Future Frontier

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(in conjunction with the fictional work Ante Up in separate volume)

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SYNOPSIS

This thesis, consisting of a novel and a dissertation, examines the intersections of place, identity and fiction. During earlier studies I encountered nomadology as represented in Stephen Muecke’s work on Australian Indigeneity, and also the developments on theories and practices of nomadology undertaken by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I began to explore the production of culture in cities read through these ideas. In the present work, my thinking and approaches have been extended significantly by Edward W. Soja’s insights into lived experience, cities and spaces, and by the rhizomatics of Deleuze and Guattari.

What is presented here is a hybrid text – novel and dissertation. Both explore ideas about the production of culture in cities and the exchange of external and internal processes that occurs between people and places. I wanted to articulate what I see as particular cultural processes of postmodern cities, which have developed in ways that depart from conventional understandings of what constitutes urban environments and urbanism. There are co-relations between cities that began in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the increasing global influence of American popular culture, and new millennium developments redefined by technological insurgence. We have seen the emergence of a new kind of city, one that offers accelerated, ahistorical, and dispersed spaces and experiences. My theorising of the ‘new frontier city’ is explicated in the dissertation, and represented in the novel through the Gold Coast.

The relationship between urban formations and postmodern cultural signification is mimicked by the relationship between the two texts. While neither directly refers to the other, an association is developed whereby key characteristics of the new frontier city, such as spectacle, subterfuge, simulation and speculation, are manifested by my fictional characters, themes and stylistic approaches. In addition, the dissertation sometimes works creatively while the novel is derivative of actual icons, people, monuments and events. The work examines the collapse of distinction between the ‘real’ (traditionally represented by the city and urban formations) and the hyperreal (presented by fictionality). I see and position the cities of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the Gold Coast as texts – as new frontier cities where the language of signs, simulation and consumption permeates the cultural and urban fabric in intriguing ways.
I argue for the new frontier city as a site rich in narrative potential. I critique readings that privilege Euro-centric, modernist notions of high cultural values and cosmopolitanism which continue to exclude the new frontier from ‘serious’ cultural status. The fascination I experience for the new frontier city is enacted through an amalgam; a methodology which is applicable to the divergent urban and cultural formations of new frontier cities and the kinds of fictions they produce. The assemblaic and nomadic approach taken in the thesis allows for the development of a relationship of association. For though I am influenced throughout by contemporary urban theorists such as Soja, Sudjic and Frost, whose variant perspectives challenge dominant discourses in their fields, the text remains deliberately unsituated. It contributes to understandings in the realm of urban policy and analysis but ultimately functions as a treatise on how the writer can merge both fictional and non-fictional perspectives to construct meaning and narrative in the seemingly random and impenetrable urban landscapes of the new frontier. The novel and dissertation are therefore parallel documents which map this process rhizomatically. I resist explicit and didactic explications in order to ‘mimic’ (in Deleuzian terms) the more arbitrary and distillatory process of the creative writer.

The opening chapters of *Future Frontier* explore the development history of Los Angeles, the Gold Coast and Las Vegas, concentrating on the meaning and characteristics of the new frontier city in relation to the narrative experience. *Section Two* concentrates on broader definitions of new frontier cities and the contrasts with European architectural and urban experience. *Section Three* explores the effects of cinema and cinematic mimicry on new frontier cities. This section features micro-concentrations on celebrity worship, reality TV, plastic surgery and the geography of extreme experience. *Section Four* focuses primarily on the Gold Coast and examines ways in which the distinctive processes of the new frontier have influenced significant subsections of its culture in the arenas of politics, development and architecture. *Section Five* posits a ‘culture of subterfuge’. Here the associated effects of gambling, risk, speculation, crime and fraud are examined. The closing statement, *Culture of Contradiction*, offers a navigation through the narrative potentials of the new frontier by recognising it as a site fuelled by inherent, overlapping and divergent fictional voices.
This analysis informs the stylistic technique of the novel, which features three contrasting voices and timescapes. These ‘speakers’ converge obsessively on the elusive character of Jade. The key storyteller is The Dealer, a croupier who attaches himself to Jade in ways which are reminiscent of classic noir but subverted by his displacement in the new frontier. His object is to reveal, to ‘turn over’ the present. Another aspect of Jade’s character is evoked by the recollective voice of Anthony who is isolated and remains ignorant of other players in the game. The third voice is representative of the city – the omnipotent eye of the Gold Coast. Each ‘version’ of Jade’s story overlaps the other. Because the reader never gains access to her own interior monologue Jade remains absent, in an intimate sense, while being relentlessly pursued, coveted and externally revealed. Jade, like the new frontier city, must always be read and experienced through the chimera of unreality – through the affected gaze of others – in order to be known. Jade fascinates as the new frontier city does, and she is marked by desire for impermanence.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Signature of Candidate
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Sally Breen
22 December, 2004
The relationship between the writer and the city possesses an indissoluble history. Urban cultures have long struggled for, rejoiced in, and wrestled with the means to interpret themselves; to render their effusive and intangible atmospheres effectively with the written word; to impart, infer, evoke and mimic without reduction or erasure. It is a formidable task to capture the multitude of affects, faces, monuments, exchanges, dreams, voices and histories that infuse the city and turn it into a living organism. This ephemeral moment of connection, when the writer is given over completely to the story potential of a city, creates a desire to elevate it from the level of backdrop, muzak or setting in fiction. In such works, the city is no longer just a reference point or a stage, it is everything; infusing all modes of narrative device; becoming character, place, voice, structure and a site of complex meaning. Consider the relationship of association between James Joyce and Dublin, Baudelaire and Paris, Allen Ginsberg and San Francisco, or Kingsley Amis and London. These writers have produced seminal works of urban representation. The narrative and poetical intention moves beyond reflection to a kind of textual ‘embodiment’. The rhythmic sensations of the city are mimicked, captured and celebrated stylistically. As a result, each of these cities now has a linguistic texture that forms part of its abiding cultural identity.

But what of the new cities? The cities that are still being written, that are consistently rewriting themselves? Cities built on fine sediment with an absence of historical substratum, and with little or no literary contemplation? This is where I found myself. I was setting out to write a novel that the city of the Gold Coast would permeate, in which it would speak to the reader, just as it had done to me, but that voice was elusive. Though I was seeking to engage with a tradition of municipal creation and contemplation, I was approaching a city with few reference points. When I opened story collections on cities, the Gold Coast was missing. In the gamut of Australian literature, I found it in less than a handful of spaces. It wasn’t enough.

I began, then, just as the Gold Coast had done, with notions of imitation and resemblance. I sought reflections of my city in the literature written about the places it mimicked culturally: Las Vegas, Miami and Los Angeles. In this way, I found myself consistently turning away from the conditions and examples of my own national
literature. The Gold Coast could not be sought historically, classically or with a European sensibility. Its tone was altogether different. Its tone was contemporary, disjointed, discontinuous, filmic, figurative, marginal, symbolic, and primarily ‘American’. And though these modes of expression can be sought to varying degrees in Australian fiction, I found the most potent resonance of the mood and significance I was seeking in Californian literature and film. I found it in words about pictures; in cinematic landscapes; in characters that acted like cameras. I had been seeking a literature that approached the world around it with a wide, full colour lens, with an extroverted perspective, with a multiple and almost eradicated sense of self. I would be influenced, just as the Gold Coast had been, by the Californian imagination; by writers such as Brett Easton Ellis, Raymond Chandler, Eve Babitz, Joan Didion, James Ellroy, Evelyn Waugh and Horace McKoy. And by the relevant cinematic viewpoints of Los Angeles and Las Vegas produced variously by film directors such as David Lynch, Wim Wenders, Roman Polanski, Ridley Scott, Martin Scorsese and Darren Aronofsky.

Both the novel and the dissertation are exercises in evocation. I wasn’t looking for ways in which I could prove that cities like the Gold Coast and Los Angeles were the same. They clearly weren’t. What they did share was a 20th Century development philosophy that produced and manufactured radically different urban formations to those developed in the centuries before them. These were cities that had erupted at exceptional levels. They had not evolved from industrial processes or revolutions; they had thrust themselves into inhospitable landscapes in an unprecedented and rampant fashion made possible by concurrent movements in technological insurgence: a physical and ideological synthesis of new frontiers.

I noticed too that these cities shared what appeared to be an overarching sense of cultural marginalisation; a contradictory circumstance of visibility and invisibility. As postmodern urban spaces they carried with them a conflicting series of facts, interpretations and perceptions which, despite their obvious success as rapidly growing territories, placed them in opposition to dominant urban and cultural paradigms. Los Angeles, the Gold Coast and Las Vegas are all highly visualised, fantasised and prophesied cities where the production and consumption of popular culture is often viewed as fadistic, shallow, fatuous or at best suspicious. These perceptions form part of the national social fabrics, and manifest socially in all manner of negative ways.
culture wars that take place between states and territories on the east and west coasts of America (Los Angeles and New York) and the southern and northern states of Australia (Queensland and N.S.W/Victoria) are in part a natural consequence of capitalist competitive economics, however, the obvious displacement of the new frontier is also a product of its uniqueness. Here are cities so often criticised and even detested for their apparent vacuous excess that defence or denial of this position often leads to extreme forms of territorial defensiveness. In the ungovernable urban realms of American Hip Hop, for example, the coded and hymn-like evocations of territorial identification in Los Angeles and New York can manifest in gang warfare and drive-by shootings – a moment when the language of the local penetrates the body; when annihilation of a physical and located presence is the last word.

As a writer seeking to produce a cultural product in and about the city of the Gold Coast, the dilemma of displacement is obvious. When I first moved to the Gold Coast in 1992 I brought with me a set of associations about place and landscape that were completely at odds with this new territory. I had grown up in the out-lying semi-rural area of Pine Rivers, on the north side of Queensland’s capital city of Brisbane. The area is now largely resettled and subdivided to cope with the consistent in-migration of new families but in the 1970s it was still a place of waterholes, creeks, paddocks and parks which backed up against fences and wide suburban streets. As kids we rode our bikes to the biggest of the abutting rural properties to play chicken with bulls. Sometimes cows and horses broke fences and it was not uncommon to see them grazing for fresh grass on footpaths. The bush that surrounded and encroached on our houses was scraggly, full of lantana and the ghosts of early pioneers, Joyner, Leach, Cash and Eaton – the same names adopted by our school football and athletics teams. We ran around playing fields with these English names on our backs, the names of our town’s founding fathers whose dead were buried in the historical cemetery behind Coles New World supermarket. And because they were there, because we wagged school and sometimes smoked cigarettes on their graves, we knew why everything else was there and what function it played. People had gone before us, had made this place, and our recollections were infused with their colonial history. When we came back home in the late afternoon with dirt and leaves in our hair we imagined we were pioneers too; settlers, and explorers of this terrain. And even though we had a tendency to turn Council playgrounds into death stars, and the ground around us into Star Wars space, we knew about another, more local kind of history, an English
kind of history, a knowledge which equated to a sense of ownership, of belonging and at a deeper level, of conquest, for we had our own contemporary stakeouts and takeovers to contest. Pine Rivers had always been a rough place where we learned quickly about Friday night fights, the sound of hotted up cars and how to ride our bikes very fast.

In the early 1990s I moved into Brisbane city’s urban core. This was a formative time in which my perceptions of space were affected by the big country town topography of Brisbane’s inner city streets: I had shifted from a wide open rural space to a compacted space which still possessed visual remnants of its own horse and cart past. This was a city that I remembered and pictured in muted earth tones – sandstone façades and industrial tracks; the late sun on a white federation veranda; back alleys and train lines full of grey grit and graffiti; jacaranda trees, big business, hillside views, old boarding houses and skinny one way streets.

Then, quite suddenly, I found myself on the Gold Coast just one-hour south east of Brisbane but the urban and social contrast could not have been starker. I was a product of a colonial city, a city whose determinative moments had revolved historically around colonial settlement, convicts, politics and war. I now found myself in a place that reflected none of this. I was in a city that glowed, where everything seemed to shimmer, where it was just as hot as my hometown but where the light seemed bigger, stronger; a shocking combination of the sun and the sea’s bright glare. Everything appeared flashy, pretty, transient, and temporary. There was a lot of sun and a lot of skin: no centre, no underground, no dirt, no visual history, no historical configurations and no decay. The effect was foreign and destabilising.

Every Friday I made my way back to Brisbane reassured by the apparition of its centrifugal skyline. I went back to the Coast on Sunday, sometimes Monday if I could help it. I had developed a conception of how a city was supposed to operate and feel, and refused to grant permission for the Gold Coast to pull rank. It was an exercise in denial I experienced years later in the restaurants, bars and cafés of Los Angeles, except this time I was taking a more neutral position. I was listening now to New Yorkers who said yes, they were here for the weekend, yes, they often came here to play, but no, they could never live here. They were confident they went home to a serious city. I wasn’t so convinced anymore. Years of living on the Gold Coast had changed me. I realised that
what constituted a city was interpretable; cities were not templates which could be predetermined or fixed even when our prevailing notions of them often were. I had developed a relationship with the Gold Coast that was different to but just as valid as the one I had developed with Brisbane. The curious thing was that nobody believed me.

Statements about art and arts practice on the Gold Coast and in other new frontier territories continue to be viewed as paradoxical or oxymoronic by the majority of those who comment on the validity of cultural product because these territories have such powerfully pre-defined commercial purposes. Any assessment of a new frontier culture is affected by the populist reputation preceding it in the public imagination. The persistent tension between what locals know and what others perceive and pronounce about these territories creates a vacuum in which local product is overshadowed by a concentration on what is, in most cases, an irrelevant geographical signification or a taken for granted, preconceived image of the city. The same kind of pressure is not applicable to those artists who work from within the engine rooms of hegemonic culture. Their geographical status is seamless. If their cultural legitimacy is brought into the frame, then recognition of their urban origins is almost always favourable, rather than a source of questionability or judgement. Artists in new frontier territories start from behind the eight ball – first they must overcome their compartmentalisation – the restricted potential of their reach.

There are of course exceptions and in more established new frontier cities, like Los Angeles, examples of cultural practitioners with widely recognised reputations are clearly in evidence. Certainly, artists continue to be attracted to these territories because the perpetuation of myth and fantasy, the merging of dream and reality, are conducive to creative innovation. Indeed, California has historically exemplified a freedom from modernist authority and has produced in Hollywood one of the world’s most successful creative industries. However, it is exactly this kind of hybrid commercial success that also reduces the expectation that the city may have broader artistic activities and intentions. Los Angeles does produce art as more traditionally understood, but people are surprised that it does.

A similar situation applies to the Gold Coast. Its reputation as a site of pleasure and recreation permeates the national imagination. In this case, visually dominant commercial tourism and leisure industries seem to preclude acceptance or awareness of an alternative
cultural life. Art on the Gold Coast is apprehended as unexpected – not usual – alien to what the city sells about itself. Therefore, reactions to it oscillate between various expressions from disdain to surprise; most are patronising. What happens at the micro level of the new frontier is simply irrelevant to the visually dominant commercial purposes. Cities like the Gold Coast, Las Vegas and Los Angeles are granted permission to be obscene, eccentric, popular, successful and even innovative on the condition that they do not erode the cultural hierarchy. They must remain quirky aberrations of aesthetic taste, not define it. All this points to misinterpretation of local cultural life against which resident artists, not surprisingly, cultivate a certain defensiveness. It follows that their cultural products are frequently aggressively self-referential, self-mocking or self-destructive. This is certainly true of the literary canon of Los Angeles, which has often sought thematically to obliterate itself as writers such as West, Chandler and Waugh set the tone of urban apocalypse. The hegemonic produced by various arbiters of high culture excludes the legitimisation of new frontier culture because it threatens the separatist core principles of excellence on which ‘high art’ and/or modernism are founded.

It became increasingly clear that the interpretation of the new frontier city required new critical terrain. There was no familiar definitive map that suited the territory. The procedure would require a more rhizomatic approach; navigations based on enquiry and multiplicity rather than resistance. I looked to philosophers, Deleuze and Guattari in particular, for an understanding of how I might define this process and I looked to the works of urban theorists who were calling for alternative points of view. Edward W. Soja, Lionel Frost, Deyan Sudjic and John Downey saw the potential inherent to these contested technological landscapes and advocated alternatives to the prevailing mood of authoritative deconstruction. Just as cities like the Gold Coast and Los Angeles could not extract themselves from the postmodern semiotics of images and signs, I required a methodology that would fuse literary, cinematic and popular points of view with a developed and nuanced framework of cultural and urban analysis. Because, as filmmaker Wim Wenders has suggested, ‘Even a barren landscape asks to be captured on the right terms.’ (Slattery 2003: 24)

In the context of the new frontier the appropriate terms would translate to a localised notion of circumstance which suggested that even though the Gold Coast was firmly and
deliberately situated outside of the European urban experience this did not necessarily translate negatively. I saw the Gold Coast as a series of actualised narratives. As a metaphor for the process of fiction, it held significant promise. Like other new frontier cities, it was in my view a culture engaged permanently in its own creative act. I wanted to *arrive* at the site of all this perpetual story; to get used to that perpetuity rather than try to ‘get to the crux of it’, for this wasn’t a city which could be epitomised, centralised or captured. Its episodic impermanence resisted such a reading. The Gold Coast could only be intermittently rendered. This was a city that spun tales, commodified identification, and lied about itself in order to sell itself – a city whose major project was ultimately to be outside of history (Wise, 2004: 3; Wise and Breen, 2004: 164). I desired neither to privilege nor deride that process but to open it out – to create a map of the new frontier, a chronicle, a collage of conflicting points of view, an assemblaic examination that would tease through contradictory understandings, impressions and experiences that conjured the new frontier and the myths, publicity and fictions it perpetuated about itself. I had to *arrive*; to read the city without distorted or pre-coded points of view which reduced its significance and denied access to its value. This was not a city that could be read in correlation to the European principles of ‘centrality’ or ‘essence’. I would have to go instead, via California, Los Angeles and Las Vegas, across the territories that had influenced and made the Gold Coast, in order to navigate an alternative understanding about its past and its potential.

To do so it was necessary to distinguish why new frontier cities continued to be marginalised, why they had erupted and operated the way they did, and why this unique trajectory continued to be such a contested issue. Why, for example, did notions and practices of risk, speculation and gambling proliferate in these spaces? Why did entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, con artists and the ‘self-made’ permeate and control these cities, and what, then, was the role of the state? These and other cultural affects of new frontier development required more thorough investigation and clearly necessitated the inclusion of associated cultural and social research. It is always difficult in simulated and contradictory spaces to determine the parameters of cause and effect. I have therefore utilised a combination of case study, fictional reference and response, creative writing, theoretical application and urban analysis as means of revealing the overlapping concerns and fascinations of the new frontier.
…the spatial specificity of urbanism is investigated as fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency. Understanding lived space can be compared to writing a biography, an interpretation of the lived time of an individual; or more generally to historiography, the attempt to describe and understand the lived time of human collectivities or societies. In all these “life stories” perfect or complete knowledge is impossible…studying cityspace presents a potentially endless variety of exemplifications and interpretations. (Soja 1996: 11, 12)

The opening chapters of *Future Frontier* explore the development history of Los Angeles, the Gold Coast and Las Vegas respectively, and by doing so, attempt to define the meaning and characteristics of the new frontier city in relation to the narrative experience. The thematic vernacular of each city is examined with particular attention to the visual, linguistic and physical formations of what can be understood as a Hollywood-influenced urban mythology. This self-referentiality is then considered by analysing the films, texts, and boosterist practices which have defined and influenced the process of knowing and naming in these cities. *Section Two* concentrates on broader definitions and characteristics of new frontier cities and the developed positions are tested, contrasted and explored in relation to the European architectural and urban experience. The effects of cinema and cinematic mimicry on the experience of living in the new frontier cities of the Gold Coast, Los Angeles and Las Vegas are explored in detail in *Section Three*. Assumptions regarding new frontier citizenry are questioned by investigating the production of popular culture and its effects (actual or preconceived) on identification and subjectivity. The section features micro-concentrations on celebrity worship, reality TV, plastic surgery and the geography of extreme experience. *Section Four* focuses primarily on the Gold Coast and examines ways in which the distinctive processes of the new frontier have influenced significant subsections of its micro-culture in the arenas of politics, development and architecture. *Section Five* looks at the supposed detrimental effects of derivative simulation in the new frontier by positing a ‘culture of subterfuge’. Here the associated effects of gambling, risk, speculation, crime and fraud are examined in relation to urban and social experience. The closing statement, *Culture of Contradiction*, offers a navigation through the narrative potentials of the new frontier by recognising it as a site fuelled by inherent, overlapping and divergent fictional voices.

I have attempted throughout *Future Frontier*, to give the same weight to accusations as celebrations; to include incongruous positions as a defining mode of the new frontier
experience. The study is not mounted as a defence, however it does seek to legitimise the new frontier city’s municipal position in order to proclaim space for it as a conducive narrative site. As a writer I am not seeking to deny its surface or disprove it. I am seeking permission to declare, just as Douglas Coupland has done for the accelerated culture of California, that perhaps surface is depth. (Coupland 1991)
SECTION ONE: Hollywood Made Me

CHAPTER ONE: The Mirage Actualised – Los Angeles Development

Gittes
There’s going to be some irate citizens when they find out they’re paying for water they’re not getting.

Cross
That’s all taken care of. You see, Mr Gittes, either you bring the water to L.A. – or you bring L.A. to the water.

Gittes
How do you do that?

Cross
Just incorporate the Valley into the city so the water goes to L.A. after all. It’s that simple.

Gittes nods.
Gittes
(then)
How much are you worth?

Cross
(shrugs then)
I have no idea. How much do you want?

Gittes
I want to know what you are worth – over ten million?

Cross
Oh, my, yes.

Gittes
Then why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can’t already afford?

Cross
(a long moment, then:)
The future, Mr Gittes – the future.

(Polanski & Towne 1974)
On a Sunset Boulevard overpass Jake Gittes gazes down at what’s left of the Los Angeles Riverbed below. ‘Sun glazes off its ugly concrete banks. Where the banks are earthen, they are parched and choked with weeds.’ (Polanski & Towne 1974) This is a town where a man can drown in a riverbed in the middle of a drought and no one is supposed to figure it out. Just another riddle in the city, a riddle without a client. But Jake Gittes is not Jake Gittes, he’s Jack Nicholson and this is not L.A. but Chinatown, a screenplay by Robert Towne.

This is a fiction. Scene 99. This is a story, a film noir drama about water and Los Angeles, but it is also part fact, part documentary and part historical excursion. Jake Gittes never actually happened, his nose was never sliced open for its flagrant curiosity, but the water did happen; the diversions, the run offs and the theft. Los Angeles did steal its own water. However, it is the first ‘fictitious’ incident, Jake Gittes and his nose, that leads us to the water, brings us to the moment where we reflect on the possible reality and consequence of Los Angeles’ otherwise erasable development. It is the film and not the corrupt events themselves that are visible. We arrive at this recognition via fiction. Robert Towne, the storyteller, navigates the public consciousness through the parched riverbed of Los Angeles’ history, aware that the history of this celluloid city, that histories in general, have always only been a series of fictions. And so in Chinatown we arrive at the point of intersection, where all Los Angeles’ stories meet on pages and screens.

Los Angeles is one of the world’s most mythologised cities but unlike other fabled metropolises, such as Paris, Rome or Jerusalem, its infamy is apolitical and agnostic. It has achieved unquestionable cross-cultural standing with an almost paradoxical lack of historical or religious subtext. L.A. has not been ‘created’ so much from evolutionary or historical moments as through the poetic invention and supplication of words and images. It has been founded and sold on the promise, rather than the declaration, of meaning. This contextual ambiguity produces and infuses the city’s textual and filmic representations. The literature of Los Angeles is loaded with images – appropriated, derivative and iconic – because L.A is a borrowed, temporary landscape where the filmic vision of the city overwrites and/or underwrites every other representation of it. This self-referential tension is captured beautifully by the collaboration of auteurs, Robert Towne and Roman Polanski, in Chinatown.
Chinatown. Every major western city seems to have one. A world within a world. A district that deliberately sets itself apart from the larger machinations and identifications of the city surrounding it: an exoticised version of the east in the west, a duplication present and recognisable as ‘the same’ wherever it exists. In Towne’s screenplay, Chinatown is manipulated as a site of extrinsic danger. As a distant metaphor for trouble it has strong dramatic effect and plays on the notions of organised crime that its municipality visibility invites and creates. It is the recurrent presence of this site for the character of Gittes that means we are invited to imagine, again and again, the ‘infamous’ district and his place in it. And just like Gittes, the consistent contemplation of Chinatown acts as our primary diversion, a process that mimics contemplation of the city itself. What we expect is not what we receive.

The corruption witnessed in the film is not a virus spreading from Chinatown to the rest of L.A. but is a defect already present in the business, corporate and official veins of the whole city. Polanski and Towne show us that the safety Gittes covets is not necessarily geographical and that his immunity to public conspiracies is not granted. Gittes has removed himself from the red light district, from the police force, from Chinatown but he can’t escape the fallout of civic corruption. Now he can feel the danger but he can’t see it. Gittes’ failure to clarify and recognise in time the series of masked manoeuvres occurring around him results in narrative tragedy; a pattern of failed comprehension he inadvertently repeats.

Misunderstanding is at the heart of Chinatown, lurking even in the apparently innocuous phrases…Gittes, whose inability to perform these traditional detective functions of clarification and explanation allows Chinatown to preserve its mystery. (King 2002)

By deliberately focussing on a process of concealment, Towne and Polanski not only subvert the assumptions of noir cinema, they effectively interpret a period of Los Angeles’ ambiguous past. Like their detective, this city does not adhere to convention. Like Jake, it is in rebellion against its past and therefore the representation of it is saturated by a series of perplexing delusions and tricks. The absence of history is the mystery. The incriminating secrets of the past equate to the contemporary riddle but rather than retrace, the film asks these questions by moving forward: the trip is more an investigation through the confusions of the present than a journey back. In this way the writer and director effectively map Los Angeles, a city with an invisible history.
I draw on *Chinatown* because it assists in contextualising my own narrative position; it provides an access point to the interpretation of new frontier cities and their methods of cultural production that is otherwise difficult to articulate. The Gold Coast, like Los Angeles, is a city where images resonate, where pictures overlap and imitate each other. In this way *Chinatown* offers a valid and useful model of contradictory signification; for it becomes apparent in most analytical literature on Los Angeles that the sense of lack and failure which emerges is infused with a European imaginary. That is, a great deal of analysis is referred through an imaginary whose framework is embedded and striated with hierarchal structures, sedimented history, centrifugal systems of operation, a sense of permanence and a privileging of space that does not apply itself effectively to the new frontier.

Los Angeles is a virtual city, a discontinuous narrative. Its ‘meaning’ cannot be discerned from the fictions it spins but from the gaps that open up between them. This kind of communication occurs not on the page, the postcard or the placard but in the open air. It requires an absence of things in order to move. Like a satellite dish it faces out, to the sky and preferably to the sun, receiving messages that simultaneously travel through and bounce off matter. It engages with the type of transmissions that one cannot see. In a city like this no monument can ever compete with the unlimited access the imaginary provides. There is no boundary – the recall extends to a vanishing point where what is supposed to be remembered is already forgotten. Without grounding, these images continue to proliferate.

There would be about a hundred teenagers dancing in front of a huge screen on which the videos were played; the images dwarfing the teenagers and I would recognise people whom I had seen at clubs, dancing on the show, smiling for the cameras, and then turning and looking up to the lighted, monolithic screen that was flashing the images at them. Some of them would mouth the words to the song that was being played. But I’d concentrate on the teenagers who had forgotten them; the teenagers who maybe never knew them. (Ellis 1986: 194)

Such images form the variances of my own cinematic recall, from the atmospheric, to the specific, and the sublime. Edward Norton kicking a black man’s skull into the kerb in *American History X*. Robert Downey Jnr slumped against a sculpture wall, reflecting a blue pool in *Less Than Zero*; the camera panning in slow motion across the perfectly still water to his face. Steve Martin talking to a road sign. The acid rain in *Blade Runner*. The anti-
urban flight of Los Angeles skateboarders in *Dogtown And Z Boys. Colours* and its gang warfare – the world reduced to blue and red. Death’s face on *Mulholland Drive*, and the ‘white male panic’ (Klein 1997: 79-80) of pre-colour noir. And then there are those long line streets dotted at precise intervals with one hundred and twenty nine different species of palm tree; all of it hyperreal, and all of it in my head; an audio visual junkyard of inherited memories and inscriptions out of which I can only build a replica of Los Angeles, an amorphous shell. To expect these images not to lie would equate to trusting my own sick eye.

If according to Kafka cinema means pulling a uniform over your eyes then television means pulling on a straitjacket, stepping up an eye training regime that leads to eye disease, just as the acoustic intensity of the walkman leads to irreversible lesions in the inner ear. (Virilio 1997: 97)

**Writing the City**

A cab ride in Los Angeles will take you through spaces that have more life on the screen than they do off it. There is where this film was shot. That is where this actor was. This is what ‘they’ made here. On and on as you alternate between the only states that matter in this city, speed and gridlock. And before you know it you have already passed by the scene you are trying to re-imagine. There was the week, the person, the moment that wasn’t. The space of Los Angeles is like high-grade slate – the only thing it captures and reflects is light; everything else slides away. This evasive sense of identity and placement is reflected succinctly in literary representations of Los Angeles. Californian essayist and novelist Joan Didion is revered for her ‘studiously anti-climactic and fragmented fiction’ and for her ability to render ‘uneasy’, ‘self-conscious’ and ‘remote’ female protagonists who all display large degrees of ‘passive detachment’ (Hulbert 1996: HREF1).

The anxious narrators of her disjointedly elliptical novels are always interrupting, challenging, undercutting themselves. By fits and starts: that is how they write, a stylised stuttering that has become Didion’s trademark delivery. That is also how her characters live. The Didion protagonist is a woman adrift in history, her own and America’s. (Hulbert 1996: HREF1)

The remote position of principal narrators in Didion’s work is also prevalent in the majority of fiction written in and about California. It is a position that both contradicts and confirms popular notions of the territory as a site of cultural excess and confusion, for while these characters appear loose, indiscriminate and fragmented they often display
acute levels of external awareness – a characteristic not often recognised as immediately as geographically attributable alienation. Theirs is not an introspective intelligence nor do they indulge often in extravagant emotional display, rather the narrative characters reveal unhinged but controlled temperaments concerned with the outside, with a reserved capacity for mute reflection. Like Didion, many other Californian writers have been, ‘expert at coolness, numbness in hot climates’ (Hulbert 1996: HREF1). In the memoir Where I Was From, Didion is startled by the ‘pragmatic’ detachment of the voices of her own family and their contemporaries in the crossing accounts, diaries and oral histories which describe the harsh immigrant journeys to California across the unforgiving territories of the western frontier. These were people ‘given to breaking clean with everything and everyone they knew’ (Didion 2003: 7), who sometimes suffered and lost irrevocably in their quest to arrive.

The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried. They were women, these women in my family, without much time for second thoughts, without much inclination toward equivocation, and later when there was time or inclination, there developed a tendency, which I came to see as endemic, toward slight or major derangements, apparently eccentric pronouncements, opaque bewilderment and moves to places not quite on schedule. (Didion 2003: 7-8)

Migratory quests and odysseys of faith, where other people's children where left for dead, where people survived on the cut throat of a deer, or froze to death in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, had infused the women in Didion’s family with a resistance towards hesitation as well as imbued California with a peculiar tradition of heroic embellishment and a characteristic narrative position that tended towards the mythological. The reserved and distant points of view so prevalent in Californian literature resonate with a dark luminescence and a barely concealed sense of imminent danger that are as much a reflection of a contemporary sense of displacement and alienation as they are an attempt to capture the brutality and heroism of its fabled frontier past. In Where I Was From Didion questions the ‘artlessness’ of the crossing story: ‘There survives in their repetition a problematic elision or inflation, a narrative flaw, a problem with point of view: the actual observer, or camera eye is often hard to locate’ (Didion 2003: 30). Of one such account she asks,
Who witnessed this moment of departure? Was the camera on Josephus Cornwell’s mother, following her son with the last look? Or on the son himself, glancing back as he vanishes from sight? The gravity of this decisive break demands narrative, conflicting details must be resolved, reworked into a plausible whole. (Didion 2003: 30)

Curiously this is not a demand Didion makes of her own creative work, nor is it a defining trait of much Californian fiction. The problematics of the omniscient narrative and the displaced witness continue to define the Californian narrative position, even when, as it is in Didion’s case, the story is delivered in the first person. Ruptures, confusions, second hand accounts, secrets, mysteries and diversions saturate California’s cultural landscape to the point where narrators, however they are drawn, are meant to be brought into question and distrusted. In the following extract from *American Tabloid*, James Ellroy shifts and distorts the ‘camera eye’ without actually changing the point of view. The reader is drawn into one position and is just as quickly relocated to somewhere else. We are not sure at times whether we share the view of the main protagonist or remain solely in the viewfinder of the omniscient narrator – the narrative voice shifts from a beat not unlike relentless television to a slower tempo which gives the impression that Ellroy is backing up favourably against the inside of one of his character’s heads. This level of paranoid narrative distortion means that we are never really convinced of who is speaking or who is actually watching who.


The fragmented perspectives shared by Didion, Ellis and Ellroy are the extreme reactions and manifestations of the frontier experience no longer with anywhere else to go. It finally ruptures here, at the edge of the country and turns back on itself, annihilating but at the same time offering a distance that separates the protagonist from the agonies and corruptions they perceive. In this way the position of the ‘native’ Californian is as inflated and elevated as Didion claims it always has been. For the frontier generations of the

*Future Frontier*
American West, ideological possession of California was something that had to be earned. It was a test of initiation Didion often experienced as a randomly attributable ‘Code of the West’ (Didion 2003: 96).

New people, we were given to understand, remained ignorant of our special history, insensible to the hardships endured to make it, blind not only to the dangers the place still presented but to the shared responsibilities its continued habitation demanded...but the ambiguity was this: new people were making California rich. (Didion 2003: 95-6)

This pervasive notion of an elusive but ‘real’ or ‘native’ Californian underwrites the remove of California’s literary characters. These are voices that speak from the inside of a culture seen to be inhabited by strangers, imposters, aberrations and amoral events. Often the protagonist hovers at the edge of apparent horrors not quite participating but not quite looking away.

When we get to Rip’s apartment on Wilshire, he leads us to the bedroom. There’s a naked girl, really young and pretty, lying on the mattress. Her legs are spread and tied to the bedposts and her arms are tied above her head. Her cunt is all rashed and looks dry and I can see that its been shaved. She keeps moaning and murmuring words and moving her head from side to side, her eyes half closed...Spin kneels by the bed and picks up a syringe and whispers something into her ear. The girl doesn’t open her eyes. Spin digs the syringe into her arm. I just stare. Trent says, ‘Wow.’ (Ellis 1986: 189-90)

Characters such as Blaire in Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* coast through the city barely raising an eyebrow or a pulse; acting as if the world owes them a future while remaining simultaneously incapable of deciding what that future may be; because, as the narrative paradoxically reveals, often their fate has already been decided for them. This pervasive combination of passive intelligence, apathy and fatalism separates these voices from the characters penned by a generation of Californian writers who went before them. Rather than expressing an abhorrent rage at the disintegration of ‘paradise’, the reader is left with an overriding impression that these contemporary characters have thrown their hands up at the end of a long journey and submitted California to the endless onslaught of ‘new people’, to anyone who wants to take a shot. In the case of Huxley, Chandler, Waugh and West, the detachment of the narrator was much more sardonically disengaged and compounded by a marked European influence; both the language and
the point of view were inherited and removed to the point of condescension in a way
that the complicit protagonists of Ellroy, Ellis and Didion could never be.

Aimee Thanatogenos spoke the tongue of Los Angeles; the sparse
furniture of her mind – the objects which barked the intruder’s shins –
had been acquired at the local high school and University; she presented
herself to the world dressed and scented in obedience to the
advertisements; brain and body were scarcely distinguishable from the
standard product, but the spirit – ah the spirit was something apart; it had
to be sought afar; not here in the musky orchards of the Hesperides, but
in the mountain air of dawn, in the eagle-haunted passes of Hellas. An
umbilical chord of cafés and fruit shops, of ancestral shady businesses to
the high places of her race. As she grew up the only language she knew
expressed fewer and fewer of her ripening needs; the facts which littered
her memory grew less substantial; the figure she saw in the looking-glass
seemed less recognizable to herself. Aimee withdrew herself into a lofty
and hieratic habitation. Thus it was that the exposure as a liar and a cheat
of the man she loved and to whom she was bound by the tenderest
vows, affected only part of her. Her heart was broken perhaps but it was
a small inexpensive organ of local manufacture. (Waugh 1951: 103-4)

The observational device Waugh utilises here not only allows the narrator to keep his
distance, it also allows him a position from which to pass absolute judgment, for the
remove of the character is reiterated by the conservative language of permanence,
tradition and a sense of history that Waugh has brought with him from Europe to the
territory. This is not the language of Los Angeles, nor is it the language of Aimee
Thanatogenos, rather it is the language of the critique of both. It is the collision of these
contrary sensibilities that gives these imported narratives their intriguing tension. The
confusion arises for the narrators when the acute alienation they feel is confounded by
the ingénue of Los Angeles, however she is symbolised or fashioned. Their descriptive
desire is so repressed, so guiltily formed, that it manifests in a twisted wish for the
annihilation of their heroines and ultimately, for the city’s apocalypse.

None of them really heard her. They were all too busy watching her
smile, laugh, shiver, whisper, grow indignant, cross and uncross her legs,
stick out her tongue, widen and narrow her eyes, toss her head so that
her platinum splashed against the red plush of the chair back. The
strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they really
didn’t illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as
though her body recognised how foolish her words were and tried to
excite her hearers into being uncritical. It worked that night; no one even
tought of laughing at her. The only move they made was to narrow the
circle around her. (West 1957: 386-7)
In the first half of the 20th Century Los Angeles was the perfect setting for European and East Coast artists in exile to project such apocalyptic visions of the future. Caught as they were slumming it in paradise, the stage was set to substantiate Los Angeles as the top billing star of noir. Writers such as Brecht, Huxley, Waugh and West holed up in their bungalows in the orange groves and told the world that hell was a movie set full of femme fatales who drove you mad until they were avenged.

I would read books like *The Loved One* or *Day of the Locust* or *Ape and Essence* by Aldous Huxley. The point of these books as far as I, a bleached blond teenager growing up in Hollywood, was concerned was that though the authors thought they were so smart – being from England or the East Coast and so well educated and everything – they were suckers for trashy cute girls who looked like goddesses and just wanted to have fun. These men could say what they liked about how stupid and shabby and ridiculous L.A. was, but the minute they stepped off the train, they were lost. All their belief in the morals and tenets of Western civilisation was just a handful of dust. (Babitz 1992: 108-9)

As Eve Babitz suggests, the weight of such powerful fictional representations has continued to infuse perceptions about the city and its people, perhaps to the detriment of contemporary writers and filmmakers who see the city altogether differently. The apocalyptic canon that Los Angeles carries on its back tends to override contemporary citations because of its enduring enchantment and success. The harsh and detached point of view – the shadow of noir history – has formed the mainstay of the Californian literary canon. In the wake of the disparaging proclamations of visiting writers in the first half of the 20th Century (especially Waugh, Huxley and West) a noir sensibility was inculcated and developed into a kind of folklore, an underbelly identification the city could not be separated from (particularly in the hands of Hammet and Chandler). In the latter half of the 20th Century the narrative mood ruptured, unsurprisingly, into despair (with Ellis and Didion) and further into self-destruction. Alongside these commercially celebrated writers, Charles Bukowski emerged as Los Angeles’ cult figure of confessional doom. In his prolific catalogue of works (forty two publications of poetry and prose from 1962 to 1998) the protagonists are not fighting an urge to surrender to the city or to its temptations – they have already done so – and this devil-may-care admission attracts and speaks to the culture of California held for so long under the pressure of narrative abuse and attack. These are ‘insiders’ hanging by a thread, seeking at all times to unplug themselves from a sense of association with a reviled and fractious system.
I must have been mad. Unshaven. Undershirt full of cigarette holes. My only desire was to have more than one bottle on the dresser. I was not fit for the world and the world was not fit for me and I had found some others like myself, and most of them were women, women most men would never want to be in the same room with, but I adored them, they inspired me, I play-acted, swore, pranced about in my underwear telling them how great I was, but only I believed that. They just hollered, “Fuck off! Pour some more booze!” Those ladies from hell, those ladies in hell with me. (Bukowski 1998: 167)

A recent anthology of Los Angeles-based writers heeds the canonical influences of its literary past while encouraging the irruption of difference. The title, *Absolute Disaster – Fiction from Los Angeles*, emerges as more of an effective marketing strategy than an accurate reflection of the content. The editors have attempted to position the works in a familiar apocalyptic vein with sections dedicated to ‘Disasters in Love’, ‘Disasters in Cars’, ‘Disasters in the Hood’ and ‘Disasters in Spirit Imagination and Thinking’, but the tone, style and nuances of the writing begin to unhinge the framing through predictable doomsday rhetoric. ‘Disaster’ is rather a position from which to start: from the end of the world back, these emerging writers retrace human threads through what might have been caricatured or regurgitative noir narratives. The language operating in *Absolute Disaster* is closely, sometimes cruelly intimate; the ‘camera’ is not outside the head – the view comes at you from the inside. The protagonists often want entry points more than they want exits.

Behind him, he could hear Carolyn and his brother shouting and running after him on the pavement, but he kept going, feeling the speed as the skateboard started to rattle beneath him, and he heard dogs barking at the noise behind him, howling, and the whole world seemed to be opening. At the bottom of the hill was a thin film of blue that covered the world. With enough speed he could puncture it and tumble through… (Craig in Montgomery ed. 1996: 314)

This Californian voice of confusion, at once sharp and oblique, surfaces in its most dystopian form in the filmic landscapes of Los Angeles and Hollywood. The narrative shift from pragmatism into what Didion referred to as an ‘eccentric’ delusion is complicated by David Lynch to great cinematic effect in *Mulholland Drive*. The leading character’s interior monologue manifests as a grand metaphysical delusion; a surreal visual narrative which spirals out of her own reach to a state of being in which nothing, not even her own mortality, is beyond reinterpretation. Lynch directs the characters of *Mulholland Drive* into a kind of possessed oblivion, wet nursed by the Hollywood
The notion of Hollywood as the world capital of corrupt, twisted fantasy is hardly new, thanks to Nathaniel West, Raymond Chandler, Roman Polanski and countless others. But in wrestling with that notion, Lynch makes an extraordinary leap to embrace the irrational. Its sheer audacity and the size of its target make the director’s earlier eviscerations of idyllic American oases and the rot beneath them seem comparatively petty...For ‘Mulholland Drive’ finally has little to do with any single character’s love life or professional ambition. The movie is an ever-deepening reflection on the allure of Hollywood and on the multiple role-playing and self-invention that the movie-going experience promises. That same promise of identity loss extends to the star-making process, in which the star can disappear into other lives and become other people’s fantasies. What greater power is there than the power to enter and to program the dream life of the culture? (Holden 2001: HREF2).

What emerges from an analysis of the Californian narrative position are a number of distinct and significant movements all of which gravitate back to, and have their thematic roots in, the formative frontier experience; that of the loner, the disconnected individual adrift in a new hostile territory, given up on his/her history and possessed at all costs by the enchantment of an unfounded promise. We have seen the confusion of European writers in exile who revelled in the baroque opulence of their disdain; the coke addled anti-heroes and despairing heroines of Ellis and Didion; the self-destructive shadows of self led into infamy by Bukowski; the jackhammer post-noir of James Ellroy; and the cinematic ruin of Scott, Aaronofsky and Lynch. Theirs are characters who have completely fragmented and surrendered to the seductive tropes of Southern California’s desired but elusive mythos. Where then, post-alienation, post-rebellion, post-apocalypse, can the Californian narrative take us? It is a question that editors Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia are asking in The Misread City – The New Literary Los Angeles. This collection of ‘author profiles, literary journalism, and speculative pieces’ attempts to liberate Southern California from its pervading literary history, for though the editors acknowledge it has been a successful legacy, it is one that has left L.A. battered and torn. Timberg and Gioia want to ‘get at the Los Angeles that came after’ the disdain, disintegration and despair, to pierce through the chimera of dark tales that has become the city’s literary trademark.

Without ignoring the city’s rich past, we have tried to focus on the present – living writers active in the final decade of the last century and the first few years of the new one. One guiding conviction is that the
literary arts have taken their own shape in Southern California; from its poetry to its pulp fiction, a shape that often baffles its Eastern and British visitors. (Timberg and Gioia 2003: xii)

Here again, the dichotomy between Los Angeles’ success and the invisibility of its contemporary reality surfaces. In a region founded on blind perseverance it is not surprising that some reputations, especially the successful ones, remain difficult to shake. The contributors to *The Misread City* seem to be suggesting that an alternative viewpoint is possible from the inside of the heap. Reading this text, and others like it, one gets the impression that an emergent narrative position is surfacing for Southern California, a point of view in which despair and disdain have settled into a kind of mutual reverence, a recognition of displaced kinship, however perverse, between the territory and its people.

...It is a cycle and I question
The urge to deliver, every few years,
The baby of oneself whole to a new home.
I am so certain I should live alone. But over
And over, I have taken the long road to the obvious.
I want to call this new way what it is:
How I am finding in sand, in dust

Enough for bloom, enough for sustenance.
(Factor in Timberg and Gioia eds. 2003: 153)

In this extract from Jenny Factor’s poem, ‘Letter From Headquarters’, we can still hear that call – the transitory mentality of the new frontier which has always infected the Californian narrative. Here though, it offers something different, not just a fabled promise or an empty black pot, but a recognition of the reality inherent to perpetual journeys and arrivals, a willingness to call this penchant *as it is*. Illusion and disappointment are not gone, just faced head on, and this more nuanced capacity for self-reflection separates these fresh literary voices from those before them.

In Wanda Coleman’s poem, ‘Prisoners of Los Angeles’, the speaker wakes to the sounds of ‘workbound traffic’, to the world ‘going off’ and instead of curling in on herself (as you could imagine some of L.A.’s previous heroines would have) she faces first her own face in the mirror, and then, through the frame of an open window, the reflection of herself that she registers in the panorama of the city.
so this is it, i say to the enigma in the mirror
this is your lot/assignment/relegation
this is your city

i find my way to the picture window
my eyes capture the purple reach of Hollywood’s hills
the gold eye of sun mounting the east
the gray anguished arms of avenue

I will never leave here
(Coleman in Timberg and Gioia eds. 2003: 149)

Interestingly, Coleman chooses to capitalise the ‘I’ only in the last phrase, lending extra weight and determination to her final declaration, \textit{I will never leave here}. And while the title of the poem suggests that this may not be a choice, in the end it emerges as one. She has seen in the mirror, and in the window, an unmistakable if somewhat reluctant affinity with her city. These examples and the essays in \textit{The Misread City} suggest that a potential for emotional and spiritual rearrangement is occurring in contemporary Californian narratives. In these more recent fictions the authorial position has dramatically shifted. The protagonists are no longer outside the frame. They are enmeshed in the landscape. The city is inside them. The need for remove and the passing of judgment is no longer applicable. Like the complicit protagonists of Ellis and Ellroy, these characters are not exempt from responsibility but they also seek a kind of personally defined freedom from redemption.

In this way the current manifestations of Californian literature remain less useful for the kind of social deconstruction that theorists like Mike Davis employ because they are, more often than not, first person narratives where the liability of misery, sexual abuse and apocalypse is shared. If we consider how pervasive and how useful the Armageddon depiction of Los Angeles remains as a primary source of its self-perpetuated and external persecution, then the alternative viewpoint of contemporary Californian fiction will struggle to extract itself from invisibility precisely because it offers a way out. The emerging position is informed – it is more mature in that it references the ridicule, the peculiar ambiguities, the popular forces and the whacked templates of Los Angeles’ culture but also dares to suggest that they may indeed be unique instigators of resilience, circumnavigation and change. ‘The pace of endings thus can become the place of beginnings’ (Fine in Timberg & Gioia eds. 2003: 66). Such a renewed sense of connected autonomy provides a freeway to possibility which the fatalism of apocalypse denies. It
also provides a warning to other misread new frontier cultures (such as the Gold Coast and Las Vegas) that certain seeds can only germinate after fire.

As the poets of Los Angeles gradually rescue their city from the mortmain of stereotype and situate it, newly discovered, in our consciousness, we may find it as familiar, and as strange, as our own transfigured neighbourhoods. (Goldstein in Timberg & Gioia eds. 2003: 142)

As the primary instigator of the new frontier, Los Angeles has both enjoyed and suffered a persistent tension between the projected ideal of itself and its convergent reality. It has, in no uncertain terms, written itself off in order to find itself. Is it possible then (and to borrow from Bladerunner) for its replicated cities – its outreach colonies, such as the Gold Coast and Las Vegas – to accelerate this process of self-identification? Could these cities and others like them, which have imitated the grand narratives and ceremonies of Los Angeles’ dreams, circumvent its disasters? As derivative territories they are in the unique position of being able to see and learn from where they are headed. In order to test this hypothesis of potential it is necessary to digress.

**Picturing the City**

When we visualise a city we often recall and reflect on monuments or icons that signify municipal identity or form a frame for its placement in the world. If the reflections are not personal then they are usually associated with the trade fair of public imagery. Even if we have not visited a city we can imagine its iconography: all cities are remembered, visualised and sold on images of monumentality. At the mention of a city’s name a score of persistent images flash in our minds. We see these architectural monuments, effortlessly. The Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, St Paul’s Cathedral, *L’Arc De Triomphe*, are manifested realities but they are also virtual, digital, transferable municipal signs, which traverse the earth and bounce back from space as images. As pictures. Such sites are known and recognised by millions without ever being ‘seen’ in their locations. Their power is not limited by their three dimensional reach. What we recognise in the process of general association is not the place, the icon or the building, but its surface. What we remember about these monuments does not require physical experience. What we remember is the impact of their transference.

*Future Frontier*
As the consumption of images augments, it follows that some cities, particularly those constructed in the 20th Century, will be accessed predominantly by the imaginary, because the new frontier city has never sought to separate the actual and the visualised. The desire to revert to a particular concrete reality is removed from the equation. Living and remembering in the new frontier do not necessitate recognition of the original experience, for simulation will generally carry with it new forms of usage. In cities like Las Vegas, for example, the reconstitution of wonder replaces the desire for the original with the desire for sensorial convergence. In the new frontier, recall is dominated almost entirely by free-floating images that have no connection to the spaces they represent but are images for the sake only of other images. There is no track back to the site itself. ‘When John Wayne rode through my childhood, and perhaps through yours, he determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams’ (Didion 1968: 30).

Illustration 3: Hollywoodland sign, Beverley Hills, Los Angeles

**The Semiotics of Collective Dreams**

On a Metro bus heading down Sunset Boulevard I first saw the HOLLYWOOD sign. That is, I saw it for the thousandth time but this time without a transmission. Here the sign was framed by the window of a bus and in between the letters, the heads of a Hispanic family bobbed in and out, a new microwave cradled protectively in the father’s
lap as the bus lurched forward. On that windy Los Angeles morning no one else seemed to care about the proximity of the sign.

When the HOLLYWOOD sign was erected in 1923 its effect was immediate, if unexpected. Originally reading HOLLYWOODLAND, the sign was constructed as part of an elaborate but ill-fated real estate promotion, and as David Reid says in the introduction to Sex Death and God In L.A., ‘merely languished into permanence’ (Reid 1992: 34). Unlike other famous monuments which have taken years, decades, even centuries to conceive and assemble – The Statue of Liberty, Notre Dame, The Sydney Opera House, The Colosseum – the Hollywood sign was a relatively simple concept, a white word that was never meant to last, which would prove to be as successful as its weighty predecessors and its intricate contemporaries in conjuring identification and wonder.

The HOLLYWOOD sign has become Los Angeles’ monumental accident, heralded for nearly a century as an allegorical expression of the culture it represents. The sign is Los Angeles’ definitive international shrine, fifty-foot sheets of white plasterboard and tin stuck irregularly on a hill, ignored and even scorned at ground level but adored by outsiders as representative of the seductive world of movies and celebrity. A sign that signifies nothing in particular, leads nowhere, but conjures millions of fictions. And it continues as long as it stands, to promise their production.

A trend was started by Peg Entwhistle, who climbed the steep slopes of Mt Lee to the HOLLYWOOD sign…HOLLYWOODLAND and clambered to the top of the thirteenth letter. (Peg had a bit part in Thirteen Women but it led to no other offers.) She could not go on facing indifferent Tinsel Town. Peg dove to her death. Other disillusioned starlets followed her lead, and the HOLLYWOOD sign became a notorious signing off place. (Anger 1975: 239-40)

We come to the point where we must ask how we reconcile the reduction and the power of these words and images; that is why the HOLLYWOOD sign still affects us. Like all monuments, its message is not definitive but interpretable. Unlike other monuments, however, the context of its placement is always changing. Hollywood, like the sign itself, is a concept that defies lockdown. The HOLLYWOOD sign has endured for precisely the reasons for which it is criticised. It doesn’t speak, it reflects and mirrors.
HOLLYWOOD. The cultural and social effects of Southern California on the rest of the world begin with this single word. Its meaning cannot be discerned from any type of linguistic association or history. It remains potent and ambiguous because it is signified only by the projection of images. Therefore the connotation of HOLLYWOOD never settles; it remains contextually fluid. What it means, and to whom, is immeasurable. What we can understand is the indisputable power of its reach. HOLLYWOOD has defined and recapitulated the trajectories of popular culture. It has constructed the contemporary religion of celebrity and permeated the moral, sexual, and social fabric of more cultures in the world than any other city or industry. “The affair between celebrity and light sensitive paper was the greatest love story of last century” (Gill 2003: 7).

In cities like Las Vegas and the Gold Coast celluloid images are not just consumed, they are mimicked, reflected and reproduced. From a flat screen, from a shallow surface, new frontier cities construct an identity based on replications; from an already compressed notion of culture they reproduce and produce their own culture. It follows then, that a confusion of the effects of this process can lead to misinterpretation; that reading these derivative cultures at the surface level results in the idea that they are merely weak substitutions. The weakening, eradication and ultimate absence of the original, of the real is posited by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* as a symptom of what he refers to as the four phases of the image; reflection, perversion, masking of absence and finally total absence which results in pure simulacrum (Poster 2004: HREF12). He suggests that the culture industry deliberately collapses structural boundaries thus inviting sensorial overload and consequent mass apathy (Hawk 2004: HREF11). What a more nuanced reading suggests, however, is that an absence of a concrete reality (or the original subject otherwise captured by the image) can also be a liberation – an opportunity for new frontier cultures like Las Vegas and the Gold Coast not only to epitomise this contemporary state of flux but to translate and reinterpret the evolution of (im)pure simulation.
CHAPTER TWO: The Mirage Actualised - Gold Coast Development

Just north of the Queensland border, surveyors for the Pacific Highway linking Brisbane with Sydney came upon a torrid swamp, about five square miles of low-lying mosquito infested land. Rather than go through it they turned their road at Currumbin. Today that one time swamp is Australia’s most valuable pocket of real estate and the country’s most popular holiday resort. (Carter 1958: 27)
Another continent. The same ocean. Imagineers stand again, on flat land, in the heat. Here they will make a city that will rise out of the sand. They wear masks to protect their skin from the unstable ground. Men have sandmined for kilometres to the west. From the shore line back the sand stretches, a white desert of space to wonder in. Few will remember how they mined the ground as years later the citizens and tourists of this city sunbake on the edge of what is left; a thin strip called Paradise. The Gold Coast’s first highrise will erupt out of this sand into the sky, a rapid teaser for the feature lengths to follow. In pictures, the Lennons Hotel sits alone in a white grainy sea, its guests protected from the wind and the desolation outside by high walls that train their vision on each other. In archival footage they play in the pool and wait for the city outside to catch up with them. Every year they come back and the city has been added to; the area around the Hotel has gradually been dotted with wood and grass and cement; and they keep coming, and they keep building. A white, sand-mined desert by the sea. The big empty. The six storey ‘highrise’ had taken two and a half years to build and cost 500,000 pounds. Every bucket of concrete was hand mixed on site. Today an average fifteen to twenty storey highrise is built in less than a year but costs many millions.

