused perpetrator’. I am relieved she included a ‘witness’ as worthy of some defence, for I am not an obvious victim, yet I can see that as a witness I have borrowed elements of the ‘enduring defence’ of trauma autobiographers such as Burroughs, Sage and Galloway. However, as they are all first-person victims of abusive or difficult childhoods, my impression is that they have a much fiercer moral right to tell their stories than I do. Perhaps Cass Brennan had in the extract she’d read also sensed my doubt about speaking for others, and more particularly over others: my fledgling investigative voice begins by reminiscing about visits as a little girl to the courts with my macabre mother; and how now as an adult, I must prepare for her death. Confessing to uncertainty about the rightness of my narrative quest, I imply that the investigation into Simone’s death is potentially a way to mitigate my own pending loss; and like the adults of trauma autobiography restrained by their childhoods, I too want to emancipate myself—and the way I can do this is by turning my mother’s ‘ghastly interest in true crime’ into ‘something more productive in my

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14 Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2010), p. 149.
hands’ (Peters, p. 189). I can see I am something of a co-victim in *Have You Seen Simone?*. In *Bad Blood*, Sage’s mother (like my own mother) never escaped the drudgery of domesticity, but Sage is determined to, despite becoming a facsimile of her mother through a teenage pregnancy. She eventually escapes through academia, and much later as a middle-aged woman through the crowning release of her book. Although I see echoes of myself, a reader is left in no doubt about who owns the story in Sage’s account.¹⁵ In *Have You Seen Simone?* my moral right to tell the story is much less obvious.

Douglas identifies that there are elements inherent in the genre that perhaps may work to persuade a reader to adopt the writer’s point of view:

> The appeal of autobiographies of childhood is dependent on particular reader positionings and investments. These texts solicit an active reader who will participate dynamically in the politics of the autobiography either by being represented by the autobiography or by being confronted into witnessing what occurs within it. (Douglas, p. 154)

As in any narrative techniques are applied or naturally arise, for instance ‘[t]he personal disclosures of an autobiographical narrator may produce a sense of intimacy between the narrator and reader… Readers are encouraged to consider the similarities and differences between the autobiographical life and their own’ (Douglas, p. 155). I recall Cass was not only critical of me for superimposing myself on the Strobels’ and the Suckfuells’ tragedy (a tragedy she now belonged to), she also referred to my technique as ‘convincing’ and ‘juicy’. The word ‘convincing’ particularly resonates. So much work and experimentation from me had gone into crafting an authentic voice. Luritzen states that ‘in order for the moral project of an experiential project to succeed…the reader’s trust in the narrator’s credibility is crucial…’ (*The Ethics of Life Writing*, p. 2). Cass was perhaps sensing the carefully constructed narrative persona I was developing in my essay, its deliberate but subtle attempt to strike a chord, entertain, induce empathy, *convince*. It must have seemed like a very subversive technique to a young woman with a polar opposite opinion. Even now, writing about the wrongs and rights of what I did in an appropriately philosophical tone is beginning to feel like textual manipulation, justification disguised as mea culpa, another violation.

There was worse to come. I kept my word and gave Tobias the opportunity to review his interview before it went to print. But on acquiring the full manuscript through a court order, Cass would see for the first time I had described and complimented the décor in her family home (which she and Tobias had invited me into), also the luxurious wobble of her own long brown hair—personal details that put not just me back in her home, but when she failed to get an injunction, also allowed in untold anonymous readers (Peters, p. 232-233). She would also discover I had paraphrased her emails to me, specifically her criticisms of me.

Including Cass’s views in the text felt ethically sound, as though being endowed with ‘narrative privilege’ I was attempting to rebalance the text by providing her with an opportunity to answer back. Publishing one’s unadulterated view comes with heavy responsibility, especially when you know there are subjects who have indicated they disagree with you. Adams talks about how it is important to be aware of narrative privilege. Its acknowledgement ‘motivates us to discern who we might hurt or silence in telling stories as well as whose stories we do not (and may not ever) hear’ (Adams, p. 181). But I am conscious that on another level that paraphrasing Cass’s criticisms, that is allowing her ‘story’ to be heard is also helping me.