Lennons Hotel poolside 1957. The famous are being photographed atop a sculpture of a black seal and her pup. Everyone wants to be photographed on the seal. Her eggshell
finish has been rubbed by hand, tempting others to grasp her polished back. Her concrete terrazzo head rears, shooting foaming jets of water into the pool. Everyone loves a fountain. Two celebrities can ride her 700-kilogram form with ease as they smile for the white flash. People will remember these times, these images. When the tourists go home the image of the seal travels with them. She evokes not only the Hotel but the lifestyle and the city.

Lennons Hotel poolside 1980. For thirty years things have risen around the seal. Buildings, accents, profits, libidos, the sun. Gold Coast halycon days. She has borne mute witness to the boom. For the best part of three decades the town has rocketed through modernity, and she has stood for it. Now that the manifestations of possibility have arrived, her hotel has aged and so too has her effect. Her reach lessens. The sun still shines over Lennons Hotel but for shorter and shorter periods; other loftier, more charismatic buildings encroach and shadow. In 1985 The Gold Coast Bulletin reports that a man named Pigeon has bought what is now considered to be ‘the white elephant’ of Lennons for $24 million from Carlton United Breweries (Metcalf 1985: 1). Within a year Lennons Hotel will be demolished and a Gold Coast icon erased.

Lennons Hotel Poolside 1986. Surveyors wander in the Hotel grounds calling out a set of coordinates one after the other. They measure the land, they measure the buildings reach. They ignore the seal. When they knock down her home hundreds of people will come to say goodbye or to protest the demolition of history but by the time the giant black ball is shot through the building the seal and her pup have already been sold to the highest bidder.

Surfers Paradise Riverside 1987. On the pier of the Sakura Japanese Gardens restaurant the seal sits. Waterless. Directly east, on the other side of the highway, the site that was once her home is now becoming an Oasis – a huge white commercial and resort centre symbolised by a blue heart. Pushed to the limits of the nature strips that once lined Lennons, and other expendable sites, The Oasis is her hometown’s new aorta. Soon, a monorail will link this transplanted heart to the new soul of the city, Conrad Jupiters Casino, training its rookie dealers downriver in a warehouse not far from the seal.
At the Sakura Gardens Japanese Restaurant only the proprietors know the seal’s story and perhaps that is enough. Sometimes they tell it, sometimes not. Occasionally the Seal is photographed by snap happy Japanese tourists. She is immersed in the holiday sounds of a new generation, with her back turned, holding vigil over the million-dollar river. One night before the world reaches the nineteen nineties she disappears.

Nerang River 1997. The seal lies buried in the river’s ruddy silt where she has been sinking for ten years. Above her the city continues to burgeon: her vanishing remains a mystery. Tiny fish and mud crabs make a home inside her copper piping, running in and out the open wound of her mortar mouth. Barnacles and leeches bind themselves to her outside. Some people have asked questions, many more have not. Across the highway two blocks from her old home, a small group of people are discussing heritage. There are doctors, school principals and children looking for a distinct symbol to bestow on a festival of the past in a fast money town. Dr Thomas, organiser of the Broadbeach Heritage Festival commented, ‘It quickly became clear that the Lennons seal was part of many, many memories.’

They begin to track her, tracing her movements to the pier. Standing on the jetty the good doctor has a hunch that the seal is somewhere underneath him. The organisers, the media, the kids, the well-wishers, and the public relations department of the casino, hover anxiously on the shore. Down below, the Aquanaut divers dig the seal out of the sediment. This done, they wrap thick ropes around her middle. She is raised from the water on the arm of a small crane and the people cheer. Cameras flash again. ‘A Gold Coast icon was rescued from her watery grave yesterday and though she looks a little worse for the ordeal, it won’t be long before she is back to her former glory’ (Gold Coast Bulletin 1997). When the people and their fuss disperse the seal, with her pup still in tow, is transported to the Conrad Jupiters Casino – the same corporation which ushered in her sell off now pays for her restoration – overdue and funded by the gambling chip.

Broadbeach State Primary School 1998. Freshly sandblasted, the roughed up edges of her mouth now serrated, her once sleek black surface mottled under the pressure of erosion and parasites, the seal and her pup become an elevated symbol of survival in a town that characteristically ignores antiquated lore. And though she sits now on a wooden crate in another temporary home, she keeps the playground company of children who, if they
don’t love her, have learnt something from her. She is their discovery, a new generation fossil. One hot morning on butchers’ paper the school children write three words each to explain her: Grey discolourful sad. Old cool heritage. Big pretty heritage. Rough concrete beach. Sweet cute, ugly sometimes, smooth. Old grey heritage. Rocky water texture. Cool cement peace.

At The Broadbeach Heritage Festival the children take groups of people on walking tours, pointing out the odd detail (when their teachers shut up) on buildings, in parks, along the streets; points of history. But the feet of the boy from 3B drag. He says he’s sad because his mother promised she’d take him to Movie World today and, you know, all this is taking ages.

**The Instant City**

Gold Coast imagineers were required to tell their stories well, to overwrite the ancient, to reinscribe the land, to avoid recognitions of heritage and placement. Of course a policy of erasure was nothing new. It has surfaced in all places where unjust claims are laid, to stall time, to trick time, for the sake of justification and the protection of new interests. On the Gold Coast, it has never stopped. The stories go on today, unlinked, blatant, defying yesterday – defying anything previous.

Initially, the Gold Coast’s development was akin to many other settlements born out of the colonial mother. It was a new city, in a new nation on an old continent. But it developed in ways that not only ruptured links to its Indigenous past but also to the form of civilisation that had imposed its new life: England, Great Britain, The Commonwealth. Unlike other cities in Australia, its connections only transiently led back there. When Gold Coast imagineers looked out at the Pacific they were not perpetually gazing ‘home’, they were looking to America, to an alternative future.

The people came quietly at first, living on the passing trade of sugar plantation men, timber getters, and cotton farmers – the latter a response in the 1860s to America’s civil war; cotton did not take off but the sugar and the stories did. Like the timber they floated for despatch down the Nerang River, the messages got through, gained speed, and built up strong ideas. This was to be a different place, produced on sugar and larrikin dreams.
'Early buildings were exuberant and the lifestyle characteristically and deliberately at odds with 19th Century convention'. (Allom 2000: 4)

At this early time coastal development proliferated at the two extreme points of the Coast, Southport and Coolangatta. Although it is often said the last forty years best characterises the Gold Coast, this is perhaps only applicable visually, for the boosterism psychology of the city was inculcated from the beginning. Just like California before it, the Gold Coast was marketed around the country as a place of respite and recuperation, a place that mingled the green and gold for a tired nation. It mattered little when they got here on bone rattling coaches that the amenities were often inferior to home. The point was that this wasn’t home and everything it promised was on the outside, in the sun, the air and the sea.

Spring is calling. Come to Southport. Springtime finds Southport in its most bewitching mood...with delicate sunshine beaming on its beaches and background mountains and an exhilarating nip still in the air, to bring a glow to your cheeks and a song to your lips. (The Steering Wheel Society & Home 1938)
The onset of the 20th Century triggered the development of the stretch between the north and south points of the Gold Coast. Bridges, roads, highways, the beginnings of widespread car ownership, the boom of Australian beach cultures, surf life saving clubs, and the prerequisite fibro weekender, all fast tracked and coloured in the gaps with an aggrandised procession of people. But the first half of the 20th Century also brought with it war and depression, slowing the race considerably. It was not until post WWII when building restrictions were lifted that the Gold Coast’s rampant insurrection took an
unshakeable hold. The Gold Coast currently spans 1,402 square kilometres with 70 kilometres of coastline stretching from South Stradbroke Island to Rainbow Bay. At June 30 2004 the population was 469,214 making it the sixth largest and fastest growing city in Australia (Gold Coast City Council 2004: HREF8).

Tell a city to germinate and it will. Convince the people that its happening before it is and they will see it, and dream of their place in it, until such a dream address exists. The process of naming in the new frontier has always preceded the physical. A name can sell a place before it exists. And these names were intoxicating lures. Like fly fisherman, real estate imagineers ‘matched the hatch’, trailing artificial materials which resembled and imitated dream bait when trailed through people’s minds.

On the Gold Coast, names sounded like the places people ogled on their silver screens, the places the stars moved in. The pioneers revelled in the intangible language of escape. From one vanishing point to another they named American as a way of narrating themselves through a new world; an act of recitation that included a country otherwise outside of the imported cultural vision, for it wasn’t necessarily America they wanted, just Hollywood’s version of it. Clients were drawn by a double edged imaginary involving the lure of movies and names redolent of an exotic American dream.

Gold Coast suburbs such as Miami, Surfers Paradise, Palm Beach, Florida Gardens, Monterey Keys, Chevron Island, Rio Vista, Sorrento, Sanctuary Cove, Hope Island, Santa Barbara, Rialto and The Isle of Capri sprang dramatically into the landscape and sold quickly on the promise of celluloid connotations. And this filmically derived process of naming has continued to this day; a flamboyant baptism which has extended to streets, golf courses, residential estates, highrise buildings and shopping precincts. The names of some of the Gold Coast’s busiest streets come at you from signs on the roadside like an external shot lifted from a Hollywood movie: The Esplanade, Bermuda Street, Sunshine Boulevard, the Gold Coast Highway, Monaco Street and Hooker Boulevard borrow the linguistic gloss of famous Californian streets such as Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood and Vine, and Mulholland Drive, where the culture of movement is celebrated.

The exoticism of appropriation is extreme in some suburbs of the Gold Coast where whole subdivisions are named after Hollywood movie stars. The rather conservatively
named but completely manufactured suburb of Parkwood has dedicated sections of its road grid to the twin pinnacles of Gold Coast cultural preoccupation: movies and golf (though the two are nicely delineated by Uplands Drive). On one side you can cruise down Marilyn Monroe Drive into Lucille Ball Place, James Cagney, Clark Gable and Grace Kelly Closes which all meet at the juncture of Gracelands and Elvis Presley Courts. On the other side, Peter Senior, Arnold Palmer, and Henry Cotton Drives roll resplendently into Greg Norman Court or around the extensive grounds of the Parkwood International Golf Course. Just north-east from Parkwood, the small waterfront suburb of Anglers Paradise includes Sundance Way, Cockleshell Street, Nirvana and Midnight Courts, Lobster Pot Place and Rum Point. This seafaring fantasy continues in Paradise Waters with, Buccaneer, Viking, Neptune and Midshipman Drives. Further south and into the older canal estate suburb of Rio Vista near Surfers Paradise, the names give way to a Mediterranean and South American resort ethic with Monterey, Pasadena, Montevista, Palmetto, San Michelle, Pensacola, Ensenada, and Mexicala Drives all lining an identically subdivided grid. The trend flows to the new waterfront development of Clear Island Waters with Montevideo Drive, Santabelle Court, Santa Cruz Boulevard, Key Largo Street, and Martinique Way.

Similarly, continued development in Los Angeles has hinged on the hype and promise of the Hollywood imaginary: the seductive potential of discovery and projection in a new land. But in the early part of last century California had its dream factory exporting myths around the world. The Gold Coast had nothing but its natural resources and the promise and the potential to be like somewhere else. New settlers on the Gold Coast desired freedom from post-colonial reality and it was Hollywood, not the British empire, which effectively marketed such escape.

These were the 1920s, an age of change with most families enjoying a regular weekly diet of Hollywood at the ‘flicks.’ Estate developers searched for the catchiest of American names for subdivisions: Palm Beach, Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, Miami. Southport could boast two cinemas including The Pier constructed out over the Broadwater in 1926. The Pier was perhaps one of the most memorable aspects of a Coast holiday until well into the 1960s, with the water lapping over the rocks, visible between the cracks in the floorboards. (Longhurst in Allom 2000: 35)
Gold Coast imagineers applied Tinsel Town’s artificial philosophy to a real city and constructed buildings and estates the same way the film studios manufactured movie stars. Land was manipulated like a starlet; plucked, shaved, covered in gloss and hemmed in by contract. In the early days investment in Gold Coast land was seen as a gamble. People bought enough space to build simple beach holiday houses, which they constructed slowly over many summers. Great sweeps of land acquisition were uncommon until independent investors realised that much of the available land had already been purchased by a variety of real estate dealers who were selling it back to them for hugely inflated prices. So wealthy graziers, and business magnates from ‘down south’, went one better. They bought large tracts of what most considered to be undesirable swamps and floodplains, and set about the massive task of reclamation, dredging and re-levelling until completely new subdivisions existed. Where the water wouldn’t stretch they built giant funnels in the ground to channel it in; a move highly reminiscent of the themes explored in Chinatown. After the first canal subdivision was approved in 1957 it took only two years before the Gold Coast City council rushed through the Canal Acts in an attempt to control their frenetic development. ‘The land developers were in business – literally making real estate to order’ (Carter 1958: 28). And the developers went even further, to acquire and design worlds within worlds based on Hollywood imagery. Gold Coast estates and towers conjured feelings of glamour and self-projection to which people all around the world were addicted. The progression of this form of consumption from the cinema to everyday life was a shallow and highly effective development strategy.

At the peak of celluloid driven urbanisation in the 1980s, Warner Brothers built the largest film production complex in Australia at the base of the Gold Coast Hinterland in Oxenford. The scale of the development has been surpassed only recently by Fox Studios in Sydney. The Warner Brothers Studio is accompanied by its own theme park, Movie World, and a residential estate, Studio Village – the suburban epitome of the city’s insatiable and long running love affair with the screen.
Case Study 1: Destination Hard Rock Café

In a city where a thirty-year history qualifies you for a museum collection, there is a site that still exists with a more or less continuous history. The site has hinged on the shifts, movements and building booms of the city. It began in an estate called Elston and ended up in Paradise. The buildings that have risen and fallen, been renovated, stretched or amended on this site have conformed to and confirmed the speed/intensity (in the usages of Virilio and Deleuze) of the times. Each building has been a symbol, a point of reference for all the things the city has meant and will continue to mean as tourist capital. Unlike most other Gold Coast sites, that have either been razed or gone through extreme modifications, each building on this site has retained a sense of the other. The shape and architectural foundation has remained, so that a shadow of the building’s former self is still visible: a layering effect, uncommon to the Gold Coast architectural aesthetic. The previous manifestations hover, if they are remembered, as physical contradictions of the city’s dominant development philosophy of eradication.

In 1925 Jim Cavill, entrepreneur and the founder of Malvern Star bicycles, bought a block of land for forty pounds in the coastal estate of Elston. The Jim Cavill Surfers Paradise Hotel was born at the end Surfer’s Walk where people arrived aboard Murray’s Ferry from Southport. Old photographs show people walking or alighting from cars parked at irregular intervals along a dirt track that is now Cavill Avenue, which later became the real estate pinnacle of the Coast – ‘One the shortest streets on the Gold Coast is set to become one of the richest in Australia.’ (Gold Coast Bulletin 1985: 1)

Illustration 10: Cavill Avenue, Gold Coast 1925

The track in 1925 was wide and rough, lined at disparate edges by huge eucalypts and other ancient trees whose branches shaded the walk from the river to the sea.
Surfers Paradise hotel was marketed as a place of ‘luxury and atmosphere’. Its 16 bedrooms and 30 cabins ‘all have running hot and cold water, commodious wardrobe and telephone with in most cases an attached bathroom. There is silent anticipation of the guest’s every comfort and the cuisine is of the utmost good taste’ (Elliott 1980: 94). In aged sepia photographs, couples huddle close together; you can make out the women most sharply in their long white dresses and bonnets, some carrying babies, their hair turned up against the forehead, as was the fashion. When The Surfers Paradise Hotel was destroyed by fire in 1935, Cavill constructed another whose main feature was the Johnny Walker scenic tower, designed originally as a double level honeymoon suite at the corner point of the hotel. The image of Mr Walker with shiny boots, top hat and cane is instructive of the rate of change for it wasn’t long before such trappings seemed dated. In one faded image you can make out the tall arms of cranes and half constructed highrises of the Paradise Centre looming behind Johnny like urban premonitions.

On the corner of Cavill Avenue and the Gold Coast Highway, The Surfers Paradise Hotel played host to famous visitors and entertainers from all over the country in its Paradise Room. During the day patrons sipped beer in The Garden of Tropical Fruits and listened to the sounds of caged exotic birds, orang outangs and leopards in the resident zoo; an experience not lost on the subsequent owners of the site who renamed the hotel The Birdwatchers Bar – a long lean-to with expansive tinted ground level windows where men watched another type of ‘bird’ passing while the congestion in the traffic built. In the late eighties, the demolition of The Birdwatchers caused community outcry, but what was coming for this site was beyond the reach of the local.

Today the Surfers Paradise Hard Rock Café looms large on the same site, a giant Les Paul Gibson guitar replica replacing Johnny Walker as chief capitalist icon. In 1996 it was the largest neon sign in the Southern Hemisphere (Webb 1996: 3). The Hard Rock Café, globalised franchise god of American ribs and rock memorabilia, currently turns over more tourists and more profits than any of its predecessors ever did. The words ‘Love All Serve All’ light up its recognisable-in-all-nations façade. Perhaps its all-world appeal and consequent power will preserve it for a while longer yet. But the Hard Rock Café is an eighties phenomenon, a concept now rendered uncool due to this very pretension. How long till an imagineer casts a cool eye over it? ‘Prominent Gold Coast property developer Gordon Douglas says the old will always continue to make way for the new’
In the 1950s Carter could already see the trajectories the Gold Coast’s speculative paths seemed likely to take:

The makers of the Gold Coast have taken a little bit of California, a little bit of Florida and a little bit of New York…One day they may even take a little bit of Nevada, for there is constant talk of a gambling casino. (Carter 1958: 31)
CHAPTER THREE: The Mirage Actualised – Las Vegas Development

The best way to arrive in Las Vegas is by road, at night. You have been driving for three hours through the Mojave Desert in a chiaroscuro world of headlights, tarmac and undiluted night. The road is hypnotic. The landscape is a dark nothing beneath a vault of stars. The city arrives suddenly as you breast a ridge. In that first moment Las Vegas is a surreal apparition, a spectacular glaze of light floating in the empty desert. It is a moment of magic. (Stewart 2002: 22)
In the desert Las Vegas is becoming. In an outpost town of Nevada, dreams are being laid. Others have passed through it, the Mormons, the miners and the Minotaurs, (Spanier 1992: 61) but the desert still sleeps. It will take the collaboration of gangsters, movie stars and moguls to turn this flat stretch of desert into an international playground – a city built on illegal money which will set out to satiate even the most tangential possibilities of whim and fantasy. From the moment of the mafia’s arrival in Las Vegas, the built environment will form the bedrock of this city’s attraction. They will replicate paradise, truck in the Mediterranean, and rework the exotic. The buildings and elaborate casinos will simulate the Hollywood imaginary and these glamorous celluloid myths will continue to perpetuate its conceptual growth. Las Vegas will erupt out of the desert just like the mushroom clouds from atom bombs the American military will detonate for over a decade behind it. Las Vegas will operate outside the law, be a law unto itself. It will ignore historical codes and mark out its own unique trajectory. It will look like everything else all at once, it will be like everything else all at once and this simultaneous compression of space and time will make it unlike anything anyone has ever seen.

I did dance till dawn. I turned upside down in a rollercoaster above the Empire State Building. I lounged by a marbled pool beneath Tuscan cypresses. I grooved to the best reggae band this side of Kingston and waltzed to a string orchestra in a ballroom the size of a town. I drank champagne atop the Eiffel Tower, smoked a cigar on Cleopatra’s barge and sipped martinis on the terraces of Monte Carlo. (Stewart 2002: 23)

In attempting to explain the unlikely spectacle of Las Vegas in the middle of the Nevada desert David Spanier suggests, in Welcome to the Pleasuredome, that it was the infiltration of organised crime figures accountable to the Chicago bosses which effectively transformed the locale from a place of transient arrival to a ‘destination’ (Spanier 1992: 74). Prior to the mafia’s involvement, the core business of the city was not gambling. Las Vegas had benefited from a long line of spin off associations – in the early part of the 20th Century mining camps and the small communities which surrounded them sprang up vicariously along the Spanish trail. Later, Las Vegas’s proximity to Hoover Dam, to Los Angeles, to Reno, and the Nellis Air Force Base meant that large numbers of workers, tourists, miners, soldiers and others en route or looking for a good time were always at hand. This was the Old West, a place ‘different from any other American town…where social distinctions hardly counted’ (Spanier 1992: 64). Today, the ‘improbable’ geography of Las Vegas forms part of its surreal attraction, but it was, initially, a logical stopping off point,
a nexus of new frontier crossings and trails and ‘owes its existence and success to transportation’ (Spanier 1992: 61).

The place was called Las Vegas Springs. Men horses, mules and oxen could find rest and water. Travellers liked to stop at Las Vegas because it was at the edge of a fifty-mile desert – the *jornada de muerto*, journey of death – that had to be crossed to reach Los Angeles to the south-west, Salt Lake City to the north-east and Sante Fe to the south-east. (Spanier 1992: 61)

The transitory experience of Las Vegas’s formative years could be said to be relatively pragmatic, in the sense that the trajectories it hosted evolved out of a process of progressive exploration. Before the Mafia’s infiltration, old school frontier men controlled Las Vegas. Ranchers, prospectors, plainsmen and miners had built a city of ‘wooden log or framed gabled buildings with rectangular false fronts’ (Spanier 1992: 5). In the 1940-50s the Mafia was able to ‘confiscate’ such prospecting nomadism and mass-produce its effects via the injection of a Hollywood philosophy of entertainment and spectacle. In all new frontier cities transitory amusement is both inherent and appropriated. Las Vegas, Los Angeles, the Gold Coast, Monte Carlo and Miami have all been built on counterfeit public spectacle and the manufacture of it. Such interventionist strategies were not foreseeable nor were they written into the vocabulary of speculators one hundred years earlier.

‘Ours was the first and doubtless will be the last party of whites to visit this profitless locale’ (Christmas in Spanier 1992: 5). The dismissive attitude inherent in English Lieutenant Joseph Christmas’ statement about the formative territory of Las Vegas in 1857 also marks reactions to the Gold Coast by early commissioned explorers. ‘In 1770 Captain James Cook considered what is now known as the Gold Coast as “a place to be avoided”’ (Gleeson 1996: 12-13). Both assessments were, of course, quite wrong. By 1991 Las Vegas was reported to have received over 21 million visitors which was more than the total foreign visitors to London (Spanier 1992: 2) and the Gold Coast continues to hold its place as Australia’s premier tourist city both nationally and internationally, hosting almost 10 million visitors in 2002/3, which were recognised as bad years for tourism (Gold Coast City Council 2003: HREF8). What European pioneers were looking for in these territories could not be seen. What they had been trained to unearth was not present. Colonial prospectors in America and Australia were clearly adept at natural and
Indigenous erasure. They could not begin to conceive, in the middle of deserts or swamps, an erasure that would result in the creation of postmodern municipal fantasy.

The ascension of Las Vegas as an eminent new frontier city is thus not indebted to official settlement but to the superfluous imaginary of Hollywood. Like the Gold Coast and Los Angeles, Las Vegas continues to operate predominantly as the terrain of the entrepreneur, not the state. Rampant and ambitious individualism not only instigates alternative social and urban laws (as Governments oscillate between the relegation and protection of investment) but it also continues to define idiosyncratic architectural forms and expressions, which began for Las Vegas with the Flamingo:

In 1944, Bugsy Siegal passed through Las Vegas, the town was then sleepy and undeveloped. Its city fathers were planning to preserve it as a kind of far western living Ghost Town, pushing for an ordinance which would oblige all new buildings to look like “Oater” movie sets. Siegal’s grandiose scheme was to build the biggest hotel/casino in the United States. It would make Monte Carlo look like “peanuts”. He borrowed several million dollars from several shady sources and in 1945 bought up the land surrounding a tacky hotel owned by a bankrupt widow. He moved in with an army of architects, decorators, entertainers and bandits with one or two arms. The Flamingo was born…The metropolis of Super Schlock arose out of the sands. Siegal implanted a style, which flourished like a wild flaming out of control cancer in the Mojave Desert. (Anger 1975: 355)

David Spanier credits the construction of Bugsy Siegal’s Flamingo casino in 1946-7 with ushering in ‘a major change in direction’ in casino development (Spanier 1992: 65). The era of the honky tonk, wild west gambling saloon was to be overshadowed by a new resort ethic, where casinos were no longer pit stop venues but impressively constructed ‘worlds’. Attention shifted away from Downtown and the rather congested formations that fed off the railway station in Freemont Street to the long lines and ample spaces of Route 91, the direct line to LA, which would become know as The Strip (Spanier 1992: 67). Here, in a space more conducive to expansion, the mafia were responsible for fast tracking the development of large-scale resort casinos and centres such as The Dunes, Stardust, Riviera, Tropicana and The Sands. ‘Forget town planning, forget commercial architecture, forget good taste: these massive structures radiate to the skies an awesome vitality’ (Spanier 1992: 78). The new development style fused colossal proportions, branding, full-scale entertainment and ‘hyper-extravagance’ (Spanier 1992: 117). These themes, of course, fed directly into the Hollywood imaginary. This was a private
playground where two of the most powerful groups in 1940s American society, the
movie moguls and the gangsters, the makers and the shakers, built a city that would
profit substantially from their collaboration.

Hollywood’s penchant for excess had developed as generations of stars revelled in their
immediate wealth; extravagance was both supplied and expected. Instant money brought
aspiration, indulgence, addiction and those who were happy to profit from dealing it out.
In the age of prohibition and tabloid scandal, just about any recreational fetish could be a
racket. For every movie that made a million, there was always someone on the outside
who wanted a cut. Every boom had its harness, every legitimate dollar a monkey on its
back. The mob did not steal into Hollywood and Las Vegas as it had done in New York
– it rode in because the cities encouraged it, and as Kenneth Anger says of Los Angeles,
‘It wasn’t long till it had it by the balls’ (Anger 1975: 345).

Hollywood loved it. It may not have endorsed the reality of the Mafia but it was seduced
by the concept, the combination of fear and power that epitomised the kind of trashy
instant glamour popularised by the Hollywood Jazz Age. The symbiotic relationship
between Las Vegas, the Mafia and the Hollywood imaginary was epitomised by the public adoration of the Rat Pack. Stars like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr and Mae West were flown in on private jets, comped by gangsters, paid extravagantly to perform in casinos or host, as Sinatra did, all-night, all-weekend ‘happenings’ where the show continued off stage for the right people at the right price. Not only did the Rat Pack notoriously frequent Vegas, but Hollywood set films there, such as the James Bond *Diamonds Are Forever* where the urban backdrop of ‘casino fronts, [was] shown again and again with glittering verisimilitude’ (Spanier 1992: 74). Some stars dreamed of owning their own casinos: ‘Roy Rogers talked of a dude ranch. “I’m going to build a Hotel” became a stock phrase among celebrity visitors’ (Spanier 1992: 67). The mutual adoration society between Las Vegas and Hollywood, projected as a sort of nefarious quintessence of cool, captured the imagination of the American public, who flocked to Las Vegas in huge numbers. Locals remained ambivalent to negative reputation if it resulted in seriously profitable flow on effects. Las Vegas had always hosted people who played and this hospitality stretched to include those who might wish to remain unnamed.

“The townspeople took it quite calmly,” recalled Robbins Cahill, then the head of casino licensing, “and rather bragged about the fact that that fellow from Murder, Inc. has come to Las Vegas and is going to build the most fabulous place that anyone ever heard of…The only attitude I ever got out of the town was, Hooray! He’s going to bring money into the town.” (Spanier 1992: 68)

Vegas’s reputation for ambivalence is also highlighted by Hunter S Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

…nobody cares. They would rather not know. If Charlie Manson checked into the Sahara tomorrow morning, nobody would hassle him as long as he tipped big. (Thompson 1998: 106)

But despite this combination of private protection and public success, the tensions never dissipated between the traditionally moded élite in Las Vegas and the gangsters who thrust it into the future. Both finally lost out to the sway of corporate power in the eighties, but by this time, the Mafia’s vice-like grip had set the tone. However homogenised some say Vegas has become, it continues to be derivative of what was then the pinnacle of anti-establishment fantasy. Las Vegas is a city whose reputation was laundered by ‘bosses’, by an ‘organisation’ whose understanding of how to operate
outside the frame, while appearing to remain within it, was well honed. ‘Such men set the style of Vegas, in those formative years, rather like the cowboy set the image of the West’ (Spanier 1992: 68). The Mafia had manipulated other states and territories, principally New York and Chicago, to brutal effect; they were visible within the cultures they inhabited but curiously elusive to capture. In Las Vegas, the Mob attempted to arrest a potential state apparatus and re-fashion it, reterritorialise it as if from a rib of its own relatively autonomous structure. The desire was to develop a new frontier city whose *modus operandi* would mirror their own. In marked contrast to other covert Mafia operations however, the goal was not to invade, undermine or smash and grab. It was to efficiently traverse, progress, control and skim. This required inside men (interior guises) and outside men (exterior processes). During the 1950s the Mafia built and operated highly lucrative casino ventures, they ‘had an instinctive feel and flair for gambling’ (Spanier 1992: 69) and knew what it meant to manipulate territory. The difference was that in Las Vegas there was no control precedent; this was the desert – the territory of the nomad – a new frontier, a transitory place existing between points along the Spanish trail. And though the ranchers and plainsmen had begun to demarcate boundaries in this territory they were not prepared for another kind of intersection, for what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the ‘secret power (*puissance*) of the war machine’ (1987: 366). They develop a comparison between the games of Go (understood as operating like a war machine) and chess (understood as operating like the State):

In Go, it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival. The “smooth” space of Go as against the “striated” space of chess. The *nomos* of Go against the State of chess, *nomos* against *polis*. The difference is that chess codes and decodes space, whereas Go proceeds altogether differently, territorializing or deterritorializing it (make the outside a territory in space; consolidate that territory by the construction of a second, adjacent territory; deterritorialize the enemy by shattering his territory from within; deterritorialize oneself by renouncing, by going elsewhere…). Another justice, another movement, another space-time. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 353)

The Mafia found holes everywhere. Martin Scorsese captures the correlation between the methods of the Mafia and the urban effects of their ascendancy in the new frontier city of Las Vegas in *Casino* – a fictionalised account of Vegas wise guy rise and fall drawn from historical fact. The film chronicles the relationship between Ace Rothstein, based
on Jewish bookmaker and ‘sharpest odds maker in the country’ Frank ‘Lefty’ Rosenthal, and Nikki Santoro, inspired by notorious Vegas hard man Tony ‘The Ant’ Spilotro (Spanier 1992: 220). David Spanier explored the relationship in detail in Welcome to the Pleasuredome three years before the film’s release. ‘The partnership between Rosenthal and Spilotro was the axel around which all Mafia activity in Las Vegas occurred’ (Spanier 1992: 220). Spanier explains how Lefty was sent in by the Chicago bosses to act as senior executive at the Stardust casino, despite never gaining a license – he was the Mob’s admin man, their inside man. By contrast, ‘Little Tony was sent to Las Vegas as an enforcer…in the first three years after [his] arrival more Mafia-type murders occurred in Vegas than in the previous 25 years’ (Spanier 1992: 219, 220). It is exactly this combination of interiority and exteriority personified by Rosenthal and Little Tony which both enabled and annihilated the Mafia’s command in Las Vegas. Their converse methods of operation created a flow of cash, but also a flow of tension, which was vulnerable and unsustainable due to its impure form of detachment.

We certainly would not say that discipline is what defines a war machine: discipline is the characteristic required of armies after the State has appropriated them. The war machine answers to other rules… they animate a fundamental indiscipline of the warrior, a questioning of hierarchy, perpetual blackmail by abandonment or betrayal, and a very volatile sense of honor, all of which…impedes the formation of the State. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 358)

The opening credits and the first scenes of Casino feature a narration by Robert De Niro’s character. Ace Rothstein (Rosenthal) outlines the initial processes of exemption which enabled the mafia access to ‘paradise’, to this new frontier.

Who could resist? Anywhere else in the country I was a bookie, a gambler always looking over my shoulder, hassled by cops, day and night but here, I’m Mr Rothstein. I’m not only legitimate but running a casino and that’s like selling people dreams for cash. (Pileggi and Scorsese 1995)

Following Ace’s lead the viewer is guided through the space of the casino and ultimately the labyrinth of deferred responsibility and invisibility that characterises the war machine, the Mafia, and Las Vegas. Ace’s verbal and visual tour is followed by a diatribe from his sidekick and protector Nikki Santoro (Spilotro). The following extract is taken from Nikki’s opening monologue and illustrates the complex layers of power and illusion which permeated the city’s construction.
And along with making us legit comes cash, tons of it. I mean what do you think we’re doing out here in the middle of the fucking desert? It’s all this money. This is the end result of all the bright lights and the comp trips, of all the free champagne and free hotel suites. And all the broads. And all the booze. It’s all been arranged just for us to get your money. That’s the truth about Las Vegas. We’re the only winners. The players don’t stand a chance. And their cash flows from the tables to our boxes, through the cage and into the most sacred place in the Casino, the place where they add up all the money, the holy of holies, the count room. They had so much fucking money in there you could have built a house out of stacks of hundred dollar bills. And the best part was that upstairs, the board of directors didn’t know what the fuck was going on. I mean to them everything was on the up and up, right? Wrong. The guys inside the count room were all slipped in there to scam the joint dry. They’d do short counts, they’d lose fill slips, they’d even take cash right out of the drop boxes. It was up to this guy here standing in front of about two million dollars to skim the cash off the top without anyone getting wise, The IRS or anybody. Now, notice how in the count room nobody ever seems to see anything? Somehow somebody’s always looking the other way. Meanwhile you’re in and you’re out. Past the jag off guard who gets and extra C-note a week just to watch the door. I mean it’s routine, business as usual. In, out, hello, goodbye. That’s all there is to it, just another fat fuck walking out of the casino with a suitcase. Now that suitcase was going straight to one place, right to Kansas City, which is as close to Las Vegas as the Mid-West bosses could go without getting themselves arrested. That suitcase was all the bosses ever wanted and they wanted it every month. Now these old grease balls might not look it but believe me, these are the guys that control Las Vegas, because they controlled the Teamsters Union. And that’s where you had to go if you wanted to borrow money to buy a casino. No one got a Teamsters loan unless the guys in this room knew they were gonna get their little suitcases. (Pileggi and Scorsese 1995)

Scorsese’s chronicle of the operational breakdown between Spilotro and Rosenthal is a brutal metaphor for the Mafia’s eventual implosion in Las Vegas. Both players became caught in a vortex of polarised associations and actions which damaged communication lines with each other and to the bosses back home. This heightened sense of individualism placed them in positions of isolation thereby jeopardising their protection from the war machine they no longer sought to protect. The collective code of the pack had been irreversibly ruptured and the State in the form of the FBI were able to reiterate and intervene for as Delueze and Guattari determine, the war machine devises a methodology of speed and secrecy; which pertains also to the State in secondary terms. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
In the end we fucked it all up. It should have been so sweet too but it turned out to be the last time that street guys like us were ever given anything that fucking valuable again. (Pileggi and Scorsese 1995)

The late 20th Century forces of globalism and corporate power combined with increased governmental controls and public enterprise may have eroded the Mafia’s stronghold on Las Vegas but its legacy has remained. Las Vegas’s proliferation as an instant city continues largely due to the fact that corporations are attracted to Las Vegas for the same reasons the Mafia built it: excess and production. They too are seduced by capitalist spectacle. It is perhaps grotesquely appropriate that Las Vegas’s first new frontier mob man, Benjamin ‘Bugsy’ Siegal, was shot between the eyes (Anger 1975: 345). In the following quote from Casino, Ace Rothstein reflects on the implosion of power which led to the Mafia’s downfall in Vegas. He comments on the cyclical nature of control by referring to the confiscation, dumbing down and legitimisation of manipulation and consumption in Las Vegas. He hints too, at the possibility of subversions, suggesting that crooked operators like himself will always understand, and therefore always be able to penetrate systems however they are protected, propped up or proscribed.

The town will never be the same. After the Tangiers, the big corporations took it all over. Today it looks like Disneyland and while the kids play cardboard pirates, mummy and daddy drop the house payments and junior’s college money in the poker slots. In the old days the dealers knew your name, what you drank, what you played, today it’s like checking in to an airport…Today, it’s all gone… After the Teamsters got knocked out of the box the corporations tore down practically every one of the old casinos. And where did the money come from to rebuild the Pyramids? Junk Bonds. But in the end, I ended up right back where I started. I could still pick winners and I could still make money for all kinds of people back home. And why mess up a good thing? (Pileggi and Scorsese 1995)

This closing statement from Casino effectively portrays the architectural and power based shift in Las Vegas from Mafia based stronghold to corporate ownership but also alludes to the idea that Mafia involvement in illicit activity in America can never be completely eroded. It is a position that David Spanier supports. He suggests that despite widespread protestations that Mafia infiltration is no more, their association has merely shifted to relatively invisible sidebar pursuits such as drug trafficking and prostitution.

Las Vegas is notorious as a lucrative outlet for the drug gangs operating in Los Angeles. Indeed, it has the second highest drug abuse record of
any place in the United States...Secondly, there is probably a Mafia connection with prostitution in Vegas. All the services masquerading under entertainment...imply a degree of pimping or behind the scenes organisation. (Spanier 1992: 215)

Spanier also refers to rumour of a middle management penetration by the Mob post-legislative restructure but agrees this kind of ‘espionage’ tactic illustrates just ‘how far Vegas has changed from the days when major Casinos were seen literally as “Our Thing”, Cosa Nostra’ (Spanier 1992: 216). What cannot be disputed is the massive effect corporate attachment has had on the flavour and magnitude of Las Vegas’s built environment.

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi and Scott Brown described the architectural form of Las Vegas casinos as manifesting in two distinct categories, ‘ducks’ and ‘decorated sheds’. Ducks are casinos which present themselves as immense and elaborate sculptures – their ‘function, structure and material are secondary to...representational form’ (Spanier 1992: 121). Decorated sheds are more conventionally shaped Casinos whose façades are enhanced by the pervasive language of signs. *Learning from Las Vegas*, released in 1973, was groundbreaking in the sense that it professed fascination and sought to claim theoretical space for Las Vegas as a new frontier city. But it was also an indirect testament to the architectural vernacular of the mafia, of the nomad war machine, and was ultimately, and in hindsight, a lament for its demise.

But for all the radicalism of *Learning From Las Vegas*, Venturi and Brown are full of nostalgia for redundant technology. The light bulbs of the flashing signs of the Las Vegas strip from the 1950s appeal to them, but the vacuum-formed, back lit perspex which has replaced them – just as Burger King has taken over from the diner – does not. The Las Vegas they wanted to learn from is no more the real Las Vegas than Jane Jacob’s nostalgic view of Greenwich Village was the real New York. (Sudjic 1992: 27)

The progressive shift towards a corporate aesthetic which Venturi and Brown sensed, was to radically change the experience and form of the Strip. As Spanier notes, the Strip is no longer a mix of ‘juxtaposed’ sites where casinos such as the *Circus-Circus*, *The Stardust* and *Caesar’s Palace* shared street frontage with ‘trinket shops, junk food stands [and] sleazy motels offering adult movies and waterbeds’ (Spanier 1992: 130). Today the Strip is completely dominated by the hyper-warehouse style casino, where the ‘duck’ and the
‘decorated shed’ have cohabitated to an extent that distinctions between them are termed, even by Venturi, as ‘abstract’ (Spanier 1992: 131). While early manifestations of the corporate aesthetic remained clearly within the realm of immense kitsch, casinos such as the Excalibur, Treasure Island, and Aladdin, with their garishly coloured ornamentation, fake turrets, pyramids and pirate ships piercing the night sky, were extensions to, rather than departures from, type. These casinos, though much larger in scale than those which preceded them, still relied on identification and over-saturation toward a single theme. The mid to late 1990s, however, ushered in a new era of multi-layered connotation enabled by technological advancement. The semiotics of casinos has become more sophisticated, able to simulate to scale, and to such an extended level of detail that nods to the ridiculous are less necessary to have a convincing effect. In Las Vegas, the fake is getting realer. Enter the concrete rendering of the counterfeit city. Enter New York New York, Paris, Monte Carlo, and The Venetian. In 2004, Las Vegas doesn’t just simulate the moods and wonders of the world, it simulates its cities.

Illustration 17: Paris and Venetian Casinos, Las Vegas, Nevada

**Vertical Vegas**

I have been express lifted to the thirty-first floor of Monte Carlo casino. I’m standing at the window of my room, one of three thousand, and they are all full. I am gazing at the sheer elevation of the Hotel as it runs on beside me, at the cream surface of its right
wing, higher and more expansive than ten football fields. I am framed by one window, a frame that repeats itself identically in hundreds of long lines. I look into the other rooms, at the details the same as mine. The gold lamps, the dark wood furniture. The striped luxurious wallpaper. The inherited flourishes of a Mediterranean past. And only when I have fully registered the immensity of this thing I’m in, can I cast my eyes out. To the mighty stretch of Las Vegas. To everything getting bigger. To the city of endless lengths, endless heights, endless concrete and endless sand.

I remember the flight over the majestic red rock canyons. The parched mountains pierced with snow. The city stretching across the flat plain of the desert, the thousands of houses spreading back from the strip in the brown and dusty earth. It hardly ever rains here. Nothing grows roots. There are no drains. Instead the city is settled, held down with concrete and it is only concrete and rock that can give this desert’s incessant horizon line any vertical symmetry. I look left and right at the massive casinos, knowing there are more of them I cannot see, and I am impressed, full of wonder, caught by the thrill and the horror of their size. I look further to the distant ragged horizon, to the giant canyons that ring this city. The symbiotic exchange between the constructed topography of the casinos and the colossal real. And it’s as if the casinos are trying to be the mountains; trying to call out to them across the expanse of the great American plain – this big, unforgiving country – and I know why bones, human and animal, used to litter the Spanish Trail.

I look toward the back end of the New York New York; to where the twin towers are still standing; to the architectural gestures of a casino masquerading as a city, lined up as different levels, as different colours, textures, façades and shades, as separate buildings, interconnected by a rollercoaster that runs between them, out into the desert air and back in. I can see the tip of the Lady Liberty’s flame held aloft somewhere on the other side. Later, when I enter the New York New York on foot (via a quick tour of Manhattan and over the Brooklyn Bridge) I will see it is a dark casino. A space that imitates the crush and rush of its muse metropolis. After visiting the famous Downtown Deli I will wander along the narrow alley ways of Greenwich Village, cobblestoned and lined with false front tenement buildings, while also trying to navigate my pastrami sandwich, which is more like a giant mound, replete with a whole green pickle longer and almost wider than my hand. And while I’m traipsing through Coney Island and gaming floors modelled on
Central Park and laughing at the change machines which are actually New York Cabs I will be lost in *New York New York* for hours. It will happen in every casino, in every fake city. There is a moment on entering where you must relinquish the idea of ever finding a quick way out. The illusory effect of the mirage, of the distant oasis, has always defined this city.

Illustration 18: *New York New York* Casino, Las Vegas, Nevada

Our room was in one of the farthest wings of the Flamingo. The place is far more than a hotel: It is a sort of huge under-financed Playboy Club in the middle of the desert. Something like nine separate wings, with interconnected causeways and pools – a vast complex, sliced up by a maze of car-ramps and driveways. It took me about twenty minutes to wander from the desk to the distant wing we had been assigned to. (Thompson 1998: 109)

I have never walked so much. It does not take hours to walk the strip, it takes days. It does not take days to visit every casino, it takes weeks. You can see the hotels looming in the distance ahead of you, behind you and even off the strip to the east and west their massive forms conjure and cajole. Everything is instant but seems to take on time and
space forever. ‘After five days in Vegas you feel like you’ve been here for five years’ (Thompson 1998: 193). A strange circumstance where physical reality contradicts imaginary signification. ‘The buildings are so gargantuan that [you] think them closer…the distance boggling, unclear, otherworldly’ (Roorbach 2004: 262). In Las Vegas size matters. You must allow for the time it takes just to leave your own building. And then finally, you spill out of the casino with thousands of other tourists, slightly bemused and relieved. On the expansive sidewalks of Las Vegas the crowds amass 24/7, making their way slowly along the strip, held together by its long lines, intent on gazing and moving forward as if on some kind of perverted pilgrimage.

And the casinos know it. The walkways that run the length of the strip appear flat and straight but are purposefully convoluted – lined by barriers and directional diversions such as complicated stairway structures and narrow escalators – leading you on tangents and one way directions. At times you must wind your way through the casinos just to get back out onto the street. You have no choice but to follow. You are transported over side streets, carried into elaborate foyers, required to bottleneck at certain points and therefore be tempted to stop. You get caught in rooms which, ‘smell like plain hugeness, the smell of a room big enough to have weather’ (Roorbach 2004: 264). And nothing is exempt from this game of grabbing human attention – you are swamped by the incessant affects of the ‘architecture of persuasion’ (Spanier 1992: 123). The holograms, dancing girls, choreographed waterfalls, spruikers, voice overs, giant LCD screens, oxygen bars, Elvises, the curling lights and the flashing signs get in your face, in your head and under your skin without any actual contact. They hover just beyond you. You move and absorb and are saturated; and the effects of this engagement appear later like magic, like neon stigmata.

This madness goes on and on, but nobody seems to notice…customers are being hustled by every conceivable kind of bizarre shuck. All kinds of funhouse-type booths. Shoot the pasties off the nipples of a ten foot bull-dyke and win a cotton candy goat. Stand in front of this fantastic machine, my friend, and for just 99 cents your likeness will appear two hundred feet tall, on a screen above Downtown Las Vegas…nobody can handle that trip…the possibility that any freak with $1.98 can walk into the Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God, howling anything that comes into his head. No, this is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is far too twisted. (Thompson 1972: 46-7)
Old Schools New Worlds

In a subsequent study, Re-Learning from Las Vegas, Venturi noted that increased pedestrian engagement in Las Vegas was reminiscent of the traditional functions of the American Main Street; he saw this as being at odds with the original cruising, motor vehicle dominated experience inherent to the long lines of Route 91 (Spanier 1992: 129). I would suggest, however, that there is nothing retrospective about this shift in engagement at all. Las Vegas is, rather, a city with a multiplicity of projected purposes and designs all of which are increasing as a consequence of its rapid growth. Las Vegas is about cruising and gazing but it is also fast and fly-by. It is all these things. You can freewheel along the Strip on your own two feet, on a Harley, in a helicopter, a Corvette, or a Cadillac. They sell all kinds of movement in Las Vegas, to alleviate the vertigo, the pressure of open skies and flat open space. You can hire choppers, private planes, and strange celebrity-style people-movers that look like elongated A-Team vans. Limousines are as prevalent as dimes. And nearly as cheap. But people still walk because gazing at the surfaces of these buildings in slow motion is just one part of what is now a series of simultaneous
experiences dealt out at street level, eye level and from the sky. The multitudinous effect on your sense of placement can be destabilising. You feel distorted – like the physical subject in an impressionist painting – your presence is always only a glimmer in an atmosphere big enough to consume it. The monumentality of Las Vegas’s 21st Century urban formations encourages the merger of physicality and surface, of awe and veneration, for as casino developer Steve Wynn infamously declared, ‘Las Vegas is what God would have done…if he’d had the money’ (Spanier 1992: 33).

The new millennium era of casino development in Las Vegas has also resulted in multipurpose market attraction. The city has seen and retained enough semblance of its manifold phases that dream access can be bought in a range of ways all demarcated by different sites or geographical precincts. You can find your wild west version off the beaten track at joints like Texas and Boulder Station; your Diamonds are Forever version in the old school casino beauties such as the Golden Nugget, Bally’s and The Riviera; your Leaving Las Vegas version anywhere Downtown along Freemont Street; or your Oceans Eleven (remake) version filmed on location at the new-wave world of The Bellagio. While all of these versions of Vegas remain accessible, it is the luxury finishes and elegant designs of the new millennium casinos such as The Bellagio, Mandalay Bay, Paris and The Venetian that have enabled the proclamation of a ‘new’ era of sophistication for Vegas. This ‘progression’ is in many ways a recycling of the aesthetics of style and service heralded by the mafia during their reign, and the process has been similarly enhanced by fusions with popular culture and celebrities representative of music, television and film. ‘In Vegas, every celebrity reverts to the apex of their 15 minutes even if their star has long faded’ (Powers 2004: 34).

The high gloss, lifestyle publication simply titled Vegas positions itself firmly as the ‘eyes’ of ‘the most incomparable city in the nation’ (Carr 2004: 22), seeking to ‘capture the exact moment in which we are living’ (Albin 2004: 24). The exact moment is located for these publishers in the realms and symbols of Vegas’s new era – a postmodern position which deliberately intermingles notions of high and popular culture – thereby perpetually rescuing Vegas from the precipice of kitsch. Indeed, the main function of this fused vernacular is to reinscribe Las Vegas’s raw and raucous energy with a symbolic language derivative of classical culture in order to attract and retain a hipper market. The main game has shifted away from families toward the international party set which is both
imagined and evidenced. *Vegas Magazine* has regular columns titled Stars & Players, Celebrity Playground, Shot on Site, The Strip, Up All Nite, Fame Game, Desert Patrol – all of which are subtle rearrangements of the personality or celebrity profile segment.

While every Vegas nightclub claimed to be hosting the “official” Billboard Music Awards post-celebration, not surprisingly all the action was at the Palms. It was quite the scene at N9NE with No Doubt’s Gwen Stefani sashaying through the crowded dining room several times. Upstairs, Ghostbar was even hotter (despite the frigid weather) with the appearance of Black Eyed Peas, The OC’s Mischa Barton and Benjamin McKenzie, Joe Jackson, porn star Ron Jeremy and *Girls Gone Wild* creator Joe Francis…But when heirheads Richie and Hilton (accompanied by a demure Nicky Hilton) arrived at the soirée for Interscope Records, the penthouse lounge swirled into a frenzy with photogs falling all over themselves to capture the controversial *Simple Life* co-stars…The only other duo who garnered so much attention were nascent couple Tommy Lee and Pink, who couldn’t keep their hands off each other. (Powers 2004: 34)

In this saturation of celebrity coverage, the ‘we’ to whom *Vegas* magazine consistently refers remains largely unqualified. Allegiance to the sense of localism the magazine projects is always elusive, but suggested in the chic, contemporary language, in tones that mingle a sense of intimate confidence with sexual provocation. The implications of social attainment are further endorsed by a concentration on extravagant consumerism through select, high-end advertising. The inside cover of the February 2004 edition of *Vegas* features a double spread on *Caesar’s Palace* – a name which in the era of Hunter S Thompson might have conjured neon, fake turrets and provocatively swathed togas – but the graphic tones of the advertisement are noir inspired black and white, representing Vegas’s relative aesthetic shift to extravagant understatement. In the foreground we see a thirty something man, groomed and suit-jacketed. The top buttons of his crisp white shirt are undone. His head is thrown back, laughing. A woman we can’t see is reaching for him, one finger on his collar. An elegant hand holds a martini glass in the foreground. Another pair of hands reaches out, feeding him olives off a swivel stick. A small text box by his head reads: ‘Caesar. 2.13am. 2004 AD… Ah. Nothing Starts The Day Like a Good Breakfast… Caesars Palace Las Vegas Live Famously.’ Other advertisements continue the trend towards chic indulgence with products ranging from Ultra Lounges and Meta Clubs to imported spirits, designer fashion, custom designed jewellery, and Cadillac 4WDrives. ‘Where you start the evening may determine where it ends’. ‘If you’re in here you already know’. ‘All the perks and pleasures you crave’. ‘Intimate Comfortable.
Cosmopolitan – new words to associate with Vegas’. ‘Where life is elevated to an art form’. Indeed, *Vegas* Editor Glenn Albin wishes he could deliver the reader, ‘an experience [that] would be so vérité they would feel like they were in the same room’ (Albin 2004: 24). This desire for access characterises the mythology of the new frontier. To transcend the voyeuristic moment and enter the inner circle, the projected fantasy, is what Vegas – the magazine and the city – so effectively markets. This is not merely the documentation of a ‘a certain social stratum’ but envy of it – the ‘eyes’ of the born again Vegas are wired green (Albin 2004: 24). Vegas projects a hyper sense of consumerism by injecting the speculative promise. If you gamble successfully, you can buy that life instantly – engage in shortcut access rather than earned delivery. Meanwhile, you can also experience it vicariously through the opulence of the simulated environment.

Vegas is alive with a certain earthiness, a great variety of people, mostly concentrated in these huge buildings…Vegas is just endless groping, epitomising the modern era of possibility being everywhere. It’s all held in front of you, concentrated, and visitors are inundated with the idea that people are really living it up in some elusive penthouse. The city has become a symbol around the world and it’s massive in the way Americans like. The Bellagio is no small thing after all. (Austin 2004: 82)
The 21st Century lifestyle philosophies currently courted by Las Vegas are reminiscent of the grandeur of the gangster era, however, these two phases are separated by an unprecedented period of globalisation. While the Mafia distrusted corporate capitalism and was ultimately ousted by its massive intervention, the ‘new’ Vegas seeks to reconfigure the late 20th Century strategies of homogenisation by creating both real and illusory pockets of distinctiveness in what is unavoidably a globalised market. The ‘new’ Vegas actually cuts through and exaggerates these blanket effects by becoming a brand itself. In this new ‘top shelf’ landscape, branding is reconfigured as a signature city style, avoids the eighties philosophies of warehousing – of catering obviously to the masses – and concentrates on simulating a ‘casual’ sense of exclusivity. Entertainment facilities are now being contracted out of casino boardrooms and into the hands of a new wave of MTV generation entrepreneurs who compete ferociously for the fickle title of uber next-big-thing.

As Vegas insiders know competition is always a good thing. The stakes are constantly being raised – both in and out of the casinos – and each new restaurant, bar, club and boutique that opens somehow manages to trump the last “in” spot. But that’s what keeps players like Maloof, Morton, Steve Wynn and Bobby Baldwin in the game – it’s that kind of town. (Powers 2004: 34)

Bad boy thirty-somethings, Bronson Olimpieri and Andrew Sasson, personify the new recruit mentality of Vegas. Imports from Los Angeles and Miami, these so-called newcomers are ‘obsessed with what Las Vegas is missing’ (Powers 2004: 78). Both are partnered with major hotel corporations and paid to deliver difference. Olimpieri is the general manager of *Vbar*, ‘the city’s original “ultra-lounge”, housed in The Venetian resort and casino’ (Powers 2004: 78). The ultra-lounge phenomenon in Vegas signalled a movement away from garish and extravagant entertainment venues to more intimate sizes and subtle notions of theming. Each of these bars claims to offer something different but they do share a certain repeated aesthetic: expensive but understated detailing, cosy environments, designer seating, subdued lighting and an emphasis on superior service. VIP’s can ‘control their own areas by purchasing tables’. Olimpieri says he knows he is doing his job when he can walk in and see *Vbar*, ‘packed with a bunch of different people, from all over the country and the world having a good time with smiles on their faces’ (Wiser 2004: 58). Olimpieri with his tattooed arms, shaved head and impeccable, open cut suits, cultivates an image of edgy cool, while Sasson comes over
quite deliberately as ‘a smart ass kid’ effortlessly presiding over a variety of entertainment and real estate ventures including the management of The Bellagio’s ‘ultra-lounge’, Light.

The problem with Vegas is that they group young people as just young people... They don’t understand within that group are different demographics like there are with everywhere else. So Las Vegas said, “Let’s build a nightclub for everybody.” But it doesn’t work that way around... (Powers 2004: 78)

Sasson’s ability to read the new frontier city and intersect it successfully is evidenced by his further expansion into restaurant and residential real estate markets. Both ventures are driven by the desire to ‘fill voids’ in the urban landscape and to meet the expectations of the new generation demographics he identifies with. In 2002 Sasson formed a partnership with entrepreneur and developer Laurence Hallier to construct Panorama Towers – a thirty storey lifestyle and residential building – behind The Bellagio casino.

Sasson explains his vision for the building:

It’s for anybody from 25 – 50... It’s a group that understands a certain lifestyle. They’re not looking for somewhere to belong. They have their friends. They want a cool pool. They want a grocery store with fresh fruit. They want a property that looks like 2000 – not 1950 or 1960 in North Miami Beach. And that’s what we built. (Powers 2004: 80)

This shift in concentration to highrise residential markets is a global urban trend but one which is manifesting most particularly in new frontier cities. The potential for more symbiotic relationships between tourists, residents, locals and investors, opens out understandings of urban usage and allows for a far more differentiated environment than these cities have seen previously. Enter guns for hire, like Olimpieri and Sasson, who can articulate the desires and trends of the fractured postmodern culture to corporate sectors, and cities like Las Vegas begin to be redefined. The opportunity for these kinds of collaborative intersections and ventures between celebrities, developers, whiz kids and entrepreneurs continues to define the progression of the new frontier. Of course, such rhizomatic movements are now underpinned and enabled by global corporate capitalism, but as they say in Vegas, as long as the machines are paying, you keep playing.

**Fear and Loathing**

Las Vegas is not the kind of town you associate with ‘getting real’ or ‘growing up’. It is not a place where you are supposed to have a composed meaningful moment, a
significant epiphany. It is not the kind of town where you suspect you might find out what is true to yourself, what really moves you, what you care about. Las Vegas, it seems, is a place where you go to escape the tide of these things. But like many actual processes or experiences of the new frontier, once you are there the promises of escapism and wish fulfilment are often reversed. This is a city which markets distraction, which promises a liberation from reflection and analysis, but often instigates such introspection by default.

How does Las Vegas get away with it? It is a thought which crosses many people’s minds. Moments of sombre reflection do occur, surprisingly enough, during a three day gambling trip… Las Vegas is a place to get away from it all but it is also a place where one is assailed by disturbing thoughts about what one is doing there, in a fundamental way. Losing seems to induce a state of mind which prompts introspection… This self-questioning is an inevitable side effect of playing with chance, of exposing oneself to these stomach churning reversals of fortune. One feels things more intensely in Las Vegas. (Spanier 1992: 14)

Vegas as a peak site of personal rupture or failing is exemplified by two of the city’s most well known fictions, Leaving Las Vegas by John O’Brien and Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter S Thompson. Both were originally literary works later transferred to popular film and have become paradigms of the various kinds of polarised extremities generally associated with Vegas. These are stories where the lead characters are seeking liberation from the Hollywood imaginary, and thus the spectre of Los Angeles hovers in both of these texts as both a warning and a trigger. Emblematic of the Californian tradition, they displace European notions of quest and pilgrimage by thrusting such weighted symbolism up against the relatively splintered environments of the new frontier.

The ambiguous relation of a seemingly rich legacy to the shoddier realms of west coast life. California then is a place where old stories, inherited worlds are re-enacted – seldom to one’s benefit…this grafting of old traditions to new circumstances is echoed by…plots which are constructed as quests… These quests however replace medieval fulfilment with contemporary perversity. (Skenazy in Timberg & Gioia eds. 2003: 44, 48, 49)

The works share, too, the folkloric sense of freedom traditionally associated with the American road trip. But the journeys enacted here are not characterised by a sense of arrival, rather by a less optimistic tone of departure. For though both novels display west coast narrative influence they are ultimately criticisms of it. Thompson may have chosen the sub-title ‘A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream’ however like Ben in
Leaving Las Vegas, his mission is not to actually locate this aspiration, but to annihilate its mythos and run from it.

“I hate to say this,” said my attorney as we sat down at the Merry Go Round Bar on the second balcony, “but this place is getting to me. I think I’m getting the Fear.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “We came out here to find the American Dream, and now that we’re right in the vortex you want to quit.” I grabbed his bicep and squeezed. “You must realise,” I said, “that we’ve found the main nerve.”

“I know,” he said, “that’s what’s giving me the Fear.” (Thompson 1998: 47-8)

These narratives are peopled by those wishing to disconnect from the reality, from the baseness of the world they perceive in images. The combination of detachment, antagonism and rage is produced chemically. Thompson and Dr Gonzo’s arsenal of drugs is infamous, as is the cast iron alcoholic consumption of O’Brien’s semi-autobiographical character Ben. When Ben is eventually fired from an advertising agency in Los Angeles he decides, with rather mechanical reasoning, to drive to Las Vegas and drink himself to death.

Time is now the biggest irritation in his life. Las Vegas looms in the back of his head. Free from closing hours, lots of liquor always everywhere, it is inevitable that he will end up there. All he has to do is remember not to gamble drunk which means not gambling at all, and he can make his money last long enough to comfortably wrap things up and have fun doing it. (O’Brien 1996: 75-6)

Ben, true to form, never wavers from his purpose. Both O’Brien and Thompson were seeking to test the limits of human endurance as a recompense for social and/or individual disappointment. Their texts oscillate continually between the edges of self-preservation and self-annihilation, for despite the unforgiving narrative positions, there are throughout tiny mercies and small victories against what Thompson terms the ‘forces of Old and Evil’ (Thompson 1998: 68). There is a raconteur spirit in Fear and Loathing, and a sense of resilience that is also embodied in O’Brien’s text by the character of Sera – a prostitute whose capacity for survival is diametrically opposed to Ben’s unfailing death wish. The game for Sera and Thompson is to outwit and out-play, to avoid capture under any circumstances and to stay alive doing it. ‘Anyone can do anything to her; she couldn’t
care less’ (O’Brien 1990: 116). Nearly twenty years separates the publication of these two texts but the sense of despair they share is measurable in equal terms. For Thompson it manifests in the realisation that Las Vegas may be the epitome of both the intensity and failure of the sixties generation to radically or permanently reinscribe the illusions and hallucinations of the American dream.

History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of “history” it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time – and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened… (Thompson 1998: 67-8)

The lament for revolution has petered out by the time O’Brien’s character, Ben, limps into Vegas. The only politics operating in this text is personal, but Vegas is similarly heralded as the end of the road. If Los Angeles has produced the promise of dreams and broken them then Las Vegas offers cruel respite from the realisation. It offers, according to these writers, the ultimate urban form of personal and/or social suicide. For Ben the propensity for signing off is literal, for Thompson, Las Vegas is the place where evidence of his generational futility would always be painfully visible – despite or perhaps even because of, his own noncompliant consumption.

There was no point fighting on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave… So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (Thompson 1998: 68)
This new species of city is not an accretion of streets and squares that can be comprehended by the pedestrian, but instead manifests its shape from the air, the car or the mass transit railway. Landmarks are reduced to flashes of slow-moving traffic, glimpsed from above on elevated highways amid a glittering river of red stoplights, or famous place names translated into the illuminated station signs that punctuate the darkness of metro tunnels. But the equipment we have for making sense of what is happening to our cities has lagged far behind these changes. Both the popular and the academic views of what a city is are coloured more by historical perceptions than by present-day realities. Painfully little work has been done in what it is really like to live in such a city, with its diffuse focuses, and its enormous distances. (Sudjic 1992: 298)
The Gold Coast’s relationship with Hollywood is determined by its flagrant addiction to the consumption of urban and cultural signifiers. Just as Hollywood homogenised and exoticised different versions of cultures cinematically, Gold Coast imagineers sought to replicate these images in the urban environment. Transported and imported concepts derivative of celluloid fiction came via the Pacific, effectively bypassing the colonial mother, and the expected European urban models and trajectories. On the Gold Coast, counter culture was spread implicitly, it was implanted and manifested as a municipal story able to continually rewrite itself. Immediately the city represented a shift in the nation’s urban formations, marked by a seemingly instantaneous compression of space and time. With Hollywood as its superintendent, the Gold Coast has never understood the notion of restraint. It has spun outwards on hyperactive trails sparked by notions of dispersion, Pacific, voyeur, celluloid, virtual and sprawl, refusing the models of high density, trans-Atlantic, flaneur, sanctioned, centre, modernist and foundation.

A city that is not so much topical and territorial as teletopical and extraterritorial. A city in which the geometric notions of urban centre and urban periphery will gradually lose their social significance. (Virilio 1997: 80)

What the Gold Coast does share with other major Australian cities is that it continues to project itself outwards. Phillip Drew in *The Coastal Dwellers* (1994) argues that the locus of postcolonial Australian identity is the edge, not the centre, the coastal rind and not the outback. Our major cities teeter on this coastal rind, arising out of a reluctance to transfer spiritual and cultural identification away from the mother country, Britain. Drew suggests that,

Australians have always looked outwards to gain a sense of who and where we are. The coast replaces the centre as the chief spatial and symbolic focus in our culture. As such it is a reverse of the Italian Humanist ideal, which elevated the centre as the prime symbol, with everything else subordinate to the centre. (Drew 1994: 2)

As I argued earlier, however, it is not to Britain that the Gold Coast gazes out, but America. A process exists between the Gold Coast and America that goes beyond general global transactions in popular cultural consumption. It is more particular, more intrinsic, being driven by new developments in urban formations. The Gold Coast, like Los Angeles, Miami and Las Vegas, is a player in a new urban frontier.
Lionel Frost in *The New Urban Frontier* (1991) analyses the shift from what he terms the ‘Euro’ city to the ‘Western’ city: the shift in economic dominance from the Atlantic Rim economies to the Pacific Rim economies. He details how new frontier models radically redefined notions of development and put into practice a series of municipal responses designed to alleviate and avoid problems associated with typically modernist cities whose densely populated centres were faced with relative ‘diseconomies’ such as deterioration, infirmity, lack of privacy, fire, waste disposal and noise.

With the shift towards the Pacific came a pronounced change in the physical and spatial form of cities. These new cities, instead of developing physically as virtually transplanted European cities, took on a distinct and novel urban form. (Frost 1991: 18)

The new frontier is characterised by an urban philosophy that embraces dispersion as opposed to high density. ‘They [new frontier cities] coped with very rapid rates of population increase by spreading outwards through the replication of dispersed suburbs’ (Frost 1991: 19). Los Angeles’ rapid population growth, for example, was enabled by improved transport systems which opened up a whole new trajectory in North America as thousands of people travelled to the state of California by rail. This in-migration boom meant you could be in the Promised Land for next to nothing, as rail companies competed for a greater share of the market. Increased local public transport services allowed people to live in more dispersed areas. Relatively buoyant local government economies and comparatively higher personal incomes also led to an upsurge in spending and development.

Barthe’s description of them as “instant cities” is apt, given their extraordinarily fast growth and relative absence of historical foundation. The difference between “western” cities and “eastern” cities was a matter of expanded space and compression of time. (Frost 1991: 4)

Frost further acknowledges the accusations of monotony levelled at the expansive territories of new frontier cities and cites filmmaker Woody Allen as a purveyor of ‘the cultural polarity between America’s two largest cities’ suggesting that ‘socially there is a marked contrast between compact bustling cities like New York and the more comfortable but somewhat bland cities such as Los Angeles’ (Frost 1991: 160). Certainly, new frontier ideology has levelled, flattened and stretched notions of urban form.
however the use of the term ‘bland’ seems misdirected here. Granted, new frontier cities are not complicated, turbulent, metropolitan structures piled on top of themselves like Euro cities. They are not highly textural or sculptural. They are not monumental in the Humanist way: reverence is not directed to the prominence and permanence of the town hall, square, or cathedral. Instead, new frontier cities display reverential expression – like massive reflectors of two dimensional form they appear as sleek, flat screens projecting the multiple extremes of light and sign. This cinematic vernacular is most marked in the entertainment and pleasure strips which cut across and dominate these cities, however the force of such shop front/false front/staged sites as municipal signifiers means that notions of surface, smooth space, and spectacle permeate the cities’ suburban tracts and overall cultural sensibility. We have seen with reference to the Gold Coast, for example, how this identification extends to the process of naming wide suburban streets after film stars. This kind of permeation also leads to other intersections and styles which characterise the Gold Coast as a new frontier space. The difference is in the detail. Yes, the streets do stretch in organised prearranged fashions but the consistent reworking of urban territories results in architectural expressions and flourishes which mimic the multiplicities of the entertainment strip, in the same ways that many of the people seek to. The new frontier has its own colours different to the Euro city. When Gold Coast artist Scott Redford exhibits in the National Gallery, his enamel ‘Surf’ paintings are full of iridescent yellow. They shine like surfboards. They proclaim slogans in bright blue and red. They pronounce Surfers Paradise as a new world leader. Next door his Dead Board videos play without sound on giant screens. Voyeuristic frames in which girls in bikinis saw through surfboards leant up against beds. On the boards Redford has painted one word. Death. The lifestyle is bright. The lifestyle is golden-haired but the lifestyle also has guts and humour and teeth. His interpretations of the Gold Coast aesthetic are, like many artworks produced by new frontier artists, immediately associated with certain assumptions that arise from the municipal association. In conversation with writer and Australian National University Gallery curator Chris Chapman, Redford attempts to debunk the immediacy of such cultural assumptions.

CHRIS CHAPMAN: It’s well known now that your art derives specifically from your experience of growing up on the Gold Coast – a mecca for tourists, a glitzy strip of highrises lining postcard-perfect beaches, and a haven for the culture of the surfer. You have used the motif of the surfboard to signal various symbolic references: its economical form as a ‘sculpture’ relates to the cool aesthetics of
minimalism, and the integration of imagery and motifs gives it a pop-cultural attitude. Further, the board itself can be understood as a surrogate, or a ‘stand-in’ for the surfer. In this way the board is a sexualised object, even a kind of fetishised body-double. Can you outline the trajectory that the figuring of the surfboard has made in your work?

SCOTT REDFORD: First of all let me say that NO I have never surfed a surfboard, ever! Growing up on the Gold Coast [mainly at the suburb Broadbeach, although I was conceived at Burleigh Heads – MADE IN BURLEIGH HEADS where my surfboards are made now] everyone surfed but I always wanted to be different. Alternative is today’s term. Of course we were always at the beach and I was a nipper [a young - under 14 – trainee surf life saver] at the Broadbeach Surf Club, but even then as a kid I was more interested in perving on the older men in the showers. So surfing was always for the other guys. Me I always wanted to be an artist. I remember being picked up by some guy when I was fifteen or whatever and he told me about some big time surfer that tied younger surfers to his favourite board and fucked them at Burleigh Surf Club. So after that I was always hanging around Burleigh wondering if this was true or not. That’s where the text ‘14 GUYS ROPED TO THEIR SURFBOARDS’ comes from in my 1993 work for the Perspecta exhibition. So surfboards are always linked to homosex and home for me. (Chapman 2003: HREF3)

The consistent interplay between expansion and compression of time and floating signifiers in the new frontier city results in a kaleidoscope of visual, physical and psychological affects. The urban formations are characterised by movement, by the car, the surfboard, the screen, the billboard and the Hollywood movie; a place where the citizen is the voyeur and the flaneur. Driving feels like flying. Walking feels like scanning. Looking is always gazing. Movement is high speed. Roads are long and just when the urban environment feels familiar it changes. Bodies, buildings and ideas get transported, move quickly across the surfaces of the city; surfaces composed of asphalt, glass, canvas and saltwater. Speed and velocity dominate as the urban territory continually elongates and vanishes along points: an urban manifestation of virtual and celluloid dreaming.

The further west we drove the more ‘pop’ everything looked on the highways. Suddenly we all felt like insiders because, even though pop was everywhere – that was the thing about it, most people still took it for granted, whereas we were dazzled by it – to us, it was the new art. Once you ‘got’ Pop you could never see a sign the same way again. The moment you label something, you take a step – I mean, you can never go back again to seeing it unlabelled. We were seeing the future and we knew it for sure. We saw people walking around in it without knowing it, because they were still thinking in the past, in the references of the past. But all you had to do was know you were in the future, and that’s what
put you there. The mystery was gone, but the amazement was just starting. (Warhol 1991: 14)

Flying down the Gold Coast Highway at night, drunk from Surfers Paradise, drunk from the effects, you remember only the light. The lights as they swirl and flash at a hundred kilometres an hour reflecting on everything, the car, the glass, the mirrors, your face. Your face hanging out the window for air, your head facing up at the sky, the lights relentless. Your skin drinking in the light, the dust and the roar of engines, the wind in your face carrying you and the salt and the cool sea. The neon fantasies, the words, the signs rolling over your chest. At high speed the buildings flick past you, whippet thin and merging. The black screen of sky is pierced with multi-coloured mansards and minarets. The world is full of edges, vertical lines of light, and you trip through it on a wigged out horizontal passage. The highway is a cable. Your car the current. The city electric.

Illustration 21: Gold Coast skyline and Macintosh Island Park

The perpetuation of a sense of innovation, which is actually the recycling of old traditions, concepts, ideologies and symbols, disseminated and reconfigured with perpetual advancements in technology, is a defining feature of the new frontier city. There will be in the new frontier always new ways of looking at things, always something
missing, always a new market to be fostered and created because each instigated trend is an act of (im)pure simulation which purposefully settles into false periods of stagnation only so that re-urbanisation, market construction and re-identification can take place. In Las Vegas the desert wind runs over everything. On the Gold Coast waves take away marks in the sand. These are territories attuned to the cycles of impression and erasure. In this way the perpetual re-sedimentation of these environments is both artificially instigated and naturally affinitive.

New frontier industry is thus focussed and built on non-tractional, non-traditional items: the relatively intangible industries of tourism, entertainment, retail and gambling – and more recently ICT. These are industries where consumption is transient and products hinge on cycles of reinvention to retain and boost their consumer impact. The constant pressure to maintain attraction results in competitive exhibitionism. Two major effects manifest in the built environment. One is the acceleration of change, development and redevelopment, and the other is the diffusion of fantasy and hyperreality in architectural forms.

Each time you think, “They can’t possibly top this.” And yet, they do.
And one thing’s for sure – somehow they always will. (Herczog 1999: 4)

The negative effects of such accelerated instantaneous growth, such as traffic congestion, strained social services, pollution and inadequate public infrastructure, are overlooked or seen as secondary to the primary purpose of progression. The new frontier city promises to yield profits at such phenomenal rates that fast-tracked greed often results in corporate pressure, which in turn leads to inadequate urban planning. Las Vegas is the only city in America that produces the phone book twice a year to keep pace with the rapid rate of change (Herczog 1999: 4). Like its new frontier sister city, the Gold Coast (annual population growth 3.5% for the past decade – Gold Coast City Council, HREF8), Las Vegas is the fastest growing city in the country with 4-6,000 people relocating to the area every month (Herczog 1999: 4). Since the US census in 2000 Las Vegas’s population has intensified from 478, 434 to 1, 650, 671 as of July 1 2004. (Wikipedia HREF) Both of these cities suffer from the backlash of the new frontier phenomenon. They are too successful. Their problems arise not from the style of the city, but the inability of state and local governments to navigate the new frontier effectively. Examples of bureaucratic organisations lagging consistently behind the
commercial pace are constant; the tension is characterised by divergent systematics. Policy intersections frequently miss the mark in the new frontier because the express operations and purposes of entrepreneurial activity oppose control with speed. ‘...the state never ceases to decompose, recompose, and transform movement, or to regulate speed’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 386).

New frontier cities have always experienced the pressure of misinterpretation and marginalisation; their innovative development and highly commercial methodologies create points of difference that place them in opposition to dominant cultural paradigms. While the exclusions that occur are perhaps not intentional, they are a reflection of derogatory national opinions and arise because products or ventures emerging from new frontier culture disassociate themselves deliberately from every preconceived centre; they avoid frameworks because they must have the ability to move, plug in, switch, adapt and spread. Thus the new frontier city is difficult to compartmentalise – a necessary procedure for Eurocentric interpretation and endorsement. Therefore cities like Las Vegas and the Gold Coast are often relegated to having dormitory relationships with their nearest big cities. It is easy to attribute such a status to urban areas understood as outpost new frontier cultures. These are cities used to a secondary position. For the Gold Coast, its proximity to Brisbane continues to reduce its acceptance as one of the nation’s largest and fastest growing cities. It continues to be disproportionately overshadowed culturally and politically by the state capital despite its phenomenal expansion. Similarly Las Vegas, despite obvious proactive and formative correlations with Los Angeles, continues to suffer from the inherent association because the relationship has not adapted and kept pace with the primary growth of Las Vegas. Both Las Vegas and the Gold Coast are recognised principally as places of drop out and escape – as talismans of excess and play they continue to be valued by non-locals primarily for the consumptive experiences they can readily provide.

New frontier cities are the progressive product of the postmodern condition; more conducive to a virtual consciousness than culturally sanctioned cities such as New York, London or Rome. Thus, the new frontier celebrates the postmodern conversion of parody to pastiche, a process which Fredric Jameson states can only come after the fragmentation of the ‘great modern styles society’ where lack of faith in the original or ignorance of it leads to an erasure of the ‘linguistic norm’ (Jameson 1983: 113).
Pastiche is like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour. (Jameson 1983: 114)

Jameson suggests two possible positions on the idea of the termination of the enduring subject. One, that it is dead, and two, (which he refers to as the more radical) that the individual subject as forged by the modernist aesthetic ‘never really existed’ and was ‘merely a philosophical and cultural mystification’ (Jameson 1983: 115). Jameson seeks not to draw a conclusion about which of these two positions is correct. He is more concerned to attribute stasis and impotence to the emergent postmodern culture as it struggles to articulate what he sees as the folly of its own uniqueness in a world where an individualised notion of original practice has lost its meaning and is therefore unachievable.

It is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are doing. What is clear is merely that the old models – Picasso, Proust, T.S. Eliot do not work anymore... the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds – they’ve already been invented; only a limited number of combinations is possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already. (Jameson 1983: 116)

As cultural theorists such as Jameson and Mike Davis have suspected, the new frontier city’s assembled and organised public environments do relay dreams as collective imaginary in controlled doses, however this sense of control does not always extend to a homogenised or heterogeneous experience. It does not always lead to what Jameson refers to as the ‘death of the subject’ nor does the ‘age of corporate capitalism’ stratify subjectivity to the extent that the loss of ‘the older bourgeois individual subject’ (Jameson 1989: 116) leads, by necessity, to the homogenisation of every woman and man. Such conclusions avoid recognition of a kind of free form personal interaction and comprehension which the free enterprise and the technically advanced circumstances of the postmodern environment also encourage. New frontier citizens receive at random and interpret the public stimulus individually. What begins in the outside is interpreted by the inside. They undertake an external process of visual comprehension as they drive, play and gaze but the meaning of this experience is not necessarily as given or
predetermined as Jameson suggests. As a new frontier citizen you do not so much run off at the mouth as run off in the head, because this comprehension requires a collective bank of pictures; memories you don’t know you have. Just being in the outside in a virtual city requires active loops and leaps of imagination, to string you along and to string the multitude of effects together. If, according to Jameson, the more important question is not whether the individual subject is dead but how notions of fragmentation effect cultural production, should we not turn away completely, then, from classical modernism and turn instead to the work of those contemporary artists and writers who seek to reinterpret the conditions of the post-metropolis? It is a question also posed by Soja in relation to the interpretation of the new frontier:

There are significant continuities between Metropolis and Postmetropolis eras, just as there are between Fordism and postfordism, modernity and postmodernity. But again, the discursive question revolves around whether a certain tipping point or threshold has been reached where the interpretive power of studying the “intensified” new forms and functions outweighs a revisioning of the continuities that link the present to the past. (Soja 1996: 241)

If the models of Euro culture are no longer applicable in these new frontier cities and to these splintered times, why do we persist with what even Jameson refers to as an ‘imprisonment of the past?’ If pastiche can be belittled due to its connection to the weighty and satirical heights of modernist parody then perhaps assemblage is a more useful term to apply to contemporary cultural production, particularly in new frontier cities.

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject. In short, we think that one cannot write sufficiently in the name of an outside. The outside has no image, no signification, no subjectivity. The book as assemblage with the outside, against the book as image of the world. A rhizome-book, not a dichotomous, pivotal, or fascicular book. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23)

In this context contemporary art need not be liberated from concerns with authenticity, for as an assembled process it is already shifting away from being ‘about itself’ (Jameson 1989: 116) and becoming a renewed, unfixed and perhaps even radical form of subjectivity and placement.
‘History is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus...What is lacking is Nomadology, the opposite of a history.’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23)

And it is this multiple, nomadic, convergent position that the contemporary writers and poets of Los Angeles are taking up when they refuse to pretend they’re dead.

Slowly I Open My Eyes – *Gangsta Soliloquy*

While the city sleeps there’s this blast of silence that follows the whine of daylight: a defeat that wraps around buildings like a python, or one of those blue sheets they bundle corpses up in. *Wanna go for an ambulance ride?* Fragments of the sordid and the quote unquote normal vie for my attention. Hacking coughs and seductive yoo-hoos dangle in the 3 a.m. air. Up on this roof, I smoke cigarettes and wait. I feel like God up here. No kidding. Jerusalem Slim on his final night in the garden. Mr. X, Dr. No, The Invisible Man. All the same guy, different movies. It’s a city of delinquents: my disciples. Maybe some bum down below finds one of my stubbed out butts and is delighted. Everybody’s looking for something to inhale and something else to empty into. The whole city reels and twinkles at my feet, but the stars aren’t impressed. They see it every night. The eighty-year old elevator operator downstairs snores like he’s trying to suck up the Hudson. Humans act as if they’re going to stick around forever, but nobody ever does. That’s what cracks me up.

(Gerstler in Timberg and Gioia eds. 2003: 134)

The new frontier is not a city of current affairs, conclusions or contentious issues, but it is a city of sensations and speculations. A city that requires questions not answers. A city that has always asked not what have you done but what are you dreaming of. Curiously, this kind of artistic engagement is misinterpreted as vacuous, as if imagination has never assisted the interpretation or perception of ‘the real’ in Euro cities and their citizens who suddenly seem to mistrust this kind of captiv ation. But what is it that we prize in the contemporary world, in the new millennium, in the new frontier? We are attracted to flights of fancy, ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9) – for where has a monopoly on reality ever got us? How can it be said that a city of conceptions and simulations is not about ideas? Not only does this kind of assessment miss the point of the new frontier entirely but it also expresses, perhaps more importantly, a reluctance to grant people permission to dream.

*Future Frontier*
The diagonal frees itself, breaks and twists. The line no longer forms a contour, and instead passes between things, between points. It belongs to a smooth space. It draws a plane that has no more dimensions than that which crosses it; therefore the multiplicity it constitutes is no longer subordinated to the One, but takes on a consistency of its own. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 505)

**Reading the New Frontier City**

Los Angeles’ prevalence as a cinematic site results in a confusion of expectation. As a result, some contemporary urban theorists seem to be drawn into dilemma regarding its celluloid citations. When Mark Klein talks about L.A. as ‘the most photographed but least remembered city in the world,’ he seems to lament its inaccurate reflections in the cinema as if fiction is somehow responsible for chronicling history, yet he admits that because there are so few examples of primary source material on Los Angeles, ‘there is precious little else to turn to’ (Klein 1997: 247). But the function of these images is not to reveal some kind of inherent ‘truth’ about the city they are set in. The nature of film suggests that such notions and intentions are evasive and questionable. The function, rather, is to entertain, to move, to question, momentarily to suspend or manipulate the disbelief inherent to the cinematic experience in order to encourage flights away from, or different interpretations of, the real. When these images subvert the viewer’s perception of real space/time, the reality to which the images pertain becomes individual play. The viewer will begin to believe but in his/her own way. The fiction provides a point of reference to past events in the contemporary culture, an access point, which depending on its success, begins to congeal as civic mythology. The fiction acts as a chrysalis, insulated by its obvious context as a construction, however during its next phase, a kind of mythological birth occurs because the distinctions begin to slip: the cocoon is eroded by interpretations that equate it unquestionably with the real. When Klein observes that ‘Chinatown may be the Ur-Text for L.A. political history but it obscures as much as it clarifies’ (Klein 1997: intro) is he perhaps missing the irony of such a point? Klein’s view, like that of Mike Davis, is convoluted in its deconstruction of noir literature and film. Both confuse the stylisation of noir with purposeful socio-economic erasure while at the same time recognising it as the pinnacle reversal of ‘the overhyped but evacuated promise’ of Los Angeles (Klein 1997: 77).

As much as I love noir and find it exotically compelling, it is nevertheless often utterly false in its visions of the poor, of the non-white in
particular. It is essentially a mythos about white male panic – the white knight in a cesspool of urban decay; about desire turned into a slot machine…the hard boiled story cannot help but operate, very fundamentally, as white males building a social imaginary…what results is a pose; it distracts the memory away from community life as it existed in the city. (Klein 1997: 79-80)

While this position rings true in terms of the inherent distraction of noir, the relative invisibility of actual communities, the micro level voice and a sense of reductionist reality, Klein ultimately misunderstands the instigation and premise of such narratives in the canon of Los Angeles’ fictive history. The function of noir was never directed at the micro level experience. It operates on the surface of the new frontier city, at the level of fantasy, and while Klein duly recognises that these ‘urban fables’ are ‘anti-boosterist’ and ‘anti-tourist’, he fails to see the connections between the fact that they were actually produced by ‘newcomers’ or ‘tourists’ and did more for the pervasive attraction of Los Angeles than any other commercial activity. Such is the curious interplay of consumption, rejection and reiteration in the new frontier environment. These are not simple processes that can be reduced to the binary oppositions of ‘Sunshine and Noir’ (Davis 1990: 15) or ‘sunny Protestant Jerusalem’ and ‘tantalising prurient Babylon’, of ‘investment’ and a ‘fast weekend’ (Klein 1997: 74). These things are never operating in isolation or in reactionary gestures to each other in the new frontier as Klein and Davis are drawn to suggest – there is always a process of intermingling.

Hyperreality is here to stay. It will not pass by, and therefore it must be thoroughly understood and contended with as a vital part of contemporary political culture. In interpreting its meaning, it is also clear that we need to go beyond the rigid utopian-dystopian dualisms that have thus far marked so many of the interpretations of the changing urban imaginary. The postmetropolis is neither utopia nor dystopia tout court, but both in heavy doses…and more. (Soja 1996: 348)

In The History of Forgetting, Klein takes us on a nostalgic journey through the ‘forgotten’ L.A. It is an ‘anti-tour’ that criticises the collective erasure and despair caused by ‘failed [public] policies’ (Klein 1997: 3). We are invited to witness what isn’t there, to mourn what has been torn down, to recognise and unravel what has disappeared; to stroke the ‘phantom limbs’ (Klein 1997: 2) of the city. Klein’s study, however, begins to cave in and distort when he utilises fictional representations of Los Angeles as evidence of this erasure, effectively turning film into a primary source material for the city’s history. It seems to me that we are now talking about two different modes of cultural experience;
fiction, and cultural policy and governance, do cross over and inform each other, at times to points of indistinction, but they remain differentiated. And though some very important references and analyses are drawn between collective forgetting and the production of falsified images, it is important to note that a film can only represent itself as an historical document because, ultimately, it remains a fiction. And though film is a narrative language that can distort perceptions of the real, and has throughout its history been utilised to achieve this effect, it should not be held to support or supplant the real entirely. One obvious form of experience is removed from this analysis: the comprehension of the viewer is assumed. I would argue that the viewer is not as convinced as s/he would need to be for the claims of urban theorists such as Klein and Davis to take hold. When fiction signifies periods of history, specific events, public figures or cities, the consumer is capable of realising that there is much left outside the frame; the knowledge that s/he is participating in a spectacle, a representation and a simulation, is part of the experience.

The Accelerated History of the New Frontier

In Euro cities revolution has a historical moment. Revolution in the new frontier city is constant. It is not a movement of allegiance but of motion continual; a cyclical process turning on the replication and duplication of surfaces. Its point is not to erase. There is no intentionality because the new frontier city has no author. In a Euro city like Berlin, sedimented history is the author. Berlin is a story about itself, a historical vision that produces nostalgia for the moment perpetually by its own history, for the Berlin of the 1930s, for a nostalgia locked up in the ephemeral moment:

…Albert Speer wanted to build structures that would decay gloriously, impressively, like Roman Ruins. No rusty hulks or gnarled steel slums. He knew that Hitler would be in favour of anything that might astonish posterity. He did a drawing of a Reich structure that was to be built out of special materials, allowing it to crumble romantically – a drawing of fallen walls, half columns furled in wisteria. The ruin is built into the creation…which shows a certain nostalgia behind the power principle, or a tendency to organise the longings of future generations. (DeLillo 1984: 258)

Los Angeles, like other new frontier cities, produces a nostalgia based on replications, but rather than wishing to return to or resurrect a moment it never had, the culture accepts the multitude of copies and inventions presented. Nostalgia, in Los Angeles
terms, has always been based on fictions. It is thus a nostalgia bent only on an idea of nostalgia. For though all nostalgic moments are produced from stories, Euro cities acquire a type of narrative history not present or possible in the new frontier: Euro history is oral, is written, is spoken, is traceable, has an owner – the more you dig the more you unearth; the words are etched into the landscape, the city and the imaginary. In the new frontier the images that stand in place of its history are not catalogued and remain unnamed. The ruin is not built into the creation.

I don’t trust anybody’s nostalgia but my own. Nostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction and rage. It’s a settling of grievances between the present and the past. The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence. War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country. (DeLillo 1984: 258)

It is this acquired and simulated relationship with history which results in an accelerated process of identification and placement in the new frontier city. A sense of belonging is not imparted over time but injected suddenly; control over time is both defied and delivered, the weight of history ultimately condensed. Rapid advancements in technology have enabled the formation of radical urban and cultural reinterpretations reflected spectacularly by the assembled and relayed environments of the new frontier city. Space and time are no longer constants, causing a dramatic shift in the perception and usage of urban territories. But these perceptions have yet to penetrate with any intensity beyond the locale. New frontier forms of modification continue to be misinterpreted as systematic ruptures or failings.

It becomes increasingly clear that the majority of critique levelled at the new frontier involves a posture of protection. What frightens some cultural commentators about the ascension of new frontier cities and other technologically enhanced concepts is the idea that their own lifestyles, their own familiar and protected civility, may be threatened or is becoming passé. The position is fuelled by nostalgic notions of community which are actually idealised visions of civility rather than achievable realities. Commentators such as Klein are therefore just as guilty of perpetuating an idealised mythos as Hollywood is. The fear inherent to such critique is cyclical and has been attributed historically to many progressions in cultural and technological production. In this context it should be remembered that innovation rarely results in total erasure. Photography did not replace painting, the Internet did not erase the book and video did not kill the radio star.
Changing the angle of perception slightly, to include history in the pantheon of hypermedia, rather than exclude it, we can start to see things differently. Rather than being new of necessity, hypermedia’s contribution to and advancement of the cultural apparatus of representation lies in its re-constitution of the historical practices it re-combines. (Tofts 1999: 11)

The rapid changes occurring in many cities point to the adoption of elements of new frontier models and forms in order to compete with global markets and trends. The globalising forces of capitalism driven by dominant American agencies mean that Americanisation is, of course, not limited to new frontier cities. Disney in Paris, the proliferation of commercial product warehousing, re-urbanisation fuelled tourism, and take home Harrods’ embossed souvenirs, are all commercial strategies that have required a shift in thinking in the cities that have resisted yet finally adopted them. If this adoption is initially reluctant, it continues because it is popular and it makes money, and as this recognition gains weight more industries are entering variable processes of adaptation as a means of survival. Without conversion traditional modes of business no longer ‘cut it’ and risk redundancy in a world where choice and the rapid delivery of choice are paramount. But these shifts, as many critics have observed, do not necessarily result in the dumbing down of cultural production.

The complaint that cultural criticism gives as much weight to Donald Duck as William Shakespeare is, of course, nonsense. What has been missed in such grumbling is the simple fact that alongside questions of taste and value, the issue of what constitutes culture, and for whom, is not a constant commodity. (Tofts 1999: 9)

Technological and cultural shifts are impelled by the savvy and mobility of an increasingly demanding public. That is, the idea that change is forced upon a conservative public is simplistic and usually fuelled by capitalists who wish to protect market share or by a certain kind of cultural theorist whose anti-capitalist position insists that such current movements are invasive. Capitalist or anti-capitalist, what emerges as a constant, particularly in the new frontier city, is that the majority of citizens want these ‘new’ products, services and experiences. Tory Jones, Australian urban theorist and strategic planner, recognises that the ‘Gold Coast is not outside of the mainstream of popular urban culture, but at the forefront’. She quotes John Pastier from *The Architecture of Escapism*.

*Future Frontier*
We drift away from deep meanings and galvanic ideas towards seductive surfaces and personal gratification. We may sing the praises of opera and poetry, but when we vote with our feet we are far more likely to find ourselves standing in Disney World or Las Vegas, than in the Kennedy or Lincoln Centre. (Jones 1998: 4)

The hybridisation of cultural production and the accelerated collapse of distinctions between high and low art is more and more probable given the convergent philosophy of taste in emerging markets. The tensions that result between the traditional/heritage arts and the consumption of proliferating products of popular culture suggest that many conventional forms of culture have not adapted well to technologically enhanced global markets and (in particular) the rapidly mutating environments of the new frontier. These cultural shifts do not require a return to modernist cultural ethics – such ideas are largely useless for the contemporary city. What they do require is the development of a highly fluid telecommunications infrastructure which will encourage and meet increasing demands for effective technology and knowledge transfer. The ability for cultural sectors in the new frontier to access, engage and articulate a relationship with the postmodern environment and markets is vital if they are to maximise potential.

Of course, the need for such cross fertilisations arises out of postmodern economic pressure and this observation is not posited without recognition of the exclusions and exploitations (social, economic, political and environmental) that can result from emergent systems of production. However, it is also important to recognise that such exclusions have and will occur in every ‘system’, in every metropolis. That is, when new urban formations are criticised, deconstructed and regulated, exclusions are given undue weight. This is particularly ironic given the exclusionary discourses and practices of the modernist formations they are replacing.

Ideological critique warning of the exclusions of the past being repeated in the future are valuable however perhaps this does not tell us about the new. It does not provide us with a new vocabulary: instead it shows the dangers of using the old one. (Downey 1999: 205)

By continuing to suggest that a reversal or a containment of technologically informed trends is possible, some policy makers, critics and urban planners risk cultural gridlock by submitting to what Daren Tofts refers to as a ‘digital orthodoxy’ (Tofts 1999: 9). What
should be sought is a recognition and understanding of contemporary movements and
their impact on the future with applicable theory – theory of potential – which embraces
change and attempts to navigate positive, innovative and considered terrain.

The old certainties of urban geography have vanished, and in their place
is this edgy and apparently amorphous new kind of settlement...To
accept this image of the city is to accept uncomfortable things about
ourselves, and our illusions about the way we want to live. (Sudjic 1992:
305 & 309)

Outside Definitions: Reclaiming the City
Euro cities clearly do engage with faddist change, but for the most part they distrust it.
Unlike new frontier cities, they do not rely principally on cycles of commercial simulation
and replication. Nevertheless, as the rate of technological acceleration spirals, evidence of
the adaptation of certain new frontier processes continues to surface. The relationship,
however, remains uncomfortable.

In 2001 Bloomsbury Press released the first publication in The Writer and The City
Series, The Flaneur: A Stroll Through the Paradoxes of Paris. For the flaneur – in this case the
appropriately dapper Edmund White – notions of paradox emerge not as a defining
urban trait of the city but as a recurring momentary collision between Paris’s sense of
stylised history and a relatively undetermined present:

Above a certain level of income and social standing every detail in a life
follows a fad...Of course following fads means avoiding those that are
already too successful. Recently I attended a dinner party where a group
of five sophisticated gay men...all talked about “l'air du temps”... I finally
realised that it must mean something like Zeitgeist, the ideas or fashions
that are in the air and stronger than the taste of any one person. They
were all deploring the way that in spite of their best efforts “l'air du temps”
affected their own aesthetic decisions. (White 2001: 13-14)

White evokes a simultaneous love of novelty and a deploring of the faddistic as a
defining characteristic of the contemporary Parisian. It is precisely this fission that signals
the paradoxical moment between an acquired and thus historical taste and an injected
one. The desire to submerge oneself in the luxury of consumerism without the loss of
individual choice emerges as a constant if somewhat seductive struggle. ‘I go by Colette’s
all the time just to see what “l'air du temps” consists of, that way I can avoid it.’ (White
2001: 14)

Future Frontier
The Euro city appears and at times deliberately presents itself as oppositional to contemporary collusions because engagements in postmodern cultural trends must be inculcated gradually into its heavily striated structures, be they personal or cultural. By contrast, the new frontier city propagates risk, alterity and uncertainty because they are uncertain territories. In these urban environments the future is just as ambiguous and malleable as the past, therefore the new frontier city has less to lose from risks associated with speculation and commercialisation than the Euro city which has built its wealth and power on precedent codes and above all, on an unshakeable belief in its own historical worth. The cultural and political effects of radical or revolutionary change are written onto Euro cities in ways that cannot be translated to the new frontier. Change in the new frontier is continuous, it has no historically definable instigators, no justifications and no precedents. It is a position White and many other members of the European intelligentsia tend to view as remiss. By contrast other commentators are more accepting of the subtle differences between revolutionary and evolutionary processes. In David Malouf, Jane Tulip quotes the famous Australian author, and sometime Gold Coast resident, as saying:

I feel comfortable with the notion of an Australia as a place that is still being made. Things are changing all the time. I feel comfortable, as obviously some people don’t, with things that are not yet settled and things that are not yet determined and things that are going to go ways we haven’t predicted. (Tulip 1990: 1)

Global urban shifts and affects cannot be explored effectively, let alone predicted, if approached from positions that fear paradigmatic collapse. ‘To suppose that some sort of picturesque dream of a city based at third hand on Camillo Sitte’s explorations of central Europe at the end of the 19th Century is going to offer anything to such cities [Tokyo, Los Angeles] is pure fantasy’ (Sudjic 1992: 29-30).

It is not enough merely to identify Los Angeles and the Gold Coast as cities of surfaces. To do so is to reduce their potential, to read them only in opposition to what they are not and to overstate what is obvious. They become then convenient tools for the advocacy of dominant cultural paradigms which privilege traditional territories. Their difference is recognised only to the degree to which it can be exploited; allowing for the
retention of personal, profitable and/or political identifications with more ‘actual’ cities. If we subscribe to this position then what constitutes a city is no longer open to debate.

In the opening paragraph of *The Flanuer* Edmund White states, ‘Paris is a big city, in the sense that London and New York are big cities and that Rome is a village, Los Angeles a collection of villages and Zurich a backwater’ (White 2001: 1). He suggests that the characteristics that define a big city are numerous and curiously not always applicable. If a city is defined by its tall buildings, he muses, then Paris is noticeably deficient. But if a big city is recognised as a place where you can stay up all night, eat whatever you like, score heroin and swap your wife then Paris is par excellence. White suggests that Paris’s ‘role as a generator of ideas’ has contributed to its big city status since the 18th Century. ‘Small cities,’ he declares, ‘don’t set international standards in morality’ (White 2001: 3). And while these generalised markers of civic status could be applied to Paris or indeed any other large city as an exercise in municipal measurement, it is White’s personal journey into the ‘unknown’ parts of the city that reveals a different, less determined, and more contradictory picture. For every claim of Paris that White makes or explores, a converse suggestion can be drawn. Every declaration of liberty can be offset by a what he terms as a *peremptory* and *arrogant* justice (White 2001: 5). Every romanticised inclination of the city can be declared as fancy or lost. Paris, it seems, is no longer definable in its own historical terms. White shows us that cities are often misinterpreted by the sum of their projections; that writing and reading a city is not a fixed or predictable activity even when our notions of what constitutes it is. It follows that once we are inside the city, whether in the depths of its sedimented history or cruising along its surface, we are somewhere different to the general, dominant and given perceptions that tell us where we should be. You are never here.

In the global village even the smallest spaces and cities can define international standards in morality, albeit indirectly or momentarily. Take Kabul, Port Arthur, Sarajevo, Kuta, Baghdad or Washington – not places necessarily where the buildings are big and you can dance all night but certainly places where the ethics and morality of the human race have been played through or brought into question. Take Los Angeles, and you realise that technological power and the production of the world of images can be effortlessly generated in what White refers to as merely a *collection of villages*. In the 21st Century the city has complicated its position as a potent signifier of human relationship with time and
space for it is now an entity that can be accessed physically, imaginatively and technologically. Our confusions are thus expected, are representative of the tectonic cultural shifts and unique possibilities of disembodied interaction that technological advance allows. In the nowhere and everywhere space that hosts the rupture and collusion of the physical and virtual worlds, the flaneur and the voyeur have cohabitated. For some, it is an uneasy match.

When that occurs, it results in the reiteration of culture wars, the perpetuation of competitive exclusivity and of binary ordering which is counterproductive to more open and inclusive studies in spatiality and sociality. There is no future in constituting cities and their citizens as coming up shallow in cultural geography; in fuelling already futile debates that themselves result in spatial and social privileging. ‘I ask for a geography that acknowledges that the grounds of its knowledge are unstable, shifting, uncertain, and above all contested’. (Soja 1989: 106)

What is required is the recognition of difference, not opposition, in reactions, readings and writings that necessitate more than a glib eye and a cynical line; a way to read and a way to write the new frontier that does not ultimately seek to reduce its significance. This shift in intention will require, at the very least, an attempt to play on the surfaces, to examine the gaps, to fathom the action in the fissures when the surfaces and the essentialist definitions begin to slip.

The agenda for urban theory has always been set by the European experience. But it is a model which has less and less relevance even for the cities from which it was developed. (Sudjic 1992: 30)

**Case Study Two: Dogtown Skaters – You Make the City, I Make it My Own**

The new frontier experience is manifested intensely by skateboarders and surfers; their bodies at once static and thrust into a velocity powered by their own body weight on the board, a flat plane that glides over smooth surfaces. Both skateboarding and surfing are forms of recreation that gained ascendency in California and most particularly in the new frontier city of Los Angeles. The history of surfing is linked inextricably with the freedoms and counter-cultural movements of California in the 50s and 60s. The ideals of surfing culture and the new frontier city mirror each other. Open space and territory, both literally and ideologically, were paramount to the surf culture phenomenon. The
new frontier offered a freshness that ran counter to the dictatorial and aggressive urban narratives of the Euro model, suffering literally and symbolically in the aftermath of the Second World War. This freshness, combined with a growing resistance to the conflict in Vietnam, meant that the new frontier city and the lifestyles it offered were attractive to a country tired of Euro rhetoric.

In Los Angeles’ formative years boosterism was infused with notions of health, sunshine, serenity and salt water. The ocean, ‘perhaps principal among smooth spaces’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 387), was integral to the city’s image. Like many other new frontier cities its proximity to impressive natural formations replaced the need for historical foundation. Instead, the new frontier defined itself entirely by what it could see, and used the unmarked smooth territories of the desert and the ocean to define a position from which to speak.

The history of skateboarding is, like the city that bore it, largely enigmatic. It is infused with the same ambiguities because it evolved not out of official practice or endorsement but as an underground movement, an alternative form of both sport and lifestyle that the city of Los Angeles perhaps unwittingly encouraged. The 2002 release of the documentary film *Dogtown and Z Boys*, produced by famous Dogtown skater and promoter Stacey Peralta, goes some way to explaining skateboarding’s growth as a world wide phenomenon. Peralta examines the relationship between the Dogtown skaters and their city of Los Angeles.

There is a place where America’s manifest destiny collides into the Pacific Ocean. A place where the fabled Route 66, the roadway of American dreams, terminates. This is Dogtown. (Stecyk 2001)

The opening sequence of the documentary begins with a picture of the earth from space. The camera descends telescopically from the earths’ outer rim, to America, to the west coast and down into the streets of Dogtown, the coastal stretch between Venice Beach and Santa Monica California. It is a powerful statement about the locale and its impending impact. For though skateboarding had emerged briefly as a sport of choice for young Americans from the late 1950s, it crashed dramatically in 1965 as fads such as the hoola hoop and the yo-yo diverted the public’s attention. The invention of the urethane wheel, and the emergence of the Dogtown skaters into the public
consciousness through competitions and magazines such as Skateboarder, revived the sport and thrust it into the multi-billion dollar realm it occupies today. The Dogtown skaters captured the imaginations of young men and women all over the country because their style was markedly different to anything the public had seen associated with skateboarding previously. It was a style born out of their territory and their relationship with it. The Dogtown skaters defied the upright theatrics of early skateboarding champions and at the now renowned Del Mar Nationals in 1975, they emerged as ‘unconventional’ and ‘disorderly.’ Their style was infused with the L.A. street and while other skateboarders looked more like tottering ballerinas on their boards, the Dogtown skaters drove the style into the ground, cutting and sweeping their hands across the tarmac in homage to 1970s surfing heroes such as Larry Burtleman who had pioneered such moves on waves.

‘There was so much aggression. They were more like a street gang than a skate team’. (Stecyk 2001)

Los Angeles’ streets provided the means for the Dogtown skateboarders to reinterpret their environment. In the afternoons when the surf was blown out they rode the streets and hills of Dogtown and the asphalt banks that levelled out the hillside playgrounds in
their schools, constantly reinterpreting architectural intentions and redefining methods of usage. ‘These perfectly tapered waves of black asphalt would allow the virtual transmission of surfing water manoeuvres to concrete’ (Stecyk 2001). They lived everyday in the shadow of decay and failed entrepreneurial dreams. The economic fallout present in their neighbourhoods was manipulated to new ends.

Around the turn of the century visionary land developer Albert Kinney set out to create a European like community geared towards art, culture and amusement. Kinney’s’ dream would become Venice California replete with canals, gondolas and a full scale replica of the colonnaded square of its Italian inspiration… The party ended in the mid 60s. The beachfront expanse running from Venice through to Santa Monica had become rundown and seedy. Attendance at the once magnificent Pacific Ocean Park plummeted and in 1967 it closed and soon thereafter became a no man’s land: a place where pyromaniacs, junkies, artists and surfers would excel in symbiotic disharmony. (Stecyk 2001)

The Pacific Ocean Pier became the Dogtown Epicentre. ‘A dead wonderland’ filled with the clapped out carcasses of rollercoasters and rusted piers. The Dogtown crew would surf at a spot they tagged ‘The Cove,’ a tiny inlet between the point at Venice and the remains of the Pacific Ocean Pier, screaming through and around the decrepit columns of the crumbling structure on their boards, the risk of being impaled on rusted tracks or taken out by the debris of faded amusement directly contributing to the fearlessness and aggressive level of skill that infused their surfing and skating styles. The Dogtown skaters and surfers rigorously defended this territory as local, as theirs, and entry to it had to be earned. This process of branding and identification extended from the ocean, to the streets, to the boards and the skating paraphernalia produced by Zephyr shop co-founder Jeff Ho, whose designs defied and subverted the sunset style of surfing culture at the time and infused it with the hard core urbanity of the Dogtown environment. Gone were the pastels and beige tones and mass produced idyllic decorations. Ho’s boards were Dogtown signatured: identifiable by their street style graffiti, customised detail, vibrant psychedelic colours, and hard-hitting symbols and codes.

Skaters by their very nature are urban guerrillas. They make everyday use of the useless artefacts of the technological burden and employ the handiwork of the government/corporate structure in a thousand different ways the original architects could ever dream of. (Stecyk 2001)
The most telling example of this method of reterritorialisation is the Dogtown crew’s invasion of suburban swimming pools in Los Angeles. In the 1970s the city was gripped by the fiercest drought on record. Local Councils issued severe penalties for exorbitant water usage. As a consequence, many suburban pools dried up and remained unused. In an endless quest for rideable concrete the Dogtown skaters realised the potential of these pools for their own use. They would cruise through suburbs, standing on the roofs of cars looking for pools. They would take photographs of the suburban grid from hillsides and mark out the potential sites. Eventually, even a filled pool presented little contest, as the group equipped themselves with pumps and drainage hoses effectively able to drain a swimming pool in less than a few hours. They didn’t know the people that lived in these houses and they didn’t know the neighbours, they just skated the pools until the cops chased them out. The skaters posted lookouts at the front and back of houses and worked out effective escape routes, sometimes even coming back the next day to ride a pool they had already been busted in. The compacted and highly risky nature of the activity led to a frenzy of skating. They knew that the pool was only available to them for a short amount of time and the skate marathons that ensued eventually led to the birth of vert and extreme skating as the skaters pushed the limits of gravity and time to work the poolsides. ‘You gotta understand this is concrete warfare we’re talking about’ (Stecyk 2001).

At this point skateboarding ‘was coming from a whole new realm, no longer just derivative of surfing’ (Stecyk 2001). It is easy to see the correlations between what the Dogtown crew were intuitively attempting and what has become professional vert riding today.
'There were no precedents. They set the precedents every day when they went out and rode.' (Stecyk 2001)

Unable to conceive of ramps at the time, the Dogtown skaters just rode what they could find and in this way created an urban language that would inspire young skaters all over the world and ultimately lead to the creation of skateparks and ramps across the globe.

The Dogtown adventures were captured from the outset by photojournalist Craig Stecyk. When the resurrected *Skateboarder* magazine commissioned him in 1975 to do a series on the Z Boys, a wave of skateboarding mania ensued. *Skateboarder* became the biggest selling magazine in 1978 for the Southland Corporation as kids in Ohio, Germany, Australia, Britain and Japan saw the images of the Dogtown urban rhetoric and wanted a piece of it.

The photos really translated the velocity of the way the Z Boys were living. They said way more than here's a guy on a skateboard. They showed a lifestyle, they showed an attitude and they showed a code. (Stecyk 2001)

The skateboarding lifestyle exemplified by the Z Boys was embedded with a new frontier urban narrative. It was, and still is, the city of Los Angeles that informs the style, image and attitude of its participants. Today the territorial identification of street cultures in Los Angeles has shifted from the edges of Venice Beach and Santa Monica to the suburban tracts of the nodally developed Orange County – a city within a city – a mythologised, constructed and intensified version of new frontier experience. The OC is the contemporary locus of Californian ‘punk’ industries. The relatively affluent skateboarders in Orange County still dress, speak, act, move and skate with an attitude that is derivative of Dowgton street culture and skaters. It is a consumption that is often criticised as naïve and appropriative, especially since it is now projected and imitated worldwide. What such conclusions miss is the notion that adaptations are part of the rhetoric and have been from the beginning: ‘it was lowbrow and wild and screw you’ (Stecyk 2001).

Skateboarding is a street culture and therefore engages with the dominant contemporary street cultures of Californian punk music, hip hop and gangster rap. A globalisation of a local language is then transferred to the individual territory. And though the
commercialisation and corporatisation of the sport has long been criticised, even by some of those on the inside, the actual practice of skateboarding is still subversive and in most countries, illegal in public places.

The sound and flash of a gang of skateboarders ripping through local streets remains a nonconformist spectacle. It is their speed and flight through the pathways, roads, boulevards, malls and sidewalks that forms the principal and characteristic free spirited moment, a moment of abandon and ownership that disturbs assumed usages of urban spaces.

Skateboarders are part of a nomad war machine, re-territorialising and de-territorialising the public, corporate and private environments of their cities and towns for the purposes of sheer play. ‘Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential but it was the minds of eleven year olds that could see that potential’ (Stecyk 2001).

The urban formations, natural environments and lifestyles of new frontier cities encourage a relationship of interpretation with their citizens. Nothing is a foregone conclusion. Everything is moveable, changeable, interpretable. The long lines, the concrete, the surfaces are playable. What detractors of the formations of these cities don’t see is how the city looks at sixty kilometres per hour crouching on your board or balancing at high speed on the balls of your feet; what it looks like upside down, one wheel of your board hanging off the edge of the coping; how the super malls, endless streets, stairways, and public enclaves transform in your head to territories of possibility as you superimpose your own flight up or across them. Ultimately, urban experiences in the new frontier are interpretable and require shifts of expectation, interpretation and usage.