Telling stories against oneself can be an attempt to justify one’s argument. It is an apparent technique, conscious or otherwise, found in euthanasia autobiography. Considering that ‘the suicide assistant’s role as a life writer is effectively determined by their complicity in the death they narrate’, one could argue that my role as an outsider in an unsolved death is effectively determined by my legitimacy as an investigator (Couser, p. 125). Like the suicide assistant I constantly need to justify my actions. Couser talks about the ‘ethos of candid exposure’ (telling stories against oneself) in the euthanasia text as being ‘always vulnerable to the suspicion that it is only gesture—“rhetoric” in the pejorative sense’ (Couser, p. 158). Or put another way, gesturing to failings can be used to garner trust with the reader, and predicate a response that the writer is inordinately fair. Although I write genuinely, I am also aware that my decision to expose Cass’s inner thoughts just prior to her marriage pique a reader’s narrative interest in the text; but more specifically her criticisms provide me with a platform from which to argue my own contemporaneous, ethical quandaries about writing a book I would nevertheless still go onto publish.

Similarly self-serving, I also write with the greatest respect about Cass’s dedication to defending Tobias by finding out what happened to Simone, describing
her passion as being equal to my own. It began as a genuine and gracious gesture, but I cannot help but be aware there is a benefit to me. Cass’s arrival on the scene also provides tension for my ending where we two contest over suspicion and Tobias’s innocence. The initial collaboration between us swung much more in my favour than hers, and if I had considered her a vulnerable subject, that is, someone who Couser defines as a person in a state of dependency, for example: ‘disability, illiteracy, institutionalized, legal minority, incompetence, or terminal illness’ I would consider I had committed an ethical breach (Couser, p. 16). Since she is a trained lawyer who invited me ‘in’, however, I did not consider her vulnerable, although I was sympathetic to her emotions around a pending marriage.

Janet Malcolm ‘characterizes journalists and their sources as codependent, although she doesn’t use that term…in which each party is unduly and anxiously dependent on, and manipulative of, the other’ (Couser, p. 5). To a degree Cass Brennan was using me too. Subsequent to the interview she asked me to access information about other suspects. She also wanted me to provide information regarding the forensic studies conducted in the case. I declined to provide the information, and made it clear I remained suspicious of her partner, just as I had in person in the interview. A year after the interview I received a copied email from Tobias to my former university imputing I was unethical and withdrawing consent for me to use the five-hour interview in which both he and Cass had participated. Amongst the reasons for rescinding consent was the troubling ‘working relationship’ between me and the producer of Channel Seven’s ‘defamatory’ documentary; the lack of university consent papers; the concerning merger of fact and fiction stated in my proposal; and lastly, a concern that a protagonist role in the hands of an unethical person could be causal to a miscarriage of justice in an ongoing investigation into such a serious matter.\footnote{Personal email correspondence, 2 February, 2012.} I had no control over Channel Seven, and as I had provided a proposal describing my approach prior to the interview, the only issue was the university consent requirement. In lieu of this I had recorded Tobias’s agreement to the interview. In trying to withdraw the interview, I can only think Cass and/or Tobias was convinced talking to me would be to their advantage, just as I wrongly believed the Brennans, on reading the book and coming to understand the case better, would ultimately concede my right to publish it. Strangely enough, I never
considered that they might question my credibility.

The Brennans’ trust in me was broken, if indeed ‘trust’ had really existed in the presence of expectations about ‘what’ and ‘how’ I should write. Nonetheless I feel I disappointed them, and in an emotional sense I betrayed their expectations. Miller writes about the ethics of betrayal, seeing it as sometimes necessary in a work. Betrayal, she points out, is sometimes even the very point of a story. ‘“You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you”: this is the first line of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Women Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, whose narrative flows directly from the refusal to obey that injunction’ (*The Ethics of Life Writing*, p. 152). Hong Kingston’s words remind me of Mrs Brennan’s warning to me on her driveway that day. ‘Don’t you tell anyone where [this house] is. Don’t you dare’ (Peters, p. 214). I wouldn’t, but given the presence of a documentary producer, it was already too late. I regret this collaboration and can see how the subsequent violation of privacy with cameras in the dunes has been linked back to me. But perhaps betrayal is the point of this story too, beginning with Tobias’s betrayal in misleading the Strobels and the police, and flowing from there it is a betrayal that ultimately leads to all others.