Appropriation or Methods of Reinterpretation?

Commerce seeks to dominate the personal by manipulating the complex and competitive process of decision making that surrounds it, but sale often precedes the forces driven from the inside of a culture, that is, the emanations of the personal, because capitalism appropriates localised or micro level desire more than it creates it. For though commercial systems are capable of inventing desire where there is none, it could be
argued that the next big thing is usually just the rapid catapulting of an idea or invention into the commercial market that has conceptual allegiances to pre-existing localised purposes or acts. The phenomenal rise of Los Angeles-derivative skateboarding is a definitive example of how something occurring in the local, in the microenvironment, can suddenly find itself part of an international commercial exchange. And yet, for contemporary skateboarders who engage with the sport all over the world, the act retains its subversive significance. While some critics argue against this kind of commercialisation as leading to blanket forms of appropriation, in many cases it doesn’t, because the commercial activity of skateboarding occurs in protected, legislated and therefore striated spaces of the state apparatus, in a completely converse territory to the act itself. As the Dogtown skaters so effectively demonstrated, their engagement of space operates adjacent to official usage. The world may be becoming increasingly ‘smooth’ in its methods of production and communication as a means of reimpacting ‘smooth in the wake of the striated’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 387) but there can be, according to Deleuze and Guattari, no such thing as a totally striated or totally smooth space. The mechanisms and laws of the state continually fail to control the flows, speeds, movements and velocities of the skateboarder in flight. Attempts are then made to striate/commercialise/control and reduce it from within, to turn it into an industry in order to potentially neutralise its dissidence. Thus the exchange of penetrations continues.

It is true that this new nomadism accompanies a worldwide war machine whose organization exceeds the state apparatuses and passes into energy, military-industrial and multi-national complexes. We say this as a reminder that smooth and the form of exteriority do not have an irresistible revolutionary calling but change meaning drastically depending on the interactions they are a part of and the concrete conditions of their exercise or establishment (for example, the way in which total war and popular war, and even guerrilla warfare, borrow one another’s methods). (Deleuze and Guatarri 1987: 387)

Thus wherever there is localised intensity or difference, ruptures will spread. In the case of the Dogtown skaters, while skateboarding products proliferate, the act of skating retains its *concrete*, street level of localised reality. The same is true of the Gold Coast’s consumption of Californian representations, products, architecture and celluloid culture. From a macro perspective this absorption may be seen to be symptomatic of an urban society unable to articulate its place and status in the world, and yet, the Gold Coast has
emerged as one of Australia’s most distinctive cities. It continues to produce innovative mechanisms and structures of its own which continue to defy dominant paradigms. Its citizens are engaged in typically Australian pursuits as much as they are in the construction and participation of simulated experience, and they manage to do it all, for the most part, without a totally fragmented sense of self or an American accent.

The clichéd portrayals of Los Angeles as the home to armies of cheerful amnesiacs absorbed in endless projects of self improvement, smiling their gooney smiles and murmuring “for sure” and “have a nice day” and “real good” at the slightest provocation, utterly miss the point of how radical L.A.’s premise was from the beginning. Had Americans always wanted to emancipate themselves from the past? Very well. Here at last was a place where it would actually be possible to do so. The first condition of paradise, the Spanish writer Julian Marias once wrote, is to find a place where there is “space to spare and where history is scarce”. (Rieff 1992: 50)

It is important to recognise that while the effects of globalisation are occurring for all cultures, the Gold Coast’s consumption of Californian models is concentrated visually and finds its most prominent effects in the built environment, in commerce and technology, and is yet to affect personal or spiritual identification of its citizens as profoundly or directly as it has done in urban forms and capitalist products. The arena of the personal act and the commercial instigation of that act are separate terrains. The Gold Coast is perhaps Australia’s most prominent example of Americanisation, or more particularly Californication, but there is little evidence to support an idea that fascination with American celluloid images and commercial concepts has led to an increase in direct, personal or spiritual allegiances to Hollywood or America. While the political effects of American dominance and intervention have serious implications for many cultures, a similar eradication of autonomy does not necessarily occur at the micro level. Private identifications cannot be erased altogether because these are determined and present in the locale, and in this context people will continue to tell their own stories despite, or perhaps even because of, the simultaneous consumption and regurgitation of other stories.

Cities like Los Angeles and the Gold Coast are consistently read and written through an ideology that does not apply to them in order to re-entrench notions of cultural dominance or allegiance. Los Angeles is not New York and never will be. Its history, urban and social development have, since its conception, been markedly different. But
instead of attempting to meet Los Angeles on its own terms, to accept this difference, its existence is too often denied, written off as an aberration, a mistake – reiterating the misapprehension that unless cities look, feel, act and smell like Euro cities they are not cities at all.

In September 2001 The Australian newspaper published another facile feature article on the Gold Coast titled “Feminism Gold Coast Style and Other Tales from Australia’s Weirdest City”. This kind of glossy, high on colour, low on content journalism about the Gold Coast surfaces in the Australian national media on a regular basis. A supercilious tone underscores the argument and negates any serious attempt to investigate the city. Any interest that arises from its difference is nullified. Inherent in most representations of the Gold Coast is a refusal to validate it on the national stage, despite its successes, or indeed because of them.

City? For some reason, it still seems hard for out of towners to accept that the Gold Coast is anything more than a tourist strip – a neon vision of perfect beaches, bad 1960s architecture and white shoes. An overgrown Porpoise Spit. A place to swoop in and out of, but not to nest. But while Australia has been looking in the other direction the Gold Coast has crept up on us. Fifty years ago it was just a strip of sand with a few houses scattered along the shore. Now it has 420,000 permanent residents, dwarfing Canberra, Darwin and Hobart and rapidly closing in on its only non-capital competitor, Newcastle. The Gold Coast’s population is expected to pass the erstwhile steel city’s population of 470,000 by the end of the decade. More ominously the Gold Coast has also become what demographer Bernard Salt suggests is a vision of our future. (Stewart 2001: 23)

More ominously? It seems the Australian national media are finding the current manifestations of the Gold Coast difficult to grasp. This kind of journalism relies heavily on convenient but largely obsolete clichés – the metre maids, the white shoe brigade, God’s waiting room, the white pants suits and the gold jewellery – in a desperate attempt to resist change that could affect the power balance of Australian cultural production now centred largely on the Euro cities of Melbourne and Sydney. The latter, despite late 20th Century movements towards Pacific Rim/Asia Pacific economies and relationships, retains a power base and a series of historical moments that have produced undeniably hierarchical and Eurocentric structures. The effects of the Gold Coast’s national image censure, however, are beginning to wane, if reluctantly, as the success of the city continues unabated. Therefore, while recognition of the city’s success is increasingly
acknowledged the idea that a new frontier city such as the Gold Coast might prove to be an indicator for an urban future horrifies those who fear the sedition of a tall and ostentatious poppy.

Something’s wrong in Paradise. We’re on Queensland’s Gold Coast, place of endless amounts of new money, in the national heart of theme-park culture, and there’s a long, low beige building in front of us, just down the road from Seaworld, with a sign out front that declares this place to be Palazzo Versace… If you do happen to be a famous Italian fashion house intent upon opening a luxury hotel why on earth would you pick Australia’s Gold Coast? (Harari 2001: 32)

Why would Versace undertake a venture of this size on the Gold Coast? Because clearly it typifies the movement, the type of new frontier risks the fashion house is itself taking. The dispersal of commercial endeavour, the blurring of boundaries, the notion of fashion becoming hotel, becoming cushions, becoming plates, becoming food is the kind of contemporary contagion the new frontier city sells and sells well. ‘Cultural practices emerge, in part, from appropriating and domesticating the once bold and threatening’ (Tofts 1999: 9).

Illustration 26: Palazzo Versace, Main Beach, Gold Coast
SECTION THREE: New Frontier Affects

CHAPTER FIVE: Cinema and Celluloid Mimicry

There has developed a way of seeing and ‘knowing’ a thing without contact, experience, or responsibility. Being in the dark and watching the light; being granted the privilege of voyeurism, but having to recognise the impotence and even the absence that go with its advantage; being there and yet having no presence… Millions abide by this alienation; many are filled with hope, happiness (and the hope of greater happiness, the American pursuit) because of it. Only a few… act out the wonder and terror it affords… yet most of us have a buried understanding of the dislocation and its urge to be on the public screen. (Thompson 1994: 326-7)
The new urban frontier has arrived as a symptom of our fascination with copy, with pretence; it has arrived with television, with film, with the Internet, cable, satellite, the microchip, the sim-card and digitisation – all modes of communication that deal in the transfer of replications. It has also arrived with unprecedented, rapid and unique forms of transport and mobilisation. These are cities whose growth tracks with the touring car, the freeway, the 747, the Concorde, the space shuttle, FA18 fighter jets and the virtual reality suit. The human body and its words, actions and emotions have never been propelled further or faster.

One 20th Century product that traverses all cities and their modes of delivery in the global economy is the celebrity – at once real and imagined, a subject and an object, a black hole and a white wall.

The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of; it constitutes the wall of the signifier, the frame or screen. The face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness or passion, the camera, the third eye. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 168)

New frontier cities are similarly fashioned, they do not evolve over time but attempt on all fronts to defy it. Their primary function is not the construction of physical realities but the rapid delivery of ideas, images, reflections and masks. Not surprisingly then, cities like Los Angeles, the Gold Coast, Miami and Las Vegas are not only enamoured with the star but synonymous with the frivolity and froth of their production; because what works for the star works for the city. A symbiotic process of celluloid mimicry coexists between the star and the new frontier in cities such as Los Angeles, where time can be manufactured and manipulated to the extent that recognition of difference between reality and a constructed moment are obscure. Reality or ‘real time’ is rendered largely irrelevant and the star emerges as the new frontier’s most inestimable vehicle.

I can tell you exactly when the celebrity age was born – the mid 1950s. There had been famous people before then. There had been stars before, but never like this. Celebrity was created by a thing. The camera. The single lens reflex camera. It turned fame into celebrity. (Gill 2003: 6)

Film itself is an imitation, a screen, a wall, a dream and a fascination, but the bodies that travel across it are both products and people. Virtual, digital and physical. They are
remembered and revered often times more than the merchandise and products which fashion them. These celebrities are both there and not there, are multiple, and are simultaneously ‘live’ in a proliferation of spaces. They are heroes, diversions, abstractions, commodities, fantasies and replicated gods; ultimately their mediated transmission allows them a unique form in which to transcend life, reality and corporeality. An ‘honorific style’ of imagery conjures an imaginary but potent world. ‘Celebrity doesn’t exist in a world where the physical laws of mortality pertain…this is the first time in history that the living have been able to see the dead’ (Gill 2003: 7).

In *Volatile Bodies* Elizabeth Grosz discusses, with reference to Freud, the ‘Ego as Corporeal Projection’ (Grosz 1994: 31). She suggests that identity is an acquisatory process and that the formation of a sense of unified self requires ‘heterogeneous sensations [and] experiences’:

> If the subject were merely a perceiving and experiencing being…then there would be no way of unifying the subject’s experiences as the experiences of a single being, no way of asserting some kind of propriety over those experiences, no way of taking responsibility for them. The subject would simply be an aggregate of otherwise disconnected perceptual events… (Grosz 1994: 31)

When the identity of a celebrity is constructed for popular consumption a reverse of Grosz’s process of acquisition begins to occur. Eliminating interference, rather than making the self in question amenable and perceptive to it, constructs the identity. Because the celebrity self is becoming fragmented and multiple in a mediated arena, its body and perceptive faculties are shielded, protected and controlled in order to guarantee the commercial success of the construction. In this way the celebrity undergoes a type of reversed development where the adult self gives way to a childlike rendering. ‘All that exists for the neonate is a whirring, ever changing flux of experiences, which are not yet recognised in terms of patterns, groupings, identities and objects’ (Grosz 1994: 31).

Celebrity status always implies a split between a private self and a public self…the split between the I (the ‘veridical’ self) and the Me (the self as seen by others)… The public representation of the self is always a staged activity, in which the human actor presents a ‘front’ or ‘face’ to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve. For the celebrity the split between the I and the Me is often disturbing…celebrities frequently complain of identity confusion and the colonisation of the veridical self by the public face…contrarily, the veridical self may make
increasingly desperate attempts to overcome the tyranny of the public face. This may result in the pathological slippage between the I and the Me. (Rojek 2001: 11)

The celebrity is always someone other, another face, another body, another role. The cult of celebrity worship arises out of our curiosity, our desire to watch these transformations occurring, to see something other than and outside of our own vision. This has always been the desire of art, to trigger multiple perspectives, to transgress momentarily our spatial and self-awareness. It is also a desire that effectively manifests itself in the urban formations of the new frontier. Celebrities transgress continuously because they are alive in the culture in a multitude of ways not previously possible and we continue to invent them, even when, increasingly, they possess no definable purpose. In this way celebrities are personifications of ideals, the most esteemed and unofficial religion of the last century; a postmodern faith which the new frontier city practises fervently, expressing its adoration not only via the globalised and mediated forms of celebrity adoration, escapism and obsession, but in the relatively traditional frameworks of religious worship – architecture, art and civility – which it recombines with a celebrity-infused amoral aesthetic. In Los Angeles the billboard replaces the cathedral spire.

Impossible is Temporary.
(Billboard, Los Angeles, 2004)

Like a celebrity, the new frontier city plays many roles. It assumes the postures and intonations of its many parts. The city’s real face is not secret but infused by its transformations. It is thus many things simultaneously. Like the best actors, it shifts genres, possessing a versatile repertoire. Therefore the city’s make-up, costumes and architectural gestures shift perspective dramatically and without warning. From Gothic, to Greco-Roman, to Spanish and Moroccan, to Art Nouveau, modernist and on to science fiction, its façades are in a constant state of flux. The city does not adhere to type. It can re-invent anything – a building, a lifestyle, a celebrity or a tired idea.

Los Angeles did not just happen or arise like so many other American cities out of existing circumstances… Los Angeles envisioned itself, then externalised that vision through sheer force of will, springing from a Platonic conception of itself, the Great Gatsby of American cities. (Reiff 1992: 42)
Every city resembles the products and procedures it sells. The Euro city trades in time and its keeping. It makes money along the straight lines of tradition. It is layered and penetrated with the antique, time embedded not just in its surface but also in its core. It is a _grande dame_ whose position is predetermined rather than acquired. Experienced, private, learned and formidable. By contrast the new frontier city is received more like an impostor: a cheeky pretender who imitates the _grande dame_ and steals symbols. It has no history to speak of, only a fabricated series of beginnings, middles and ends, an inconclusive reputation and a bank account full of new money and one hit wonders. It is therefore constantly positioned on a knife edge between legitimacy and achievement. Like the ‘attributed celebrity’ (Rojek 2001: 18), the new frontier city is constantly under pressure from mass media scrutiny; the desire to unveil the ‘hidden truth’ about a seamless surface is seen as a necessary comeback to its sensationalism.

The culture of time is a state of being in the Euro city, you are asked questions about your family, your school, your history. On the new frontier you are asked nothing. You are not expected to speak. You are expected to appear; appear to have or have not. The impression is that no-one cares about your family, no-one cares about your school but they do care about how you appear. They want a performance. The city demands it.

Don’t tell them the champagne is your only liquid asset.
(Billboard, Los Angeles, 1999)

Celebrities are omnipresent in all forms of contemporary media and ultimately drive it. At any one time a star is present on the silver screen in India, live on a talk show in America, pictured in different tabloid magazines across the globe, profiled in hundreds of newspapers, stuck into scrapbooks by teenagers, downloaded from the internet, and punched onto stickers and other trinket merchandise in Mexico and China. This publicity machine continues while the multiple manifestations of his or her actual work resurface continuously as millions of people watch video, film, DVD, CD Rom, Cable/Satellite TV and streaming media. But still the saturation is not enough. What completes celebrity obsession is the production and construction of his or her ‘private life’, or as I will refer to it here, ‘public downtime’.

Public downtime is the third level of non-reality surrounding celebrity and most particularly the actor. The actor’s work creates the first layer via the production of the
film or product. The celebrity reveals the second, the manufactured personality, through public appearance. And the media invents the third, resulting in public downtime. All three are reliant on mass media delivery and scrutiny. The world follows these lines of light, addicted to the production of scandal that takes them further into the third layer, an addictive effort to zoom in, to hone in on what they feel might be an inherent or concealed truth. It may be resentment of celebrities’ ability to live simultaneously that fuels the desire to see the construction fail.

Media exposés and personality features are either authorised or unauthorised, and depending on which version is operating, are either meant to enhance profile or provide the consumer with titillating entry into someone else’s supposed ‘reality.’ (A process that ultimately also increases profile but for reasons that are not necessarily coveted.) While this is occurring, what celebrities are ‘actually’ doing is irrelevant. Even when s/he is sleeping the disembodied machine continues, fuelling obsession with the light celebrities reflect by fictionalising evidence: manipulation of photographs, footage, information from existent or non-existent sources, official statements and rumour become tabloid gospel. The life presented here is not private even though it seems to be. Instead it is actually a shared zone of proximity operating between the star, the media and the public.

‘We were like dragonflies. We seemed to be suspended effortlessly in the air, but in reality, our wings were beating very, very fast…’ (Anger 1975: 207)

Scandal acts as an unpacking of the object, a mechanism brought into play because it has the effect of re-entrenching reality, of making the star human again, just like everyone else. It reduces the celebrity’s power to operate as a line of flight. It reels him or her back in and tells us that the celebrity in question lies, cheats, steals, betrays, falters and succumbs. Suddenly the things celebrities pretend to be are not the same as the people they are, as if this was never a given. The public wants to know that celebrities are real while they continue to believe they are not: fame, the strongest currency of our times. It is a process of construction and deconstruction that also dramatically affects perceptions of new frontier cities. Los Angles suffers just as much from tabloid description as the actors it produces. The city and the territory are indiscernible as ‘perfect’ popular products to be consumed and then undone.
…one can easily live a lifetime here as a tourist, see mostly what the smoke sends, by way of promotion, never visit what is left out, except by way of crime movies. That is why L.A. begins to resemble a nether world. When Kathryn Bigelow, the director of Strange Days (1995) was asked why Los Angeles made an ideal setting for apocalyptic movies, she answered: “Perhaps because there is so little history here”. “It’s not a city,” she added. “There is no centre.” And no identity except a “poly-identity” suitable for “whatever you project onto it, a faceless place…blurred into one”. Among noir filmmakers, it is almost a credo to talk about L.A. like a bus driver giving a guided tour through a parking lot. (Klein 1997: 86)

In the early days of the Hollywood machine it may have been possible to end a career by denouncing or exposing a celebrity. The tenuous hold stars had on their fame is effectively demonstrated by Kenneth Anger in Hollywood Babylon as he describes with pitying detail the rise and fall of many a Hollywood luminary. Today the media machine is simply too big and therefore also too penetrable and manipulable to sustain that kind of effect. Damage control for the star is possible; reversals, counter manipulations and reinventions happen faster than aftershocks. Celebrities such as Woody Allen, Hugh Grant, Melanie Griffiths, Jason Donovan, Michael Jackson, Winona Ryder, Matthew Perry, Robert Downey Jnr, Bill Clinton and Julia Roberts have all managed, with the help of their own savvy public relations machines, to turn around fallout from associations with drug use and addiction, incest, stealing, prostitution, infidelity or anti-social behaviour, circumstances that previously would have equated to fatal career and social fallout. ‘Bill Clinton’s relationship with the American public similarly confounded the world’s press; the more he was hounded, the more voters said: He’s an OK prez, we like him, what he does with Slick Willy is his business’ (Simmonds 2004: 11).

In the 21st Century it is also possible, as Paris Hilton has so effectively illustrated, not only to be famous for having no talent but to remain coveted due to the public distribution of a scandalous product – in her case the on-line proliferation of black market porn in which she is rumoured to feature. These traversals and transmutations all relate to the diversification of moral codes: another by-product of the communication flood present in the postmodern. Everything is forgivable. Anything can be rearranged. Memory fades. And the space between the brink and the Promised Land? Just a ten second bite, just a push of a tiny button. It is a process of spin doctoring the new frontier city applauds and appreciates. Reinvention is not just a diversionary tactic but a way of navigating negativity, fallout, disaster and in some cases even death. As Davis suggests in
City of Quartz, this can have white-washing effects, producing a culture that erases rather than recognises the causes of social and economic disorder. But these chameleonic environments can also produce a kind of dynamism where words and motivations like pretence and manipulation can be redefined as constructive processes of re-creation.

New frontier cities have erupted in a fast tracked world. They have contributed to the acceleration of technological processes, been undoubtedly titillated by the mediated machine, and constructed themselves in times where major shifts in morality, socio-economics and technological development continue unabated. Traditional notions of discovery and exploration have been substituted by movements towards innovation and advancement; colonisation has morphed into totemic simulation and royalty has been questioned and redistributed. In part, new frontier cities have designed and transmitted a willingness to question and reconfigure permanence; a position that is surely as exciting as it is risky.
If celebrity society possesses strong tendencies to make us covet celebrities, and to construct ourselves into objects that immediately arouse sentiments of desire and approval in others, it also creates many more losers than winners. (Rojek 2001: 15)
The power of the screen is that the viewers watch time unpacking; they watch as if they are simultaneously inside the artifice and seeking to leap outside of themselves. The screen is the invisible curtain between subjectivity and the world held taut by the control of the camera. They want to believe the camera: to bypass their own eyes, to see a different perspective, a different world. ‘We are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual but in hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual’. (Baudrillard 1995: 27)

It is the compacted ‘realism’ or hyperrealism of Reality TV that seduces; the suspension of disbelief becomes easier with total effect. Viewers believe for the moment that what is happening is occurring to someone else but they too can feel it. They want to undergo every moment, to be every other person outside of their own codes. This is the drive that is taking humans to increasing levels of virtual, simulated, consumable experience. They want access – however diluted, simulated or commodified – to everything the ‘other’ has, everything that is otherwise impossible or denied them. Another century, another country, another space-time – new frontier cities both produce and deliver on these desires powerfully. The provision of such cultural experiences is highly contested. For many analysts, such as Virilio, Baudrillard, Jameson, Symes et al, the mediated environment constitutes a homogenisation of desire and culture; a screen through which reality, history and the ‘truth’ are distorted and dangerously commodified. ‘We prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror, to the catastrophe of the real’ (Baudrillard 1995: 28). The cross-cultural validity of these concerns is clearly demonstrable and has been expressed by these theorists with considerable effect, however, it could be said that such criticisms concentrate, wherever they are positioned, on the larger gestures of the global media machine. To a certain extent they thus assume a series of generalised effects that may in specific and localised circumstances be less ‘universally’ definable.

It is extremely tempting to read these programmes as a sign of our submersion in the process of media globalisation. I shall therefore…outline a method of reinterpreting reality television that evokes rather than erases discrete cultural identities. I believe this is necessary in order to not only broaden our comprehension of the evolution of television per se, but to bring it back to a level at which our subjectivity is not denied but stimulated by products that can be simultaneously global and “local”. (Venzo 2002: HREF4)
The rise of Reality TV has resulted, in part, from fascination with postmodern manifestations of consumer culture. Most particularly, the omniscience of celebrity obsession has intensified the popular desire to be noticed and to be watched. Reality TV provides the general public with access to the apparently smooth space of the media. Undoubtedly Reality TV is a generic, manufactured, franchised and heavily mediated commodity, but as Paul Venzo suggests in ‘Think Global Watch Local’, localized production of these concepts can lead to micro level comprehension that resists the heterogeneity of global paradigms. He refers to the Australian *Big Brother* household in 2002 as a, ‘collection of characters [that] invoked narratives of city versus country, conservative versus open-minded and ethnic versus Anglo Saxon that are not uncommon themes explored in the national consciousness’ (Venzo 2002: 4). Recognizing the highly selective nature of this representation he refers to the ‘top heavy’ white Anglo-Saxon straight males in the 2002 series as a further reflection of the nation’s dominant culture and the tensions that arise from interactions with it. Conversely, Venzo suggests that unproduced ‘moments of incongruity’ or ‘drop out’ in the Australian *Big Brother* series enabled the transmission of relatively ‘marginal discourses’, the development of alternative and micro forms of language by participants within the house, and resistance to authority, structure and a predilection for mutiny that encouraged rather than eliminated subjective and politicised identifications (Venzo 2002: 4).

The political immediacy that reality television offers is this: wider cultural concerns and morality are compressed into the limited time and space of life as tele-drama, where the possibility of being voted off or in, makes political demands on individuals that the vagueness of society at large cannot. Political immediacy is about survival, competition and interaction on a personal, rather than global level. (Venzo 2002: 4)

Viewer involvement in competitive Reality TV programs attributes direct power over the destiny of players to the consumer. More passive involvements, which encourage and hinge on the public downtime spectacle, are best exemplified by *The Osbournes* where 70’s rock star Ozzy Osbourne morphs into a kind of crazed and dysfunctional Mr Brady. A reversal of consumer identification occurs here because the locus of the program, Ozzy Osbourne, is already famous. Instead of attributing fame, this Reality TV program hinges on the attempted normalisation and domestication of a man renowned, among other things, for biting off the heads of live chickens (albeit that this is myth). Therefore, the
high parody of the show’s context results in an understanding, from the pseudo Jetsons opening credits, that the ‘commodification of this family is no secret’ (Venzo 2002: HREF4). In The Osbournes there is no delay between the presentation of the private life that is not private (the public downtime) and the consumption of it. And this collapse of privacy results in a domino effect of product pushing, a cross-marketing orgy in the third space of the media machine where fame is the currency: Ozzy the rock star, becoming father, becoming father of a daughter becoming rock star. And so on. These may be the reasons why the public watches it, and buys the albums, the concert tickets, and the remastered and re-released CDs, but they are not the reasons why they love it. They love it because despite the commodification that bluntly underpins the narrative (self-confessed by his wife and touted by the children) Ozzy seems subconsciously to subvert such cultural and material preoccupations by constantly referring to his family and the strange world around him as ‘fuckin’ mad’.

…the appeal of The Osbournes may rest in the discrepancy between the fiction of a hardcore metal icon and the ‘reality’ of a middle class pom lushing out in LA…underpants and beer gut…bewildered by technology and the riches that surround him… Perhaps it is easier to identify with a flabby Englishman taking out his garbage in Beverley Hills; in his anomalous appearance we can recognise our own marginal spectatorship of the culture in which he resides. It is precisely at this point that we begin to consume this media product as something other than exclusively global. (Venzo 2002: HREF4)

In the Australian version of the franchised Big Brother series, the television viewer only has access to a significantly condensed version of the events. A total of 17 minutes of live action out of a possible 24 hours has been cut, coupled, hyped and placed in relation to commentary and theming to encourage a certain kind of response, designed to keep audiences watching. Therefore, the editing continually creates but does not satiate desire. Then there is the late night Big Brother edition in which television audiences are invited to watch the participants sleeping. This is a deliberate attempt to counter the manufactured nature of the prime time segments but the selected late night hour of broadcast is obviously understood to be palatable only to the most dedicated of fans. Big Brother devotees can also have text messages sent to their mobile phones for regular updates of action in the house and log on on-line to watch the broadcast uninterrupted. However, the attention span required for lengthy on-line viewing, and the non-visual condensation of the text message, are incomparable to the comfort and ‘communal’ spectacle
experience of watching via television. In this context the shared, relatively condensed knowledge, and the ability to converse about it with other consumers, is more important than knowing everything. The live televised shows are not only an engagement with spectacle but also an engagement with a collective of fans all experiencing and interpreting the same footage. Therefore, despite the supposed increased reality and immediacy of un-cut accessibility, *Big Brother* viewers still prefer the condensed, dramatic and hyperbolic mode of the nightly compacted ‘live show’ time-frame in which they are assured that other people are participating. The religion of celebrity, whatever its form, requires the ‘communal’ and social event as much as it requires the commercial product.

The absolute surveillance that characterises life in the Big Brother house feeds an increasing taste for voyeurism but also places the viewing public in what they perceive to be a powerful position. By convincing the viewers that they are in control, in the cockpit as it were, the producers of *Big Brother* tap into the popular desire to manufacture and fuel celebrity. The false sense of power and ownership overrides any anxiety or awareness in the viewers that it is they who are being controlled by becoming hooked on the experience. Technology, then, has created the will to watch, the means to deliver it and the means to the erase recognition of addiction to it. When asked by *Vogue* magazine about his love of Hollywood, celebrity photographer Mario Testino responded: ‘You know, sometimes I’m watching TV in my room at the Chateau Marmont and I reach for my camera because I think it’s real life’ (Picardi 2000: 124).

While Reality TV has developed as a logical progression of the simulacra present in postmodern urban formations, its success hinges on the fantasies that arise out of contemporary urban concepts and realities, and subsequently these manifest in different ways. The shows are hyperreal extensions of domesticity and urban interaction, or flights away from everyday experiences. What constitutes day-to-day living, however, is individually variable, it changes when one crosses lines of cultural demarcation, be they driveways, streets, borders or nations, so it follows that interpretations of Reality TV programming will also be variable and nuanced. Thus, while the popularity and acceptance of Reality TV is partly attributable to the unprecedented dominance of the international media interface in contemporary life, it also relies on localised frameworks of urban and social expression.
Despite the global qualities—aesthetics, narrative similarities and the capacity for multi-platforming, these programmes when produced and consumed in Australia, often produce specific images, characters and references that deny, rather than invoke, the dominant popular discourses and institutions that spawned them. (Venzo 2002: HREF4)

*Big Brother* on the Gold Coast pushed such levels of Reality TV extremity even further. In *Big Brother – Why Did that Reality TV Show Become such a Phenomenon?* Toni Johnson-Woods outlines two significant departures undertaken by the Australian *Big Brother* consortium. The first and most significant was to turn the *Big Brother* house into a public attraction by placing it in one of the Gold Coast’s most famous theme parks, Dreamworld. This was the first *Big Brother* house in the world that the general public would have access to. The house became a space, not just an interface; a site where collective consumer spectacle was virtually *and* physically interactive.

After the show started people could walk around the auditorium, watch the live feeds on large screens, wander around the stage, peek into the uncut room and look over the shoulders of staff in the editing suites. They could even snoop through the house, between the second and third series the house was opened to the public. (Johnson-Woods 2002: 44)

The inclusion of a live television audience on eviction nights in the *Big Brother* auditorium at Dreamworld was also a world first and their enormous popularity reflected the inspired and shrewd marketing potential of the site option.

Generally a home is a private not a public space. Homes are not located within theme parks. The theme park location for *Big Brother* reflects a number of subtler issues… The fact that it was a Dreamworld attraction underscored the irony of the *Big Brother* house… It collapsed private and public space and conversely projected a private space into a public arena. (Johnson-Woods 2002: 79)

*Big Brother* could have been shot in any location in Australia. The fact that the producers elected to run with a theme park location on the Gold Coast reflected the city’s compatible reputation. *Big Brother* wasn’t hiding out in the corporate-government world as George Orwell had so famously suggested; it was entirely appropriate that by the close of the 20th Century he had absconded to a bunker in a new frontier city fun park.

Just as Los Angeles’ popular reputation is driven by Hollywood and Disneyland imaginaries, the Gold Coast’s dominant recognitive force is infused with the images of
fun and fantasy it conveys to the tourist market. *Big Brother*’s chief demographic, the 16 to 29 year old market, had grown up knowing that the Gold Coast was a place of other worlds: Dreamworld, Sea World, Movie World and Frozenworld had signified and delivered on childhood fantasies for that generation. Now Big Brother had arrived on the Gold Coast to render those fantasies ‘real’. When they saw Big Brother’s eyes looming large on roadside billboards all over the country, the notion that he was coming at them from the city of white lies worked because it just seemed logical. Here was a city that had always encouraged the enactment of imagineered fantasy. To children on holiday it was a wonderland of water and cartoons, of dolphins and boogy boards and life size candy canes. It transformed as they got older into a different kind of playground, of buck’s nights and hen’s nights, strip clubs, dirty weekends and glamorised sex. The Gold Coast has always been a city where voyeurism can be reconfigured as a guilt free, even wholesome, pleasure.

Enchantment with personal projection, symptomatic of our times, manifests itself most strongly in the new frontier city. These are cities that rely on disengaged expressions and false representations, in order to produce growth. The city advertises itself; its streets stretch, its buildings open out and reflect. Therefore it encourages a receptive but also adaptive response from its citizens. Moving in an open-ended and factitious space, Gold Coast residents can be at once filled with inertia, the inevitability of change and the pressure to be seen, and heard. Just like the captive inertia of *Big Brother* participants, they can engage if they choose to do so in extreme modes of self-expression while remaining relatively settled in a place that refuses to be still. People are encouraged on the Gold Coast to fabricate, to make up stories about themselves, their city and their fantasies, because they can, because the city is defined by transience. Even those who are living out their lives in the suburbs, in much the same ways that Australians in the rest of the country do, are likely to have come very recently from somewhere else and so are their neighbours. Chances are their homes and their suburb are new. More new residents arrive on the Gold Coast every year than in any other Australian city, not to mention the annual tourist influx which can significantly increase the population – in 2003-4 the Gold Coast received over 10,607,000 visitors (Gold Coast City Council 2003: HREF8). This is a city that is characterised by growth but also by arrivals and departures; by impermanence; by ebbs and flows and peak seasons. This transience and its associated personal/personality-driven myth creation means that new frontier cities invite the
extraordinary conversion of histories, ideas, people and products at all levels – from subtle shifts to extreme engagements.
CHAPTER SEVEN: The Architecture of Anxiety

The psychiatrist I see during the four weeks that I’m back is young and has a beard and drives a 450 SL and has a house in Malibu. I'll sit in his office in Westwood with the shades drawn and my sunglasses on, smoking a cigarette, sometimes cloves, just to irritate him, sometimes crying. Sometimes I'll yell at him and he'll yell back. I tell him that I have these bizarre sexual fantasies and his interest will increase noticeably. I'll start to laugh for no reason and then feel sick. I lie to him sometimes. He'll tell me about his mistress and the repairs being done on his house in Tahoe and I'll shut my eyes and light another cigarette, gritting my teeth. Sometimes I just get up and leave. (Ellis 1986: 25)
The Euro Body in the New Frontier

Living in an adolescent city makes you feel younger. Perhaps you have run from the old guard, the weight of history so present in other, older cities; from the things you have done and the avenues you have exhausted. Here everything is new. You can be who you want to be. Shake habitual reactions. Immerse yourself in water and heat. Shed clothing, layers, shed skin. For in the new cities it is the elements of light, water and heat that prevail. The earth is readily shiftable, has no weight. Here the weightlessness you feel results not only from your lack of baggage, from travelling light, but also from a feeling that you are travelling like light, instantaneously and without gravity, through a city made up of glass and sky.

You find a peace in this rampant beauty, in unapologetic shine. The stainless steel streets, the long lines that stretch like white stratus, are such a relief to float in. Where are those ragged angles and crooked collections of corners you are accustomed to? Not here in the languid curvatures and loops, the immaculate outlines of your New World. It is as if you begin to elongate in the space, to open out, to flatten, to stretch the alleyways and backstreets, all those dead ends inside you. You become an aperture to the light that glares and scorches everything. You are learning how to reflect your city.

It seems that when you act here it’s like everyone’s watching what you’re doing and yet no one’s watching how you do it. There’s an overlap between the execution and the consequence of any act that voids your responsibility. You experience a great sense of freedom in this lack of accountability but the freedom you feel is not real. Like the cool air that skips off the water, illusion is the key. It hits you but you can’t touch it. You know where it comes from but you can’t see it. You are pushed into involuntary submission.

The spectacle relays your dreams, your freedoms and your hopes as collective imagery and you are finding it difficult to interpret. Everything is recognisable as someone else’s dream, someone else’s consequence and you can find no place for yourself. Everything is occurring elsewhere, but it is occurring, and always with the tantalising promise that somehow, somewhere it can be tapped into. Your sense of potential is hyperactive but your means of achieving it are confused. You hover anxiously on the edge of nowhere, high-strung, aware that you are just outside the centre of that which is happening, a
centre impenetrable because it doesn’t exist as a concrete or tangible whole. You do not know how to work this assemblage. You begin to resist it.

You pine for your previous city because you find that you are incompatible with this new urban partner who is, in the scheme of things, so much younger than you are. You don’t understand the systems, why the ones you have brought with you, that are programmed into you, don’t work in this relationship. You are crashing. There is nothing for you to hold onto, nothing of what you expect from a city, all the memories and associations with things past – places where you can experience a commemoration of family or primary history. There are no streets that you can walk down that will take you any further than where they go. The lines they trace lead only forward. Here places cannot be remembered long, are not yours to remember. You cannot bury pieces of yourself inside this city; they will merely slide off the arc of its synthetic surface because its prime business is erasure of memory. This city doesn’t do what you think it should. It doesn’t stroke you. It strokes itself, and asks you to, all the time, and if you don’t it will run right over you, automatically delete your presence. This city tires you out because you have forgotten how to play and the lethargy, the gap that creeps into you, prompts a belief that it is your right to get back what you have lost, at any price. And the price is always high.

The young and beautiful in these images, like ordinary people, are comparing themselves with others, always fearing rejection. They live in constant uncertainty, and the fear is on their faces…you have all these lovely looking figures but so much ambiguity, reflections of the American ideal who are in the midst of this incredible alienation. (Austin 2004: 84)

**The New Frontier Body**

The city is smooth. Polished. Buffed. So many people want to look like the city. Clean, perpetually baby faced. They want the sun, the day, their morality to run off them like seawater. No curves without definition. Arcs that will meet at edges, a breast that will sit where it is told. They want the glare to bounce off them, the sun to embalm them and their jewellery to glint into space like the buildings and cars they move in. They want to mirror the city but like the sea that shines all the way to the horizon, every surface has an undertow. Inside, they are drawn to darker things that will provide them with an appropriate outside – a haphazard internal structure spinning with rips and currents.
impels the production of what looks like pure effect. The result can be a sort of moral haemorrhage. In this city it is okay to mine the underground to produce a better surface: this is a crackless world. ‘The gaps appear and we must silently mend them or have them mended for us’ (Gillman 1999: 332).

People travel to places where no one knows them to be somewhere else, to become something else momentarily or permanently. While travel is often focussed on the external, the destination or the journey, the desire is expressed internally as a need to vary personal circumstances and/or physical environments. The outcome, however, is always related to internal feeling, to feeling challenged, rested, exhilarated, overwrought, intrepid, rejuvenated, curious or informed. The traveller wants not just to read the world but to be changed by it.

Travel is principally a navigation of the self: an interior act played out through varying external motivations. The decision to climb a mountain, for example, may relate to a desire to feel capable or strong. Conversely a trip to a tropical island flirts with a popular narrative of seclusion and relaxation. The decision to travel on a package tour to the Gold Coast, have your face rearranged and recuperate in a luxury resort, operates on another level altogether. The notion of travelling in order to alter the physical make-up
of the body is different to the placebo effect of feeling as if you have. Normally, when physical changes are visible after a journey, they are the result of the journey – you go home with a tan from the sea or strong calves from a trek but they are not permanent affects that constitute evidence of your holiday effort or lack of it. Interstate or cross-country cosmetic surgery uses the same principal as the holiday, ‘I will feel different when I get home’, in order to conceal the fact that the traveller is actually different. The ‘holiday’ becomes a disguise, a ruse to explain the change.

The promotion of the Gold Coast as a site of physical transformation could be seen as a logical outcome or exaggeration of the type of experience offered by the new frontier city. The transformation for sale is cosmetic, not ‘real’, but it has occurred, thus it is characteristic of the simulated experience that hinges on desire for the absent. Everything is recognisable as someone else’s dream. In this instance the holidaymaker simultaneously bypasses and becomes what is ‘missing’. The desire to become something else, to ‘tap into’ what has been denied them, leads to a series of engagements and transformations where their own bodies become the tourist site. Cosmetic tourists are the attraction, the wax museum, and the theme park figures. They design their own permutation and the city participates in their unveiling.

Tourists are going home from the Gold Coast looking younger and more relaxed than ever. New packages include airfares, accommodation and a nip and tuck. Last week nine people from Sydney and Melbourne aged 39 to 60 flew in for a cosmetic surgery holiday. (Templeton 1999: 38)

The headline of this article declares, Holidays Leave Uplifting Feeling (Templeton 1999). The main image is a woman, glass of champagne in one hand, sunglasses in the other, standing on the balcony of a Gold Coast highrise. Fully recovered, her new face turned to the camera, she is framed by the spectacle of the city, the buildings that stretch in perspective behind her. The tourist in this instance is literally changed by the experience; a picture of her labelled ‘before’ inserted discreetly into the body of the text. Usually people who holiday on the Gold Coast go home more or less the same. The guest pitch does not hinge on a specific spiritual or cultural epiphany; instead people undertake a series of interactive momentary engagements, strung together in the heavily mediated cityscape. Most of these moments occur via participation in fleeting external pleasures that hinge on the two extreme principals of adrenalin and rest. A lap dance, a massage. A bungy jump, a cruise. Rollercoasters, day spas. A race track, a swimming pool. Water
skiing, shopping. A helicopter ride, a rainforest walk. Moshing, candlelight dining. The addition of facelift followed by a luxury respite seems appropriate.

The globalisation of aesthetic surgery has spawned numerous centres that link surgery and tourism. North Americans have long gone to Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Brazil. People in the United Kingdom still flock to Marabella in Spain for discreet face-lifts. For medical tourists in the Middle East, Israel has become the country of choice for many procedures, even for citizens of countries that do not have political ties to Israel. Germans still visit South Africa for breast reductions and penis enlargements as well as to see Krueger National Park. South Korea and Singapore are important for the Asian market and Beirut, Lebanon is the place to go for quick no questions asked transgender surgery. (Gillman 1999: 8)

The Gold Coast is currently the plastic surgery capital of the Southern Hemisphere. While it is difficult to obtain statistics in Australia regarding plastic surgery, the Gold Coast is well recognised as the queen of the fantastic plastic and has hundreds of centres dedicated to aesthetic procedures and treatments. This proliferation of cosmetic procedures might suggest a latent civil superficiality, a conclusion that is often incorrectly drawn. Certainly the subtropical environment of the new frontier city produces a culture where the casualisation of fashion involves display of flesh and skin, but plastic surgery is an activity that is engaged in by people from all cities and cultures. The consumption is globally prolific for those who can afford it, but is especially concentrated in certain epicentres, like the Gold Coast and Los Angeles, which encourage a kind of extreme participation. After all, this is an activity that occurs elsewhere and in secret, and therefore in the kinds of locations that operate on the periphery of various cultural establishments while nevertheless catering to them. Interstate or international clients are choosing to undertake the procedure in a city removed from their everyday realities, thus, while they are operating in a deceptive manner, the city that hosts them is unapologetic about the practice and uncritical of the participants in it. The client is fuelled by a desire to be accepted into the fold ‘back home’ and cities like the Gold Coast and Los Angeles offer that passport without judgement. As a result these cities attract ridicule about the choice while continuing to profit from it.

You can become one of us and we shall be happy together – and the subtext – the more you reshape yourself the more I know my own value, my own authenticity and your inauthenticity. You become a mere copy, passing yourself off as the ‘real thing’. (Gillman 1999: 18)
Cosmetic surgery has a complex history that suggests the fascination with personal transmutation is neither a recent phenomenon, nor a specific by-product of capitalist popular culture, but rather a product of an individual desire to control the way we are perceived and judged. Gillman suggests in *Making the Body Beautiful* that though antecedents of cosmetic surgery can be traced to classical Egyptian and Greco-Roman medical texts as a desire for rejuvenation, it is the rise and promise of the individual in the renaissance and enlightenment periods that has characterised and driven modern aesthetic surgery (Gillman 1999). The desire to reconstruct oneself runs parallel to the desire for social acceptance, however the principles that constitute this acceptance are constantly shifting:

> It is the desire for control of the face that existed before the world was made, before we came to recognise that we were thrown into the world, never its master, that lies at the heart of “passing”. Passing is never vanishing but rather merging with a very visible group. (Gillman 1999: 333)

The new frontier city presents a morphable face to the world. This face is not consistent and changes expressions and features to a point where it becomes impossible to discern the recognisable elements of its original make-up. It has no initial or continuous design that has remained long enough to constitute identification. The new frontier city does not salvage or cover, it completely overhauls, not only the external textures of its face, the tissue and skin, but also the elements that constitute it; the bones and cartilage are all rearranged, replaced and rezoned so that its identity is not fixed but becomes liminal. There is little trace back to the original face, to a beginning, because each transformation it engages with represents a kind of new birth. The new frontier city has and will continue to change at a rate that defies recognition. This loss of permanence continues to manifest as a self-confessed nostalgia in Australian media:

> Was our Surfers Paradise any better than this Surfers Paradise or is it nostalgia for our youth that we feel, disguised as nostalgia for a place that never was? Or is there still even a small piece of evidence that we and the Surfers Paradise we loved too well – really existed? My search for solid archaeological proof began… (Hart 1987: 25)

Like the plastic surgery client, the new frontier city cheats time and reconstructs itself but unlike the plastic surgery client, it engages with this process in the open. It refuses the desire to change secretly. It acknowledges the inevitability of collapse and participates
willingly in it, reconstructing not to retain a sense of personal order or immunity to change but to obtain an anonymous liberty from time, identity and age. The new frontier city is in this sense an unapologetic pretender.

Such a mode of operation, like all production that is perceived to be counterfeit or non-genuine, inspires rejection and disdain because in the Euro city, surfaces may be relayed, but the face and thus the identity remain recognisably ‘the same’. The Euro city retains an external dignity, cherishes its definable characteristics and relies on the stability and permanence of its foundations. Any city that rejects a classic face in favour of an interchangeable identity is perceived as inferior. ‘Each individual has to learn again and again that the symbolic body as much as the “real” material body is always collapsing, always promising to slide into oblivion’ (Gillman 1999: 332).

**Faultlines, Cracks and Apocalypse in the New Frontier**

New frontier cities tend to exist on the margins of continents, at the edges of coastlines, fault lines, deserts and other natural points of demarcation. This is no accident. The new frontier city requires, as the term suggests, a passage across, from or towards an inhospitable territory. It requires this dual sense of arrival and imminent danger as a defining mode of its character. It requires a natural environment that is at once beautiful and threatening. This is why Los Angeles persists on the crossroads of fault lines; why Las Vegas erupts out of the Spanish Trail; why myths exist about people buried alive in the Nevada desert behind the simulated Seven Wonders of the World. It is why the Gold Coast builds its highrises perilously close to the edge of the ocean and why the rich want to possess the slipping landscape of the Hollywood Hills. These are stolen territories. 20th Century ‘gold rush’ towns. Places of speculation and prospect where the prize is not what you can unearth from the land but what you manufacture on top of it. It explains why a hold on things in the new frontier is always tenuous; erasure, disappearance, tidal and molecular motion is written into their landscapes. At no point does the urban territory settle into a position where it is no longer new, no longer formidable, no longer a frontier because the new frontier city is perpetually that, a city that is always being resettled, always being rediscovered, always being reclaimed. As Thompson observes in relation to the urbanisation of the Hollywood Hills, the desire to manipulate territory is inherent to the new frontier:
Every household keeps its back to the road; that posture does somehow permit the light tread of invasion. This is a slope where fortunate people live, or people who cling to luck the way their houses hook into the unstable earth. Not one house assists an estimate of who lives there, or what kind of life it is. The air of satisfaction, and worry, is answer enough. The sheerness of the land arranges for the secrecy; that is why the art of construction has picked on so perverse a site. The land drops so fast...with so little to see, watching feels as precious as secrecy. (Thompson 1992: 322)

Existing on the edge, flouting the margins, cracks, barriers and faultlines of dramatic natural topographies, ultimately infects all aspects of the new frontier experience; the consequential mix of defiance and reverie directed towards surrounding inhospitable formations, whether deserts, ridges, mountains, seismic plates of overlapping rock or the erosive coastlines of the Pacific Ocean, imparts a reckless and noncompliant social logic. The Gold Coast thrusts its towers against the edge of the sea. As a defining feature of the city’s urban identity they are impressive. However, they can also appear simultaneously fragile. Their proximity to the massive expanse of the Pacific Ocean is dominant only from a micro perspective – the power they present is tangible – but at a macro level, the rampant cluster of highrises seems almost childish, a disobedient gesture, a fey attempt at playing God over the ocean.

Illustration 30: Gold Coast skyline looking south

This kind of audacious public spectacle certainly encourages an atmosphere of rebellious experimentation; the citizen is led to believe that even the most unlikely of frontiers can be manipulated and tamed. The underlying understanding that such a hold is tenuous and temporary may create immediate feelings of anxiety and unease but consequence is not enough to stop such progress. In fact, these addictive, playful acts of illogical
defiance define the new frontier’s municipal experience, which also ambitiously courts critique.

Many regard the urban creep into the foothills of Los Angeles as an exercise in futility; in the Malibu, whole sections of housing developments simply slide off the hillside as the earth gives way under the increasing pressure of their weight. Nevertheless, people continue to build there, to incite the inevitable because the Hollywood Hills mythology extends powerfully to the experience of living. Of course, underwriting this defiant progression is the knowledge that the city of Los Angeles itself is all the time at the mercy of the San Andreas Fault. Effrontery is not just a by-product of the new frontier in Los Angeles, it is written into the earth.

The thing about Hollywood is that it is built on a flaw, a crack, a scary fault line. The earth could open up and swallow it at any moment: studios, stars and all. It is therefore a place that is constructed in the knowledge that the yawning chasm of oblivion threatens every major player in town – because if the earthquake doesn’t hit first then the spectre of failure is always hovering in the corner of your eye, like the ghost at the Hollywood banquet. (Picardie 2000: 124)

Los Angeles is a city whose very foundations are precarious; a fact that infuses almost every facet of social expression and order produced within it. The cover note of Mike Davis’s latest work The Ecology of Fear – Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster, asserts that, ‘Los Angeles has become a magnet for the American apocalyptic imagination’. The Ecology of Fear details how attitudes of defiance and decimation have resulted in a flawed symbiotic process between the urban and ecological systems of Los Angeles. Davis claims that the refusal of developers to recognise the absurdity of their urban experiments has created a pressure cooker situation where environmental disaster of Biblical proportions will be the defining natural consequence for the city. It is an extreme position for which he has come under critical scrutiny:

Along with many other scientists, he believes the paths of global and galactic history may be due to cross in the future, possibly with dramatic results. At times, he even seems to relish the more cinematic hypotheses of extra-terrestrial collision, especially closer to home. “A 500-meter-diameter asteroid impact in the Pacific, say, 1,000 kilometers off the coast of Los Angeles, could produce a tsunami several kilometers in height”. (Schatz 1997: HREF5)
Apocalyptic visions of Los Angeles are part of its civic mythology. The desire to see the city plundered, wiped out or burned is a common narrative thread that has seen itself manifested in reality, as was the case with the Los Angeles riots in 1992. Davis suggests, however, that correlations between the real and imagined are inextricably linked and Los Angeles’ ability to mystify truth diverts attention from social injustices and preventable ecological disasters. The final statement in The Ecology of Fear, alludes with a kind of manic poetics to the final scenes of Day of the Locust and Blade Runner combined, suggesting that had aliens been watching the riots, ‘they would have been mesmerized by the city’s extraordinary combustibility’:

No other urban area on the planet so frequently produces large “thermal anomalies”. Seen from space, the city that once hallucinated itself as an endless future without natural limits or social constraints now dazzles observers with the eerie beauty of an erupting volcano. (Davis 1998: 422)

New frontier cities do invite readings which mingle comparative construction (part hypothesis, part fact, part distillation of fiction) because their own development is so effusive. Davis's work is firmly located in the realm of millennial catastrophism that has driven the popularity of so much comment on Los Angeles, fictional or otherwise (even if at times he doesn't seem to be aware of it). His desire for social justice is rooted in the real while his apocalyptic desire is rooted in filmic sequence and fictional rhetoric. While this intermingling is applicable to the new frontier, Davis often equates them without distinction. Thus the social realities he notices in City of Quartz have mutated by the time we reach the Ecology of Fear into a kind of hysterical speculation where scientific and biological research are held to support his annihilistic reverence. The dissimilarity between the real and the hyperreal, between what the city presents, sells and pushes about itself and what actually occurs, are at times not as direct, consequential or as unique to these territories as Davis suggests:

Hollywood meanwhile has reached for different hyperboles. Younger directors have relentlessly exploited the social extremes of Downtown as a nightmare stage, a ground zero… [N]one of the theories or visions on offer...however, registers the presence, probably epochal, of an enlarged low-wage working class, living and working in the central city, and creating its own spatialised social world: networks of recreation, piety, reproduction, and ultimately struggle. (Davis 1992: 21)
While this passage presents a significant noticing of the social real in Los Angeles, Davis misses the irony of his own hyperbolic use of filmic reference in other sections of *City of Quartz* and particularly in *Ecology of Fear*. Like Klein, Davis confuses real time with representation by attaching social reality to fiction and lamenting the absence of truth. The argument also ignores the filmic use of metaphor to represent class struggle by refusing to notice that cinema is in fact not documentary. Cinema is hyperreal.

Almost annually, Armageddon visits L.A. in summer blockbuster movies as well as art-house sleepers; the city is razed only to be razed again for further decimation. Frequently, these post-apocalyptic visions are accompanied by another powerful fantasy, that of being the last human on earth. It’s an indelible image: a lone human in the midst of a deserted metropolis. More than fear, it is a feeling of melancholy and disorientation that comes over us as all the familiar spaces suddenly appear uncanny. (Labelle 1999: 40)

New frontier cities construct dreams but the endless play of surfaces is but one ‘face’ of the new frontier. As has been demonstrated previously, hyperreality effects the cultural landscapes of cities like Los Angeles, the Gold Coast and Las Vegas in ways which differentiate them from conventional municipal environments but it should not then be assumed that the arenas of the real and the hyperreal are mutually exclusive or are solely responsible to each other. Hyperreality exists at odd angles to the real, the social and the political in new frontier cities and these interrelationships operate in unexpected and unconventional ways. The extent to which one penetrates the other is different to the intersections that occur in Euro cities for example. This dislocation does not necessarily have to be viewed in the negative. It can, as I am positing, be viewed as a given of the new frontier, a distinctive feature that deserves a more applicable exploration.

The fact that new frontier cities can and do fail, that they can be written and revealed to be dystopias, is of no real surprise. What theorists like Davis abhor about that realisation is the broken promise, not the promise itself. Thus the judgement emerges: cities like Los Angeles are not fit for revolution because the sun shouldn’t shine in a city that lies. What is missing from Davis’s critique is recognition that all cities are potential dystopias. All cities are political and social arenas in which the real lives of ordinary people take place and are governed in all sorts of ways. What makes new frontier cities like Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the Gold Coast targets for unrelenting criticism is that when they fail it is worse than the failure of a city that never promised. Social and economic reality is
everywhere, but social and economic reality in the new frontier city is even more fraudulent because we have thought, watched and believed it to be something else. It is a dream city, turned dream factory and we forget that the façade was never meant to be real. We lose faith. We rally against hyperbole or use it to support negative argument. We allay ourselves with a neighbouring set of constructions that conjures the opposite to the promise – a satisfaction with uncompromising deconstruction. When critics point out glimpses of the back lot, the one-dimensional scenes, the cutting room floor, we wash our hands of the new frontier city, believing that where the critique may be leading us is more permanent. Don DeLillo captures this sentiment effectively in his novel *White Noise*. Here, a group of mid-west academics discuss why human beings are so strangely attracted to televised and fictionalised catastrophe, particularly about Los Angeles.

“The flow is constant,” Alfonse said. “Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes. Only catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else. This is where California comes in. Mud slides, bush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings et cetera. We can relax and enjoy these disasters because in our hearts we feel that California deserves whatever it gets. California invented the concept of lifestyle. This alone warrants their doom.” “Japan is pretty good for disaster footage,” Alfonse said. “India remains largely untapped. They have tremendous potential with their famines, monsoons, religious strife, train wrecks, boat sinkings, et cetera. But their disasters tend to go unrecorded. Three lines in a newspaper. No film footage, no satellite hookup. This is why California is so important. We not only enjoy seeing them punished for their relaxed lifestyle and progressive social ideas but we know we’re not missing anything. The cameras are right there. They’re standing by. Nothing terrible escapes their scrutiny.” (DeLillo 1984)

Whether in the realms of science fiction, noir film or the literary left, deconstructing Los Angeles is a profitable undertaking. It is a critique that does highlight many of the unique and often detrimental processes of the new frontier but does little to decipher ways in which its differences may be balanced or reinterpreted. It tends to be a one sided argument that can ultimately seem to desire the annihilation it predicts. Environmental fallout from unsympathetic urban processes is not limited to the new frontier city nor is the threat of consequent natural disaster. Los Angeles may indeed be wiped out by an asteroid-induced wave, or the San Andreas fault, but as a city adept at reinvention, it may not be long before it reemerges. The question therefore should not be ‘if’ the new frontier territory will break down, because all models, structures and constructions

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inevitably do. Rather, we should be asking what we might learn from the new frontier city: why it exists and whether how we have made it has the potential to inform us about the urban spaces of our future. We fashioned these cities where dream, risk, plastic, celluloid, fantasy, fraud, fiction and the Hollywood machine were what we wanted. They are the manifestations of the Western world’s 20th Century desire – a desire rooted in distraction and consumption but also one that celebrates human proclivity for reinvention, reinterpretation and survival.
While Southern California has been called a place of ‘cultural confusion,’ an urban Disneyland, the historian Leslie Heumann has argued, it is more importantly a place of experimentation, an invitation and a challenge of fertile imaginations to create the ultimate and the easiest, the most fantastic and the most functional, the best and occasionally the worst, in architecture. Out of this amorphous, chameleonic atmosphere have emerged pioneering manifestations of architectural thought and practice. (Hines 1992: 259-60)
The Gold Coast is an urban culture that encourages voyeurism, a passive engagement with its spectacle. The cityscape acts as a living screen, a gateway, a live postcard. At night, thousands of lights ripple out and above, inside and over the highrise towers, making up a kaleidoscope of colour and light that reflects back off the man made canals, the clean surfaces and the edges of the sea. Inside the people move, story upon storey, in variegated spaces, the lives of tourists and residents opened out to each other. Telescopes proliferate. Sitting in identically shaped lounge rooms, the relatively dark forms of people are lined up by jokers with laser targets, a sniper’s red dot shakes across walls in apartments, finally landing on human chests. Invisible rays travelling between towers uninvited are a reminder that in this opened out city everyone is or can be watched. Voyeurism is an addictive desire. Giant constructions of glass and cement are at night like hundreds of neon light boxes piled on top of each other. Their clear façades, lined with air, are inclusive; they invite the eye. ‘Soon we will have to learn to fly, to swim in the ether’. (Virilio 1997: 3)

Your life resembles a permanent holiday. You are a resident tourist. How does it feel to live in the sky? To hover inside such a slender symbol of dominance, with the drama of the world occurring somewhere below you? Your balcony takes in the endless sea and your backyard the entire city. You exit the world when you enter the lift that raises you to another level. Your controlled environment closes out the elements, the strong coastal winds that lash at your building. Your car takes you back into the world and you drive it to the kindred controlled environments of the office, the cinema, the restaurant, the gymnasium and the shopping centre. The card that you slide into the mouth of your building or the coded numbers you punch into it, give you access back into your home. Some days when you make a cup of tea, people hover on the outside of your building, many storeys up, cleaning the windows and all the screens you can’t get to. You try to ignore them. At night the little machines in the house hum – the dishwasher, the air-conditioner, the fridge, the freezer – the answering machine blinks and the concealed security cameras swivel. Your garbage disappears down steel shoots. Sometimes when people who live above you let their wine bottles drop you can hear them bumping and crashing through floors. You let people in after you have seen them on a screen and if you have fought with them you can watch their face on your television set as they leave. Your apartment cat sleeps in the cupboards. Once when a well-meaning guest took him
downstairs to the ground, he was terrified. His body went rigid as if he was dead. You
never let him out.

Some mornings you wonder what it would be like to wake to a different horizon, to see it
swelling. So imperious is this plain of blue stretching incessantly beyond you that
sometimes you wish a tsunami would liven up the line: a giant wall of white water that
would sound like the earth turning, heading straight for you. ‘You get a bit devoid from
the world when you’re sitting in your living room 30-40 storeys up and all you can see is
blue’ (Bartsch 2000: 13). Your gaze has shifted from the ground, from sediment, from
the earth to the ocean and the sky.

From ultra-marine, beyond the sea, to ultra-sky, the horizon divides
opacity from transparency. It is just one small step from earth matter to
space light – a leap or a take off able to free us for a moment from
gravity. (Virilio 1997: 1)

**Vertical Villages**

On the Gold Coast there is the strip of highrise towers most of them compacted onto
the thin stretch of land that runs between the ocean and the Nerang River, and where the
river doesn’t run the Gold Coast Highway marks the division. This long, narrow row of
residential and tourist accommodation prizes above all the blue beyond the boundary,
the blue of the sea and sky. The strip stretches from one end of the coast to the other, its
frenetic skyline varying in scale and intensity along a forty five kilometre stretch of road,
peaking in long lines at its popular pressure points, Coolangatta, Burleigh Heads, Palm
Beach, Miami, Broadbeach, Surfers Paradise, Main Beach, and Runaway Bay.

The fascination with architectural giants constitutes more than just a tourist activity for
the thousands of people on the Gold Coast who live permanently in an elevated way. It
is an urban formation driven by the new frontier mentality of distension and reach. For
though the towers concentrate in the strips of space, they extend in a linear fashion
which is physically and visually different to methods of compacted layering intrinsic to
Euro city modelling. On the Gold Coast, the gaps of air and space between the buildings
are paramount to the lived experience. The impact that the buildings produce in the sky
is not solid or compact – it is full of light which constitutes a flashing presence that the
architecture invites in and reflects. Open, illuminated and streamlined spaces amplify
communication with the outside. The highrises stretch up and the long lines they
collectively form stretch out – not against each other but punctuated along coastal or invisible edges. Unlike the dense, nucleus skylines of New York or Sydney, these buildings do not encourage introspection, that is a spinning from and to a heart or centre. In the new frontier, parallel lines and proximate gaps between buildings create surfaces that induce and impel uninhibited desire. The new frontier’s relationship with the skyscraper differs from and extends beyond the Euro city’s desire to command and conquer time and space as characterised by Bartsch:

From at least the age of the cathedral builders, dominance of the skyline and ideological dominance have gone together. The skyscrapers of the past 100 years have thus symbolised the power of commerce and technology. (Bartsch 2000: 13)

While the skyscraper in the Euro city exists as a monument to financial and technological success, with its attributable modes of restricted access, the new frontier city skyscraper is also a place of play and temptation: the highrise environment does not generate a mood of exclusivity. Even though many skyscrapers in new frontier cities are largely residential, and therefore high security enclaves, they don’t appear to be so. The look of invitation permeates even those spaces which secure themselves absolutely from casual visitors. If conventional urban architecture is like solidified orchestral music, then the new frontier highrise is more like a pop song, capable of multiple interpretations and reinterpretations; belting itself out over and over again, sampling bits of itself into many new forms, producing a lighter, catchier melody than the serious substance of generic Euro city skyscrapers, especially as represented in the Euro cities of North America, Australia and Asia, but also in those European cities where skyscrapers have been utilised. The premise of new frontier architecture, then, is to encourage participation by seeming to compete for your gaze, money and attention. The function of Euro city skyscrapers is to suggest commercial success while concealing operation – to act as a mirror that reflects the results, and not the machinations of, burgeoning capitalist economy. By contrast, new frontier skyscrapers in cities like the Gold Coast are often accessible commercial sites, or residential sites that also contain commercial/tourist functions. Their success relies on interaction: the public is encouraged to pass through the chimera and participate in the game.

While many modern and postmodern structures in the new frontier are hosts to corporate enterprise (Los Angeles’ re-urbanisation of Downtown being a case in point),
there are many more that exist specifically to host people at play. The urban formations of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the Gold Coast overflow with spectacular architecture designed to entertain and stimulate. They are constructed in direct opposition to Euro notions of restricted access, tradition and history.

The skylines of the Gold Coast and its neighbouring capital city Brisbane, for example, are noticeably different. Brisbane’s skyline proliferates from a central core. Entryways to this river city, the freeways and railways, converge from the four principle points of navigation, north, south, east and west. The skyline emerges out of the undulating sprawl as one nears the inner city rim, which is delineated principally by the Brisbane River that winds itself around the city’s centre towards Moreton Bay. At North Quay, the highways overlap and wind around each other as motor vehicles exit into the centre or bypass it. The skyscrapers are densely packed into centrifugal formations lining a confusing cross section of one-way streets in the city’s heart. From a distance, these buildings rise as if contained inside an invisible cylinder. And while the area they fill is spherical, the lines of the building’s themselves are strict, straight and dominated by modernist commercial ethics – predominately sealed, sleek structures housing corporate, government and other business enterprises. Heritage styles also feature markedly in the city core as super structures sit alongside, or even retain the façades of, Brisbane’s colonial history.

Standing in the inner city heart of Brisbane is quite a different experience to driving down the Gold Coast highway – for it is not possible to stand in a specific place on the Gold Coast and realise you are at its centre. And while many people might look to Surfers Paradise to fulfil this function, the skyline of the Gold Coast does not begin or end here, running as it does for many kilometres to the north and south, resurging at different points along the strip.

Gold Coast urban formations are in no sense centrifugal. As an edge city, it is divided lengthways from the ocean back as a series of elongated strips split the city into roughly parallel sections. Access to the different points of urban intensity along these corridors occurs from two principle highways that run north and south: on the coastal edge, the Gold Coast Highway, and further inland, the Pacific Highway. Exits from either side take the driver to a cluster suburb of their choosing along the strips rather than to a central core. In the City Council commissioned Gold Coast Urban Heritage and Character Study,
Phillip Goad defines these strips as linear bands. He identifies six linear bands occurring in sequence from the ocean back:

1. The beach
2. The towers/residential coastal strip
3. The [Gold Coast] highway strip
4. The canal estates
5. The suburbs
6. The semi-rural hinterland.

And he notes the exceptional and distinctive urban occurrences in each that produce sets of intersections:

The urbanism of the Gold Coast is an urbanism of linear bands, of linear strips, which run parallel to the ocean. Each band contains its own particular building types, landscapes and cultural practices, which determine its social structure. Each band has its own characteristic elements that determine the band’s value… Intruding upon all these bands are both the natural and unnatural interlopers. Natural are the pre-existing creeks, rivers, estuaries, mangroves and coastal inlets. Unnatural are the great space takers of the theme parks, golf courses, casino and shopping malls. These interlopers make the bands impure. They enrich and give functional diversity to each strip, making complex a surprisingly clear definition of land use bands that occur within the city. (Goad 1997: 38)

As a direct result of this parallel infrastructure, the experience of the city is elongated and drawn by continual movement through space rather than being channelled into participation in a frenetic centre. Almost as if on a conveyer belt, the new frontier citizen cruises through the city, entering and exiting different nodes and sections. At no point is there a strong sense of arrival, because the lack of a specific and localised centre creates an impetus to keep moving. There is always another dropping off point; an effect highlighted by the fact that, rather than one central transit station, the local public bus company, Surfside, uses major shopping precincts as regular points of convergence.

The trajectory of Gold Coast bus services is instructive as it highlights the rhizomatic nature of the city’s transport grid. The city utilises buses and not subways and trains, because the main aim of the Gold Coast system is to transport people to sites dotted along the parallel strips rather than into, and around a centre. The recent addition of a railway link to Brisbane provides primarily commuter access to the capital city, and
tourist services (accompanied by buses) to theme parks located in the zones through which the railway cuts. From Brisbane, when the rail service reaches Beenleigh in the northern inland of the Coast, it abandons familiar branching patterns and reverts to one straight line that runs along the back of the Gold Coast, stopping at the semi-rural and suburban areas of Ormeau, Coomera (home of the theme parks Dreamworld, Movie World and Wet N’ Wild) Helensvale, Nerang, and then Robina, a suburb best known for its grandiose shopping mall. Here, part way along the Gold Coast’s low-rise suburban band, the line ends and the train makes its way back in ‘reverse’ to Brisbane. Very few commuters can reach any of the railway stations without using a bus or a car. Each of the stations is therefore equipped with extensive carparks.

Clearly it was more feasible to put the railway parallel to the Pacific Highway due to the continued existence of a suitably under-developed corridor. However, the distance of the handful of stations from the coastal strip means that the only rail service it enjoys is the five minute journey of the monorail shuttle connecting Conrad Jupiters Casino to the shopping, beaches and cafés of Broadbeach. The Gold Coast City Council is presently considering a light rail system for the coastal strip, which would suit its densely built, narrow and highly changeable ‘shopfront’ nature, and connect it more effectively to the Brisbane rail link. For the time being, although people do use the relatively unreliable bus service, the car is the ubiquitous mode of transport. In such ways, transport infrastructure, and planning for it, reflects the fact that this ‘is a city with no centre but many strips and foci’ (Goad 1997: 38).

The citizen in Brisbane’s inner city core walks among a dense system rather than through or along a clean line. The urban formation evokes a Euro experience; the densely packed, criss-crossing, one way streets are jammed with parked and moving cars; fumes swirl in the heavy, sub-tropical air. The shop fronts are an eclectic mix of old and new, of bright chrome surfaces and decrepit boarded sites. It is a place of noise and decay as much as it is a place of exclusive shopping and high-end money. Shoppers, bankers, students, lawyers, workers, suits, schoolkids and families converge and pass through the extensive pedestrian mall that defines its retail heart. The city centre is constantly stretching and redefining its limits to bear the growing numbers of businesses and people. The Law Courts, Treasury, Police and University spaces mingle with banking and corporate centres, restaurants, flower sellers, street cafés, shopping precincts, nightclubs and hotels.
Above this bustling hive of activity the skyscrapers rise, almost indifferent. People enter them and disappear, exit them and merge with the masses.

Brisbane’s city centre is most alive during the day. At night, it takes on an abandoned air. Despite an insurgence of inner city living and even the variety of nightlife it offers, Brisbane’s night face cannot compete with the chaotic, power-driven action of the day. The centre of gravity shifts in the evening, to peripheral precincts – outside of, but conceptually contained within, the large spherical area referred to as the inner city rim. These sites, at opposite geographical points, such as Fortitude Valley, West End, Paddington and South Bank, tend to produce a more energetic and cosmopolitan air at night than the city centre. Gold Coast nightlife doesn’t work like this. In the evening, the high-density strip simply changes shape, transforms from a commercial/tourist stretch into a space of neon spectacle. The buildings form part of the city’s entertainment, full of activity and life, not lit up but largely empty as they generally are in Euro cities at night. Tall buildings on the Gold Coast are part of the nightlife experience; visually excessive, they welcome frivolity as principal sites of play and recreation. The highrise balcony is a locus of activity. The heat and the water and the spectacle of the city draws people to the outside. Eventually they spill from the towers into the spaces around them, walking to various points where the action intensifies along the coastal edge, in café, nightclub and dining districts such as Main Beach, Runaway Bay, Broadbeach, Mermaid Beach, Burleigh Heads, and Coolangatta with Surfers Paradise the most distinctive and largest precinct, catering mainly to younger locals and the tourist market. At ground and first floor levels, the towers host nightclubs, restaurants, strip bars, retail centres and concert venues.

Tall buildings in new frontier cities like the Gold Coast and Las Vegas are thus distinguished not only by their postmodern architectural flourishes and excesses but also by their methods of usage. This in turn has an effect on the built environments surrounding them and the cultural experiences produced. Though both these cities are famous for their tourist spaces, it should be remembered that a large proportion of permanent residents live in highrise buildings on the Gold Coast. Therefore, the elevated and simulated experience is not reserved for the visitor; rather, it becomes both a product of transience and a way of life. As the Gold Coast Bulletin suggested in 1980,
‘there are very few areas in Australia with such a high concentration of people living in apartments’ (Bishop 1980: 22).

The hotels and residential buildings in the business and commercial precinct of Brisbane look like corporate buildings. The city rises in a cluster of muted sepia tones – grey, beige, sandstone, and the sheer reflective planes of the modernist ethic – deep blues and sleek shiny blacks. (Recent redevelopments for residential purposes of older commercial sites in Brisbane often retain the secluded and reserved colonial façades of the original
constructions with a distinct lack of signage, thus they are, in turn, relatively indistinguishable.) From the outside, there is no way to determine the functional differences between Brisbane highrise buildings apart from very large (but comparatively ‘tasteful’) neon signs that advertise the hotels at night. The signage of Gold Coast skyscrapers is (paradoxically) modest compared to Brisbane city’s highrise hotels because nearly all the skyscrapers are designed for living or holidaying and therefore do not need to differentiate themselves from corporate centres as markedly as hotels need to do in Brisbane, New York and other Euro cities.

Illustration 33: Raptis development advertisement, Surfers Paradise, Gold Coast

But on the Gold Coast, the dazzle of neon and fluorescent light is not contained within the frames of windows and signage. Light travels in this city, ripples over water, concrete, glass, steel and acrylic; explodes out the top of buildings, illuminates the tropical depths of hotel swimming lagoons and fans out in iridescent pastels over public spaces and parks. Light forms part of the city’s night face, its neon streetscape, with oversized baubles dangling off bridges, power lines and palm trees. Light on the Gold Coast is an addition, an accessory and an advertisement but it is also a creative experiment in spectacle. The Versace Hotel was recently awarded first place in a national lighting
competition for the piercing blue laser lines which mark out a reduced contemporary symmetry around the building in stunning contrast to the faux ornate classicism of its Greco-Roman design. These pulsing lines of blue create a halo effect, a cobalt glow magnified at night across the dark still waters of the marina beside which it sits. Artificial and neon light is as important to the Gold Coast as the sunshine is to its daytime image. The city specialises in year-round illumination. Therefore in daylight its cityscape is predominantly white. For though the architecture engages with an experimental palette, the bright shimmering ivories form the perfect canvas; capturing and reflecting back the city’s relentless glare of sun and neon.

Like Brisbane, Gold Coast business does occur in its skyline, but it is not the business of governments, law enforcement, education or banking. These modes of industry obviously function in the city but they occur in sporadic and stretched out sites on the ground, in business clusters all over the city, but usually beyond the highrise strip. They are functions that remain so separated from the public vision of the Gold Coast that the notion that they exist only in nominal capacities is often incorrectly drawn. In fact, the four largest employers on the Gold Coast are the Gold Coast City Council, The Gold Coast Hospital, Griffith University and Austar Communications, all of which operate some distance from the skyline of the city, in different sub-urban clusters where much of the traditionally moded business occurs. Suburbs such as Southport, Bundall, Nerang and Robina on the Gold Coast host a selection of government, light industry, technology firms, higher education or corporations, all of them set apart from the high energy ‘tourist strip’ of the highrises.

The Gold Coast’s snake like skyline at the rim of the sea is, in effect, a series of clusters where entertainment, pleasure, gazing and spectacle replace the traditional modes of transaction as visible sites of excess. In new frontier cities like Los Angeles, the Gold Coast and Las Vegas, play is big business. Such cities architecturally celebrate industry designed not to look like industry. Tourism, development, lifestyle and leisure replace trade, mergers, policy and labour as markers of civic identity.

In direct contrast to the sensations of awe and solemnity often generated by Euro city skylines and centres, the atmosphere that circles the Gold Coast skyline is casual and pleasurable. The buildings are meant to be looked at and engaged with. The postmodern
exteriors are combinations of sheer ivory and creams lavishly infused with bright colours, elaborate enclaves, grand entrances, outlandish details, decorative lighting, expansive grounds and lush landscaping. An attitude of open territory is largely responsible for the playful sense of inclusion these huge buildings manage to project. Unlike the Euro city’s modern and postmodern skyscrapers which often thrust up directly on the edges of streets and against each other in imposing and impenetrable lines, perimeters of space are marked out around highrises on the Gold Coast because of their resort and leisure philosophies. There is space between the building and the street, space between it and the next building, space on the verandas and space inside in the large open foyers; the body has time to adjust, to explore, to respond.

Illustration 34: Chevron Renaissance shopping precinct and highrise development, Surfers Paradise, Gold Coast 2003

On The Gold Coast the architecture of spectacle is built into the everyday, an experience that in Euro cities is largely reserved for the sightseer, for monuments and the majestic historical buildings that people queue to view, their priceless details roped off and heavily guarded. In western cities that have emerged with the accoutrements of only two to three historical architectural movements – expressionism, modernism and postmodernism – the spectacle of history is relatively absent and can only be delivered via a method of pastiche where antique experiences are replicated and embedded into the development.
I was young Icarus, The Penthouse Salesman. I wasn’t in it just for the money. Not at all. It went deeper than that. I saw those apartment buildings as works of art. I could not pass a construction site during those boom years without stopping and marvelling at the workers. I perched on the edge of massive holes in the earth with their foundations of concrete and steel, and watched for hours. They were our pyramids. My favourite site was travelling across the Southport bridge and looking down into Surfers, into the tangle of yellow cranes that stood like birds at the edge of the watering hole. It quickened my heart. And the names – Apollo, Neptune’s Court, Venus Plaza. It was the closest thing we had to our own history. (Condon 1995: 2-3)

The Architecture of Entertainment

The differences between the neighbouring cities of Brisbane and the Gold Coast are best exemplified by the style of their respective casinos, owned and operated by the same company, Jupiters Limited. The casino on the Gold Coast was opened on November 25th 1985 and is the older of the two in terms of operation but by far the younger in terms of its architectural structure. Taking its cues from Las Vegas, the postmodern landmark sits on its own man-made island and is a pastiche of pseudo classical styles and modernist excess. For years it has held a dominant place on the Gold Coast tourist strip, a giant neon, glass and cement presence echoing the Egyptian pyramids.

The Treasury development in Brisbane is comprised of two elaborate heritage listed structures separated by Queens Park in the centre of the city. One building houses the Treasury Casino and the other its accompanying hotel, Conrad International. Both the Treasury Building and the Land Administration Building were originally constructed in various stages between 1886 and 1928 and are renowned respectively as leading examples of Italian Renaissance-style and Edwardian Baroque architecture in Australia. The restoration project was undertaken by respected architectural firm Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle in strict accordance to the Queensland Government’s Heritage Act and overseen by the International Council on Monuments and Sites. The heritage conservation scheme was the largest ever carried out in Queensland and involved over sixty tradespeople with national and international experience. Where possible, original plasterwork, woodwork and finishes were restored to mint condition; a diligent and faithful process which meant that even single sections of ceiling roses often took weeks to complete. When inserts or replications had to be undertaken, the project’s joiners and carpenters went on exhaustive searches to find timber of the same variety, age and grain.
There’s the opportunity to give these buildings new life, new value, and in a way that accepts that modern architecture has its value too. There needs to be a way of using old buildings without turning them into museums. (Goombridge 1995: HREF6)

Illustration 35: Conrad Treasury Casino, Brisbane 2004

The development is reported to have cost a total of 27 million dollars and is a dramatic example of postmodern economic restructuring. Two buildings, originally constructed by the state in the 19th Century, restored in the late 20th Century via the profits of gambling revenue, to a new kind of glory where the principal commercial purpose has shifted dramatically from former official usages and now revolves around the new millennium economic drivers of entertainment and leisure.

Conrad International Treasury Casino is owned by Jupiters Limited and operated by Conrad International Hotels, a division of Park Place Entertainment, the gaming side of Hilton Hotels Corporation (USA). Park Place is the world’s largest gaming company, as measured by casino square footage and revenues, and is the only casino gaming company with a leading presence in Nevada, New Jersey and Mississippi – the three largest gaming markets in the United States. In 1999, the company
will own or have an interest in 17 gaming properties located throughout the United States, Australia and Uruguay, with a total of 1.4 million square feet of gaming space and approximately 23,000 hotel rooms. (Goombridge 1996: HREF7)

Rising just three storeys, the Brisbane Treasury Casino is billed as a place of high tech gaming spectacle contained within a distinguished 19th Century architectural façade. Compared to the gaudy nature of other casinos, the flashy technological presence is subsumed by an interior that diligently celebrates the integrity of the Treasury’s heritage origins. While there is one large gaming room (typical of most casinos) in the centre of the building, a series of smaller spaces proliferate around, underneath and above it, separated by heavy wood panelling, rich carpets, chandeliers and ornate fixtures. The effect, despite the thousands of loud, glitzy poker machines housed in these rooms, is like being inside an old world hotel with lots of intimate rooms, bars and hidden spaces.

While the Treasury Casino restoration has had spectacular results in terms of historical recognition, and is certainly a landmark site that befits and complements its city, adopting the heritage approach and remaining true to it in the interiors of the building has led to some criticism of the casino’s internal functionality.

After canvassing a number of patrons some key issues emerged, namely that patrons wanted a more fun and exciting interior, more break-out and lounging areas to meet friends and also, from an operational perspective, there was a need to improve circulation and accessibility to move around the casino. (Goombridge 1996: HREF7)

Jupiters Limited, concerned about ‘the economic viability of casino entertainment in Brisbane,’ spent an additional 16 million dollars in order to render the Treasury Casino more user friendly and functional. ‘The Treasury building is not only steeped in history and beautifully restored to reflect its past, but also needs to embrace all the action, glamour and excitement that goes with a casino’ (Goombridge 1996: HREF7). Rather than admitting directly that the heritage imperatives of the design may have, in effect, run counter to The Treasury’s ability to remain visually fluid (and thus competitive), General Manager of the Treasury Casino Brisbane, Howard Dreitzer, intimated it by saying, ‘the need to regularly update our product was vital’ (Goombridge 1996: HREF7). The multi-million dollar refurbishment included extensive lobbying to enable the erection of additional exterior signage, and ‘new carpets and palm trees in the main floor to give that
distinctly Queensland feel’ (Goombridge 1996). The internal alteration tactics employed by Jupiters Limited reveal an increasing tension between structural traditions and a contemporary commercial viability dependent unflinchingly on reinvention and change.

The Gold Coast casino, in contrast, is a huge open arena, dominated by high skylights and smooth surfaces. In its centre, a vast atrium separates the two wings of the 609 room hotel that rise on either side of the gaming arena. Shaped like a curved pyramid, Hotel Conrad is over twenty stories high. The casino area covers 5,572 square metres on two levels. The restaurants and bars, some without walls, open out to the foyer, over which the huge glass atrium hovers, allowing natural light to mingle with the artificial. It is a site amendable to change and in 2003 underwent an extensive renovation to coincide with the construction of the Gold Coast’s first major Convention Centre to which the Casino will be linked.

Unlike the enclosed, self contained nature of Treasury Casino, Conrad Jupiters also spills out into its surrounds, with elaborate landscaped gardens, promenades, walking and jogging tracks, lawns, a Romanesque bathing pavilion, tennis courts, boat harbour and the monorail shuttle linking the structure to the beach, shopping, dining and café precinct across the highway. In this way, the complex is in keeping with the resort nature of Gold Coast development, where buildings become the locus of miniature cities and leisure oriented villages.
Perceptions and Trajectories of Gold Coast Development

Gold Coast highrise architecture has been constructed with an appreciation of the city’s particular ethos of entertainment, seduction and escapism and thus without a national historical precedent. The city’s contribution to Australian architecture, therefore, has often been officially overlooked and publicly ridiculed. In 1959, ‘Architecture in Australia’, published an editorial article by Peter Newell in which he lambasted Gold Coast architectural expression.

Gold Coast architecture in the strict sense of the word is virtually non-existent...however, if we regard as architecture anything good or bad that permanently marks the landscape, Gold Coast architecture is powerfully present indeed. In its various phases of development from the primitive, through to the utilitarian and the drab, to the vulgarly vital, it has shown a disregard not only of copyright but also – and this is the more unfortunate – of the higher plagiarism of copying sensitively only the best. It has, so it seems, always claimed a special case for itself. It has considered itself always an exception where tradition and taste are concerned. (Newell 1959: editorial)

The validation of Gold Coast urban formations remains a difficult task as it has always operated on the edge of contemporary architectural movements in a country that preserves colonial styles and has long felt its own lack of historical monuments in the European tradition. Newell notices, as early as 1959, that the Gold Coast relies on simulation in architectural expression, but in doing so he plays through a resistance to such expression that has continually informed western cultural critique. Obviously, it is a position ‘indicative of contemporary anxieties to do with the figure of the author as the centralised matrix of the creative act’ (Tofts 1999: 10). But when Newell suggests that Gold Coast architects were refusing to be concerned with copyright, he denies them industry validity not due to the act of imitation but due to the extremity of their choices. He sees blatant imitation as immoderate and excessive and by doing so he reasserts the idea of an ‘ownable’ architecture; an agreed cultural value which designates where ‘lower plagiarism’ ends and ‘higher plagiarism’ begins. Newell is opposed to the Gold Coast’s reliance on a certain West Coast American aesthetic which he sees as affront to tradition and taste – the implication being that if Gold Coast architects had engaged with ‘the best’ of available forms (New York or Berlin) rather than ‘the worst’ (Californian, the Pacific) then their derivative practice would have been far more acceptable.
Cultural practices such as sampling, quotation and collagic-reassemblage, supported by wilful (mis)applications of deconstructive poetics, have redefined the author’s role as a kind of director of found materials, a ventriloquist of the already said. (Tofts 1999: 10)

Newell’s misinterpretations of the pastiche and multiple authorial processes of Gold Coast architecture are not only a reflection of his time, but of a pervading conservative view, for as Tofts suggests in Parallax, these cultural practices are not ‘new’ rather they are a series of modifications that occur throughout history against dominant or structural analysis which relies on notions of the primary functions operating in any given form. This paradigmatic position does not operate effectively for the new frontier city. Although Newell tries to credit Gold Coast architects with the development of a new ‘fundamentalism’ for Australia, what they were actually doing was rendering a culture that they were simultaneously making and seeking to represent. A new frontier sense of exuberance which even Newell, despite his misgivings, cannot help but acknowledge:

Yet, in all its shortcomings and with all its elementary mistakes, Gold Coast architecture has succeeded in developing two fundamental characteristics for the first time in this country. It has created a landscape where the contemporary style dominates and it has created an environment that is gay. (Newell 1959)

The excessive and extravagant experimentations in tall buildings on the Gold Coast have continued to be viewed by many more critics as aberrations from a more traditional and pleasing aesthetic.

Last year prominent Sydney architect Neville Gruzman stirred up a storm when he said Gold Coast highrises should be bulldozed into the surf. He described it as a disaster area… “There is no excuse for it.” (Conley 1985: 4)

The same cannot be said for Los Angeles whose world-renowned architects, such as Frank Gehry, have become synonymous with innovation; able to experiment in a new frontier city and receive worldwide validation. The colonial history of Australia has slowed the level of acceptance regarding architectural innovation and departure. The Sydney Opera House is perhaps Australia’s most distinctive building yet when it was first constructed public opinion was deeply divided. It has, of course, become a national treasure precisely because it represents Australian dissimilarity from imperial identity; a celebration of post colonial exuberance and difference. In 2003, some forty years after
the building’s construction, Joern Utzon has won the architectural equivalent of the Nobel Prize, The Pritzker.

When Prince Charles visited the Gold Coast in 1997 the local media were quick to publicise the disdain he expressed for highrise development. ‘Prince Charles criticised the tall buildings saying they contributed to the uglification of one of the world’s top holiday spots’ (Tomlinson 1997: 6). This typifies one side of a long-standing love-hate relationship with the city’s skyline by industry professionals, urban planners, officials and the public since the 1950s. Tomlinson quotes prominent South East Queensland architect Richard Allom who suggests that, ‘Prince Charles wrongly associates tall buildings with cities which are unfriendly and inhospitable’ (Tomlinson 1997: 6). As a director of heritage walking tours of Gold Coast highrises, Allom has been instrumental in promoting the Gold Coast’s architectural contribution.

The buildings express the dynamic nature and entrepreneurial aspect of the city. They are a significant part of its personality and taken together they represent the growth and development that has taken place since the 1960s. Individually, some of these highrise buildings are nationally important as seminal examples of their type and it’s time we recognised this. *(Courier Mail* 2000: 13)

A view of the Gold Coast principally as a holiday destination, and not as a fully-fledged city expressing multiple experiences of living as well as visiting, has skewed understanding of its role in contemporary architecture. If Prince Charles had visited the Gold Coast in 1945, he would doubtless have been pleased, particularly with the seaside town of Southport evolving, as it was, not unlike an English seaside village. However the Gold Coast has emerged as one of Australia’s fastest growing cities not because it has retained an imperial aesthetic or remained focused on its tourism imperative, but because it refuses to retain anything but the desire to do things differently.

Despite the highrise strip’s obvious attraction for tourists and residents it is only now beginning to receive official industry recognition and respect. In 2003, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects declared the Sunland Development, *Aria*, in Broadbeach as, Building of the Year, in a move the Gold Coast Bulletin celebrated as, ‘A blow to Modernist architecture’ (Mossop 2003: 11).
The rate of change on the Gold Coast highlights a phenomenal urban evolution that goes some way to legitimising boosterist techniques; a situation highlighted by the close association between demographer and head of research institute KPMG, Bernard Salt, and the Sunland Group development company. Salt’s data, statistics and phrases such as ‘I am a devotee, an aficionado, an apparatchik of the Australian Gold Coast’ (Salt 2003: 1) often appear in promotional material and are writ large on billboards. The potentially cyclical patterns of boom and bust on the Gold Coast also suggest however a need for a more nuanced and perhaps cautious approach. The city’s propensity to continually replace itself with an idea of itself creates a surface tension, a plane of perpetual risk to which its imagineers and developers must remain alert.

At the time of the release of Michael Jones’ study, *A Sunny Place for Shady People* in 1986, the Gold Coast was coming to terms with a real estate crash that presaged a global economic downturn. As Jones effectively illustrates, the property boom in the 70s and early 80s on the Gold Coast had led to a chronic over supply of highrise apartments. The development frenzy was spurred on by a combination of market factors: the classification of land on the strip as a ‘limited resource’; high population growth; rising inflation; and most importantly a free market economy enhanced by relaxed planning controls and a relatively egalitarian society amenable to the entrepreneur (Jones 1986: 33). An interesting contributing factor was the ability for investors to buy off the plan with very small deposits. In this way investment property on the Gold Coast emerged as a lucrative venture even for people who had relatively minor amounts to outlay.

By 1984, however, the boom had capitulated rapidly into bust. The Gold Coast highrise real estate market was flooded. Sale prices had dropped well over 50% in most cases. Units purchased at the height of the boom for $215,000 were attracting offers of just $90,000 (Jones 1986: 50). Not surprisingly, large-scale development firms turned their attention away from the coastal edges of the city, particularly Surfers Paradise, and concentrated primarily on its suburban and Hinterland sectors. Estate development on the Gold Coast boomed in the 1990s, the most significant project being the construction of Robina, one of the largest integrated mixed-use developments ever undertaken in Australia. (Griffin 1997: 1)
No-one could have predicted the invention by private developers of whole suburban precincts and the scale to which the Gold Coast city would spread west along its length and north towards Brisbane. In response to industry claims of ‘limited resources’, Jones stated, ‘there is still a vast supply of land between the sea and the mountains so it was nonsense to talk of a shortage’ (Jones 1986: 42). In just one decade, this ‘vast supply’ would be significantly depleted. The tenacity of entrepreneurs and the competitiveness of the private property market drove a new development rush that in response to the crash was not stretching up but out. The late 70’s Australian suburban dream was being replicated on the Gold Coast in the late 90s at speeds for which the Gold Coast City Council was not prepared and which it struggled to harness. Indeed, it was often accused in the local media of tolerating a culture of corruption in its interactions with development and construction firms. In an attempt to control the frenetic spread of housing estates in the Gold Coast Hinterland, the Council traded off more built up areas and granted developers license to re-level and re-urbanise them.

Urban creep into the Hinterland is to be a thing of the past under a planning blueprint unveiled yesterday by the council. Instead, Developers will be given certainty to develop in established areas such as Southport, Robina and the Coomera Helensvale corridor. “Its all about more sensitive forms of development – preserving the green behind the gold.” (Gleeson 1997: 4)

The current rush of reurbanisation projects in the Southport, Labrador and Surfers Paradise localities is an obvious direct result of this amendment. After a decade of caution, developers have turned their attention back to the edges, with local government endorsement; cranes, bulldozers, cement mixers, barricades and dust fill the air. Predictably, real estate prices are rising rapidly.

The Gold Coast boom of 1980 to 1983 was caused partly by the visibility of highrise construction, especially at Surfers Paradise. The transformation of the Surfers skyline by many large highrise developments created a great deal of media attention and publicity. (Jones 1986: 42)

Despite trepidations in the national real estate investment climate, Gold Coast developers and entrepreneurial firms persist with the implementation of massive construction projects and encourage unregulated investment. The attitude continues to be ‘ride the wave’. As Michael Jones suggests, the visibility of this express development process on
the Gold Coast creates consumer frenzy. The pace of the transformation generates a hunger, a desire to cash in, not to miss what changes and rearranges in a blink. As the city begins to replicate, in the new millennium, the process of spiralling real estate profits symptomatic of the 1980s economic downturn, the associated risk is not forgotten but resplendently defied: all the usual suspects come into play. The cranes are big, the hype is big, the buildings are big and everybody’s buying off the plan. And these freemarket, deregulated, anti-elitist prerogatives of Gold Coast society, so widely criticised by the nation’s principal establishments, have remained an attractive proposition to ‘middle Australia’. In an independent report produced by KPMG and the University of Queensland, released by the Gold Coast City Council in 2003, it was reported that inward migration to Gold Coast City accounted for a growth of 42,000 persons between 1991 and 1996, 85% of whom were from interstate.

No other single locality on the Australian continent even came close to challenging the Gold Coast for top spot [population growth]...by this measure, it can be fairly claimed that during the closing decades of the 20th century the Australian nation “created” a new big city – the Gold Coast. And if you consider that there are always very good reasons why the Australian nation has created each of their big cities over the past 200 years, then there must also be a very good reason why we have created the Gold Coast. (Salt in *Sunland Development brochure*: 2001)
CHAPTER NINE: Constructing Storeys – Gold Coast Development

The day begins with sunlight on the water, crisp cotton bed linen, perfectly brewed tea, soft breezes, dappled shade through louvres that enclose wide balconies from which to contemplate the coming day. The world awaits your pleasure. An express lift away from boutique shops, fine dining restaurants, up market cafes and coffee shops. Places to socialise. Places to walk and talk and swim and jog and workout. Lively places for play without even leaving your building.

(Aqua Development brochure: 2003)
The Gold Coast City Council has in recent years put much effort into legitimising the unique contribution of its architectural heritage. Many studies have been commissioned and released to the media encouraging the Gold Coast community to embrace its architectural difference. In 1997, a guide to the tall buildings of the Gold Coast was produced focusing on the quality and significance of Gold Coast highrise buildings. The guide, *Living High*, features 15 buildings constructed between 1950 and 1996.

The evolution of architectural form from the early 1960s and into the late 1990s is clearly in evidence at the coast. The early highrise buildings are very simple, rectangular forms, with balconies contained within the plan. In the 1970s and 1980s more fluid and plastic massing, plans and elevations were the norm. Buildings became taller and more articulated in fantasy-themed developments. Mid century modernism gave way to postmodern exuberance. (*Gold Coast Heritage Advisory Service 1997*)

The *Living High* document chronicles three major historical movements in highrise development on the Gold Coast, clearly identifiable by style and structure. Buildings constructed on the Gold Coast in the 1960s were regarded as ‘giants’ at the time, dwarfing their neighbours and generally reaching a height of ten to fifteen storeys. *Kinkabool*, *The Sands*, and the *Paradise, Garfield* and *Sun* towers were characterised by rectangular formations, cantilevered balconies, and sheer elevations. The buildings constructed in the 1970s and 1980s began to develop a functional resort ethic. They ranged from the *Iluka* building at 17 storeys in 1971 to the dramatic heights of the *Peninsula* at 45 storeys in 1982. Architects began to defy rectilinear formations and experimented with circular features and structures, the inclusion of unusual penthouses, and stepped, free plan designs.

In the 1990s, the long repetitive lines of previous structures began to fracture into multiple and split level plans. Some buildings, such as the *Moroccan* in Broadbeach, were made up of separate towers, each differing slightly in design and height. Radical and exuberant roof level decorations emerged as architects began to infuse their designs with Classical, Greco Roman, Tuscan and Spanish traditions. ‘Elaborate mansards, minarets, triumphal arches, parapets, pediments and circular colonnades’ (*Gold Coast Heritage Advisory Service 1997*) feature in a rampant experimentation with postmodern pastiche, not only in the buildings themselves but in the extensive grounds and landscaping elements that became part of the overall conception. Dramatic colours were also incorporated as designers used painted finishes to create illusions of complexity or to

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exemplify significant features. The *Grand Mariner* in Paradise Waters is a striking example of this radical shift from the previously subdued white, creams and pastels of the buildings constructed in the 1980s. It was rumoured that the vivid palette used on *Grand Mariner* was conceived to blend in with the vibrant tones of Gold Coast sunsets, thus the building changes colour as it rises from deep purple to radiant pinks and on to sky blue at the highest levels.

Progressions in the marketing and design of Gold Coast buildings are highlighted by the process of naming. The appropriation of names has always been inherent to the simulated experience procured by Gold Coast development. In the early days of expansion, post 1945, hotels, motels and the formative highrise buildings drew their names from Hollywood iconography, California, Miami, Mexico and even the American Midwest. *Florida Apartments, Aloha, El Jay's, Surfers Hawaiian, Hi-Ho, Ihuca* and *El Rancho* were all high kitsch representations, geared towards a rather naïve celebration of celluloid ethnicity.

These American names are commonplace, almost universal, on the Gold Coast. They were and still are used to fire the imagination of the Hollywood minded Australian public. For attracting local capital and customers the policy has been sound. The few long hairs who tried using Aboriginal names were knocked down in the rush of people hurrying to rival enterprises with names like Hollywood Gardens and so on. (Carter 1958: 31)

The second wave of naming in the 70s and early 80s is an obvious extension of the natural environment focussing principally on the beach and its associated activities. Buildings such as *Beachcomber, Golden Sands, Crystal Bay, Beach Palms, Breakers, Sunbird, Seashell, Sand Castles, Seacrest, Surfers Beach, Surfers City, Surf Parade, Surf Spray* and *Ocean Plaza* all reflect a distinctly tourist imperative, to conjure the principal attractions of sun, surf, sand (and sex). This is a direct reflection of the blatant marketing strategies employed in the 70s and 80s to attract visitors. The national perception of the city as a place for ‘Sun Surf and Sex’ has persisted because the packaging was simple and relevant to an era characterised by excess and rising fortunes. This is still how many Australians conceptualise the Gold Coast, despite further phases, and shows the definitive power of successful real estate marketing and design in characterising culture via image and desire.
In the 1980s evocative single words also emerged; more ambiguous, they reflected not so much the natural environment as the power and position of the buildings themselves as the developments began to reach new dramatic heights and imposing widths. Peninsula, Genesis, Xanadu, Parklane, Silverpoint, Atlantis, Centrepoint, Baronet, Princess Palms and Aristocrat all sought to reflect a nostalgically regal, dominant and imperial presence.

In the 1990s, naming reflected a purposeful shift away from South Pacific imagery to Mediterranean fantasies. Highrise names were a direct indication of their elaborate European and North African architectural flourishes. Santorini, Costa D’Ora, Contessa, La Grande, Paros, Phoenician, Scalinda, Villas de la Mer, Moroccan, Marrakech, Belle Maison, and Shaz Maisons evoked feelings of classical enchantment, which the assemblages celebrated. As the resort model flourished the names of buildings had shifted connotation from the Pacific to a concept derivative of globalised luxury. As sites of meaning and inspiration California, Mexico, Bali, Tahiti and Hawaii were no longer enough. Hollywood stars were now flocking to the resort centres of South America and the Mediterranean and the Gold Coast responded appropriately with its own eclectic mini-versions of these locales.

The onset of the new millennium has signalled a further shift in usage and naming. An upsurge in real estate markets has produced a spate of luxury residential development that focuses on ‘seachange’ living and streamlined style. The names of buildings currently under construction reflect this purposeful shift away from holiday to resident, from resort to lifestyle, from public to private. It is a language that does not seek to attract by evoking the luxury of excess and play as it did so superbly in the 80s and 90s. Now the language attempts to seduce the consumer with the promise of personal time and space: a luxury that it purports can only be bought and provided by the best in technological and architectural innovation. Zen, Windsong, Aqua, Circle On Cavill, Wings, Lumiere, Marquis on Main, Nexus, Q1, The Pinnacle, Aria and Air evoke a concentration on residence, lifestyle and facility as opposed to tourist driven holiday and resort development narratives. The billboards that line new building sites propose the onset of ‘new worlds’ of luxury. Advertisements hiding huge holes in the ground proclaim, without a hint of irony, an ‘Essentially Queensland’ lifestyle. Though many of these developments are in competition, the optimistic language they employ is similar. They may concentrate on features specific to a certain locale such as Surfers Paradise, the Broadwater, Main Beach or Broadbeach, but the promotional rhetoric underpinning the sell is largely
indistinguishable from one document to the next. It is an alluring language of privilege and sophistication which seduces by simulating perfect environments where the constraints and pressures of postmodern life are neutralised by technology. The prevailing discourse features alchemy, harmony, time, seclusion, air and light with many new development highrises such as *Air* also currently advertised as ‘sold out off the plan’. Many people, it seems, are willing to pay for the pleasure of a repackaged, high-tech, stimulating but comfortably stylish life where the lights come on automatically, the room adjusts its own temperature and the pool cleans itself.

It is a real estate sales movement that draws heavily on postmodern urban theory and a maturing of the Gold Coast promotional ethic. Development firms have become articulate in analysing urban trends and utilise this knowledge to market their buildings not only as attractive assets but also as ideas. Billboards and display centres feature slogans and phrasing that attempt to redefine architectural language. Highrises have now become ‘vertical villages’, swimming pools are now ‘your private beaches in the sky’ and development has emerged as ‘third millennium planning’.

New Millennium Architecture is a combination of technique, materials, and sophistication, imbued with the warmth and humanity of historical architecture. The fashion for ornate decoration has commonly served to mask less than flawless technique. New Millennium Architecture, by contrast, is as deeply interested in craftsmanship as in creativity. Coming into the space of the contemporary building you must perceive the dynamism of the geometry, the energy emanating from the design, the materials and the colours that set it apart. Aria is air: an element of alchemy that in ancient times represented Nature and gives to this building its specific identity. *(Sunland Development brochure: 2003)*

In what has evolved as a complex, high-end strategy, promotional sales offices, material and brochures for ‘third millennium’ investments are becoming increasingly indulgent and sophisticated. No expense is spared to create the seductive and stylish effects of something that is as yet not there. Sales offices have become miniature theme parks dotted across the landscape; environments constructed to simulate the experience of living. Extravagantly outfitted, these ground level sites are often the size of houses, inside which the effect of living in the sky is rendered through a combination of design, lighting and decorative effects. The high gloss brochures are an extension of this simulation, attempting to render the texture and experience of the impending buildings. Most feature full-page digitally produced photographs of people living in a building that is not yet
built. The surrounding environments are manipulated via a combination of architectural drawings, landscape photography, interior decoration and digital enhancement to produce whole rooms, situations and settings which emphasise the idea and potential of the site.

New millennium developers seek to create difference through visual and rhetorical evocation. Apartments are re-categorised as ‘private residences’, ‘lodges’, ‘garden terraces’, ‘sky homes’, and ‘outdoor rooms’. *Windsong*, an Albany Corporation project, features a combination of private conservatories, ferneries and powder rooms, and lounge rooms in the *Waterline Broadbeach* are listed and designed as ‘media rooms’. Other hyper-extravagant inclusions in new millennium buildings include; ‘specially commissioned finishes’, ‘residents lounges’, ‘private theatrettes and cinemas’ and ‘tanning decks’, ‘heated lap pools’, ‘observation decks’, ‘residents lounges and business centres’, ‘wall kitchens’, ‘steam rooms’, and ‘recreational pavilions’. The floor plans in most brochures also include a ‘schedule of finishes’ that detail down to the last ‘Cosmopolitan’ chrome toilet roll holder and ‘Daino Beige Sandstone’ tile, the brand, colour, texture and design of all relevant fixtures and designs – perhaps necessary informative detail when the building does not exist. But despite the ubiquitous and sophisticated rendering of brochures, artists’ impressions, models and display apartments, a buyer is still required to ‘imagine’ his or her potential space rather than view it in real time. To a degree, the Gold Coast’s rapid development cycles have meant this has often been the case, but what has changed is the increasing sophistication of the promotional process: the highrise sales pitch on the Gold Coast – and its series of simulated products and experiences – has shifted from maverick speculation and tourist driven consumption to a more distinct branding. These developments are pushed towards a certain social strata in a localised process of exclusivity similar in style to current residential philosophies emerging in Las Vegas.

We’re the place that’s made living – and playing – in Las Vegas more luxurious than visiting. Offering impeccably crafted residences, lavish personal services, priceless privacy and security, and preferred membership in the exclusive Stirling Club. Enjoy epic dining created by famed chef and restaurateur Charlie Palmer, plus a European anti-aging spa, tennis, indoor and outdoor swimming, gala entertainment, and unparalleled pampering. All just steps from the Strip. And a beautiful bonus not found on the Strip: Nevada’s favourable tax climate for
primary residents. Make sure you don’t make the mistake of missing our last Tower. (*Turnberry Place Advertisement*; 2004)

New millennium apartments on the Gold Coast such as *Aqua* by Niecon Developments focus on the elements but do so in ways that distinguish them from the ideas that underpinned nature-derivative naming in the 80s. Water here is not surf but ‘the essence of living’ with ‘soul stirring views’ of the ‘ever changing waterscape’, which ‘enrich and enliven’. The catch phrase of *Lumiere*, one of the Sunland Group’s current developments, is ‘enlightened living – private residences on the Broadwater’ focussing on the ‘style, location, and the sheer tranquillity of it all’. The ‘new millennium apartments’ are billed as ‘vibrantly fluid’ they ‘embrace the concept of light, space and natural airflow’.


FKP Properties’ development, *Marquis on Main*, and the Sunland Group development, *Circle on Cavill*, are attempting to carve niches in the already extensively developed areas of Main Beach and Surfers Paradise. Their pitches are noticeably sassier, younger, faster but are still infused with the superior lifestyle rhetoric currently driving residential development. The pamphlet for *Marquis on Main* takes a high tech viewpoint; gone are the grandparents walking kids by calm waters and couples having coffee on crisp white sheets. Instead, CD Roms, mobile phones and architectural plans that look like network cabling feature on iridescent silver pages conjuring a ‘space age lifestyle’. The marketing approach appropriates the idea of a portal, stressing the inclusion of ‘state of the art automated lighting and communications systems’ while the opening page of the document invites the reader to, ‘enter the Marquis’. Despite these and other ‘smart tower’ assertions, the pitch reveals a complete ignorance of Huxley’s dark future vision, by proclaiming the *Marquis* as: ‘A brave new place where time, space and lifestyle have been taken to the next level and beyond’:

For a millennia, humanity has pondered two eternal questions. The relativity between time and space and the nature of the pursuit of luxury. At the Marquis, the walls dividing time, space and luxury haven’t just been crossed. They’ve been redefined forever. (*FKP Properties brochure*; 2003)
Illustration 39: *Chevron Renaissance Resort*, development model, Surfers Paradise, Gold Coast 2004

Illustration 40: *The Marriott Hotel and Resort*, Surfers Paradise, Gold Coast 2003
But like many manifestations of new millennium intertextuality the point of this commodified real estate process is not to reference the ‘original’ (even rhetorically) but the endlessness of imitation; to create a ‘new’ progressive code by sampling and cutting without context. As we have seen the Gold Coast has been founded on derivative and sampled processes and the language of signs well before and during the re-formative stages of postmodernism. In the past these borrowings may have been too literal, too direct or even accidental consequences of a rather naïve new frontier aesthetic. Today, with advances in technological processes and an informed sense of application and control, the urban ‘mix’ is not as weak. Its breaks and cuts are less discernible. The ‘mix’ is no longer just derivative, but a stylisation of the already stylised, therefore a progressive and nuanced code; a discursive process relevant to all forms of culture from real estate to writing to electronic music because as Baudrillard suggests the commutation process has usurped symbolic exchange. ‘There has been an extermination (in the literal sense of the word) of the real of production and the real of signification.’ (Baudrillard 1993: 7)

To this end the new millennium phase of highrise architectural design on the Gold Coast (though not included in the Gold Coast Heritage Advisory Service Living High document which was produced in 1997) represents the most extensive shift thus far in the city’s development history. The sheer scale and scope of new millennium development on the Gold Coast is marking the city’s urban formations most comprehensively with parallel shifts in Council designated streetscaping, public amenity, and traffic zoning. Whole precincts in Surfers Paradise, Broadbeach and Southport for example have undergone major aesthetic transfer. For while Gold Coast highrise development has always been progressive, the city’s major precincts have retained a
certain outmoded urban tone decreed by older developments and town planning. As the new millennium buildings rise, they change with them the surrounding blocks, malls, streets and urban precincts some of which have remained largely unchanged and therefore dated in terms of new frontier style. And while this totalising sense of re-urbanisation can have detrimental effects (explored in a subsequent section of this chapter) the change is viewed by many as refreshing, overdue and a project previously unable to be instigated by the Gold Coast City Council alone. Driving through Surfers Paradise today you can be taken aback by the transformation. Scenes, landmarks, shopping centres, arcades and derelict, boarded or vacant sites you thought would never move or change have suddenly gone and the sensation of moving through the city is no longer as familiar as it seems to have been for some time. This sense of burgeoning potential projected by the new millennium formations had for some time been missing from Surfers Paradise, which, like many coastal strip precincts on the Gold Coast, was never meant to be familiar or recognisable long term.

**Nostalgia and the New Frontier**

Erasure hurts. You are driving down your old street and you do not recognise it. It is not your childhood street, it is not the street of your family home, it is a street you lived in six months ago. You lived there for nearly two years, for what is in this city a long time. You remember contrasting images about this place, a shaky neighbourhood on the water line of the bay, a cast-off on the calm side of the sea. You remember it as a poor suburb, a rough suburb hinged on the edge of beauty. Often you felt lucky to be there. Sometimes when screams ran out into the night, you didn’t. You recall lounging around in your three-storey walk-up high enough to see the water but low enough to catch the breeze, watching pelicans fly over. You tried not to notice the incessant traffic running on the highway side of the building because there were good sounds too, the clinking of ropes and chains against masts, birds eating berries on an old umbrella tree. You remember how you saw it for two years. How you saw it every morning when you walked along the water, north past the tackle shop that no one ever seemed to visit except a fat sausage dog holding vigil on the footpath outside. You remember the dog and the orange weather proof coats strung to the roof of the shop, flapping like fluorescent ghosts in the breeze; past the rows of two and three storey walk-ups kept clean by the retired or run down by the needy. It wasn’t a glamorous place but it was a place where everyone could
walk. You don’t remember cranes, or great holes in the ground or scaffolding or cordoned off footpaths. You stop the car.

The place that you lived in is gone. Not a single remnant of its form remains. You have never lived in a place that has disappeared and it feels strange. You don’t know how to react. Your bedroom, your kitchen, the bathroom, that veranda where you watched over the park, all of it, not there. The block of units next door is gone too, and the house on the other side, and the house after that. Now a six-foot high blue fence stretches along the edges of these blocks where all those buildings and all the people in them used to be; along it run words about light and living, about luxury and that water you used to look at.