‘Sometimes I have the uncomfortable feeling that the truest ethical position is closely related to silence, to self-silencing’ says Miller (*The Ethics of Life Writing*, p. 157). But at whose expense must this silence come? The Strobels had been living in the dark until my arrival in Germany, for eighteen months knowing little about Simone’s death. ‘You know more than us,’ Gustl said. ‘Please tell us everything you know’ (Peters, p. 93). I was to become their conduit for information, and eventually their advocate. But this relationship, although entirely collaborative, and imbued with good will and trust, was not without risk of exploitation or betrayal. In fact, Couser warns that ‘[t]he closer the relationship between writer and subject, and the greater the vulnerability or dependency of the subject, the higher the ethical stakes’ (Couser, preface, xii). This may explain why it was that for years I lived with a constant anxiety that I would inadvertently come to upset or disappoint the Strobels. Having lost their daughter, adding to their pain was not an outcome I was prepared to live with.

Disabled by grief, and dependent on me for information and support, the Strobels were, by Couser’s definition, vulnerable subjects. Powell warns about the risk of authorial appropriation leading to further trauma, and this perhaps explains my
inherent anxiety throughout the project. ‘Dispossessed bodies take on the burden of representation’, she explains further, and in this case I would add there was the additional burden of potential misinterpretation as English was not the Strobels’ first language. Only Simone’s siblings are able to read English, so in the absence of a literary translation of the text any potential ‘burden’ cannot be fully realised at this point by her parents. At the time of writing this essay, only Simone’s sister has responded to the manuscript, and I include an insert from her letter below that suggests her experience of the text was a positive one; but knowing how accepting personalities all the Strobels are, I am aware they might not tell me otherwise.

Quoting human rights scholars Lyon and Olsen, Powell warns of a danger related to such passivity. Although a narrative can be empowering for victims who cannot, for whatever reason, speak for themselves, empathy can also be a euphemism for taking control (We Shall Bear Witness, p. 198). In the text I recall asking ‘Gabi, Gustl and Alexander if they would sit together…How agreeable they were. I felt a spike of self-importance, quickly followed by self-loathing. They were so vulnerable—was I manipulating them? Or was I just helping them to understand the evidence?’ (Peters, p. 151). Maybe there was an element of both, but as they are reticent and we are mostly reliant on an interpreter I cannot really know.

I can also see there are moments in the text when my enthusiasm to solve the case is possibly overtaking the Strobels’ emotional needs. At one point when Gustl is crying, I am alarmed by my urge to shake him—‘Your daughter is dead!...Please don’t tell me [the Suckfuells] have got it as bad as you’ (Peters, p. 142). Another example, when Gustl and Hermann are grim after watching the police interview tapes of Tobias, I stop to think: ‘Had I actually asked them if they wanted to see the tapes? Or had I just assumed? I couldn’t remember’ (Peters, p. 177). It is moments like these I realise I am not really a witness in the Strobels’ story. Rather, I am the most active participant. The text becomes more about me reacting to them rather than me looking at them from afar—it assists in what Ellis an ethnographer calls ““radical reciprocity”—a move from “studying them to studying us” and requires that the researcher turn the same scrutiny on herself’ (Ellis, p. 13). I would say I go a step

further, however, and the text is driven by my need to prove myself to the Strobels. If I’d not come up with a book, I would have felt I’d entered their lives for no good reason—but then again how much is this about me, and my conscience, rather than about their needs?

I recall the Agamben’s doubt about witnessing trauma at the beginning of this essay: ‘at its centre [trauma] contains something that cannot be born witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority’ (Agamben, p. 34). As he suggests, in the enormity of my task, I think the complexity of the Strobels’ inner trauma is lost. This is a point ironically highlighted in Christina’s warm and complimentary email.

This book and you in particular leave me deeply impressed. I can not put into words how it feels to read everything that has happened portrayed from your perspective, how much thought you put into this, to read how you felt about it. One thing has become even more clear to me. You and of course Kathrin as well have been a great help for me/us in the past time and you still are. Without you guys we would not be where we are now concerning our knowledge and our feeling. Letting you two enter our house, our lives was the best thing that has happened to us in a long time. And I think I am not exaggerating when I say that you have a constant place in our hearts. (personal correspondence, 2013)

It seems okay with Christina that the story is from my perspective, just as it seemed okay with Gustl that I might glean some enjoyment from investigating circumstances that were for him deeply personal and enduringly traumatic.
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