The fence looks impressive from the car but it’s really just painted plywood connected by steel rods and poles wedged into concrete slabs. It doesn’t have a foundation because it’s temporary; it is there to protect the worksite, from theft but also, more importantly, to shield the ugliness of it. Under the fence and between the gaps you can see a gaping grey-brown hole, a wound in the ground metres deep that the new development will fill in. On the perimeter of the hole, bits of lighter coloured material, bits of your old building, stick out into the open space threatening to fall in. You notice that the signs advertising this new world don’t use the suburb name Labrador. They use the much more fashionable Broadwater – an old dog up to new tricks.

The scaffolding runs right to the edge of the footpath so if you want to look you have to stand on the road. The cars that are lined up along the street are different too. You dodge your way past a Mercedes, a Lexus, an Audi and two black and blue four wheel drives, which are in turn narrowly missed by trucks, utes and trailers full of workmen, dogs, plaster and cement.

The noise is deafening.

Up the street, you can hear windows smashing but it is not like the sounds you used to hear around here late at night, it is a sound that shakes the earth under you for moments at a time. It is a building coming down. The high frequency splinter of broken glass, windows and doors crushed in an instant. You look down the road but can’t see anything except a cloud of grey-coloured dust rising up and travelling out across the water.
Closer to you a couple stand outside a sales office leaning in to a woman talking to them as the next crash comes. They do not look up. They have high gloss pamphlets in their hands. In front of the sales office, the developers have planted a perfect garden and you wonder why they bother. It will go eventually – the office, the showroom and the garden replaced by the very big idea they sell. Miniature versions of a huge building to come: the sales office, the tiny house built in a day, an apartment plucked out of the plan and put onto the ground. Inside and out, the office is spotless white, its fixtures radiating expense, the bright gleam of crisp surfaces, freshly cut glass and angles finishing at the right time. From out here you can’t tell whether it looks like a cage or a sanctuary so you don’t go in. You get back in your car.

You drive down the street. Every two hundred meters or so is another hole, another crane, another sign filled with words trailed by lots of perfectly rounded zeros. As you round the bend, you feel the need to pull over again. Where your local shops used to be, where you bought your favourite fish and chips and ate them at the edge of the sea, is the biggest hole of them all. At the end of it, one solitary house which has refused to go. The hole stops at the edge of the timber house and continues to carve right around it. In the shadow of the looming cranes, this stubborn tiny home looks like it might just blow away.

You drive off.

It’s not as if you didn’t expect it. After all, you’ve lived in this city for a while. Redevelopment was one of the reasons you left the unit, remember? Rising rent and construction: you could see it coming. But what you can’t believe is the pace and contagion, the rapidity of erasure. The character of the whole area, spurred on by these coveted blocks, has completely changed. It’s no shock that a suburb regarded not too long ago with scorn can be remodelled and repackaged so blatantly as desirable. What is a shock is that the domino effect of this idea can disseminate so quickly. The buildings that stood here just a few months ago were not all old. Some of them were not even middle aged and yet they are gone, suddenly obsolete, just like the buildings they once replaced. Such are the brutal terms of a short shelf life.
The new buildings rise quickly. All the plans, scams and negotiating that may have taken years, has borne so much premature fruit. The council have relented. The buildings will go up high; there will be no caps. The developers have confiscated the last bit of shoreline they could see. The people are coming to pay half a million and more for cat boxes. And with buyers waiting, everything is adapting to service the new style of resident and tourist who'll pay for the privilege. Even the old petrol station’s had a renovation. Everyone wants to make a buck: restaurants, cafés, and new wholesome franchised businesses with glossy signage are springing up. The older shops, most of them run by families, with their clapped out display trays and tired signs, are hopeful in the face of all these new chains. The council is fixing the pavements with the money they’ve made from the sell out, and the bus stops, covered in graffiti and still bearing the scars of late night rage, are being remodelled and replaced.

You wonder about all the people who used to live here, just like you. You wonder where they’ve all gone.

But this is not a city where you are rewarded for such nostalgia: in the new frontier the process of development is an exercise and an experience where negativity and fallout have been redefined – the new frontier citizen is often held accountable in relation to the perpetuation of the hyperreal mantra: erasure is opportunity, expurgation is reurbanisation, progress is inevitable and change benefits.
This is what I like about Jade’s gaming logic. She’s not cheating thinking she’s going to get away with it. It will come out in the end, but it will only come out so far. Jade reasons that when someone eventually does find out, the best way to play it, to avoid getting stung, is to play off other cheats. You can protect yourself by making sure that your operations are plugged into other covert systems. Every system is protected by another. The key, Jade says, is to remain peripheral but connected. There will always be assemblages bigger than your own, systems you can’t see because they encompass you, but conversely there will always be sections of the grid you can see, places where you can operate. You never warehouse, Jade says, in a white elephant. (Breen, from *Ante Up*)
When is a lie white? When it is as white as the light here? As light as white sand in the wind? As white as a white collar? When you have been chased out of a territory where do you go? You go to the places where you are unknown. Where your history is now as clean as it was once chequered. Where you can rename yourself from the missing and the dead. Claim anything. For who is there to deny you?

Cities like the Gold Coast and Los Angeles have no apparent historical substratum. Los Angeles rose up out of the desert, the Gold Coast out of the swamp. From the beginning, they were elaborate concepts to be envisaged and sold, founded by con artists and entrepreneurs. The only legend they adhere to is the momentum of enchanted reinvention. In his studies on spatiality, Edward Soja refers to sites within greater Los Angeles such as Orange County as *scanscapes*, places where distinctions between what is real and what is imagined are so enmeshed that subterfuge becomes habitual (Soja 1996: 28).

Under these transcendental conditions, it is no surprise that image and reality become spectacularly confused, that the difference between true and false, fact and fiction, not only disappears but also becomes totally and preternaturally irrelevant. It represents the landscape of hyperreality as a fraudulent or better, metafraudulent scanscape, an ecstatic playground for the habitactics of make-believe. (Soja 1996: 29)

The term Soja applies to the new frontier in *Thirdspace*, is exopolis: cities that are at once ‘orbiting outside’ and ‘no longer what a city used to be’ (Soja 1996). He suggests that the exopolis is a simulacrum itself, that it is a replica of a city that has never existed. In order to illustrate this position he refers to Baudrillard’s ‘procession of simulacra’ as being powerfully present in the new frontier, ‘a situation in which simulations increasingly take precedence over the realities they are simulating’ (Soja 1989: 28). While the overriding presence of simulations is certainly a defining feature of the exopolis, this saturation is not complete nor is it ever absolute. No city today is a totalising simulacrum and if it were, it would no longer constitute a series of resemblances but something else altogether. On the Gold Coast, for example, the procession of simulacra still relies on its proximity to the natural forms of the Pacific Ocean and the Hinterland, however homogenised or manipulated the products which reference these sites may have become. The existence of an absolute simulation in the form of a city would require the creation of a territory outside of and beyond the Earth’s biological vision. It is the stuff of science
fiction, not because it is impossible or a fallacy but because it would require a distance from Earth – from the textures and geographies we recognise as ‘real’. Even the word progression denotes a passing through, over or along a more fixed space or temporal position. New frontier cities insert, subsume and overlay the properties of imitation across the natural fabrics of their topographies, including their people, but they do not erase them completely. After all, it was the native habitats of both Los Angeles and The Gold Coast that originally defined their trajectories. The profit potential of ocean locations, temperate environments, and rejuvenating experiences led typically to the development of new frontier urban philosophies of commodification and appropriation in these cities. The intersection of these natural forms with the concrete (or plastic/collapsible) urban formations of the city defeats the recognition of omnipotent fantasy. Even when people live in completely manufactured and re-sedimented terrains, as they do in the ubiquitous canal estate suburbs of the Gold Coast, they do not perceive the ground beneath their feet, or the water that surrounds them, to be anything less than real. The fish still jump in the canals and you can still be taken by a shark. The manufactured tributaries still connect to the sea. The point is not that new frontier cities are total simulations, but that they can be, and are, utilised in this way. It is a question of usage rather than of tangibility. This is why a culture of dissembling, fakery and manipulation persists in these cities; the simulation is a trick. It is never ever present.

It is a place of escape, a refuge from more conventional cities and environments. It is also a place where the conventional demarcations between work and play have been abandoned and the city exists for the sake of play rather than work. It is a place where ludus predominates over opus, where ludus produces opus and not the reverse. (Longhurst in Allom 2000: 31)

The basis of subterfuge requires slipping past or along a parallel plane, it requires an ability to mimic the processes of an already accepted territory and the ability to erupt spectacularly out of and disappear quietly into the fabric of the surrounding world. These are the tactics Deleuze and Guattari describe in A Thousand Plateaus in reference to the ‘war machine’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 351-423) and they are the same tactics the Mafia employed to a large extent in Las Vegas. In this context, the con artist acts as a self-perpetuating war machine. Not undertaking warfare as a physical or territorial subject, rather s/he assumes ‘its essence’, ‘when the war machine with infinitely lower “quantities” has as its object not war but the drawing of a creative line of flight, the
composition of a smooth space and of the movement of people in that space’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 422). Aided by the heavily mediated and changeable environments the new frontier produces, con artists, like war machines, ‘take shape against the apparatuses...’, ‘they bring connections to bear against the great conjunction of the apparatuses of capture and dominion’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 423).

The new frontier city is ‘no longer what a city used to be’ (Soja 1996: 239) however it does rely on a process of interpretative resemblance that renders it both similar and unique. It constructs rather than builds, copies rather than emulates so that the resemblance operates simultaneously with its difference. The proliferation of injected, simulated experiences via architecture, goods and communications, creates in new frontier cities an additional layer of experience, a new version of Soja’s Thirdspace.

...spatiality and the inquisitive spatial imagination have recently entered, as a vital third mode of practical and theoretical understanding, what has heretofore been seen as an essentially two-sided socio-historical project. (Soja 1996: 6)

The notion of Thirdspace as another realm operating adjacent to binary principles has resulted, Soja says, from the ‘re-balanced trialectics of spatiality-historicality-sociality’ (Soja 1996: 16); a postmodern movement illustrated effectively by the consumption of the term itself in a diverse range of contemporary sub- and popular cultures. Thirdspace, with its potent significations of the Other as outside of, above and/or beyond, has been utilised by scientific, technological, academic, political and alternative movements. ‘Thirdspace’ is, for example, at once a UK produced feminist literary journal, a feature film complete with Thirdspace merchandising and a web site selling products supposedly modelled from extra terrestrial blueprints. In the last case Thirdspace literally becomes the scam. However, most usages of Thirdspace suggest the machinations of an adjacent or alternative territory; another realm of experience. Thirdspace was also the key term used by technology giant Sony in their 2001 advertising campaign for the new game machine, Playstation Two. The release of Playstation 2 heralded what Sony called the development of a third level of interactive programming. ‘The alchemists have a saying: “Tertium non datur.” The third is not given’. (Winterson 1998: 57)

That there have been pronounced changes in the spatial organisation of the modern metropolis over the past thirty years, and that these changes
are inducing significant modifications in the ‘urban condition’ and the
ways we interpret it is the provocative premise of the third discourse.
(Soja 1996: 234)

The third layer is an invisible territory; a flat plane on which everything slips and
develops a multiple consistency. The recognition of this zone and its relationship to the
relatively grounded and modernist layers of production that precede and are included
within it, results in the scamscape. Taking account of it might equally result in potentially
more equitable distributions and practices – hence Soja’s emphasis on the need for a
trialectics so that we can work with Thirdspace. In the new frontier city, Thirdspace
engagements are dominant, thus the traversals between legitimate and fraudulent modes
of activity are easier to execute than they are in Euro cities.

In Thirdspace Soja outlines a definitive example of the scamscape at work. He writes of
the propagation of telemarketing boiler rooms, ‘named for the intensity of activity in the
barest of spaces’ in Orange County, California (Soja 1996: 275). The business of
telemarketing is not material and occurs for the customer in disembodied telephonic
space. The major object is the sale of ‘invisible’ investment products with, more often
than not, non-existent outcomes.

It is not uncommon for some of the boiler rooms to have a gross take of
$3 million a month, certainly competitive with narcotics and, it would
seem, infinitely more wholesome. During one police raid, a placard was
found on a salesman’s desk. Effectively capturing the sincerely
duplicitous honesties of the boiler room, another of the magical
enclosures of the Exopolis, it proudly proclaimed: WE CHEAT THE
OTHER GUY AND PASS THE SAVINGS ONTO YOU. (Soja 1996:
276)

This industry is also prevalent on the Gold Coast with a proliferation of outlets operating
both legally and illegally. Telemarketing positions dominate local newspaper classified
advertising and the highly transient nature of the population feeds the continual frenzy
for telephonic sales with call centres, selling everything from placemat advertising in
Returned Servicemen’s clubs, to package holidays, to bogus retail coupons. The
Queensland Department of Tourism, Racing and Fair Trading has recently released a
pamphlet for consumers warning of the dangers of telemarketing. This suggests that
control over these and similar tele-commercial methods is often tenuous.
They say you’ve just won a prize, or they want you to buy a subscription or a vacation, or they’re promoting a fabulous product, or they want you to give to a charity. But you have to pay them money first. These telephone offers can be scams. The scammer will: Refuse to give you time to make up your mind. Refuse to mail you information. Pressure you to give credit card details. Require payment for a free prize. Offer to send a courier to collect the money. Don’t be fooled: Don’t believe the hype about an exciting promotion. Don’t disclose personal information like credit card details. Don’t be pressured into making a decision. Don’t be afraid to complain. They want you to be afraid so they have more time to scam others and avoid detection. Get advice from family, a friend or carer, or Office of Fair Trading. Don’t be afraid to hang up and say no thank you. (Queensland Government brochure. 2003)

The ubiquitous irruption of blatant commercial manipulations into the new frontier environment suggests that the relationship between the state and those operating outside of but adjacent to its striations and mechanisms of control is, in effect, a war of images and visibility. The state enacts public relations strategies and advertising, in the form of public interest campaigns, in order to neutralise the operation of businesses outside of its own code. By contrast, the entrepreneurial, non-conventional and/or scamscape business begins clandestinely but concentrates on the collective semiotics and codes of the new frontier – the leisure precincts, the vernacular of resorts, escapism and advertising – thus covertly utilising the language of a commercialism that is for the most part state endorsed.

On the Gold Coast, the prevalence of these kinds of intangible operations has led to a situation in which some successful telephonic businesses have moved dramatically into the public eye. It is as if the proliferation of scams has created a climate in which other kinds of high pressure telephone sales techniques seem somehow more acceptable in business practice. Companies such as Trendwest and Accor operate massive corporate-linked enterprises where the core business is a manipulative and often ethically questionable sale of leisure. Their relationships with international hotel and development chains grants them legitimacy but also creates monopolised flow-on effects in the realm of package holiday, time-share and real estate sales through hard sell ‘seminars’ which ‘reward’ attendees with a short ‘gift’ holiday to tempt them to feel obligated to buy the product on sale. This movement across the terrain of Thirdspace to the city’s corporate frontlines illustrates how commercial inter-relationships in the new frontier are consistently contradictory and indissociable.
**Entering The Scamscape**

You have been told by the voice on the phone to arrive at *The Grand Mercure Hotel* Broadbeach at 1pm sharp. The hotel encompasses the *Oasis* shopping centre, once the site of the Gold Coast’s first resort development, the *Lennons Hotel*. You park underground. You enter the foyer of the Hotel and instead of making your queries at the reception desk crowded with general tourists and a Japanese tour group, you ask the concierge. He directs you to a wing on the left of the foyer. Two young women greet you, ask your name, tick it off a list and invite you to take a seat. The area they direct you to is not visible from the foyer. The furniture is expensive, a combination of exotic materials and rich colours, deep purples and rich browns, but in the sparse hotel environment it looks temporary, doll like, as if it could, quite naturally, be hollow.

A salesman comes out of a door. He has a folder in his hand. He joins you where you are sitting, checks your name again and asks you a few questions about how much you know about what you are about to do. You don’t say much. You notice other sales people and clients seated in similar formations in the entrance section. Your salesman asks you to enter another room and sit with him in some more expensive furniture. He asks you a couple more questions and explains that you are about to see a presentation and go on a tour. You agree but you are not really interested. You just want the free holiday you have been offered over the phone. He asks you to follow him into the presentation room.

The room is full of people. A corporate video is showing. There seem to be no seats so you make your way to the rear of the room where there are benches set up to lean on. Some other salesmen insist on you taking their position and they retreat to the back. When you protest they make a lot of noise, and smile at you and pat you on the back, their white teeth glowing in the low light. You take the seat.

You are in a small auditorium, attention drawn to a large LCD screen mounted above a fake fireplace. Underneath, large white candles are burning in ornate fixtures and the shelves surrounding the presentation area are filled with gleaming accessories, photo frames, books and more candles. You wonder who the people in the pictures are. The video explains that you are being offered the opportunity of a lifetime. A one-off chance to join an exclusive worldwide club of resorts, hotel chains and construction companies who all want you to holiday smart and forever. On the screen ‘average’ couples old and
young, some with families some without, are talking about their experiences. The video pauses. The lights go up.

John, your host speaker, enters the room. There’s an air of talk show about his presentation as he rumbles along, firing jokes and innuendo, every single word timed and researched to meet its fullest potential. The sales men and women up the back have been trained to laugh, to create atmosphere and they do so enthusiastically; so much so that you think they might actually mean it: your salesman nods a few times in your direction.

John has a pen and a whiteboard. On it, he explains in acronym format the meaning of the Accor group, a massive corporate structure behind this enterprise. He attempts to impress you with their size, their strength. ‘Bigger than us all’. He then asks people in the audience questions for which he already has the answers, writing predetermined averages on the board. He calculates that if you holiday for 21 days a year at an average cost of $150 a night you would spend $3,150 a year. He then calculates, with your assistance, that this will cost you for the next eighty years approximately $250,000. Then he asks you to consider inflation. He does not mention how much it costs to join the club.

The video plays, pictures of idyllic locations in Australia and around the world surface, clear beautiful voices intone. The lights come back on. John tells you that you will now be invited to view the incredible facilities the Accor group has to offer and you are ushered out another door, your salesman by your side. With the rest of the crowd, you make your way to the elevators. The staff are confident and energetic, making jokes and engaging the guests in small talk, taking John’s lead, keeping the mood up. You can imagine them in briefing rooms discussing raucously the finer points of your manipulation.

You’re quiet. You can tell your salesman is sizing you up as a tough nut but he won’t give up. He starts telling you about himself as the elevator rises 22 storeys. You know that later, when he has you in his grip, he’ll manipulate to full effect any answer you give him so you attempt to remain vague.

First stop is an empty penthouse apartment at the top of the tower. The view stretches for miles out over the ocean and to the hinterland in the north and southwest. The
apartment is spacious and beautifully decorated. Exhausted already, you immediately feel like falling on the crisp white bed covered in dark rose petals. All round you, gleaming white, chrome surfaces are complemented by a confident and contemporary use of bold colours and smart furnishings; the colour scheme continues here punctuated by rich purple and hot fiery pinks. The salesman takes note of your impressions, pointing out features and highlights as he talks about the adventures he’s had in other such apartments.

Down the hall, a lookout and presentation area has been constructed two storeys high. The ceiling has been opened out by a wide wood and steel spiral staircase. The salesman appears to want to slow down here. You’re moving too fast. He wants to share this view with you for it have full effect and he tries again to build on your trust by asking you questions about yourself. He’s good and you have to resist the temptation to prove yourself. Turning to the wall on the left, he starts expositing on the display: a collection of large glossy photographs, corporate logos and promotional material. But you’re covering old ground and when you can only muster a nod, he finally invites you upstairs. On your way up you notice other clients have fallen victim to the prenuptial friendly sales pitch, laughing and running off at the mouth, trailing behind their salespeople like donkeys. Others, like you, emanate a silent and worried body language. As people stream past you, the air is thick with chemical fragrances and expectation.

Upstairs the company have encased themselves in a wing on the top floor of the hotel. You notice staff not engaged in sales at the ends of long corridors drinking coffee, talking and exchanging paper. You see them as pieces, moving and shuffling quickly. It is Valentines Day and you notice a woman ferrying a bouquet of flowers. Your salesman guides you through another expensively outfitted promotional area, an open foyer and eventually into the boiler room. Here the noise of exchange is frenzied. High up in this sealed room with a view of one of the world’s most successful holiday cities, up to eighty couples or singles are seated at identical round tables facing a salesman each. Your man selects a vacant corner table. He wants your full attention. You notice he has two notepads, some promotional material and a set of four colour-coded pens: blue, black, red and green. Looking around you notice all the salespeople have the same arsenal. He places the promotional material on the floor, takes a deep breath and launches.
He asks you questions about how you holiday, recording and calculating the responses in a different colour pen. He draws neat lines down the centre of the blank pages of his notebooks, talking quickly and assuredly about the unique benefits of the club. He tells you anecdotes about his brother taking advantage of his club membership and the money he has saved. He talks about the club as a smart investment, the only way to holiday for the rest of your life. A way that will enable your money to be converted into points that will accumulate again every year for the next eighty years. He tells you this is not like the dead money you already spend which he circles in red. Instead, he highlights in the green column the points system and asks you, which one you would rather? You know he has an answer for any criticism or question you may have and a subsequent pen to write the response with. The drawing and circling and adding allows him to move and talk enigmatically, performing for you while you remain still. He waits for you to speak, jumps on any response, goes quiet at the appropriate moments, pulling back and then leaning in. He wants you to challenge him. He does this five days a week, three times a day.

He asks, so... would you like to join the club? You say no. He says, why not? And waits. You feel like saying I'm only here for the free holiday but you don't, you are in the game now and feel you have to respond. They have made you feel this way, they are putting effort in, and they want you to make it worthwhile. You say that you would like more time to consider the options. Your salesman tells you that this is the only time you will be able to take full advantage of the special membership, which entitles you to many more privileges than a standard membership. He highlights the difference between the two in black and blue pens. Pointing at the notepad, he asks you, which membership you would prefer? You say the special. He asks you again, would like to join the club? You say no. He doesn’t stop, he changes tack. He asks you where you have holidayed and where you would like to holiday. You respond. He reaches for the catalogue and opens it to the places you have mentioned pointing out the beautiful resorts you could stay at. He then produces a list of how much these resorts would cost you if you weren’t in the club. He asks you, just for argument’s sake, which is the better way. You tell him the points system is cheaper but not necessarily a system that is suitable for you at this time. You tell him your schedule is unusual and that you would prefer the spontaneity of choice. He counters, launching into a colour-coded sermon on investment.
He asks you if you currently own your own home. You tell him you rent. He says, *rather than paying money to landlords for the rest of your life, for holidays or for houses, you have the opportunity today to change that.* And perhaps use the money you save on holidays towards a house. He talks about smart lifestyle choices and the flexibility of the club system, one that would suit, he says, *even your hectic anarchic schedule.* He looks at you. He tries to make you feel guilty for not being smart with your money. He asks you again, *would like to join the club?* You say no. You say you find his line of questioning offensive and that you would like to end this session now. He is resigned, leans back in his chair. For a moment, you think you’ve won. Then he raises his hand and says, *I’ll just find out if it is ok for you to leave.*

A man approaches the table. Your salesmen tells him that you love the product, can see no fault in it but that you would like more time to consider. This isn’t true, but because the man is large and is leaning on the table in a threatening manner towards you, you decide to let it go. He listens to the salesmen for a few more moments, impatient. He is wearing a heavy gold watch and jewellery, his huge hands are splayed dramatically on the desk, he reminds you of a bouncer and effectively that is what he is, except here his role is not to kick you out but to keep you in. Finally he says, *if you do not want to join your salesman has obviously not done his job effectively, has not clearly explained the product.* You say that you understand the product clearly and that the salesman is not at fault, rather it has been your decision to decline at this time. The man reaches for the salesman’s pens and is about to ask you a question when you stop him.

*I am clearly not interested in this product,* you say, and find your manner extremely aggressive. You are pushing me into a decision I do not want to make.

*Game Over.*

The man looks you squarely in the eye to see how serious you are. He retreating saying, *we don’t want to do that, we most definitely don’t want to do that,* loud enough for the other clients to hear. He shakes your hand without looking at you and tells the salesman to organise your gift certificate. They leave you alone at the table.

You notice the mood in the room has changed. Caught in this air-conditioned vortex a plethora of tense frustrated people are silent in the face of their salesmen’s endless
circular spiels and you wonder at this stage if the tactic is to make you so exasperated that you sign just to be done with it or leave without your gift. But you'll stay, you have endured this much, you will leave with what they promised you in the first place. Your salesman returns and says that there will be a short wait. Another test.

He doesn’t attempt to talk to you this time. You have been caught in their grip for just over two hours. When you reach for the prospectus, he says rather aggressively, *if you're not interested just leave it here.*

You say no, you would definitely like to have a closer look at it. He eyes you suspiciously. Finally, it’s your turn. The salesman dumps you unceremoniously in the gift receiving area. A cheery man is seated behind a long desk. He asks you how you found the experience. You say that you found the sales pitch aggressive and unnecessarily pushy. He writes ‘*aggressive*’ on a piece of paper. He seems concerned. He listens. He asks you if you liked the product. You are so relieved to be on your way out that you say yes, just to be polite. A mistake. He reaches into a filing cabinet and produces a document.

*For our valued customers,* he says, *the ones who are genuinely interested in the product we have a special offer. We can extend to you a complimentary five-day holiday at either our Gold Coast or Sunshine Coast resorts. All we ask is that you attend a session at the resort during your stay to discuss the idea with some of our sales people further. If you take this offer, you will still be eligible for the special membership.*

You can’t believe it. Slumping back, you resign yourself to sitting out this last torture. Your reaction though, is enough to dissuade him.

*I guess that’s a no then.*

The nice man behind the desk stops smiling. His manner becomes efficient. He hurriedly shows you the terms and conditions of the gift holiday. He does not hand it to you but places the voucher some distance from you on the table and is standing to shake your hand before you have even picked the document up.

When you enter the lift, you notice you are shaking.
Refuge for Subterfuge: The Politics of Fraud and the New Frontier

The Gold Coast has long been riddled with the con, the take, the shady deal and the swindle. As a place of exile, it has harboured and continues to harbour many people whose dreams have turned sour in other major cities. The anonymity provided by the transient population affords a perfect cover for reinvention. There is a sense that any money is good money, any industry is legitimate as long as it survives, and perhaps this is a refreshing take on the idea of the operating élite. In the new frontier city an illegitimate or at least unconventional industry can not only be accepted but preferred. The entrepreneurial environment encourages outrageous, niche and cutting edge business propositions and products. Whereas traditionally-oriented resource, manufacturing and service driven municipal industries rely on supply to predetermined sectors, the market in the new frontier city is created, manufactured, fabricated – thus it does not necessarily require a tangible product or tangible outcomes to flourish. Postmodern capitalist environments hinge on the immediate effects and dispersions of such temporary conceptions.

The commercial landscape of the Gold Coast, for example, is reliant on a cyclical process of construction and deconstruction; highrises go up and come down, movie sets are erected then scrapped, massive tourist-related events thrust themselves into the landscape and disappear just as quickly, whole city precincts are implanted or repeatedly razed and reinvented. Thus the chameleonic environment requires people who can invent a market and incite desire in order to sell things before they exist. The type of operator the Gold Coast attracts is often the son or daughter of a more ‘restrictive’ state but can also be a local instilled with a mode of operation conducive to the Gold Coast and historically more characteristic of Queensland than southern states in Australia. This is particularly true of internationally infamous con man, Peter Foster, who was born and bred on the Gold Coast. He was selling fake Rolexes to his friends in primary school and running ‘nightclubs’ underage by the time he was seventeen (Langley 2003: 56). Foster’s family had always been into speculative ventures. His mother was instrumental in the heady days of Gold Coast real estate in the 1970s and 80s and is rumoured to be still his principal advisor.
Foster gained notoriety in the late 1980s when he was convicted of trade description offences in the UK regarding the bogus Bai Lin tea venture – a so-called ‘slimming tea’ which was nothing more than a cheap leaf bought in China and repackaged for the UK market. He remains more notorious, however, for his ability to align himself with beautiful, famous women, from page three girl Samantha Fox, to Cherie Blair, wife of the British Prime Minister. The media circus that surrounds his alliances means that these women, willingly or not, drive the hype surrounding his ventures, reputation and illegitimate products. Foster’s use of celebrity and media scandal suggests that he is both attuned to and tapping into the speculative potential of new frontier processes and he continues to utilise clever media manipulation to great effect. Foster returned to the Gold Coast in the wake of the Blair scandal and set out immediately to attract media attention by parading yet another beautiful but this time ‘mysterious’ woman around town. Speculation reached frenzied proportions and Foster claimed she was a dancer from Brazil. The woman turned out to be a stripper from the Gold Coast suburb of Nerang and the media loved it. Journalists were sent from Fleet Street to cover the story and the woman subsequently sold hers. The scandal, however, has guaranteed that Foster never pays for a meal. In *Stratagems of a Conman*, the still unpublished book that he wrote in jail, Foster suggests that, ‘a conman is one of the most prestigious and respectable professions you can pursue’ (Langley 2003).

In *Invisible Landscapes* urban analyst Tori Jones highlights, as part of a study on Surfers Paradise, the ‘peculiarity of Queensland’s social structure and political economy in an Australian context’. She notes that, ‘Queensland not only saw itself as lacking in identity, but set out to create one’ (Jones 2001: 12).

From the 1950s, recognising its underdevelopment in the national economy, and perhaps spurred by its weak cultural identity, the Queensland government vigorously encouraged growth. It achieved such through promoting an image of Queensland as a bastion of free enterprise, facilitating large scale, externally controlled investments, and forging close links with growth areas in the world economy. Queensland was open to any ideas that meant investment. (Jones 2001: 12)

The National Party, led by the now discredited Joh Bjelke-Peterson, extended an unflinching sense of control to all facets of Queensland’s social, cultural and economic life during an often corruptly constituted thirty-two year reign that was simultaneously marked by a lack of curbs on the activities of government-friendly players in the business
sector. Social and cultural domination was fuelled by anti-élitist, anti-intellectual attitudes, oppressive actions in relation to public order, and heavy handed administrative discourses that often directly contradicted the policies of the government (such as unregulated foreign investment) but served effectively to establish the public face of the party. In a damaging and traumatic cycle of propaganda, the derision levelled at Queensland by southern states, as a direct result of the National Party’s position, helped fuel suspicion of ‘outsiders’ that characterised a defiant Queensland spirit but ultimately helped to protect its maleficent government.

Queensland became in the national consciousness a flawed paradise, permeated by corruption and hypocrisy. The State Government imposed a highly prohibitive core value system on its people while it participated in and directly encouraged the development of unlawful and corrupt activities that continued until the 1987-9 Fitzgerald Inquiry into police conduct which revealed the depth of governmental complicity in corrupt and questionable practices.

The early eighties, however, epitomised the Gold Coast’s accelerated development and catapulted the city onto the national tourism and investment agenda as never before. That is, the region boomed during a contentious political period, its rapid growth to a degree enabled by mendacious public policies that encouraged exploitative business behaviour and undermined resistance.

In 1984 the Queensland Tourist and Travel Corporation was empowered by State Government to undertake joint ventures with private firms in resort development, most notably rezoning crown lands in areas of potential profitability for tourism. At the same time, Russ Hinze, Member for Albert and Minister for Local Government gained notoriety and a lengthy record of overriding local authorities that were seen to hinder large-scale property and construction development. (Jones 2001: 12)

The effects of this kind of politically developed history differ markedly from Australia’s other predominantly politically developed city, Canberra. The interventionist tactics of formative politics on the Gold Coast were in real terms subversive of normal regulatory frameworks: aggressive, uncontrolled, and not uncommonly criminal. During its equally accelerated growth in the same period, Canberra’s urban development was the opposite: planned, policy-driven, bureaucratically monitored, and focused through the social –
through discourses of ‘community-building’ and ‘public amenity’. Politics on the Gold Coast constituted a volatile economic playground were commercial interest consistently overran public interest. Interestingly, Canberra’s growth rate has slowed markedly under the current national government. This is not surprising given that the primary purpose of the city is to service and host Australia’s parliament, international relations and government. These bureaucratic systems reached peak proportions in the late 1980s and early 1990s then became subject to savage ‘cutbacks’ after 1996, since when there has been little else to stimulate continuing rapid growth. By contrast, the Gold Coast’s resident population continues to rise unabated. It might be observed that the Gold Coast has usurped Canberra’s initial development premise as a laboratory of radical and pioneering urban theory.

This city did not exist apart from a scant collection of beach huts in 1946. By the year 2000, it had overtaken Canberra to become the seventh largest city in Australia. And Canberra was planned and fed and nurtured from muddy paddocks from 1927. In fact, the comparison between the Gold Coast and Canberra is instructive. One town was designed and planned by bureaucrats; the other by free enterprise. And which city have Australians flocked to in the greatest number? (Salt in Sunland Development brochure: 2001)

Today a ‘peculiar’ reputation precedes the Gold Coast but rather than undermine acceptance (as the fallout from the Fitzgerald inquiry did for some time for Brisbane) the new frontier nature of the Gold Coast means that it reinvents and manipulates its chequered history into an unofficial imaginary. Its reputation attracts the kinds of personalities, thrill seekers, boosterists and con artists, as well as the speculators, entrepreneurs and risk takers, that the city relies on so significantly to perpetuate itself. The promise of such eccentricity also lures the tourists and a consistent stream of middle Australia seeking an environment in which to remake themselves. As Baudrillard suggests in The Gulf War Did Not Take Place, the desire for transmutation and simulation requires and allows for a series of falsified processes which have become symbiotically infused and enmeshed within the political and democratic fabric of Western Culture.

The fact that the production of decoys has become an important branch of the war industry, just as the production of placebos has become an important branch of the medical industry and forgery a flourishing branch of the art industry – not to mention the fact that information has become a privileged branch of industry as such – all of this suggests that
we have entered a deceptive world in which an entire culture labours assiduously at its counterfeit. (Baudrillard 1995: 43)

The Gold Coast is a city that markets itself and lives powerfully in the imaginary of the nation as a place of exile and redemption; a paradise of prospect; a hotspot where it is rumoured that dreams, failed or inspired can be translated into new money. An anti-establishment attitude and a proclivity for subversive success equates particular kinds of residents with the free market A-List and gets them invited to openings and parties. The Gold Coast not only provides refuge for international con men like Peter Foster but also elevates them to a level of hallowed celebrity; it is a city where men and women will jostle in restaurants to shake his hand.

We have a pressing need of simulation...and we have an immediate intuition of the means necessary to obtain it. This is indeed the fundamental advance of our democracy: the image function, the blackmail function, the information-function, the speculation function. (Baudrillard 1995: 75)

New frontier cities are the sacred turf of the self-made, thus the rise and even the fall of such personalities is fêted and seen as an example not only of the definitive Australian axiom of ‘having a go’ but as prime manipulation of the accelerated processes of the 21st Century. These characters, legitimate and illegitimate, form part of the city’s limitless constitution, ‘a masquerade of information’ (Baudrillard 1995: 40) that refuses the colonial, hierarchical and subjugated memory and instead chases a destiny more akin to the hopeful falsifications of the American Dream. ‘It is in their eyes a dream city. Most dreams are unattainable. This one isn’t’ (Courier Mail 2001: 17). Despite the fact that the ‘the dream’ is a permanent fabrication that proves inevitably to be elusive for most, the desire to break free of regulation seems somewhat closer in new frontier cities like the Gold Coast and Los Angeles. Regardless of background, means or method, these cities actively support and herald the proponents of free enterprise. In attempting to analyse Los Angeles’ anti-hero Howard Hughes, Joan Didion reflects on the secret longings of organised capitalism:

Why do we like these stories so? Why do we tell them over and over? Why have we made a folk hero of a man who is the antithesis of all our official heroes, a haunted millionaire out of the West, trailing a legend of desperation and power and white sneakers? But then we have always done that. Our favourite people and our favourite stories become so not
by any inherent virtue, but because they illustrate something deep in the
grain, something unadmitted... that we have made a hero of Howard
Hughes tells us something interesting about ourselves, something only
dimly remembered, tells us that the secret point of money and power in
America is neither the things that money can buy nor power for power's
sake, but absolute personal freedom, mobility, privacy. It is the instinct
which drove America to the Pacific, all through the nineteenth century...
to be a free agent, live by one's own rules. Of course, we do not admit
that. The instinct is socially suicidal, and because we recognise that this is
so we have developed workable ways of saying one thing and believing
another... There has always been that divergence between our official
and our unofficial heroes... In a nation that increasingly appears to prize
social virtues, Howard Hughes remains not merely antisocial but grandly,
brilliantly, surpassingly, asocial. He is the last private man, the dream we
no longer admit. (Didion 1968: 71-2)

The new frontier city appropriates such secret wishes, imaginings and admissions and
thrusts them into the mainstream of its dissident culture for popular consumption. As
Didion suggests, it is why California has been successful and it is, in turn, why the Gold
Coast has been successful. Both cities celebrate capitalist eccentricity and its associated
romanticism because the process of enchantment underscores every transaction. It is the
new frontier city's ability to so convincingly became whatever it chooses that, to various
extents from extreme to only passingly, defines the character of its people. In one form
or another many of them continually seek to reflect and re-enact the processes of
reinvention and liberation the (in)visible landscape promotes and suggests. The fast-
tracked rate of such absorption outruns any possibility of a singular urban or social
identity. Thus, to some, the malleable cityscape offers an irresistible invitation to exploit.
The proliferation of fraudulent, evasive and counterfeit activities in the new frontier city
is symptomatic of its ability to commodify and celebrate what would otherwise be a
concealed desire.

**Gambling and the Urban Relationship of Risk**

You hold a chip in your hand. You will bet on the collision of its placement with the spin
of a white ball, on what that will do. You project, you guess, you live in the moment,
breath held tight for the next. This game you play is how you live here, on the edge of
every moment; waiting for the delivery of something you cannot control. The game is
not about a bank of knowledge because you do not need that to play. The game is about
betting on the imminent, on the moments you are about to live, and it is that instant,
suspended between what you were and what you are about to be, which categorises this life; the oscillation on a knife edge between the victorious and the dispossessed.

No wonder the people come, to play in the simulated experience of their larger life. They come to the arenas that deal out the tiny fictions of their future, because here the risks are just as real as they are on the outside, only buffeted by the replacement of hard cash with tokens, coloured chips, disposable replicas, free drinks, curling lights and themed sounds. Here is a downtime pleasure, a simulated experience that hides its snag. It hides in the ceilings and inside the machines that program the percentage of loss. It hides inside the looney tunes that spill from a win, and the cartoonesque landscapes of the past that indicate where the player travels to through the machine; to the jungles of the Amazon, to the Incas, the Egyptian tombs, to Atlantis and the lost seas, back always to the present, to the Bermuda Triangles of multi-veiled reality.

And they said everyone to his fellow, “Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us”. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. (The Bible, Jonah 1.7)

Gambling is the one-sided conversation we perpetually have with divinity, with whatever forces that we believe define us. The spiritual correlations of gambling are now commodified but the act itself retains the same sense of prayer, sacrifice and ritual that characterised its development and power in ancient cultures. The casting of a die or other objects arose in many societies initially as just a game, a way of playing that concentrated principally on the binary oppositions of yes or no, on the fall of bits of painted shell, wood, stone and reed whose patterns either aligned or didn’t. But it quickly became the case that sacrificing something of value to the chosen side was believed to influence the outcome. The player’s belief that somehow the patterns which resulted held some kind of key to the mysteries of the earth, or a direct line to one or many gods, infused gambling with powerful prophetic connections.

Icelandic and Hindu mythologies mirror many Native American myths that claim that the gods destroy and recreate the world on a diceboard. (Gabriel 1998: HREF10)

The oracular nature of such beliefs and ceremonies meant that no distinction was drawn between the forces that controlled the fall of dice and the forces that were seen to
determine the seasons, the harvest, illness, famine or fecundity. The indiscernible agencies that navigated the trajectories of play were also intrinsic to life. Gambling, whether as an act of affirmation, control or conciliation, was frequently, therefore, not just a game but a ritual of serious and often fatal proportions.

In gaming mythology, when humans go up against the superbeings, the stakes include all of one’s possessions, slavery, arms, legs, eyes and heads – often in that order. Whole tribes and worlds are often destroyed and it is up to the hero gambler to restore them. (Gabriel 1998: HREF10)

Evidence of gaming and gambling can be found in Ancient Egypt, Greece and China, the spiritual and mythical texts of Hindu and other Indian cultures (such as the Mahabharata), and continues to be prevalent in the Indigenous cultures of North and South America. The historical associations of gambling with so called pagan religions contributed to the its secularisation in the west, a campaign that began with the Romans who instituted the first anti-gambling laws in an effort to prevent the use of wives and children as stakes (Gabriel 1998: HREF10). In the Dark Ages the Church began its long running and unsuccessful crusade against the profanity of gambling. But it was Pascal’s Theory of Probability, not guilt, shame or moral pressure, that signalled gambling’s final severance from the holy. When the fall of the dice became a mathematical contingency, the notion that the gods presided over the game was unmistakably brought into question.

In the Enlightenment, the impact of Reason as the marker of Western thought meant that some gamblers came to believe that chance could be overridden and the act, while it still retained some levels of sanctity, became more focused on individual ability or the illusion of such ability. Mathematical reasoning suggested that the game could be beaten and the gambler was now playing a new role, no longer in total submission to the gods but at war with probability and chance. In a further turn, then, the idea that a person could influence the outcome of a wager infused the gambling act with individual suspicions, theories and eccentricities.

The transition from an external sense of wishing or homage to a more internal and personal quest for power continues to affect the contemporary gambler. A process of seeking, of the desire to know and command still characterises the punter’s will; a calculated wish that contrives to influence the variables of an uncertain future to determine personal destiny. When a gambler has taken on the wheel of fortune and won,
the rush that follows the moment of victory has both financial and egotistical implications. The glory inherent in winning, whether the player is aware of it or not, results in a kind of sublime connection with and affirmation of the self. Ironically, the endless pursuit of these moments causes discontent.

Gambling is no longer spiritual or communal but individual. However, the seductive effects are just as consuming as they have always been. Gambling itself is the new religion, the casino is its shrine and the new god is technology. Without the aspiration for harmony or redemption, gambling is about pursuit of profit by the individual against other individuals or systems. In this way gaming today is as symptomatic of its age as it was when King Henry VII wagered not only the four great bells of St Paul’s cathedral but the image of St Paul which stood on the top of the spire (Davis-Goff 1996: 1). The brutality of gambling persists, even without ritual meaning. Not ameliorated by any belief that can justify its potential, it becomes a matter of personal, selfish desire. An obsession with self-projected destiny is what makes gaming ‘rather a rage than a passion’ (Davis-Goff 1996: 149). Contemporary gaming thus remains a ritual act full of terror and joy but it is no longer interpretable through shared notions of natural and divine lore, or prophecy, but only through the workings of the individual psyche.

In the 19th Century Thomas De Quincy said in a letter to his daughter:

“The incorrigible gambler has no faith and is not driven by it. He or she is driven only by a despair of their own luck, a rage and a hatred of consequence. Theirs is a furious desire to affront the dark malignant power inside them.” (in Davis-Goff 1996: 2)

It is no accident that the most widespread method of gambling today is the poker machine, a game that requires only one person and a machine. The attraction can be attributed to a number of factors. The poker machine heightens the individualised nature of the contemporary gambling experience as the player does not rely on nor compete with another person. It offers a kind of protection for the average punter from the high-pressure sites and stakes of gaming tables but it is also, like so many other postmodern experiences, a sedentary engagement that requires little or no movement and allows the player to own the space of the machine for the time he or she wants to play it. The player controls the level of risk, the terms and pace of the game and therefore entertains an illusion of self-determination and design. The audio-visual spectacle of the machine acts...
as a kind of private entertainment. The poker machine is a simulated table. The games it plays are all derivative of the traditional card game: alignments, suits, pairs and runs. The difference is that the tools of the experience are no longer tangible. They were first mechanised and are now digitised and pixilated; they talk, sing, flash and rattle. The poker machine is now Australia’s favoured wager. Given the popularity of the poker machine it is no surprise that the uptake of online gaming has been so rapid and successful. People are becoming more and more attracted to the socially disengaged gambling experience; to the secret, individual experience. This is a world enamoured of the button, the keystroke and the mouse.

If the poker machine is gamblers’ preferred territory, it is the Australian government’s exploited empire. In June 2001 the Australian Bureau of Statistics confirmed that poker machines throughout the country, including those at pubs and clubs, account for 58% of all gambling income at a total of $6,401 million. Poker machines account for 47% of gambling taxation revenue for government at a total of $1,786 million. There were a total of 10,853 poker machines in 13 casinos alone in Australia, generating a net profit of $1,021 million – an increase of 9% since 1999 – while the number of gaming tables, in comparison, continues to decline.

Casinos have become the enchanted arenas of the 21st century; with shopping malls and theme parks they are among the largest, most profitable sites of public experience in the western world. The gaming arena is the locus of postmodern society’s quasi-religious obsession with spaces of consumer spectacle.

Playing boards or fields are themselves altars of the sacred…Magicians, priests and gamblers all begin their work by circumscribing the consecrated spot. There is no distinction between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play. The turf, the tennis court, the chessboard and the pavement hopscotch cannot be formally distinguished from the temple or the magic circle. Game diagrams were built into roofing slabs of a temple in ancient Thebes, carved into the cloister seats of Medieval English churches and pecked into survey markers for the grid underlying the pyramid city of Teotihuacan. (Gabriel 1998: HREF10)

Euro cities are themselves divided and delineated into sections where the consumer is made rapidly aware of the appropriate level of behaviour and engagement the territory requires. Places of worship and places of work and play are outlined, and entry to them is
determined by various modes of access attributable to class, social stature, lineage and rank. Alternatively, the new frontier city is a territory whose dominant and excessive surfaces are marked out almost exclusively with play. Modes of access are not levelled but fluid, allowing for infiltration and cross-fertilisation. The citizen is encouraged to be explorative and adventurous rather than constant and accountable, to emulate the tourist by adopting transitory experience as a way of living. Therefore, while the citizen may have a fixed address, his or her movements and engagements with the city are affected by virtual and simulated experiences inherent to the environment. Traditional methods of identification are thus blurred and irrelevant. The home looks like a casino, the casino is like a church, and even the workplace often carries the signifiers of an entertainment. In this way the excesses of such a built environment are a response to the restrictions present in Euro city planning and architecture. The urban formation of the new frontier is a playful homage to a contemporary lifestyle philosophy that desires freedom in territory rather than predetermination.

The new frontier city radiates a fervent sense of impermanence and speculation. Notions of risk and play are continually written and rewritten onto the urban space and are mimicked culturally because of the ubiquitous presence of tourism, leisure and entertainment industries. There are few lines in the sand. The subsequent dissolution of behavioural and operational boundaries or the appearance of this dissolution invites shared territories for signification. Gambling is simultaneously an act, an ideal, a metaphorical design and a preferred method of operation. Running the risk, taking the punt, the wager, the venture or gamble has long characterised the development, lifestyle, economy and rhetoric of the new frontier city.

*Illusions of Grandeur and The Culture of Display*

We’re sorry we can’t be reached  
By plane or bus, sorry one can’t pull  
Even the tiniest thing out of a dream.  
We’re like the landscape inside  
A plastic dome filled with water.

But turn us over…and up again  
See?  
No snow falls.  
(Lummis in Timberg & Gioia eds. 2003: 154)
The rapid rate of erasure in new frontier cities results in cycles of perceived deterioration despite the fact that most sections of the city remain significantly younger than the appeals against this deterioration might suggest. Because the reinterpretation of space in the new frontier is determined by fashion and commerce rather than a traditional notion of taste, the aesthetic longevity of urban sites is dramatically reduced.

The most recognisable precincts in new frontier cities suffer most notably from urban demand for it is in these areas that the popular vision of the city is launched. As promotional sites in heavily commodified landscapes, they are under consistent pressure to remain on par with the hype. But despite the implementation of numerous ‘rejuvenation’ projects it is debatable whether ‘the real thing’ can ever be equal to the flawless performance the consumable image projects. In 1995, then Gold Coast Mayor Ray Stevens spoke plainly about the function of Surfers Paradise as a showcase landscape for the rest of the city:

“Surfers Paradise is a shopfront. Unless we get it right people won’t want to come and explore the rest of the store.” (in Gleeson 1995: 12-13)

The newspaper article in which this interview appeared was titled, ‘Surfers Paradise – Tourist Ghetto’ and also featured comments by other members of local government, such as Councillor Peter Turner, who supported the Mayor’s appeal:

“We can’t afford to let Surfers Paradise go into this urban decline cycle. A classic example of how this decline can hurt the local community is in Coolangatta.” (in Gleeson 1995:)

What these comments intimate is that the subsequent remodelling of Surfers Paradise undertaken by Council was not conducted out of primary concern for local people, but out of pressing need to protect the tourist dollar. They could afford to let Coolangatta go but political ambivalence just wasn’t feasible for Surfers Paradise.

“I always wanted to be a dancer,” one girl told me. “But I never thought it would be this kind of dancer.” Her predicament is, in its way, a metaphor for the plight of Surfers Paradise in general – a place, which, according to Gold Coast based events guru Lloyd Bond, has become an urban tragedy, “marginally better than a ghetto”. (Bentley 1999: 1)
Both Hollywood in Los Angeles and Surfers Paradise on the Gold Coast have struggled to assimilate the rapid reconstruction of their urban environments and thus retain the defining influences of their glossy public reputations and histories. Conversely the downmarket precincts of Euro cities are often romantically described as interesting, volatile, stimulating and intense despite the social disorder signified by these kinds of reactions. Because the elements of decay in Euro cities are possessed with architectural cachet and involve a pedestrian notion of street cred, decline forms part of the municipal experience. You don’t expect New York or Rome to be anything but marked by downsides, but it’s not something you expect from Hollywood. Homelessness, prostitution, gang warfare, urban decay and brutality are an aberration of what the region sells about itself, thus when these civic realities surface they appear exaggerated by the expected smooth space of celluloid citations. Despite the fact that Los Angeles has a long cinematic and literary reputation as a place of broken dreams, the romanticism of such mythologies does not equate to the urban effects of economic rationalism. Anyone who arrives in the new frontier city swayed by its fictional manifestations is bound to be met with crisis as the physical experience begins to bounce up against the imagined.

In 2003 researcher Tad Davis was commissioned by the Hollywood City Council to compile a listing of descriptions about Hollywood in major tourism guides and handbooks. All the entries, listed on the Council’s website, defined the precinct in direct contrast to the seductive lure of its filmic versions: ‘Los Angeles is a city of contrasts, and one of the most depressing is that between the glittering Hollywood of legend and the grim Hollywood of reality’.

Overt reference to reversal of fortune is rarely directed in the same way towards Euro cities and environments. Despite recent efforts by New York Mayor Guiliani to clean up and gentrify the mean streets, the idea that New York is a dangerous and unpredictable metropolis has always formed part of its attraction. People are not only prepared to be affronted in New York, they expect it. Los Angeles, however, has gained an unofficial negative reputation as a dangerous and polluted city because this knowledge directly contradicts its glamorous, star-studded pitch, projected relentlessly by the Hollywood machine.

… enchantment has been rather tough on the Hollywood landscape, since self-enchantment requires people to believe that you live in
paradise. And thanks to celluloid, the millions who worshipped the self-enchanted couldn’t tell whether Theda Bara’s leopard skin rug was lying in an alabaster palace or in a photographer’s studio. So a lot of Hollywood architecture seems to have been designed to look good in a photograph rather than to keep out the rain… for anything beautiful to age gracefully, eternal vigilance is necessary, and Hollywood has not been carefully tended. It has been knocked down flights of stairs, abandoned, left for dead and sold into slavery. Still if you ask me, some parts are just as beautiful as my dream version – even more beautiful if you subscribe to the Tennessee Williams decadence-as-poetry theory that ravaged radiance is even better than earnest maintenance. (Babitz 1993: 49-50)

The gap between hype and reality is reflected in but is also often attributable to the fictional representations of social disorder produced about new frontier cities. Underworld figures in Euro city narratives are depicted as tough, hardboiled, highly visible characters who are an extension of the hardline streets. Films set in the Euro environments of New York or London, such as The Godfather, Taxi Driver, Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels and Snatch, all glamorise the role of the gangster and/or criminal in his landscape and imbue him with reverential qualities that revolve around notions of loyalty to ‘family’ and territory. His brutality is often interpreted as an understandable reflection of his unforgiving locale.

Underworld figures in the new frontier are, in typical noir style, secretive, corrupt, invisible and ultimately selfish. They are never who they pretend to be and they operate as such because their city necessitates it. Such characters are prevalent in literary and celluloid narratives about Los Angeles: Pulp Fiction, Farewell My Lovely, Chinatown, LA Confidential, Less Than Zero, The Big Sleep, Get Shorty and Beyond the Valley of the Dolls all contrast the landscape of light with the interior dark.

The irresistible romanticism of a Paradise Lost extends in the new frontier to the day-to-day experience. Surfers Paradise is often represented in the local media as the Gold Coast’s equivalent to the Boulevard of Broken Dreams. A ‘Sufferer’s Paradise’ where ‘cold realities lurk behind every flurry of Gold Coast boosterism…a number of businesses are finding a pot of red ink behind the Gold Coast rainbow.’ (Conley 1987: 4) The linguistic play on the romanticism of naming in the city is commonplace. Surfers Paradise is also routinely referred to by locals as a ‘Suffering Parasite’ or ‘Surfers Paradox’.
In 1999 the Gold Coast Bulletin stated that, ‘few places in Australia have changed so much in the space of less than thirty five years than Surfers Paradise’ (Graham 1999: 18). Throughout the late nineties, however, Surfers Paradise’s progression seemed to stall, and by 1999 real estate values were down, nightclubs were pushing for 24 hour licenses, and as a result of the State Government’s amended prostitution laws, southern strip joint and brothel owners who wanted a piece of the action were said to be ‘going through Gold Coast property with a fine tooth comb’ (Wilson 1999: 11). Various stakeholders began pressuring the Gold Coast City Council to consider a rescue package that would protect Surfers Paradise’s ‘reputation as a prime family holiday destination’ (Wilson 1999: 11) – a reputation that to other observers seems absurd. The Council did agree to a $31 million regeneration project but the tension between those who saw the area as potentially one of the world’s most dynamic entertainment precincts and those who wanted to preserve ‘the family market’ meant that any definitive decision making was hampered by a series of setbacks and compromises. As a result, the area became a curious and rather indeterminate mixture of entertainment that is both childish and adult. ‘Surfers Paradise’s role in life – or what that role should be – is far more as a place for partying than, as purists insist, a truly family destination’ (Bentley 1999: 4).

By contrast the new millennium ‘renaissance’ of Surfers Paradise is due to a combination of factors, but is being driven principally by large-scale commercial development. Small operators will have to make adjustments as the prescribed visions of Gold Coast developers continue to take ascendancy.

The Gold Coast City Council’s injection of street scaping and public art, and the Surfers Paradise Management Association’s campaign *Surfers is Free*, which includes markets, fireworks spectaculars, roving entertainment and a regular beach cinema, have gone some way to ‘cleaning up’ and some might say gentrifying the precinct’s image. Both organisations’ tactics, however, retain an obvious family imperative. The public art is either geared towards children or subscribes to a rather tired, tourist-friendly modernism. Most of the sponsored entertainment activity occurs in the peak times of family involvement with the locale – early morning to early evening – and is designed, above all else, to increase retail spending. The after hours face of Surfers Paradise remains chaotic because both the Gold Coast City Council and the Surfers Paradise Management
Association would rather regulate it than endorse it. This ‘Prim City/Sin City’ (Bentley 1999: 1) dichotomy results in a confusion of expectation:

It’s five am in Surfers Paradise. Night people are leaving. Day people are drifting in. As neon gives way to sunlight, Orchid Avenue’s muscle men, strippers and demimonde go to sleep away the day in darkened apartments. Early risers meanwhile, stride briskly through Cavill Mall en route to the beach. Past street cleaners mopping up mess from the night before. Past bellicose drunks. Past fast food palaces overlooking the sea…The old magic is no more. (Bentley 1999: 1)

While such mis-readings, bemusements and deliberations on the fate of Surfers Paradise continue, the future of the showcase precinct’s urban vitality is passing into the hands of developers, who may understand more subtly the process of speculative potential inherent to the new frontier. A lack of the same understanding in publicly funded urban renewal projects has led to a situation on the Gold Coast where, once again, definitive action, risk, speed, scope and ambition are being effected by the entrepreneurs and not the state.
SECTION FIVE: The Culture of Subterfuge

CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Shadow of Noir and the New Frontier City

… “it’s a place of hiding. To be able to know a place, it has to at least want to be known. And L.A. just doesn’t want to be known. L.A. is a big secret, which is why it’s so good for the genre.” If this is true, it’s fair to say that the real mystery in these detective fictions is a quest for place, an effort to discover this hidden centre that makes Los Angeles seem, somehow, both representative and distinct, a glimpse of the future and a warning of the impending apocalypse. The Californian detective story has helped expose, if never quite revealed, the hidden life of Los Angeles and, by extension, the Pacific coast – a place people come to… “with the hope of building not only a new life but a new self”. (Skenazy in Timberg & Gioia eds. 2003: 59-60)
It is the subtext of farce always present, of pushing fact to the brink of fiction, that characterises the interplay between the citizens and the media products of new frontier cities. Though this cross-fertilisation between information and parable is symptomatic of global postmodern capitalism, the convergences in Euro-style cities are often due to collisions, overlaps or a process of ironic layering. In new frontier cities, the fusion of myth and reality is persistent and deliberate. The result of noir-inspired image perpetuation is the re-entrenchment of suspicion as truth. What may only have been hinted at before is believed, and it is believed to operate just as it is portrayed.

This is the attraction of noir – being able to watch or visualise allows consumers to participate. They are included in a world that otherwise excludes them, one that operates around them invisibly. To be lost in a dark world and to identify alternatively between the good, the bad and all the shades of grey in-between is what is made accessible by noir. The viewer witnesses everything and each experience is a kind of education, a key to the city, an explanation of what is not revealed. Particularly attractive, and intrinsic to noir, are the kinds of scenes that explore so called hidden worlds – the underbelly of society and the secret lives of the characters/individuals who permeate it: the plot behind the murder, the love triangle motivations, the shady deals, the dead and the forgotten, the ones that got away – all of it is exposed as the city’s darkest corners, backstreets and closed doors are opened out and explored. In these films, the underworld is visually and physically dominant.

The Gold Coast media often projects glamorised or over-exaggerated reactions to certain instances of murder, corruption and violence when they infrequently occur by suggesting that the city is ‘darker’ than it actually is. In this way the Gold Coast media plays on what Didion characterises as constructed secret wishes and longings because ‘the dark’ makes news and alleviates the small town mentality which still lingers in the city despite its recent rapid growth. Again, at this level of mediated play the Gold Coast is seeking to emulate; to be as dark as its mother of darkness, Los Angeles. Celluloid imitation is a safer proposition than the reality of urban undertow. There is a certain gravitation to noir in places of extreme beauty. Anything that shines must have an edge that pushes it from vacuous to fatale, from innocent to street, from manners to S&M. Like staring out a window at a beautiful view and waiting for a bomb to drop, courting noir is a self-destructive tendency to counteract endlessness and boredom. It’s a naïve wish, fed by an
attraction to danger, an adolescent rebellion against the everyday, not because that everyday experience is violent or harsh, but because it is comfortable, certain and safe. The Gold Coast wants to feel grown up, to prove itself despite itself. Like the little rich kid, it wants the initiation ceremony but not the real war.

It is neither the strong form nor the degree zero of war, but the weak or phthisical degree, the asymptotic form, which allows a brush with war but no encounter, the transparent degree, which allows war to be seen from the depths of the darkroom. (Baudrillard 1995: 26)

The ultimate Gold Coast Machiavellian fantasies derivative of noir have been played out on film and television sets. These imitation narratives, in which the Gold Coast is elevated in underworld stakes, are usually failed readings of the formulaic noir response. The productions are hyped up visions of the city involving crime syndicates, strip clubs, corruption, the nouveau riche, brothels, whores with hearts of gold, innocent young men and older hardened men seeking redemption from the worlds that have driven them there. All of these things do proliferate and profit on the Gold Coast, and everyone living in the city knows that they happen or that they exist. They must. Just look around. But, of course, an idea of being able to see crime organised is absurd. It is not visually present in the city. What can be seen is what people presume are the spoils generated by illicit activity and the people who appear to be the profiteers or providers of it. The ‘average’ citizen neither participates in nor visually encounters the machinations of what they are sure is there. Objects and people are endorsed and legitimated by a societal system whose façades are constructed in ways that hint at the connections. The threads the citizen or visitor draws together, whether they are verifiable or not, are in the head, invisible. Their viewing of them occurs only at the level of the screen or the media interface. Even when real time crime is exposed, it is relayed via images and words to the majority of people. Therefore, its legitimacy, even here or perhaps especially here, is still questionable, still interpretable, and still manipulable by someone else.

In 1999, the Gold Coast was host to what was pronounced an unprecedented murder spree: ‘MURDERTOWN Seven Dead in Ten Days’ (Jones 1999: 1). The sentiment that accompanied this media play was not outrage but titillation. The Gold Coast had not suffered enough murder, it seemed, for this to be in bad taste. What the murders apparently did was elevate the Gold Coast to the level of a world city. According to the press, this was news and it was exciting news. The Gold Coast was in the grip of murder
and mayhem. The journalists had something to do and the citizens had something to talk about. The method and geographical location of the last two murders added the kind of tabloid punch the papers craved. A retired madam who had been linked previously to ‘two hour romp’ scandals with politicians was stabbed to death in a *Fatal Attraction* style slaying by an ex-bookie in the home of a Gold Coast businessman. Pursued by the businessman with a kitchen knife embedded in his neck, the killer had attempted to flee the scene along Tedder Avenue, the heart of the popular Main Beach café district. Immediately the papers referred to the victims and perpetrators as ‘well-known’ crime figures, which led to a barrage of sensationalist copy that enhanced the unreality and ‘movie-like’ nature of the ‘scenes’ (Stolz 1999: 4).

Terror on Tedder. The usual Main Beach buzz seemed subdued, the whiff of scandal hanging in the air like the aroma of strong coffee and tapas. In hushed tones business, socialites and waiters spoke of the ‘reputations’ of the dead pair who were regulars in the cafés and bars of arguably the Gold Coast’s most desirable and desired suburb. Main Beach has just become Slain Beach… One café proprietor ordered Bulletin reporters out of his premises, accusing the paper of printing bullshit. (Stolz 1999: 4)

The editorial space was dedicated for weeks. Sensationalist front-page headlines accompanied thirteen page spreads detailing the ‘frenzied’ and ‘grisly’ crimes, never mind the accuracy of the content. A young couple found dead in the same week at their home in Springbrook, throats stabbed to the point of decapitation, were accused by the Gold Coast Bulletin of being ‘on the run’ and ‘harbouring an Aladdin’s Cave of stolen goods’ (Jones 1999: 4). The paper went on to itemise the goods including, ‘Sunbeam breadmaker, clothes, fishing gear, a gas lamp and a golfing umbrella’ (Jones 1999: 4). Hardly high stakes. What the 1999 media frenzy highlights is the perpetuation of noir myths, often despite evidence to the contrary, in the type of cities that are particularly attracted or conducive to such fictions. Cities constructed on myth creation are adept at their circulation.

The same kind of noir hyperbole permeates most crime fiction and film produced about the Gold Coast. Films such as *Goodbye Paradise, Walk the Talk, Hurricane Smith, Gettin’ Square,* and television serials such as *Paradise Beach,* all project a noir sensibility but one that just can’t seem to take itself seriously. While many Australian films do tend to adopt a ‘quirky’ approach to organised, fraudulent or corporate crime (*The Castle, Two Hands*
and Fat Pizza being cases in point) the level of almost apologetic farce in all crime productions set on the Gold Coast reflects the notion that the city itself is just an imitation of another imitation city, Los Angeles. This process of simulation results in a watered down, multi-filtered reading of the city as a setting where crime sagas, even when they are seriously proposed, ultimately descend into comedy. Ironically, these readings are prescriptive of stereotypical perceptions of the city fuelled by its urban formations and, most particularly, its reputation as a site of political corruption and fraudulent activity. But it is the larrikinism, ignorance, tastelessness and flagrant self interest of political figures such as Joh Bejlke Peterson, Russ Hinze, Pauline Hanson, con artists like Peter Foster, and entrepreneurs like Stanley Korman and Big Kev which have infused the city’s history and encouraged continued derision. This perception impels extremes of parody despite the seriousness and damaging effects of illegal or questionable activities. As has been demonstrated throughout this study, a vernacular of absurdity has dominated both popular and critical readings of the Gold Coast and continues to be applied to the city – and perpetuated by the city itself.

Paradise Beach was a Gold Coast produced soap opera about the Gold Coast, or was it? The show was produced at Warner Brothers Studios, directed by an American, run by a largely interstate crew and led by a cast of interstate actors. In her semi-autobiographical story, ‘Riding Bareback on Paradise Beach’, Morgan Smith evokes her time as a script editor on the Gold Coast by correlating the cultural preoccupations of Paradise Beach to the city on which it was modelled:

When I first heard about Paradise Beach I thought the title way over the top. Then I went to the unit my employees had rented for me in Runaway Bay, not far from Paradise Point and the Isle of Capri, Sanctuary Cove and Hope Island – names to be rolled on the tongue as they conjured feelings of fantasy and freedom. Names attached to places that exist outside the real. (Smith 1995: 93)

Emerging in the early 1990s as a serial designed in stark contrast to the Melbourne produced, wholesome and long-running soap, Neighbours, Paradise Beach took its cues from blockbuster American shows such as Melrose Place and The Bold and The Beautiful. The script writers borrowed ‘meaty’ central themes such as betrayal, deception, abduction, murder, corruption and theft and set it all against a stereotypically rendered backdrop of glamour and danger, a flip side vision of the Gold Coast: the sunny city as sin city.
In *Paradise Beach*, the majority of internal scenes were shot with pockets, strips or patches of filtered or refracted light. These shots, it appears, were designed to contrast sharply with the external scenes, most of which were shot in intense natural sunlight. The technique is obvious and borrowed directly from film noir; an internal shadiness symbolising the characters’ dark motivations in a bright world. The viewer is left in no doubt that the characters are living in claustrophobic and menacing environments: paradise is just outside but inside the characters are engaged in a dark drama. The style was so overused and so at odds with other program elements in *Paradise Beach* (produced naturalistically) that every scene, whether a dark motivation was present or not, was annoyingly affected by patches of black. The desired effect of neo-noir artifice was actually reversed. The darkness became overwrought, heavy and absurd thus the dramatic elements of the soap opera morphed into unintended comedy. It wasn’t long before the novelty of *Paradise Beach* wore off for the viewing public and half way through the second season the show was axed. Perhaps fittingly, it sometimes resurfaces late at night.

Flying south, I had felt that for three months I’d been suspended in time and space. I had thought that *Paradise Beach* was unreal, that people didn’t live like that, with no visible means of support, cavorting in the waves and entering Ironman races. That people didn’t wear bikinis at home for no apparent reason or exchange partners at the drop of a hat. But that was before I experienced the Gold Coast ‘lifestyle’. Women do wear white tracksuits with gold accessories and drink gin and tonics at Marina Mirage. Teenagers do hang out on Main Beach and travel in limos to seventies discos. Rich men do live on their yachts and make a killing building houses for the Mexicans who move there every week. (Smith 1995: 100)

While Morgan Smith justifiably attributes blame for the show’s unpopularity to poor acting, a bad time slot and the powers-that-be, she does not suggest that *Paradise Beach* failed because the people involved were making a television series based on a replicated version of a city they knew nothing about. It does, however, emerge as a defining paradox of her story. Here was a southern script editor whose passage into Queensland ‘had thrown [her] into confusion’ who had ‘been lured to the Gold Coast and Movie World Studios by the promise of an industry renaissance in the New Hollywood’… ‘eager to earn a ludicrous amount of money’ but found herself ‘gripped’ by a ‘sense of unreality…[and] suspended animation’ because ultimately, the Gold Coast was, ‘a
different kind of reality, one that [she] hadn’t understood’ – despite the fact she was being paid to replicate it (Smith 1995: 93-100).

A feature film written by Bob Ellis, controversial political commentator and speechmaker for Australian Labor Prime Ministers, *Goodbye Paradise* is a noir fantasy about the Gold Coast that pushed national political perceptions of the city to new extremes. Deliberately farcical in its scope, it is a story that begins in typical noir fashion: a once successful man down on his luck and exiled from his previous stature in the political community takes refuge on the Gold Coast, the place of his formative years, to write the kind of ‘tell-all’ book that no one wants him to write. Along the way, he becomes immersed in the machinations of various rebel and intelligence forces who are vying to gain or retain control of Paradise at a time when various ambitious political figures are proposing their own ‘Banana Republic’. The reflective narration of the main character, true to noir form, is both whimsical and hard-hitting; the story of man who cannot separate himself from the outside, from the forces operating in a strange and corrupt world:

I had a mouth like an Ayatollah’s armpit and a pressing need for a drink. I could have argued but frankly, I was curious. We went up river from the Isle of Capri past bungalow after bungalow of rich men waiting for the eternal boatmen on their summer lawns, avoided the Rialto, turned right at Sorrento and went on past the portals of Orion into Shangrila Estate. Les McCrawdy had come up in the world from when I knew him first. The class below me at Southport High where he fielded like a stunned mullet at leg slip; law graduate, local alderman, Queens Council, Federal Senator, Cabinet Minister and now tipped to be premier of the emerging seventh state. It’d be nice to say he hadn’t changed a bit but he had. A lot of it was the Labor Party caucus and you couldn’t blame him for that. And a lot of it was his new wife: a social climbing air hostess with designs on Buckingham Palace. I wondered if the unflappable Keith stood by her bed in the middle of the night the way he did mine and asked if anything further was needed. She looked ten years younger since her hysterectomy and as mean as a bitch full of bluebottles. (Ellis and Lawrence 1981)

*Goodbye Paradise* is unmitigated, pre-packaged noir. Our leading man is a jaded flaneur leading us drunkenly through the seedy streets and the rich enclaves of Paradise. His best friend is a Middle Eastern migrant he calls The Chinaman who runs a blue-rinse tourist bus called the Midnight Cowboy. Of course, our man borrows the Midnight Cowboy in the final scenes to save his hometown from crazed rampant militants who, masquerading
as new age evangelists, have set up camp in the Gold Coast Hinterland. With their eyes firmly set on the oil off shore (the biggest deposit this side of the Gulf – apparently) his ex-army mates mastermind an infantry coup to out-republic the republicans. *Goodbye Paradise* is a tongue in cheek homage to the extremes of Californication on the Gold Coast. And no matter how absurd, the narrative works because it feeds on the reputation for extremity that the city has gained in the rest of the country as a by-product of its new frontier development. *Only on the Gold Coast*, could this kind of B Grade noir fantasy be feasible in Australia. Though on one level this kind of story is fed by the simplest and most reactionary of cultural clichés, it is perhaps interesting to consider that the Gold Coast, having no easily recognisable tradition of culture, is not only open to noir inspired hyperbolic ridicule, but also amenable to its manipulation, interpretation and reappropriation.

Like Los Angeles and Las Vegas, the Gold Coast will continue to be coveted as a conducive noir site because anything can be invented in and about a city attuned to reinvention. What separates most Gold Coast noir from the production of contemporary noir in Los Angeles is that, without effort, the dangerous reputation of L.A. as a volatile metropolis lends a narrative a level of seriousness and believability. By contrast, the Gold Coast is seen as more of a whacky territory where crime flourishes not in dark rooms and streets, but under the hazy gaze of a handful of gangsters and their poolside pink flamingos. Farce arises because these are second-hand narratives, applied to a second-hand city with a reputation for kitsch replications. What usually occurs is that the narrative remains glued to the flimsy surface of an inherited noir style, which its producers rely on heavily and then wonder why it fails.

The ambiguity of the new frontier environment results in predictability – the rendering of the Gold Coast as those on the outside would expect it to be; a reflective surface devoid of any meaningful penetrations or potential insights. If speaking from the inside and reconfiguring narrative points of view is a challenge for contemporary writers in Los Angeles, then it is considerably more so for artistic practitioners on the Gold Coast who, due to their city’s derivative nature, must effectively navigate the misrepresentations of both cities. As Ellis’s anti-hero in *Goodbye Paradise* says to the naked American spiritual Guru encased in his glass temple (which is in actuality the home of the Gold Coast City
Council), ‘This is the Gold Coast, not California, and I can tell as many lies as I like’ (Ellis and Lawrence 1981).
CLOSING STATEMENT

The New Frontier City: Culture of Contradiction

Illustration 44: Gold Coast skyline with Q1 tower simulated
Absolute saturation of the imagined Los Angeles means that the city remains unfixable, unrecognisable, from a macro, and at times even a micro perspective. Certain points of reference trigger acknowledgment, for example, The Hollywood sign, The Santa Monica Pier, The Beverley Hills Hotel or the Chateau Marmont, but these are all only recognisable for the parts they play, parts that have no totalising bearing because there is no absolute whole or sense of permanence. Los Angeles has no centre that characterises its mood, reach or significance. Instead, a series of epicentres – each with its own engine room or locus of intensity – produce dispersed and evanescent effects. Thus what the experience of living and moving through the city means for the citizen is just as multifaceted, elusive and indeterminable. The persuasive chimera of L.A.’s mythology, which confuses the perception of identity in the city and seeks at all times to supplant it entirely, further compounds this interpretative difficulty.

Miscomprehension is a defining condition of the new frontier. In these transient, highly recyclable sites, the experience of the tourist, the outsider, the reader, the observer, the exile, the transient and the stranger, so effectively represented by Los Angeles fictions, is normative. The alienation acts as a curtain, a glass wall, or a mirror, endlessly refusing and reflecting back the elusive subject. Because very little is stable in the new frontier city, there are times when recognition is ruptured, when meaning shifts without warning, when nothing is what it seems; times when even the long term resident may question such shifting sensations of belonging. Despite this oblique sense of knowing, referred to so beautifully by Joan Didion in her memoir, Where I was From, we must ask ourselves if the citizen of the new frontier is necessarily locked into a negative experience as a result of these ruptured modes of interaction. There must also be – in variable spaces – a series of converse effects or ways of reading and speaking that might offer alternative modes of identification. Does the simultaneous operation of planes of illusion and planes of reality in the new frontier also produce a succession of comparatively invisible everyday landscapes that one is not privy to if comprehension is infected only by inherited forms of knowing and the distractions of celluloid saturation? The idea that each recognition in the new frontier is eclipsed or made null and void by the next denies the possibility of intersection. Yet intersections are highlighted by the nuanced and reflexive creative works produced by those new frontier artists who might characterise themselves as being both inside and outside; a position of multiplicity where points of reference begin to circulate, connect, overlap and echo each other.
The experience of Los Angeles, like all new frontier cities, is rhizomatic, firstly because any striated dissection of the city is permanently deferred by its cinematic mutations and secondly, its postmodern construction (its pastiched cultural logic) defies attempts at distinct or constant representation. Everything that symbolises Los Angeles has more life in the shared cultural imaginary than it could ever hope to achieve in the real. This does not mean, however, that ‘the real’ is not occurring or is not at all times intersecting, influencing, reading, and reinterpreting that imaginary, only that the lines of flight the Hollywood machine produces are saliently interrelated and thus more perceptible.

Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other and must be… A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles…There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree or root. There are only lines… The line of flight marks: the reality of a finite number of dimensions that the multiplicity effectively fills. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7-9)

Contradiction, confusion, randomness and rupture are powerful organising principles of the new frontier city. But rather than attribute to these alternative modes of organisation and experience a sense of limitation and reduction, we can, by way of ‘making multiplicities’, attribute to them what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as ‘determinations, magnitudes and dimensions’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8). The subjective inertia that theorists such as Jameson and Davis diagnose as consequences of such randomly defined urban order/disorder, then becomes irrelevant. This is because:

There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort in the object or “return” to the subject. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8)

The use of dualistic reference or analysis is also precluded by the connectivity of the rhizomic form: every line, even the line in flight, forms part of the rhizome and therefore connects back to every other. ‘This is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9).

Future Frontier
deterritorialised and reterritorialised by nomadic intersections (the mafia, the Dogtown Skateboarders, the scamsters, the fraudulent machines); a space full of simulated constructions and reflective projections, (celebrities, celluloid citations, theme parks, excessive spectacle, and plastic surgeons); a space prolific in smooth and endlessly reproduced physical worlds (demarcated by screens, highways, long architectural lines and elongated points). A ‘flat’ territory. ‘A plane of consistency’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9).

The ideal for a book would be to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority of this kind, on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations... a broken chain of affects and variable speeds, with accelerations and transformations, always in a relation with the outside. Open rings. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9)

The new frontier provides access for the writer that is not delineated by the weight of historical interiority. The new frontier provides a space where the outside merges with, rather than reflects, the self, therefore supplanting the desire to project, mirror or reinform the subject. The subject becomes the space in which everything moves and swirls: ‘the book as assemblage with the outside, against the book as image of the world’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23). The city, the writer, the character, the multitudes of story and intersection, are on the same page, the same sheet: there is no space between them, no expanse of territory where any of these components has the opportunity to step back and claim a separate space for themselves outside of the convolutions of these open rings.

Of course, the presence of such amenable space doesn’t mean that the ideal for the book to which Deleuze and Guattari refer is necessarily reached, only that the new frontier provides space for such interrelation to occur. This is the key difference from reading the new frontier as a reflective, simulated and derivative territory and assuming therefore, that its methods of expression are necessarily the same; that writing the city must be reduced to the regurgitation of apocalypse, the shadow of noir or a vacuous cliché. Rather, these expressions form part of a multitude of effects, which are often not as separatist or reductionist as some postmodern urban readings might suggest in what is merely a confusion of surface. There is more in the new frontier than what is revealed via repeated snapshots of its renowned façades. There are other kinds of surfaces operating.
There is an intermingling, an *intermezzo* of illusion and reality that includes the elements of its projections but also includes the human, which has throughout the new frontier’s relatively short history been presumed to be abnormally infected, requiring liberation and salvation, or as we have seen in the case of the European gaze, inviting ridicule and annihilation. The point is not to seek layers but to identify navigations. ‘Never send down roots, or plant them, however difficult it may be to avoid reverting to old procedures’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23).

If converse positions, subjects, interminglings, flights of excess and fantasy continually re-surface, if rules remain interpretable, if morals shift consistently, if icons, monuments and stars can be invented and just as quickly disappear, then the cultural terrain does emerge as perilous and unpredictable, but perhaps more importantly, it remains fluid and dynamic. All the movement, buzzing, relay and distraction allows for the infiltration not of the new, but of the next. The images and myths that the new frontier city produces about itself are fabrications, aberrations and manipulations: a matrix of confusions enacted to protect itself from stasis. The new frontier city resists dominant paradigms and thus defies, wherever it can, aspects of stilted governance and control; continually throwing up subversive movements, intensities and lines of flight that demand, on all fronts, change and reorganisation. ‘A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25). This is where the emerging poets of Los Angeles are starting from, not from the beginning (for in this context there isn’t ‘one’) and not from their over-prophesied and predictive ends, but from the middle.

“Those things which occur to me, occur to me not from the root up but rather only from somewhere about their middle. Let someone then attempt to seize them, let someone attempt to seize a blade of grass and hold so fast to it when it begins to grow only from the middle.” [Kafka] Why is this so difficult? The question is one of perceptual semiotics. It’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from the left to right or right to left: try it, you’ll see that everything changes. It’s not easy to see the grass in things and in words… (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23)

This different mode of experience, of seeing things from the middle, allows the writer in the new frontier city the chance to shake off assumptions, rules, regulations, guilt – all the dated and ineffectual tropes of 19th Century or European urban form – and make
use of a ‘perceptual semiotics’ that speaks, sounds and reads more like the streaming pulse of their landscapes and cities. It is this desire and willingness to see outside of and beyond an imported cultural vision that Los Angeles poet Dana Gioia evokes in ‘California Hills in August’:

I can imagine someone who found
these fields unbearable, who climbed
the hillside in the heat, cursing the dust,
cracking the brittle weeds underfoot
wishing for a few more trees for shade…

An easterner especially, who would scorn
the meagreness of summer, the dry
twisted shapes of black elm,
scrub oak, and chaparral, a landscape
August has already drained of green.

One who would hurry over the clinging
thistle, foxtail, golden poppy,
knowing everything was just a weed,
unable to conceive that these trees
and sparse brown bushes were alive…

And yet how gentle it seems to someone
raised in a landscape short of rain –
the skyline of a hill broken by no more
trees than one can count, the grass,
the empty sky, the wish for water.
(Dana Gioia in Timberg & Gioia eds. 2003: 146)

Gioia’s poem deliberately resembles conventional poetic structures because the poignancy of its moments, the notes of departure, arise so strongly in this context; she reconfigures alienation by imagining and re-placing the European sensibility in a ‘hostile’ environment. She utilises the metaphysical model while denouncing its lack of cultural transfer. Gioia has come after her imagined character; she is not native to this landscape, but she was raised in its space and because of this connection, because she can interpret, speak and identify with its apparently bereft symbolic language, the perceived aberrations of California morph into its blessings.

Gioia shows us that it is possible to get at the cultural patterns and parameters of the new frontier city via conventional or Euro/19th Century inspired urban models if they are reconfigured and/or usurped. The tendency to compartmentalise, striate and hierarchise
many forms of cultural production as a means of suspension and control must be resisted if the new frontier is to be rendered effectively. Otherwise nostalgia takes its place; nostalgia for traditional practices in social order – an expression that is ultimately a lament for the perceived loss of what Dejan Sudjic refers to as ‘the myth of community’:

The most cherished of contemporary myths is the recurring dream of community. Half rose-tinted Frank Capra, half Passport to Pimlico, it’s a fantasy that celebrates the corner shop, borrowing a cup of sugar from the neighbours, and all those other unimpeachable suburban virtues that range from motherhood to apple pie. (Sudjic 1992: 279)

Sudjic sees the pervasive doctrine of community as being out of step with the actualities of contemporary urban life; a misapprehension that ‘is inextricably tied to the lasting grip of the countryside on the Anglo Saxon imagination’ (Sudjic 1992: 280). He claims that the sentimentality of urban theorists, such as represented in the early work of Jane Jacobs, has led to romanticised and idyllic notions of interactive village life as ‘natural’, solid and fixed; ultimately resulting in unachievable concepts of urban best practice in policy making and design. The fallacy of municipal community also underpins the current work of urban theorists such as Davis and Klein when deconstructing Los Angeles. This type of urban analysis relies on the ‘comforting conviction that there is an underlying sense of continuity, of collective memory and shared experience to give meaning to the aimlessness of everyday life’ (Sudjic 1992: 280). Such a conviction is held to support the argument that new frontier cities like Los Angeles epitomise the postmodern fracturing of western social structure. To Sudjic, the preservation of the myth of community has been ‘elevated to the point of fetish’ without a converse understanding or admission of the concealed commercial and political motivations from which it is designed (Sudjic 1992: 283).

To the Jane Jacobs camp, urban motorways produced broken families and fractured family life, leading to crime, drugs and gangs. The equation was as simple as that. By that definition, community was apparently a form of social control. (Sudjic 1992: 283)

Sudjic suggests that the attractions of the city have little to do with primitive and idyllic notions of social stasis, protection and organisation. ‘Life in the city has never been stable’ (Sudjic 1992: 283). For Sudjic the complex fluctuations of the post-industrial city are more nuanced and less determinable. Increased mobility, movements towards total
privacy, ethnic diversification, decreasing household sizes, decentralisation and the internationalisation of the world’s largest cities create situations in which the meaning of contemporary urban living is in a constant state of flux:

Reactions to these shifting definitions has, to say the least, been mixed – just as was the response to the no less dramatic transformations that London, Paris, and New York went through in the nineteenth century. Victorian critics attacked what they saw as the lifeless, spirit diminishing industrial city. And a hundred years later…equally bitter polemics were focussed on the state of the metropolis. The world, it was said, faced an irreparable loss: the extinction of the traditional European city, mankind’s most precious artefact. (Sudjic 1992: 297)

Effective representation of the new frontier city requires an affinity for its altered and diffuse spaces. Just as the experience of living in the city has transformed, so too must the sensibility of its written form. The multi-faceted confusions, fascinations and anomalies of the postmodern metropolis tend to be abhorred by contemporary literature more than they are embraced. Symbolic ownership of the metropolis has passed more succinctly to the eye of the filmmaker whose gaze lingers and knowingly projects the peculiar beauty of its rapidly capitulating forms.

This Tele-visual acceptance of the vitality of the city, reminiscent of the over excited futurist poetry of midnight railway stations, is in sharp contrast to the conventional contempt of western literature for the new incarnation of the city. The camera provides a moving view, yet one which can also be carefully framed to look composed and considered, which has had a very large part in creating the image that we have of specific cities. The neon and the heat haze and aerial photography of West Side Story filmed from a helicopter shooting along avenues and diagonally down Broadway, provides an image of extraordinary power. (Sudjic 1992: 304)

Emergent filmmaker Sophia Coppola is doing for the new frontier spaces of California and Tokyo what her father did for New York. In the 2003 release, Lost In Translation, her camera rolls indulgently at various speeds through the neon infused streets, flicking through grand hotels, sidewalk eateries, nightclubs, tiny lounge rooms, gaming parlours and karaoke bars; her characters are always looking up, always looking out, always gazing in silence through widows and screens. Many scenes in the film involve the camera eye resting longingly at the surface of expansive plate glass windows where her leading lady sits, legs curled into her chest, high above the city, contemplating with a curious sense of
vulnerability and poetic grace, the daytime concrete animal of Tokyo unwinding seemingly forever below her in a haze of light grey rain.

The architectural historians have only just begun to get to grips with the way the modern city functions… It took Reyner Banham to point out that the freeway is as much a part of urban space as the civic square, and Venturi’s book on Las Vegas tried to do the same for the strip. But the message is put across far more effectively in the cinema. It reveals just how irrelevant is the city-beautiful ideal of vistas and sequences of spaces unfolding at pedestrian pace to a city that stretches… (Sudjic 1992: 301 & 304)

Recent indications suggest, however, that the postmetropolis may be poised for a literary resurgence, particularly in cities where manifestations of new frontier experience are celebrated. As we have seen, current poets and writers of Los Angeles are interested in engaging with their city in ways which productively reflect it. Not surprisingly this seems to be occurring in the offshoot realms of collections – in the production of poetry and short story – as the movement attempts to claim a space for itself. If these expressions are not yet manifesting in the mainstream, it is not due to a lack of quality or desire but more likely to a commercial reluctance to support it. Perhaps though, persistence in nurturing an alternative voice, one that speaks more directly to the new frontier citizen, will result in a resurgence of poetry and short story. The intensity of the poetic moment and the focus of short story both lend themselves to the fast-tracked, precipitate nature of the new frontier. That is not to say that the postmetropolis cannot be effectively presented in the novel, only that its structure might move away from epic or linear narrative and more closely resemble the delineated expression of these tighter constructions.

Australian author Fiona McGregor’s 2002 novel *Chemical Palace* thrust a fiercely technicolour version of inner city Sydney into Australia’s literary landscape. She presented what could otherwise have been dismissed as the marginalised avenues of subcultural desire as a relatively ‘normalised’ environment – a city where electronic music, surrogate families, nocturnal schedules and alternative sexuality are mainlined into the culture; where entertainment is not peripheral but meshed to the everyday experience; where a passion for transformation and transmutation can simultaneously offer a way out of loneliness, a powerful avenue of personal projection and an entry point to collective engagement. New frontier spaces and territories often have a relatively
increased potential to provide a transformative notion of experience. For though Sydney is Australia’s oldest city, and retains in many quarters evidence of its formative past, it also engages in a predilection for change and experimentation, fracturing over the years into an amalgamation of spaces, marked by satellite centres and a plethora of postmodern architectural expressions. It is in this sense a hybrid – an adaptive international city, a globalised environment; a city of shifting influences. This pulse is what McGregor successfully highlights. But just as the contemporary writers of Los Angeles must carve out a narrative position in the face of a weighty and persistent ideology, so too, does the writer of any frontier environment or city. These are spaces that must be liberated from the weight of what is, to them, an irrelevant or ill conceived notion of history:

Here in this country we have no Roman ruins on every green hill; no crumbling viaducts or castles or keeps to remind us of ages and lifetimes gone. In this country we must search among the absences, the seemingly bright and airy spaces, wherein dance the elusive dust motes of memory.
(Crew 1992: 15)

Alongside the centric myth, the absence mentality of Australians continues to be romanticised and mythologised by many writers. Postcolonial Australians have at close proximity the sense of inhabiting an alien context, of belonging somewhere else. Though there may not be any ruins to look upon Australians have continually gazed back to mother countries, effectively deferring historical responsibility. In the above quote, Gary Crew advocates a search, an expedition to rediscover memory. While he suggests postcolonial Australia doesn’t have any antiquated history, he seems to be suggesting that it find some – why? Indigenous Australians have already determined the history of this continent and continue to do so in direct contrast to the postcolonial experience, which is forever in a state of stagnant recollection and erasure. Theirs is a living culture. Any postcolonial excursion into its mythology may be granted, shared but never owned. There will always be an absence. The discovery of memory in Australia will always only be a tracing. The gaps, cracks and absences created by the colonial experience are, in most western cities, neutralised, hidden or rewritten by the rhetoric of empire. In new frontier cities, they are more visible – not out of an enlightened sense of reconciliation but because no attempt is made to conjure legitimate evidence of antiquated history. It simply is not there. Instead, historical significations in the new frontier are adopted and implanted indiscriminately – history is paraded, mocked and celebrated in various
pastiche forms but never does it acquire the weight of its own lie. In this way new frontier cities are, as David Reiff observes, ‘anthologies of the world’ (Rieff 1992), places where notions of belonging are both collapsible and interpretable. The new frontier city acknowledges the absurdity of its historical position, exposing, rather than seeking to conceal, the invasive methods that have always underpinned western development.

Exploratory and excavatory processes are thus inappropriate for new frontier cities. Instead, their ‘seemingly bright and airy spaces’ should be celebrated for what they are. In a postmodern world, contradictory sites should be granted permission to remain infeasible and therefore unique and full of potential; plump with possibility rather than emaciated, marked by lack.

The question of writing for the new frontier city no longer relates to memory nor the search for, or preservation of, traditional cultural significance. Rather, it demands recognition of the fascinations of the present. For too long the architecture of recollection has dominated interactions with new frontier spaces and inhibited the legitimacy of their urban and cultural formations. We created the new frontier because we needed a space where the past was as undetermined as the future. This freely expressed desire should not be obliterated by postcolonial anxiety or overshadowed by a privileging of history. The function of the Euro/19th Century city as the prominent signifier of relative constancy, urban evolution, cultural understanding and historical movement is becoming invalid even for the cultures that seek to perpetuate it. The new frontier has a different function, it leads us into an unpredictable future and invites us to be comfortable with that.
APPENDIX

Map 1: Gold Coast Region
Map 2: Surfers Paradise Region – The Strip


* Some archival material was sourced from Local Studies archives stored without some relevant details.


  http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/06/movies


http://www.rut.com/mdavis/americanearthquake


http://www.nmia.com/kgabriel/professional/myths

http://www.uta.edu/english/hawk/semiotics/baud.htm

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Ante Up

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We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day
we’d all be millionaires
and movies stars
and rock gods.
But we won’t.

(Chuck Palahniuk –Fight Club)
Inside Straight
This is Jade. Her story begins the first time you remember being lied to. Jade is the colour of a lie. A silicate of lime and magnesia, a hard green, blue or white stone. Green. A green that is not leafy lush or verdant but unripe. A green that is sour and inedible. Betrayal. A caustic taste in the mouth. White bile in the guts. Green White Blue. White lies, the green eyed monster, licentious blue. Jade, the colour of a lie.

There are certain people who are prone to being lied to. There are certain people who aren’t. But there are certain cities where the colour of lies is so camouflaged inside the fabric of the streets that every word ends up being tinged with a shade of something untrue. The Dealer lives in such a city. He was born into this prevaricated space. He has made it his life. Jade did not always live here.

♦♣♠♥

The Dealer

Jade arrived on the Gold Coast in the cold season, August, 1996. I remember the time: 3:57pm. It had been a long afternoon, the floor subdued. I was still a rookie then, what they call a lumpy, but I was working my way in. She came directly to my table. Blackjack. Round 701. A bunch of papers and keys in her left hand and a modest wad of cash in the other. She dragged back the vacant chair in front of me resting her stash on the rubber lip of the table. I checked out the papers under her hand. Usual hotel check-in paraphernalia and a Greyhound bus ticket. Couldn’t see the details, but wherever she was from she wasn’t wasting any time.

Jade settled quickly. She put the papers between her legs, drew out a few hundred dollar bills, waited for the next round and asked me to hit her. She was serious. She was young. Not an average combination.
I remember her hands – quick, elegant hands with fast fingers – but I didn’t miss the way they shook. It was the shaking that got me. It wasn’t nerves. The rest of her was clear, focused. It wasn’t drink, cause her eyes didn’t drift. It was something else. Jade had the sickness. It was something I knew about, something I hadn’t seen for a while. Everyone in The Casino had symptoms, but not everyone had it like her. I felt it as soon as she sat down; that mix of intensity and distance. Jade was on the take.

But she wasn’t like the others. Jade was sick but she wasn’t diseased. She could have left that table, that room, anytime. What drove her wasn’t addiction; I saw addiction every day. She knew about the game, she knew where her decisions were taking her. It wasn’t fear or excitement that made her shake, but knowledge. Jade was here for something else, something bigger than a dice or card. And when she looked at me, straight into me, she knew I’d seen it too.

We played.

Our hands conducted the game on that table. The game between us was happening in our heads. Her eyes, our subtle smiles were locked in a forcefield the table kept at bay. The faster I dealt it out to her, the more she defied me. But it wasn’t the cash she wanted then. In twenty minutes she had my number.

Like most practised gamblers, Jade didn’t attempt to speak to me. She hit the table with her index finger when she wanted something and sliced her hand through the air when she didn’t. And I liked talking in symbols, it was what I was trained to do but I found myself wanting more than anything to speak to her. It was the game on the table that kept me quiet. Three other players on either side of Jade, one of them Asian, all good but typically last-minute and fussy. Jade, win or lose, just kept firing.

I remember she sat the last one out. No play, just sat there and watched my hands and every movement I made was cleaner, magnified, better because she was there. I forgot
about the machines and their tidal noise, the sound of money falling into steel traps, the rattle of tokens flushed repetitively down holes. None of it was there. My eyes didn’t register the swirls of insistent light, flowing up the walls, rolling reflected over our bodies. I concentrated only on the fluid movement of my hands. The precision of my splays and folds was perfect. The effortlessness in my features right. It was a ballet, it was a test, and when she pulled her papers out of her lap in preparation to leave I found myself, mid-deal, wanting to stop. But I didn’t. I kept dealing and tried to let her know with my eyes that there had to be more time. And in that moment I sealed it.

Jade smiled.

She took her room key, a flat acrylic card, white and shiny and angled it towards me so I could see the number – 1109 – then she stacked her tokens and left. There was no look back; it wasn’t necessary; Jade knew she had me. And that’s when I got scared. As soon as she’d fallen out of my line of vision I remembered why I wasn’t on the take anymore. Why I’d spent so long trying to undo the fallout. Why I’d started dealing because I thought it would keep me clean. I faced people all the time that acted like they knew but all they did was make it easier to refuse. Jade changed all that.

I was still vulnerable to the rush. Still curious.

Whatever she wanted me for, the possibilities, the idea of it was charging in like rapid fire between me and an old friend – but I didn’t have any friends and I didn’t even know her name then. All I knew was that my past was irrelevant. A woman I’d never spoken to had superseded it and I was heading as fast as I could to that room.
Jade walks out of the gaming room but she doesn’t leave the arena. The colossal size of the Casino, something she isn’t used to. She has gambled before but nothing like this. Nothing like this sheer, immense, materialisation of the game.

To Jade, the world is full of raucous light and noise. Of glass and gold. She moves toward a more open territory, a giant atrium full of tilted light; white sails hover above her linking the Casino to the arc-shaped arms of its Egyptian body. And from the sails hang an installation of primary-coloured lanterns, inflated suns, moons and stars dangling forcefully in the air above her. She stops to enjoy it in a bar without walls. From here she can look up to where the roof opens out on either side of her, through the glass elevation of the hotel’s four-storey entry, rising to the west, to a bright blue sky; past the rigid trunks of palm trees, running in perfect symmetrical sets, their tops stretching higher than her eyes can see. Below them a bounty of lush foliage looms and encroaches on a circular drive busy with concierges, footmen and bellboys in smart black suits and shiny name tags, reshuffling the crowd, darting gold-plated luggage trolleys expertly between bodies, all the people arriving and departing, in limousines, taxis, buses, shuttles and private coaches. The constant parade. Transparent doors fling open.

Inside, Jade moves through a carnival of artificial light. So bright, so relentless, she imagines she can feel ripples and beams passing through her, quick flashes on her skin, the fleeting iridescence of weightless pleasure. She tries not to blink. She believes she is gliding, passing lightly through a fluorescent waterfall, moving up and down the mirrored walls, along the shiny surfaces, throwing back the light and the darker shapes of her body in warped golden glows. Jade is gold-plated and this is how she feels about the world. Swimming through the neon echo that reminds her of the windfall, of the sound of falling money.
In the Casino Jade does not have to hide, or cower, or protect herself from the presence of more powerful people. The distraction of noise and light is enough. In this city desire is not a secret. It is a place alive with potential, not a fantasy but real. The Gold Coast does not disguise the game of living. Existence is not luck. Existence is strategy.

No one here knows her real name, no one knows where she’s from and it doesn’t matter. The Casino encourages Jade to become what the rest of the world will not let her be; anonymous and open to invention. She does not have to be herself, she can be anyone she wants to be, counterpart to a space saturated in risk and jeopardy; to a life lived on the outside. Today the Casino is glamorous, it is trashy, it is home and to Jade it means the world – the desire and the actuality. She will sleep here until she finds her bearings, until she stops leering from her escape, until she has accumulated enough cash.

Jade requests a high floor because she comes from a place where living is done close to the ground. The first room she gets she doesn’t like. It looks out to the mountains rolling behind the city, over the covered car park of the Casino, a pale yellow concrete roof that only reminds her of dead space and the backs of things. She doesn’t want to be stuck looking at the backs of things. She wants to see the future. A room facing the hinterland reminds Jade of her past, of her hometown and all her formative spaces. Hills and valleys trap cold secrets. Jade wants a flat stretch of territory full of easily collapsible constructions always higher than the small patches of land they sit on. Jade knows that in open space she can control the terms. She demands another room. The receptionist is resistant but Jade knows how to make people feel comfortable, to manipulate, to like her. She smiles, tells the woman where she is from, tells her wide-eyed, that she has rarely seen the ocean. It works.
Jade finds herself facing the sea on the second highest floor, encased in the wings of the Casino. At night the electric blue and white lights that run along these wings will fill her with fluorescent energy.

Jade likes the idea that this room is now her home. That there will be no one else that can enter it without her permission. That money can purchase her a fluid identity and an unfixed address. In the two arms that spread out to the sea Jade is in the right, facing northeast, viewing the city for the first time from up high – its best profile. She’s elevated enough to see the ocean but not the sand for her fairytale home sits back from the salt on a man-made island separated from the rest of the metropolis by a moat of dark green water.

The highway in front of the Casino is a marker, a bitumen rivulet dividing the city into two parts. Blocks that front the ocean and blocks that don’t. The Casino hunkers down on this borderline, turning its back on the sprawl and opening its arms to the coastal stretch that lingers seductively in front of it. From here Jade can view the action in these coveted streets and dream about how and when she will enter them. Like the Casino, Jade does not need to look back, the world is now turning in the small space between her and the salt water. An idea of heaven. A flat land, on which everything slips, and is always new. A warm place on the edge of the country far from her home in the womb of it. A place that worships the limitless blue beyond the boundary. For Jade the edge is the ideal space, uncertain, where her history is changeable and her future endless.

Tonight she waits. Wondering if The Dealer will come to see her. Watching cable instructions on how to play games she already knows how to play. She is pleased to be in a place where entertainment is both childish and adult, a city bold in its declarations, rich in attendance and gloss, in all the things that are muted in her
previous world. The fact that she cannot see the sand does not disturb her; these
towers that block her view of the ground are full of the transient. She is buoyed by the
promise of strangers. There are enough spaces to hide.

Jade knows the transient streets will protect her. When she shifts between
worlds here she will not be noticed. And just like the Gold Coast, what else can she
cling to but her own ridiculed fantasy? She is the invention of Popsicle time. A
fugitive in the loophole world. As if someone has photographed the idea of her
essence away, Jade plays with what’s left – with the pictures, memories and
inventions – with the idea of who she could be in this city. She is not physiologically
tied to her psychology. She expresses every vague emotion. She does not struggle
with the concept of being bound to her own body.

Jade has erased the link.

Her corporeality is not her crutch. It is not her alibi. It is vapour, a machine,
the Red Sea, a room. It is wherever she sees herself. It is not transcendence to which
Jade aspires, but illusion. She is hooked on the mirage.

♦♣♠♥

The first room I go to is the wrong one. It’s not the girl I want who answers the door. I
apologise. I don’t usually get numbers wrong. Downstairs I ask the girls on the desk and they
tell me the woman in 1109 has moved, and they roll their eyes at me. They don’t like the fact
that I’m going to see her. I’m not supposed to, but it isn’t that that gets to them. Deep down
casino staff don’t like it when the customer wins.

Nice work, I think.

The first thing she says to me is: Come in.
I just nod; she knew I’d find her. Like all standard hotel rooms the entrance way is small, so when she steps back to let me in I slide past her and our clothes and parts of our bodies brush, electrically, and I wonder if I’ve read it all wrong. Maybe she just wants to sleep with me. I’ve been in these rooms enough times before. Walking in I can feel her behind me but when the room opens out I head for a chair by the window instead of the bed. She stops at the mini bar.

Drink?

Bourbon.

Straight?

Thanks.

I watch her pour our drinks and notice the shaking in her hands has stopped. Now that we’re alone in a smaller space she seems taller, really long in simple black and bare feet and I realise that though she’s beautiful, in a kind of unusual way, her body is not why I’m here. She crosses the room to hand me my drink. I raise it in thanks and take a long sip. She steps back, sits facing me on the edge of the bed. For a moment we say nothing, just concentrate on the drinks, on each other. I want her to speak first but I know she won’t, so I ask her name, fully aware I probably won’t get a real answer. She doesn’t hesitate. She looks me in the eye and says:

Jade.

She already knows mine. It’s on my badge.

So, Jade, I say, placing my drink on the reading desk and leaning forward, tell me what’s on your mind.

When she laughs me off I realise the reason I’m here is definitely not about sex. There’s nothing flirtatious in her amusement. I sit back. Jade looks past me – gliding around, feeling me out. Her curiosity is not physical, she’s just trying to get inside.
You’re a bit rusty, aren’t you?

It’s not aggressive, just an observation. I look down because I know it’s true.

Could say that.

Well, she says looking out the window, I don’t suppose that matters much around here?

Depends.

On what?

On how far you want to go.

Jade makes a thoughtful noise, running her left hand absentmindedly along the raised stitching on the in-house bedspread. I let her mull it over, thinking about all those hundreds of bed covers in The Casino, the ones I’ve been on, every one of them the same, swirls of lurid florals and colours to hide the stains. Jade looks up at me and says:

I haven’t come here to go half way.

And she means it but suddenly the look on her face is becoming unsettling, like all her features are slipping, are losing their grip. Her bottom lip is shaking. I ask Jade where she’s come from, to try and calm her down, but she just completely glazes over, like I’m not even here. I look at her closely, intently, because I can, because she doesn’t seem to be seeing me anymore. Her skin is so pale it looks like baby’s flesh and though her face is angular, it is still pubescent, softened by the baby fat and at this moment I can see just how young she is, maybe eighteen. And I can’t help but wonder how much she really knows.

Excuse me.

She stands hurriedly and makes her way, head down, to the bathroom. I think there might be tears but I get the feeling this might be an act so I don’t waste any time. I look quickly around the room for signs, evidence, and indications. There’s no bag, no wallet, she must have them stashed in the cupboard but that’s too close to the bathroom and she might
hear me or worse come out while I’m there. On the bedside table are the papers she had with her today. I grab the bus ticket, fold it quickly and place it in the fold on the inside of my casino jacket. I take our near-empty glasses and busy myself making drinks. I don’t trust her yet but there should be no reason why she shouldn’t trust me.

The door opens.

I’m sorry, she says.

Emerging more like she looked today; slightly shaken but impenetrable. Confident. She’s certainly got the skills, the ability to switch; I just don’t know how much she’s aware of it.

That’s okay. Here.

I hand her the drink.

Get this down.

Jade takes it gratefully looking at me over the rim; her eyes are wide and shining. No hint of a miss but I know what she’s doing. I might be rusty but I don’t forget and Jade is luring me in. Making me the protector. I decide to run with it. She’s standing very close to me. I lead her to the window, and the crook of her arm feels very thin in my hand, fragile like a bird’s wing. Below us towards the ocean, the city is glittering.

Tomorrow, I say, meet me over there.

I point to the café precinct of Broadbeach directly in front of us.

Gino’s. 8:00pm.

She nods and I down the rest of my drink.

Thank you, she says.

We’ll see.

And I leave, shutting the door quietly behind me.
The Dealer is driving home. The city is sleeping. Wrapped around itself, stalled without warning by the onset of winter. Jade has arrived in downtime. When the lines of light on the road are scarce, when the tables in the Casino are roped off, when the locals take a breath and the balconies on the towers stay lit but unpeopled. An eerie landscape, when the late night face of the city remains made up but with no one to please. A perfect set with no one in it. And The Dealer worries, as everyone here tends to do, if the tourists will come back.

Cold is a shock to the system here. The city is not built for it. After a heady summer it takes moments like these to adjust: to get used to low temperatures. The cold snap will not last but the town is an apparition like this; a trick of the light – beautiful, shivering and empty.

The Dealer drives over bridges, past the man-made canals, over the inky black water that shimmers with light. Pockets of darkness punctuated with neon. The car hums. The tourist strips have wound down and the lack of other cars on the streets and bodies on the sidewalks gives him time to think.

He touches the ticket in his breast pocket again, for the fifth time, but he does not read it. He will wait until he is home safe, somewhere he is sure there is no eye in the sky. He thinks about her and if she is at the window looking at the sleepy city thinking about him. He is driving away to the north, driving back home, and every second, every kilometre is undoing his resolve. He is going backwards along that quiet road, going backwards to a time when he laid the bets instead of collected. When he lost more than she could ever make. His index finger starts to twitch on the steering wheel, kicked in by the memory. The Dealer still knows how to play. He still
wants to. He will help this woman even though every instinct tells him not to. He will help this woman, standing now in the anonymous room, in The Casino, in the artificial light because he is what he is; a dealer with a past; a man programmed with farce. The city has won.

♦♣♠♥

I forget to close my door when I come in and it slams shut behind me, pulled sharply back by the force of the wind. The sudden crack of noise makes me jump. I remember what it feels like to watch my back. I turn around and lock it.

I dump my stuff on the two-person table inside, already littered with trails. I take the ticket out of my jacket and clear a space to place it. I do not open it. I move around my space looking for distractions, make a cup of coffee, peel myself out of my uniform, pick things up, move them, put them down. Finally I settle on the couch, flicking erratically through cable channels. But I’m not really interested in anything on TV, I’m interested in where that ticket is going to take me. The white and blue band distracting my vision - glowing like a sapphire light in my room. I move towards it, touch it; finger it as if it were Braille. The apartment fills with the rich smell of coffee. The minutes shift deliciously slow. The suspense is killing me. Always has done.

I decide to take a shower.

My bathroom window looks out over the resort building next-door. A peach-coloured low-level string of cat boxes. It’s quiet, the rim of identical rooms dark. But I can hear the sprinklers the managers run late at night, even in this drought, and the indulgent spray they throw over the glossy tropical garden blooms out in measured sections. Directly below me, the sick plants fringing my building lean towards the fence, desperate for
moisture. Like everything designed for locals they must survive without exemption. For the tourists and the opulent grounds that house them, the fresh water flows unchecked.

Under the water I look at the dark tones of my skin, another product of my city. Being a croupier gives me late mornings, even in winter, full of sun. Mornings where the simple pleasure of laying my head at eye level with millions of grains of sand is meditative, of how the ocean and the shiny gravel it makes has saved me. I think about Jade’s skin and wonder where she’s been hiding to make it so pale and I wonder if it might be jail.

I turn off the water.

Wrapping a towel around my waist, I go straight to the ticket, steam coming off my hot skin. I slip the ticket from its sleeve slightly afraid, aware suddenly of how much its knowledge might affect me. I can smell the money, the fresh notes Jade had pressed up against it all the way from Armidale. Armidale. Six hours south. A cold, conservative inland town. Jade Barker. Single ticket. One way. No concession. Tracing Jade.

♦♣♠♥

Jade takes the elevator to meet The Casino’s night face, to drink in the acceleration of noise and light. All the slower punters have shuffled away. The foyer is full of young people, drunk from other precincts that have shut down or kicked them out, and they circle the floor of The Casino to ward off the end of the night. The tables are busier and faster. The bars are packed. The music is louder, the lights more relentless. The floors in front of the ATM machines are littered with white receipts like oversized confetti and the mood is edged with the desperate.

Addicts who still have jobs crawl out into the night and stay later than they should, for just one more spin, one more round and Jade likes the buzz, the sense of
hyperactive danger – she likes to play when she can barely hear herself think. She doesn’t talk to anyone, just signals the dealers and watches, ignoring the smiles, the nods of approval that cannot conceal the jealousy of a fellow player’s eye. She stacks her tokens into tall towers and she knows when to walk away.

In Jade’s room the artificial air she breathes raises her body temperature so she sleeps without the sheets. The electric lights rising and falling over The Casino flood her windows with kaleidoscopic swirls, twisting through the open space she leaves between the curtains. She cannot bring herself to close them. Every few seconds the neon rolls in, crawling over her. She takes the full force of the light traveling up the building, rippling into rooms, keeping punters awake. But Jade doesn’t mind being woken up when she can go down anytime and play. She lies in the light. She likes it.

In the morning her room is so bright Jade imagines that just for a moment, she’s at the end of the world, that the burning sun she can see all around her but not quite feel is atomic. The room glowing orange but still cool. Flashing relentlessly with the promise of day. Her curtains are only half closed against the light, just like her eyes. She reclines longingly, letting it hit her, gazing into the white heat sky.

Jade likes the duplicity of rooms in The Casino, the presence of attendants, their anonymous murmurings in hallways, the mess of her life catered to by strangers. She engages in nothing domestic, nothing but play and thought. She begins to float. Her only concern is victory.

Outside her window cranes swing past delivering cement, miniskips and tools to workers renovating the giant atrium that hovers below; nothing remains the same for long. The Casino is always updating, always changing, and yet inside these
rooms it still feels like a tomb. Somewhere to be hidden and forgotten. Jade revels in the claustrophobia.

Downstairs in the lobby bar she drinks mineral water and watches. In the early morning The Casino is a sea of grey. Coach loads of white-haired players congealing in the bars for morning tea. Their eyes cast skywards to the light of Keno screens. Hobbling with walking frames, in American tracksuits or smart two-piece numbers and sensible shoes, clipping along the expansive stretches of shiny tiled floors. Jade sits above them in The Lobby Level and watches. The easy listening sounds of a cabaret singer with a palm-tree voice rise up from the bar into open space. The crisp click of glass, teacups and non-alcoholic cocktails – The Casino in the morning.

Jade takes lunch in The Bathing Pavilion, a sprawling Romanesque landscape of tri-level pools, spas and water features. The trickle of water and time. In the middle of the day the winter sun is warm enough to lie in and tourists from the colder places burn up and play. Jade likes all the homogenous comfort of identical sun beds and crisp white towels. When the wind gets cooler on her skin, she retreats into The Casino, waging games randomly. Jade likes wandering in The Casino, all of its edges curved. There seems to be a lack of walls and everything angles towards something else. Every surface is oblique, every line bent and tilted. The bars and restaurants thrust out into open levels held up by round columns and vast bowed sheets of Beachwood or frosted glass. Only their back walls are solid. In The Casino there are no straight lines, no clocks, no windows and no natural light. The hours drift.

Jade’s head begins to fill with the consistent hum, the rattle of cutlery, glass, tokens and coins landing in sudden bursts. Bottles gathered, glasses cleaned, the sounds of fragile things, the squeaking of machines. Voices lifting, laughing and
cussing in a wave of peripheral noise that is not distinctive but gradual. Her head
aches between her ears.

Only her room is quiet. Glass encased.

Jade lies quietly on the perfectly stretched sheets of her king sized bed. Her
body curved to the window. She stares into a vacant patch of sky and waits until it
changes, until she can see that faint whip of blue, caught on the glass, until the city
is glittering in the early evening. She moves toward the sealed pane, resting her
hands flat against its thickness. She feels like pushing, like falling through the sky.
She smiles, buoyed by the promise of a night with The Dealer. Across the road
Broadbeach hums with families on holiday and the onslaught of hundreds of rainbow
lorikeets flying in at dusk. Tiny birds darting out of the sunset full of cacophonous
song. But Jade can’t hear them, only watch them swarm. Tiny flashes of red. The
rapid movements of their silhouettes splashed against an evening sky. They go to a
small forest of pine trees fringing a vacant lot, a rare unbuilt space hostage to a
traveling carnival that never moves. And The Casino with Jade in it looks over it all.

♦♣♠♥

8:00pm at Gino’s and Jade is already at the table. She seems calmer than yesterday and the
smile she gives me is smug. She knows I’m in. I feel the rush of uncertainty, the idea that
something is going to happen, that there will be consequences. I know that Jade will attempt
to guess my next move. But I am ahead of her. She is in a daze. Her indifference will work to
my advantage. She is in the afterglow of escape. She does not expect that I’m accustomed to
challenge. She feels that the space I’m from precipitates some kind of lethargy, a lazy mind
and she thinks this is what makes me a prime target. Like everyone else Jade has forgotten
that I live inside the promise of paradise. I sell it but I don’t believe in it. I pretend so they
don’t see me coming. I’ve never found it hard to keep a straight face.

I take a seat. We exchange hellos.

We don’t talk about anything much at first. Jade seems to like the sidewalk
atmosphere, all the people she doesn’t know. I don’t know them either, but I’m used to it. I
pick Gino’s cause it’s the least pretentious of the restaurants round here and I know when
we want to get down to it we’ll be able to. The noise of Italians on keyboards, fireworks on
the beach and the busy street will protect us.

I notice we’ve both made an effort for each other. She looks beautiful in red, the
strange equine features of her face made up strong. I wait until after the meal, until the
coffee comes, to ask her:

So you never told me where you’re from?

Jade takes three sugars and dumps them in her coffee.

Sydney, she says.

The first lie and she doesn’t even flinch.

Did something go down for you there?

What makes you say that?

I don’t know. Your reaction last night when I asked you.

Oh that.

Jade looks away from me as if she doesn’t want to acknowledge it.

Not a surprise, most people who come here are running from something.

They don’t look too phased if they are.

I laugh. Yeah, not much gets taken seriously round here.

She gives me a wayward look. That’s what I was hoping for.

I look back at her square on. Okay then, what’s the plan?
Telemarketing.

I’m taken aback. Trying to hide it by sipping my coffee; the long glass shielding my face. It’s not what I expected and not as big time as I’d had in mind. The waiter comes over with the bill. I wait till he leaves.

You wanna get into that?

No. I wanna get into someone else’s.

I know what she means and I tell her I like it.

Good, cause I’m gonna need your help.

I’m listening.

I wanna come at it from the inside. Get their trust; move in on someone in particular.

Whatever it takes?

Yeah. To do that I’ll need a voice, a body, a player on the outside, someone who can move for me when I can’t. When I’m in there, you know what I mean?

Yes.

And it’s gonna take a lot. You have to be on call, be fluid with me, there when I need you… There’ll be other things too, sidebars, cause I need to build it up.

What?

The cash.

Sure. Any particular reason?

You don’t need to know that yet. I haven’t decided whether I want someone in on it. But for the rest, the cut is fifty-fifty.

Sounds reasonable. But if I want out, I’m out. No questions, no cut backs. Okay?

Okay.

I pay the bill.
The first thing The Dealer and Jade do is get her a series of dodgy credit cards. It only takes a scanner and someone else’s mail. Don’t put anything, he tells her, in your own name. Jade knows all this but it’s part of the game, The Dealer must be the teacher. They must do and talk and devise these things together so the days are filled with excuses to meet and sound each other out. And the city makes it easier. Everyone’s a stranger. Everyone’s from somewhere else. No one gives a shit.

He tells her that she should live in Surfers Paradise, that she shouldn’t live near him. Not because he doesn’t want her to but because that’s what new people do. Live in the famous place because they don’t know any better. And she shouldn’t live too big, he says, because that will cause suspicion.

In the back streets of Surfers, on the riverside, they find her a large but nondescript place near Budds Beach. Not a tower but a three-storey walk-up and it’s not dodgy enough to ruin her story but not flash enough to scare anyone away.

You should get a flat mate, he tells her, it’s normal.

They like how the days pan out. In the mornings The Dealer goes to the surf alone. Jade doesn’t like the surf beach. She’s only five minutes away but she still thinks walking around a neighborhood is enough to get you known. She sleeps instead. When The Dealer is in the water he doesn’t think about her, or the chances or what he’s doing, he doesn’t think about much. He bodysurfs and lies in the sun, letting himself melt. He has always left the world like this, on the soothing atmosphere of sea spray, but on the drive over to her house the idea of her starts
rushing in, starts making him want to play. And not even the ocean can separate The Dealer from Jade, from the pull of her secretive game.

They drive low to the ground, in the kind of car that always feels good on these clean long-line streets, a white low-line Celica gliding through the city from banks, to real estate agents, to post offices, building her identity, always talking; in the car, in lines, walking back and forth – they speak the same language; an understanding based not just on the words but on the codes.

They have lunch from two on various alfresco tables in the winter sun, weighing things up, teasing things through. And then The Dealer goes to work.

Jade doesn’t like it when he goes; everything seems too slow. She desperately misses the distraction of The Casino. Sometimes she goes with him because she can’t stand to be alone. He tells her she should get out but Jade doesn’t know the city well enough. She hasn’t found her bearings, her equilibrium or her first sting. The rooms in her bare apartment feel cold but she stays there alone, working on the things he tells her to and then she stops to think. In this city there is plenty of time to dream.

♦♣♠♥

Jade and I have developed a routine. I meet her after work, just after midnight, and we go to the places where the odds of winning are better. Illegal dens and hothouses where I know the crew and they know me. Sometimes they’re surprised to see me back – mostly they’re not. That’s the good thing about an invisible world, no one inside it judges you. They forgive you because they need you to return. I like gambling with Jade, she makes it feel good again.
When we’ve won enough or lost too much I drop her home. We’re always moving around the city, in its peak times, in its downtimes, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that Jade’s getting to know it and I’m getting to like having her around. Late at night when we’re driving she looks out the passenger window most of the time, spellbound, gazing at the lights and the towers and the sea. And I know it excites her, because it’s beautiful, this city, whether it’s in the light or the dark it’s been made to be looked at.

When we pull up at her house and talk about tomorrow over the low rumble of the engine I sometimes find myself wondering if she’ll ever ask me in. But I know that’s not my role. Every day I get further away from the chance of that proximity. She won’t sleep with me because she needs to trust me.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

They look good together, The Dealer and Jade. Both tall, one pale, one dark. One young, one roughed out. They like how they look. How they leave questions and strange impressions behind them, but The Dealer should know better. The Dealer should know that in this city, nothing, not even the good stuff can hold out for long. This city is always turning, over time, over them, over itself, and they are on the surface that always slips. Routine is just an illusion. It can happen, it can happen for weeks, but eventually something will give. Something will crack. Something will disappear.

Jade is starting to see the shifts, starting to precipitate change. She can feel the pull under her feet. What’s happening over there? And there? And there? That’s what she wants to know. The Dealer is forgetting to look past her because he’s
lonely, he’s damaged and he needs to rely on her need. Jade is damaged but she’s still close enough to be motivated by it, to be strung tight.

The Dealer prefers how it is between them now. How it isn’t too dangerous, how it isn’t too bad. He’s still got a handle on it. A bit of sideways activity, a bit of slack, who doesn’t do that? He just wants the preparation to roll on and on. But it won’t. He won’t be able to slow it and he won’t be able to stop it. He can’t protect her. It always starts with something simple.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

We are in a Main Beach alfresco café. I don’t like places where you can smell perfume and aftershave over the food and coffee but Jade likes it, she likes to watch. Our table is resting rather precariously on the slant of the footpath and I’m finding the constant tilt distracting. I fold up a coaster to place under the leg but the cardboard seems to snap rather than fold so it’s not really working. While I’m jiggling with the table leg Jade says:

God, there’s so many wankers here.

I look up from underneath the table, puzzled because she’s speaking with more amusement than disdain. Does she mean other than us? Because she seems to have overlooked the fact that we’re here too, or is it just because their vulnerability excites her? I don’t press the issue. The waiter comes out, having seen my dilemma.

Oh I’m sorry sir, he says looking rather amused at my ripped up coaster, the legs unwind, see?

Smug bastard. I watch him as he bends down with exaggerated bother, a tonne of gel on his head. These guys are always looking out for someone else. He adjusts the table so that instead of wobbling it is now set on a permanent angle.
That’s great. Much Better.

My head’s throbbing, has been all day. I ask him for a mineral water.

Jade?

Nothing yet, thanks.

Jade seems to be preoccupied with something over my shoulder so I look down at my menu. As I do I hear her sudden intake of breath.

Isn’t that…?

I turn around.

Yeah, that’s him.

And I turn back to face her. Behind me a group of four are taking their seats. One of them is my ex-boss PJ, Peter Jackson. Not of the cigarettes fame, but of other stuff. Just as harmful.

What’s he doing here?

He’s from here.

Really? She says it like she thinks it’s good news. Do you know him?

I used to.

I try not to notice that everyone seems to be looking in the same direction as Jade. I stay tuned to the menu. I must be the only one who wants to eat around here.

Wow, I can’t believe it.

I look at her incredulous and check her expression to see if she really means it. She’s still staring at him.

Oh get fucked, Jade. Don’t be an idiot.

Fuck you, she says flicking open her menu angrily. Jesus, settle down will you.

Sorry. He’s done some bad shit to me and a lot of other people, that’s all.

Jade tilts her head up slightly and says without looking at me,
I think what he’s done is pretty smart.

Yeah right, I say ignoring the fact that she just insulted me. It’s real hard running drugs and laundering cash on the Gold Coast.

I look at her pointedly.

And he’s only famous cause he’s failed at it, rather spectacularly.

And I’m referring to a scandal last year that landed him in the papers across the world and me nearly in jail, but Jade doesn’t seem to get my meaning.

He went to jail, didn’t he?

Yeah, but not for that. He went in a long time ago and I bet he still jokes around about being fucked up the arse.

I’m going to go over and say hello.

I roll my eyes at her.

Get in line.

No, I’m serious, I wanna talk to him.

What is it with PJ? For some unknown reason chicks like Jade have always fallen for him.

Don’t.

Why not? He could probably help us.

Us? I don’t think so. Why would he wanna do that?

I don’t know.

And I can see as Jade sits up, righting herself and angling her chair to get a better view, that she thinks he would.

Don’t flatter yourself, Jade. Stick to what you know.

But you just said it yourself, he’s nothing.

He’s not nothing. What he does is nothing.
What are you saying?

I’m saying that if you don’t wanna end up with a tyre around your neck in the fucking Nerang River you’ll stay at this table. Know what I mean?

Oh bullshit. You’re just exaggerating.

Jade, I’m telling you that if you go over there I’m leaving. I’m out.

What is wrong with you today?

Don’t you listen? I said I knew him, right?

Jade’s getting impatient with me, leaning back now as if trying to distance herself.

Yeah, so what? So does half the fucking western world.

I move forward cause I don’t want anyone else to hear me. But already people are looking at us, they can sense a fight. I stare down the lady at the table next to us with the cat’s arse face till she looks away. I look back at Jade.

If you value my opinion, which I’m beginning to think counts for shit, you’ll leave it alone.

Don’t, she tells me leaning in close, tell me what to do. Just cause you came out the other end a borderline fucking defective doesn’t mean I will.

Okay Jade, you said it.

I feign calm, taking my napkin slowly out of my lap and refolding it graciously. I don’t want to make a scene but part of me wants so badly to slap her, to snap her out of it, that dangerous and annoying combination of insolence and naivety.

You can count me out. As of now.

What? she says, her eyes darting around nervously as I stand up.

I’m going to work. You decide, Jade. If you go to that table, don’t call me.

And I walk out facing front, struggling to contain my anger, but I don’t falter and I don’t look back. The last thing I want is for PJ to see me.
The next day I wake to the prospect of Jade, her derision and her lies. Rain bears down heavily, drenching the city. Later the sun will come out and people will think it signals a clearing. But the sea knows better. You can always tell what kind of day it’s going to be by the colour of the ocean. When its ashen and churned the rain will not hold off for long. In the afternoon it will turn green mirroring the onset of hail. The black will roll in and unload a torrent; drops so heavy and thick they sound like thunder. Rain and cold spell big business for a casino.

If I was going in, it would be a busy day. But I’m not going in today, maybe not for a few days. I sip my coffee, Jade’s blue and white ticket in my hand.

I ring my supervisor, tell him there’s been an emergency. And there has been - just not the kind he would endorse. I can tell by the resignation in his voice that he doesn’t believe me. I go silent, wait for him to speak. I haven’t done much to piss him off before, and so in the end he lets it go. I tell him I should be back by Friday. I hang up and put the ticket to my face. It doesn’t smell like money anymore.

I still feel sick from yesterday. From how close I came to hitting her, from scolding her like a father. I just wanted her to stop looking at him. Damn PJ – he’s the best excuse for a gangster this town’s ever had and into all kinds of things I’m sure Jade wouldn’t mind knowing about. But she shouldn’t know about that. She shouldn’t know about him. Then again, I know I can’t stop her. She’s got to ride that one in on her own. I’ll just have to be there when she stumbles out. But I wonder why the hell I’m so willing to do that? Why she has managed, so quickly, to get this hold over me? But if I’m honest I do know why. It always takes an equal amount of stupidity and guts to make anything interesting. For me it
started with blackjack but if you count childhood it started way before that. I worked out early that betting was really about people. At first I conned them out of their cash because I needed the money to play and then I realised that psychology was a much more fruitful game. Still, I’ve picked the wrong target before. And that’s why I need to know about Jade.

I groundwork. Hone in on Armidale, a town across the border in New South Wales. I’ve never been there, which is a disadvantage. It’s a six-hour drive but I need to know everything about why she left. Why her hand was shaking when she laid her first bet. Why she’s on the take with me here, what her fixation, what her crocodile tears and what her past are all about.

I’ve told her I’m out because it buys me time. I’m not leaving her because I can’t. I don’t think I’d be capable of letting go of this now. As much as I’m worried about PJ, it’s going to happen because I can’t protect her or shield her from the pull of that kind of reputation. I can’t compete with that. The jealousy just creates a diversion, a cover so I can get away from her and find out who she really is. The more I get to know her the less I know. There’s something missing in Jade, it’s not just about the money or the means, there are things she’s not telling me.

I watch the rain falling past the giant sheet of glass that forms the back wall of my apartment; puddles of water gathering on the edges of the verandah, drops sliding and slipping like a stream down the building. All this water the city needs but struggles to put up with. People get depressed here in the wet. They can’t move. Everything is designed for the outside, conceived in heat. People live here because they love exteriors. Going internal doesn’t suit them. They dither around shopping malls and spend too much money; they watch movies and videos and cable TV until the walls start closing in. Then they come to The Casino to throw away what’s left. Jade must have brought the rain with her. Our first symptom of torment.
I leave my city. Anticipate cold. Driving north-west towards Warwick the landscape shifts within kilometres. So close to home the rainforest covets the highway, shades the car, wraps around the air, letting in a speckled light. I wonder why I never come out here. But I can only deal with this open space, this lush territory from inside the car. From here I can entertain thoughts of rest and recuperation in flowing hills and valleys. But I'll never do it. If the car stopped and I found myself with my feet on the ground, listening to the punctuated stillness I’d go mad. If I ever close my eyes and can’t see numbers and cash I’ll know I'm dead.

Already I’m spinning out. Like I’m caught in the tail of a whirlwind. The car cruises through a green world so deep and rich that I open the windows to smell it. To take in the rush of dankness, the sexy heaviness of the vivid air. This place is female. I feel both exhilarated and suffocated by the rainforest. On every bend I’m overcome by the fervour of it. Driving fast, the car hugs the curves, glides lowline along the road; the shale scars of rockfaces appear like open wounds. To my right the sensation of height, of edges, hovers and I am aware of the precariousness of a mountain and my machine.

In between Warwick and Glenn Innes it starts to snow. At first I think the white pebbles dissolving onto my windscreen are hailstones. They aren’t. The way they melt on impact in their deceptive softness assures me that I am seeing my first snowfall. I check the clock. 1.45pm. It’s the middle of the goddamn day, just across the border outside Queensland, and I’m experiencing snow. I can’t believe it. It’s the kind of surreal moment that requires beer.

I pull into the next pub, a rectangular shed on the side of the road in a place called Deepwater. I know the car I’m driving is possibly worth more than the pub so I park out front just to be an arsehole. I thought the first time I saw snow would be in Europe drinking heavily with some foreign welsher and her understanding family. Being a Queenslander that’s
how I’d always pictured it. How I’d played out cold condensation in my mind. I never thought I’d be running into a shack in the dry sheep country of northern New South Wales with a cold sleet wind after my arse.

The door is heavy and snaps shut behind me. The guy behind the bar is my age and looks like the kind of dude you’d expect to see in Byron Bay not Deepwater. I take this as a good sign. He doesn’t really smile as much but makes a concerted effort to appear energetic as he pours me a schooner. I take a seat on the edge of the bar with the others. The others are one couple and their approximately two-year-old kid and another guy about thirty-five sitting between them and me. No one says anything. The beer tastes good and the fire heater in the corner reassures me. The barman moves to my left and starts rummaging through some paper work, which looks like stacks of betting slips. In front of me footy tab stubs lie in piles and, half interested, I check out who’s playing this week. The TV above the barman’s head is black and white punctured by ripples of static. The coverage flickers from the horses to Gary Sweet looking concerned on re-run daytime telly.

The woman or the girlfriend, which means I’m not looking at her, asks the barman to try her keycard in the Eftpos machine. He does and the familiar whir of a completed transaction is greeted by surprise.

Hey, Billy, you should try yours. Mine’s workin’.

The barman gives her a cup for the pokies behind me and she settles down on a stool. The machine’s not turned up that loud so I can hear the chunky slip and press of her game. Billy wanders over and gives his a go. He’s not so lucky. Us boys settle back to the beer. Outside a gale force wind does its best to open the doors and we all turn round to check it out. It looks like a blizzard out there and the locals seem nearly as shocked as I am. The surprise on my face is greeted with:

She’s bloody cold out there, mate. Where you from?
The Gold Coast.

This appears to explain everything.

The little kid seems impressed with the novelty of my presence and crawls over to my feet, stands, grabs the tail of my jacket and lets out a horrific sort of giggle. Billy tells me to meet the kid and mum turns around for a second because she thinks this situation is cute.

The guy next to me says:

I used to live on the Coast. You work in the hospital?

No.

Yeah, well, you look like one of them guy nurses in the hospital I used to know.

I’m not sure how to take this so I just let it go with a smile and a nod. We drink.

The kid falls off my leg and starts crawling around under the bar. He or she, I can’t tell, picks up a discarded TAB ticket and holds it up to me. I take it but the kid gets pissed off so I give it back. This goes on for a few minutes. And I wonder about this kid, this blip on the floor of a hotel. Will he fare any better than the ones that get left in carparks in The Casino? He’s already onto the game and I realise that you just can’t get away from it now.

Everywhere there’s something to take a risk on.

I hear the rumble outside of big tyres on gravel. The guys around me seem to tense up. An older man emerges from the recesses of the bar. He looks like the publican, the kind of man I had expected to see first – kind to children, rough on himself. Mum yells out something I don’t quite catch (an announcement) and everyone looks to the door. When it opens they look away. The old publican and the young barman stand together to my right. I look at my beer. I can tell the guy who’s walked in is big. I can feel the impression of his stature next to me at the bar, the heat and the cold. I glance up at him, quickly. He’s the only one smiling. In age he’s somewhere between the publican and the barman, but with laugh lines that extend from his eyes down to his mouth. I take a swig. The men exchange
abbreviated pleasantries and the big guy asks if anything was resolved at the end of discussions last night. The publican says no, slightly strained as if repeating himself and says that they thought the plan was that he would come here this afternoon and they could figure it out. The big guy goes: Right… and shuffles his feet. The barman says nothing and tries not to look too stoned. I notice the big guy’s voice is different, more controlled. His torn jacket and dirtied-up Blundstones don’t go with his voice.

Well, if Joyce is here then, he says, maybe we can go over it now.

If you like, says the publican. She’s out the back.

The big guy goes to move, a little too quickly it seems and the publican says:

Wait. I’ll get her.

The barman turns to his betting slips and the big guy moves out towards the back, even though he isn’t welcome to. He passes Billy at the end of the bar and gives him a nod. Billy raises his beer in mock salute. By the time he’s rounding the corner the publican and Joyce come out a side door. Joyce looks like she’s been scraping gravy off pots for twenty years and she nods and moves around uncomfortably between the two men, much bigger than herself. I hear the big guy say something about whether Joyce has any time and she says in a resigned way that she can make some for him. They file through the door, Joyce first, the big guy in the middle and the publican last. I finish my beer and refuse another. The two men beside me stare into space, watching something I can’t see. I stand and the poker machine hum is broken. I thank the barman and say some predictable bullshit about braving the cold and everyone smiles and the kid is blocking the door and for the first time his mum and dad stand up, making attempts to move him or her, I can never tell. I walk back into the frigid day wondering about all the things people do to survive – how not even trick money can save everything. I wonder too, about the small but persistent persecutions Jade might
have been running from. I leave Deepwater, strangely unsettled, and for the first time ever I really hate this car.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

Armidale is colder than anywhere I know. Heat is something I travel towards. Cold affects me inside, the chill gets inside my skin. I prepare well but everything I have seems inadequate. Winter clothing sold in the tropics never covers or warms enough. My jumpers are too short, not thick enough. They don’t have roll neck collars. My jackets aren’t lined; my trousers are too thin. They breathe too much. Everything I own breathes too much. I feel out of place – ridiculously cold.

I like to move languidly, to take my time.

In cold towns everyone’s moving quickly, dashing and then succumbing, to rooms boosted by fires and conditioners that make your cheeks puff red in appreciation of the false heat. A heat that is only an aberration for there is always somewhere the wind will catch you and the ground will freeze your feet. Little wonder she left. This is no place for melting. Here, water is the last thing I want to be near, to flow around me. I want to get back that cold water buzz.

I feel back to front, inside out in a town that no one tours to – where no one is leading me with a numbered flag. I walk around, unnoticed and overlooked.

My real destination is secret.

My real destination has fled and I am here to try to track her trace in the frozen ground. I’m thinking, all the time, about the traces she might have left, closer to her now without her really knowing it. These are the streets she has walked down, the streets that have made her. I can recognise Jade here, in the cold, in the edge of danger and isolation that
seems to swirl around this town like a hostile wind, desperate and flighty, it bristles on my skin, makes me feel like a hunted thing. There are ghosts here, strange potencies, enough history, even on its surface, to make you want to run. An old town that has seen hangings and floggings, hosted rebels and made men. Just another old town the young try to run from.

The pub sits in the middle of the Armidale city mall. Armidale is beige and brown in winter. I decide to stay here at the Tattersall’s Hotel because it makes me feel like a bookie. I don’t need to stay in a pub, I could grab one of the more comfortable-looking Country Comfort-type establishments on the way into town but I want to hang out where the action is. I want to hang out where people drink and tell stories, speculate, fall over and let things slip. I want to stay where business means persisting with a hard hand.

I'm not used to negotiating closed facades. I'm used to high, transparent entrances, to doors that turn by themselves, to floating through with the air. Here I enter with difficulty, pulling the door open against the wind. I walk through a foyer area with information booths dedicated to the local University. The dining room and the bar that adjoins it are empty except for the publican; you can always pick them. I ask him if he’s got any rooms available and he says yeah, tells me I’m in the wrong place and directs me back the way I came.

I see a door with Office written on it and go through. There’s barely enough room for me to stand inside. The office consists of a small part of the public bar sectioned off for use as a desk. The barman is about the same age as me. Burly. Sad. He sells me a room with a shower and asks me if I want to see it first. I tell him it’ll be all right. While I’m signing the book that looks about a hundred years old he tells me I can park out back and that if I come home later than twelve I have to enter through the fire escape.

Like an alley cat, mate.
No worries.

He tells me his name’s Jim, that he’ll get me a heater. Jim walks me to the stairs and, pointing to the dining room says,

Top food. I’ve put you on the third floor so you’re away from the noise. We’ve got a band on here tonight.

I thank him and start climbing. Halfway there I’m thinking some noise mightn’t have been too bad. The staircase is immense, may have once been grand. But like so many old structures it just feels like a pathway to a former glory. The silence amplifies my steps on the hard wood as I climb higher to the third level.

On the walls of each floor cufflinked hands point the way to rooms in faded gold. The hallways are dark and wide, full of the frigid air of colonial ghosts. This is a place built for something lost, for another time. I run my fingers along the mahogany handrail. Next to me another two metres of space stretches out on the stair as if once they had to factor in the considerable traffic of men. Now these quarters are deserted and I feel small inside a mausoleum of time, shivering under the high ceilings, my body weary in defiance of this cold inert history.

♦♣♠♥

I wake to a bang and the room is briefly red like human eyes in flash photography. I hear something hissing. I remain stunned, midway, halfway back from the fog of my dreams. My guess is the heater. I sit up to confirm that nothing’s on fire and to check that it was actually the heater and not the electric blanket or me that has bust. I see the pitiful appliance ticking away to itself in the half-light and I laugh at the absurdity of this cold. A cold even the gadgets can’t handle. I am aware of every part of me that is not literally touching the heat in
this blanket. A thin whistle of wind enters the gaps around the shrunken window but it
contains no light or sun. I pull myself under, protect my face and think of Jade shivering.

The level of light tells me it’s early evening, so Armidale can wait. I appreciate my
cocoon, let my mind wander, wait out my down time. Inside the dimness I think I hear the
voice of a woman. I’m not sure. I wait, hear her again. She is close to me but buffered by
walls and cracked linoleum. She is not speaking but calling out, over and over again. Softly
and then with an edge. Softly and then with an edge. I listen, lean in different directions. She
is not next to me or above me. I am no closer to her; I cannot place where she is. She seems
to be all around me as if circling with the draughts. I picture her moving on the bed. I hear
no one else and in my mind she is alone. Moving with as much conviction as I am still. She
calls for the last time and I see Jade quivering.

♦♣♠♥

Jade is on her way home in a brand new car, with a brand new man. PJ doesn’t drive
like The Dealer. He drives like a man relaxed, sitting back in the seat, one hand on
the edge of a very expensive wheel. Jade likes comparing him to The Dealer. His
older rounder head, his older rounder body. But it is the way he holds himself, his
defiance that makes her want him. And this desire has got nothing to do with how
she actually feels, only what he can make her feel.

PJ is rich but rough enough around the edges to make a girl presume she’s in
control. He’s a man that seems to do nothing but is always doing something. The
wave of his notoriety carries him, makes him sexy when all he is, is dangerous. He is
constantly in restaurants, the kind of Gold Coast restaurants that pay him to come
back.
They have just had a long lunch and Jade is full of wine, promises and images; of how she looks with him, of what they might do, of how he looks at her – because he didn’t, not at first.

Yesterday, when she introduced herself, she said that he was a friend of her father’s a long time ago. That her father had mentioned him and said that if she ever saw him while she was on the Coast she should say hello. Jade knew that she couldn’t just be another fan. There had to be a connection to ward off the dismissal. She had to get him wondering just what it was all about. And he is.

PJ avoided her eyes all through yesterday’s lunch, running the name she gave through his head, and failing to find an answer. He excused himself and on his mobile phone in the alleyway behind the restaurant he asked a few other people to run the name through their heads. And what they came up with was a lie. Jade’s clumsy indiscretion. They tell him that family never had a daughter. But he decides to fuck her anyway. Her courage has amused him.

Back at the table Jade carries on the charade. She has always planned on being this girl so the transition for her is simple. She is at this table, with these people and she is the first person she has ever wanted to be. Not the name she was born with, not the names she has stolen or invented but the name she has always wanted. Weston. Jade Weston.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

I take the bartender’s advice and decide to eat downstairs. It’s 8:00pm on a Friday and the place is relatively empty. The dinner crowd consists of a handful of half-dead pensioners, a family, a single woman and a few rugged-looking guys in trenchies. I notice the regulars have
secured all the tables by the fireplace that feels so inviting and warm on my back. None of them seem as approachable as the heat and I’m not in the mood to talk just yet, so I take a table from the many available on the other, colder side of the bar.

I eat lamb cutlets because they’re something I never eat on the Coast. The small town atmosphere and the cold lends itself to home fare and rich gravy. I enjoy the food, the heavy red wine in my glass, and I watch. The family sitting by the entrance to the kitchen belongs to the publican. His wife smiles at me but otherwise I remain a stranger. The guys in trenchies have been at it all afternoon and their conversation about nothing reverberates loudly to my right. They retire to the racing simulators at the back of the room. When their women arrive they become more raucous, and the girls seem eager to catch up until they realise just how far-gone they are. The boys get louder, start swearing, kicking and hitting the pretend dashes of their pretend cars. I watch the publican walking over to them with weary indifference. I hear the intimidating tone of his voice but not what he says. When he walks back past his kids they regard him with pride and he gives his son a playful uppercut that makes him smile through his chips. The publican’s wife rolls her eyes at me affectionately. Five minutes later the trenchies and their entourage have gone.

I am beginning to be seduced by the banality of this room, this town and the easily negotiated interactions. It’s quiet in here and strangely exotic and I’m filled with a desire to slip into the folds of customary routines. Just for this moment I believe in the preservation of things past. But when I walk into the public bar and the fruit machines send me their ominous signals I know we’re destined to wager our memories, repeat our mistakes and relentlessly pursue and resist uncertain futures.

I take a stool at the bar. There are a number of vacant chest-high tables scattered around the room, but being alone, a seat at the bar is always a better option. It feels strange to be present in rooms with poker machines and not have cards in my hands. In The Casino
they loop me, these devices, surrounding the gaming tables at all angles in wide supermarket
aisles peripheral to the games that still require me. I resent anyone who is amused by these
gadgets, and even here the feeling doesn’t leave me, doesn’t stop me grimacing. The barman
sizes me up, while pouring a beer for someone else. The room’s fairly empty but watching
this guy you’d think it was packed, he’s amped, an energy coming off him that’s not entirely
natural. But it’s not a desperate rush, this barman’s got the personality to ride it out, enough
talent to make me smile. And I let him catch my amusement, because I don’t want him to
stop and because I know too well that people in these kind of jobs survive off recognition.

What’ll it be? he asks me.

Red.

He rests for a moment on the bar in front of me, dropping his head for a bit of a
laugh. I know that wine isn’t the coolest choice in a country pub but I don’t give a shit and
he can see that. His laugh’s playful, recognition of an impromptu stake-out between us. And
he doesn’t reach to pour me a glass; he procures the whole cask, not the four-litre but the
slightly more respectable Yalumba two.

It’s yours, he says.

And so aided and abetted, my night begins. He takes care of the first couple of refills
but as the bar begins to fill I switch the cask around and take care of myself. Eventually he
stops asking me for the money, so I just leave it on the bar because I would have bailed a
long time ago if it wasn’t for him. I’d planned on having a few drinks in every bar in town, to
scope and wander, but I’ve felt no urge to leave. I know he’s my man and it’s not just
because of this that I’m happy to sit here and forget my plans; I want to stay here because I
like him.

I’m always drawn to guys that are the opposite of me; it’s why I’ve got few mates at
The Casino. They’re all too similar. They know what I know. They see what I see. They
make the same moves as me. I need a clown to smash apart my reserve and tonight, watching, I realise he’s the antidote, the kind of fleeting friend I look for when I need a break from my own head. His hair is blonde to my black. His fingers move with a looseness mine resist. Tonight his mouth is running off with words and smiles, diametric to my silence.

And I’m not alone in my reverie. The people piling in are getting younger and younger and all of them love him. The oldies out the back have cleared out and on my trips to the men’s I notice that attempts have been made to transform the dining hall into a makeshift band venue. There are a few tragic lights spinning over what passes for a stage but the room’s so large and draughty the result is more blue light disco than rock ’n’ roll. No sign of a band. Those who are in the room are crammed into the coveted seats around the fire. Back in the public bar, one of the bouncers is wrestling with the jukebox, pulling it away from the wall. And my man announces to the crowd:

Boss has gone home, so let’s fucking crank this piece of shit up!

There is a raising of glasses and voices. I notice the sound guy from next door has crept in for a beer and is leaning wearily in the hallway, keeping an eye on his gear but far too bored to keep fiddling with it. Even if the band does turn up he knows there’ll be no competing with this guy.

Two obviously underage girls sidle up next to me at the bar and he makes them wait. They fidget nervously with their hair. When he does eventually point at one of them she says,

Two Cocksucking Cowboys, please.

How ‘bout a clit-licking barman?

And before they even get it he’s produced two shots, and waved them away with his towel.
When they look at me in mock protest I just shrug and watch the arch of their necks as they throw back the toffee-coloured mix. The only people playing the machines are two fat girls with the same hairdresser and this rather pleases me. Two out of forty’s not bad. The rest are crowded around the bar and its nearest tables. In this few square metres of space they jostle for position, to be closer to him whether they’re aware of it or not. The noise building under the rising canopy of smoke is the kind of concentrated din where you hear so much but nothing in particular. Over where the machines are is dead space so I propose a silent toast to The Lunatic, a man who inspires rejection of easy options.

As the night rolls on I’m beginning to notice how The Lunatic runs his show. I see the small packages he slips under the notes he gives back, how occasionally he walks into a room behind the bar and returns with his towel covering his hands – a white veil he uses to hide his secret transactions. Someone will order a drink and get little change from fifty. So, we are not that dissimilar after all, he’s a Dealer too.

♦♣♠♥

I’ve been in town for nine hours and a certain amount of minutes. I have consumed a decent meal, many glasses of red wine, some Cocksucking Cowboys and am now warm enough to approach a glass with ice. Maybe ready enough for where the Lunatic is taking me. Somehow I’ve become embroiled in a mass exodus from the pub to the only club in town. The Lunatic leading the rowdy pack but walking slightly ahead with me. I like that he’s singled me out.

I meet Camille on a dark street corner two blocks from the pub. Everything happens on this night in close proximity. I see her coming towards the Lunatic and I, a single figure – long and blonde – rolling in from the northern end of town. It looks like she’s headed to the same place we are. She crosses the road and says something to The Lunatic as she hits the
kerb in front of us. He doesn’t introduce me but he seems to know her well. This appears logical and innocuous at the time, but what is time when you’ve stopped counting minutes in a curfewed territory? The Lunatic doesn’t slow down to chat so Camille just falls naturally into step between us, her head turned towards me, smiling.

And I remember laughter ricocheting between us but most of all I remember that face tilted to the right, amused with me. That face, like an eclipse I don’t stop staring into, not because I’m romantic but because it is astronomical and so damn unexpected.

The Lunatic takes us to the only place in town open after 12:00am and you have to be there before then or you don’t get in. And once you’re in you can’t come back out. Looking up I wonder if The Terminus might possibly be the most overused name in the world for a club but we’re already late so I don’t mention it.

Because we’re with The Lunatic the guy on the door waves us in. Inside he seems to be getting carried further and further away, drawn on by groups of mostly young drunk people. I follow him, the beautiful Camille to my right. I’m so aware of her but we don’t talk, it’s too loud and there are far too many potential run-ins to negotiate, especially near the toilets. We are making our way up the stairs and across a wide platform to the dance section of the club. When we get there I’m kind of dismayed. Such a long journey for such a predictable place and I realise I’m far too drunk to deal with it.

The club is really just one huge concrete room, with a hose-down floor, two massive bars covered in plastic and surrounded by sticky pools of beer. There isn’t much light. For a few moments I find it hard to see in front of me. The dance floor’s like a beacon in the darkness, running around it a dull metal ring for the men to lean on. It looks like a cross between a skating rink and a cattle auction. The Lunatic has gone. I turn to Camille.

Is there anywhere else in here we can have a drink?

She laughs. Yeah, pretty bad isn’t it?
I just widen my eyes to let her know I’m not coping.

Follow me.

Camille leads me downstairs to what the Terminus calls its Cocktail Bar, and it’s a far cry from that but at least it doesn’t remind me of a bullring. All I have to do is concentrate on her.

Camille is on top of me and her face is defiant now and not as curious. We are lying in the car park of the Tattersall’s hotel. We have fallen over and it is definitely my fault. She tells me that I shouldn’t go around town asking questions about people, about women…

Or what? I ask, shaking her playfully but she doesn’t finish.

She doesn’t answer me because her face slips onto my chest, passed out. She is a dead weight and I’m laughing too much to move so I just lie there, giggling, shaking my head, looking up through the distended chink the road makes through the metal structures above us. I have been in town for hours. I have consumed an uncertain amount. I have lost count of the drinks, the minutes, and have forgotten almost all the things people said. Most of all I remember The Lunatic telling me that Armidale is one big bed.

I wake up alone. Camille’s gone. I guess it’s late morning from the traffic sounds of what probably constitutes a full Saturday in town. Light’s pressing on my window from high and bright.

I can hear doors opening and closing along the hall and the familiar muted female voices of hotel-room changeover ceremonies. I sit up and peruse the carnage generated last night. Basically it looks as if we had more fun negotiating objects than each other. I must have made feeble attempts to draw the beds together but the gap and the fact that I still have
all my clothes on, including my shoes, suggests to me that we did not sleep together. The air in the room feels thick with smoke and alcohol but there is only me here now so the window can stay closed. I lie back down on the disordered beds and try to recall what happened. A knock at the door startles me and before I can answer a woman is staring at me and the state of the room with some amusement.

Sorry, love.

I groan appropriately to indicate beyond a shadow of a doubt my pitiful condition but I’m smiling at her so she smiles back.

Have a big night, did we?

What time is it?

About eleven, love. ‘Bout time you were up and about, eh?

Guess I’ve missed breakfast then.

By a mile.

We both laugh. She comes into the room and starts to gather up the towels.

I’ll just change these over for you, and the bin.

I watch her bustle around with the energy it takes to stay happy in a nothing-an-hour job and I like the way the whole situation makes me feel less alone. Mothered and wayward and seventeen. She closes the door softly.

I remember a sideways jaunt up the fire escape with Camille in my arms. We’d gotten in too late to come through the front. I remember talking to her neck because her head was thrown back involuntarily as I cradled her in front of me and tried desperately to make it up all the stairs without knocking her feet or her head on the walls and railings. But luckily she woke up when I nearly dropped her and I was glad she did. I remember we stayed up smoking and raving as we talked and fell around. I know that she probably told me things I’ll never find out again. I know I probably told her things I shouldn’t have. It annoys and
amuses me that the anonymity of this room, hidden away in this town, has made me careless. The idea that I have dropped my guard gives rise in me to a vague feeling of panic, not because I feel any shame for what I may or may not have done but because I lost sight of my game. It’s time to dummy up and deal.

On the bench next to the washbasin I find a note from Camille. She has written on the back of my room receipt,

Waking up with the competition is not a good look. Come see me – The Pink Pub.

And I decide that, maybe, I can deal with this today.

♦♣♠♥

Camille’s bar is listed in the local directory and I make my way to the other side of town. From down the road I can see her through the well-lit windows; an apparition behind clean glass. The pub glows, sending out a warm yellow light, its cherry-coloured walls looking temperate and safe in the cold. Outside, it’s messier and more open than Tattersall’s; made up by plate glass windows and not austere facades. The chaotic mess of some attached scaffolding gives the pub a tilted effect like a warped dolls house; a ring of settled dust has left a yellow tinge on the street.

The pub’s two-way entry keeps the cold out and in this tiny space the wind is caught against the doors pulling in and opening out. In the seconds that I am trapped in this draughty undertow my heart leaps into my throat. I’m afraid of Camille. Afraid of that assurance she has, of how she moves. But of course there’s no way I’m going to show it.

I take a seat at the bar but she hasn’t seen me yet. She’s even more beautiful than I remember, gorgeous in fact, and I wonder what the hell she’s doing here.
Camille’s involved in a conversation with a man who would be pronounced dead on a breathalyser. The way he’s leaning in to her and sizing her up with an admiring but fearful eye makes me smile, albeit nervously. The way she’s handling him sternly but quietly offers me some solace from the light-headedness, the heat generated by my pounding blood. This occupational strategy links me to her. It tells me that both of us are in the business of negotiating human mess.

Watching Camille, my survival mechanism kicks in automatically. I feel myself pulling back from her, from that connection which had me just hours before, carrying her upstairs and all the disarray that was turning around us. It seems stupid now, and I’m embarrassed at just how easily I have let her in.

She disappears behind a door at the back of the bar. I breathe out. Slowly. Look for something to do. The place is half full of young people talking shit into their beers, arguing about music and pool. The cues hit. The words, the room, the coloured balls roll. They all drop clumsily in the absence of melody. Two guys next to me lean against the bar trying to amuse each other while lamenting the scarcity of available talent. I watch the television with them not actually registering the transmission, the dance of pixels.

I see her out the corner of my eye, to my left near the pool tables. She waits for me to turn my head. Smiles and nods. A cloth in her hand, she leans into one of those assembly-line juke boxes, blue lights running its circa-fifties rim and the song she chooses, I gather, is for me. I listen to the song, vaguely recognising it from a few years ago. A country twang, a sentimental melody, a rough attitude. I don’t want to think about what she might be trying to tell me. I face into the bar and watch her move. Camille knows what I’m doing but her movements are unaffected, elegant. Trained as I am in body language I know she’s unperturbed by my eyes, by my presence. She is operating as usual and it’s the elegance that gets me. I realise it’s the key.
In The Casino appearances are never indicators. You never judge at face value. In a visual world people learn quickly how to imitate so the best dealers never make assumptions about accessories and war paint. You watch only the body. People constantly act as if they are on television. They have forgotten the art of movement. Consequently, the players let little things slip. An arm curved in too tight at the elbow. Hands gripping the edge. A leg bouncing uncontrollably. The way they talk tells you nothing. Talk is cheap. Who they’re with or who they’re not with can be amusing or deceiving. Hangers-on arrive as many things, usually diversions – hired help or innocents meant to distract. Dress is just another guise, another posture you can’t trust. Rich doesn’t always equate to efforts in semblance. But one thing you can always read is the body. The way Camille moves tells me that she’s playing herself down. She’s making an effort so practised it’s almost seamless. But I’m beginning to see it. Camille’s gotten away with it for so long she’s almost convinced herself and everyone else that she belongs here. I sense an alternative history. Lost potential explains the rough edges. Camille walks towards me.

You want a drink?

Without waiting for me to respond she pours me a bourbon. She remembers.

I take the drink and Camille smiles at me knowingly. It’s making me nervous this idea that she might have a really good memory. She cuts to the chase.

So do you still want to know about Jade? Or have you come to see me?

Bit of both I suppose.

I try and read from her reaction just how much passed between us. Judging from her open expression it’s probably too much but she seems unsure about what she’s going to say next. I can feel the hesitation and it makes me think she’s trying to prompt me. We’re dancing around the issue. Camille looks like she wants to talk to me. She doesn’t know me well enough yet.
What I don’t get is why you’re looking for her here. She’s gone. Weeks ago, I think.

I’m not looking for her. I know where she is.

I can see Camille is not sure how to take this. Her face changes, she knows I’m not playing her cards right.

So what do you want?

I want to help her.

Camille stops wiping down the bar. She looks at me. Her gaze is straight and her eyes are green. Green like Jade’s name.

Bullshit, she says without dropping her gaze.

My feet slip off the rung on the stool and the jerk of my body confirms her suspicions that what’s going on between me and Jade has got nothing to do with therapy.

Camille waves me away with her towel and I think she’s going to walk away but she doesn’t. I can see she wants to but she leans in because she can’t help it.

I don’t know what you’re playing at or how the hell you two met but I’m going to tell you this because I like you and because I think you’re in over your head.

Her voice is softer now:

Jade’s trouble. She’s not as vulnerable as she makes out and she will fuck you over.

I consider this for a moment. She leans back, waits for my response. I see her body deflate a little like she feels better now she’s said it.

Thanks, Camille, but you’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.

I take a stab in the dark. Her admission to liking me has made me brave.

What I really need to know is what you’re keeping from me. It’s you who’s not telling the truth.

I expect her to get pissed off. But she just smiles and keeps wiping down the bar.

Okay, she pauses, if I can’t stop you, you should know everything.
I raise my hands in supplication, to accentuate, to convince her it’s the only reason
I’m here.

Just tell me this, she says, are you in love with her? ‘Cause if you are there’s no point.

Are you? Is my answer.

Camille looks at me like I’m mad. Eventually she says:

Mate, you’ve got no idea.

So tell me about it.

Not here. Camille glances around, casually but I can see under that practiced shift of
her head she’s just a little nervous. The bar under her cloth - very clean.

Tomorrow? She asks.

I nod to let her know I’ll still be here.

It will take dinner. It’s a long story.

And I’d take the invitation as a come on if her face wasn’t so sad. I decide it’s time
for me to leave.

Ok Camille, just ring through to the pub. Let me know the details.

She nods. Looking past me. Miles away.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

Everyone plays under the same moon. Six hours, hundreds of kilometres south from
the Gold Coast, from Jade, The Dealer is making a move that will not go undetected.

Different geography does not lend him immunity. It lends him Dutch courage.

Absence is a test The Dealer cannot win. Sooner or later he will take Camille in his
arms and open himself up to distraction. Tiny moves in the atmosphere will be felt
much later. The sting of a slap always stronger than the initial impact. This is the
moment, the impact he can’t see. Jade entering The Casino. Looking for him. Scouring. Walking the floor four times looking for him. But he's a runner, just like the last one, just like them all: missing with the residue of their game still fresh on the table.

See her face fall, see her drop the ball. Watch her leave the arena without even laying a bet. See further into the distance as The Dealer leans into The Enemy, into Camille, stupidly with his palms open. Hear the ricochet of his mistake travel into the night. A mistake that will etch itself fatefully onto all of their faces. Absence is a test only Jade can win. She will go now to her new man and she’ll raise the bar. Jade doesn’t like it when people disappear.

♦♣♠♥

Before leaving Tattersall’s to meet Camille I decide to take a fortifying drink at the bar. This vague feeling of danger I feel about her won’t leave me. I was hoping an indication from The Lunatic would deny it. I'd expected some kind of response. The one I get is definitely not the one I want. He pretty much ignores me. A bad sign. A big warning.

There’s a gang of his followers warming up in the bar and The Lunatic is on the other side with them, so the guy who sold me the room is now pouring my bourbon and dry. Even he seems removed, if reluctantly, and I realise they know something’s up. Something they don’t like has transpired between me and Camille. Something they don’t trust. And now because she has sent the message through about dinner, they know I’m meeting her and they don’t like it. I had registered some tension between The Lunatic and Camille on that first night. Nothing obvious. Nothing verbal. More like a mutual territorial distance. The Lunatic seemed to know everyone and Camille was alone. Now I think about it, once I gravitated to
Camille The Lunatic did kind of disappear. If this is what Camille meant about competition, it’s got to be about more than just rival pubs. I try to remember all the things both of them might have said to me, but the night is clouded over.

The Lunatic doesn’t ask me to join them so I move to a table near the windows at the front of the pub. If they want to look at me they are going to have to turn around.

The Lunatic’s huddle makes me think that something or someone powerful here has decided Camille’s fate. He’s not the ally, nor the friend I had assumed he was. He’s dropped me like his last shot. And the frightening thing is it has nothing to do with me, merely my association with a woman I barely know. As I look at him now I can pick up the hardness in his eyes, the set of his jaw. I never expected the brush off. I never expected him to take anything that seriously. I thought he was harmless. Now I see there’s ascendancy in that face.

He’s going on to his devotees about his parents arriving in town and they all knock back shots in sympathy because there won’t be a party tonight. And I know anyone his age who is still afraid of their parents must have very powerful parents. When I approach the bar for another bourbon I see them checking out my gear. I guess I’m a little over-dressed or maybe it is just all the black, the leather jacket that amuses them. City garb. I’m not sure which city. Certainly not mine, certainly not theirs, but one thing’s clear – they assume I’ve dressed for her. This is predictable. This I can deal with. Let them jerk themselves off over it, what concerns me is The Lunatic. The others don’t matter. It’s The Lunatic who knows what this town is really about. He’s the pit boss with the power to kick start or shut down my game. And I’ve aligned myself with someone he considers to be on the outside so now I’ll never learn his version. All I have is Camille and I have to find out why. Why it is that in twenty-four hours all you can have left at your table, is one unspoken reason and one beautiful, but incriminated player?
I don’t know if I’m early or late but Camille is still not here and I have made a spectacle of myself already. Archie’s on the Park is on the New England Highway heading north out of town towards Glen Innes and the Gold Coast. Driving out, the highway was dark and the entrance darker still. I’d learnt that Archie’s was part of an up-market inn, a heritage-listed homestead, but I had not expected it to be quite so well-hidden. No signs. No indications. Just acres and acres of black land and a low-lit cluster of rooms fanning off a circular drive. A place so dim I had to look up to the moon for light, and to the country winter sky insane with stars. Obviously a place for those in the know. I have to hand it to Camille; she has me leaning on the back foot.

Behind gauze blurred windows I can see people dining in a peach room and so I cross the gravel drive and head towards them through a flame-lit archway. Inside the foyer I can’t see any waiters or staff so I ring a bell on the front desk.

Big mistake.

This attracts the attention of all the diners, including those who had been discreetly trying to check me out and those who haven’t. They stare in open-mouthed silence for only a few seconds but it’s long enough for them to let me know I don’t have a clue. It has not, thus far, been a confidence-building evening.

The sound of the bell draws the maitre d’ and a concierge out of hiding. When we have established that it is indeed the restaurant and not the motel I am after, I’m ushered to a table, dreading that Camille is going to reiterate my stupidity by standing me up.

The maitre d’ is the only person working the restaurant tables. He attends to all requests. I decline his offer of a drink, finding myself suddenly conscious of how sober I should be in this placid room where the talk seems muted and secret. I stare at the black
grand piano facing me, willing it to life, anything to drown out this suffocating VIP gentility.

Where I'm from, A-list is made as obvious as architecturally possible. The understatement of this room takes me unawares. The diners seem comfortable with the fact that the restaurant is really just a wide bland room with a bar at the rear and a hexagonal fireplace in the middle. They seem comfortable with the fact that Archie's has seen better days, that the rich peach colour-scheme is dated, that the old cane chairs are painted white and that the waiter is old school. I, however, am always unnerved by effortless privilege. I fiddle nervously with the weighty cutlery.

Then I see her. I see her walking in from the cold outside and all thoughts of my displacement disappear. Camille enters the room. She moves just like she did behind the bar but the way she looks tonight doesn’t match any pictures of her I have in my head. This is the Camille she hides, smiling at me and my body is not frightened but drawn to her. I cannot wait for her to reach me, to sit with me, to confirm my place here. This is how it feels to look at her now. Overwhelmed completely by her beauty and her will.

The maitre d’ appears on cue, greets her kindly as Camille, and draws out her chair. I notice the women at the table across from me are whispering about her, eyes averted – another warning – and she does not kiss me hello.

She looks at me over the menu.

How are you?

The tone of her question worries me. She says it like she thinks there should be something wrong.

Fine. And you?

She just nods. Could her tone mean she knows about the brush off with The Lunatic? Is it because she’s aware of the gravity of what she’s about to tell me? Or is it just
because she can see the way I’m trying not to look at her, that she can see all these questions on my face. I stay back. Held conveniently at bay by the table that separates us.

Should we order? Camille asks.

I’ve been staring at the menu and haven’t read a word.

Sure. You can order for me, you know what’s good.

She signals for the waiter. While they talk I search her face for fault, for some kind of flicker of calculated interest. But there isn’t one. I’m finding it hard to read her like this.

She’s like another girl. Another version of herself. The full-blown elegance. If I said I knew what she was like, that would be a lie. If I said I knew how she played, it would be a guess. If I said I knew who was on what side of the table here then that would just be wishful thinking. Even smiling at her feels like a risk. The waiter leaves and Camille turns back to me.

Do you mind if we wait until after the food? she says

Really, Camille, I think we should just get into it.

Fine.

She doesn’t like me saying this, I can tell she’s not used to being told what to do. She takes a few deep breaths but doesn’t start. I try not to show my impatience, moments away now, from what I came for. If she throws out even a half hand I’ve got the feeling I’m going to take it. If she’s got bullets, the aces, I’ll try not to second guess her. I can’t afford to hesitate just before she does. A strange table. One I asked for. But one I don’t understand. I thought Camille might be a survey player, in it for the social, but there’s nothing small about the kind of talk we’re about to have, I realise now. She keeps stalling and I can feel the sweat pooling at the back of my neck – a two-pronged excitement bunching in the tautness of my spine – for her and her story. This is the tension that arises on all private tables before the players play. This is the moment when the game is not quite underway, when its movement
can’t protect us. I tell myself to stay composed, stay focused, stay still. I look up at Camille and her mouth falls open, ready to begin.

   Jade wasn’t the only one involved, she says.

   And there it is. The first card, face down. The ante’s up. I take it.
Come Clean

“If I hadn’t been really rich I might have been a really good man.”

– Citizen Kane
Jade and Camille were never friends. They grew up on opposite sides. The same town, the same property, but separated by the kinds of invisible lines that always run between people. Jade went to state school in Uralla, a small town on the outskirts of Armidale. Camille was boarding on a scholarship at NEGS, a big time school just off the centre of town. Camille wasn’t liked at school. She was a ring-in, a poor girl on a meal ticket. And that fear and suspicion might also have had something to do with the way she looked. Money could never produce the natural beauty or the raw edge Camille had.

Camille did everything in her power to ingratiate herself, to teachers, students, the community. And it worked, for a while. She was good at it. She learned early on in life to give people what they wanted. It helped her survive. She didn’t listen to what people said but read them, taking words at face value and trusting actions. She fed them actions; her face, her eyes, her body. She learnt how to hold herself so that her real feelings didn’t show and she listened to people and she coaxed them.

When Camille hit trouble, she knew how to diffuse it. She would make her eyes so warm, so inviting, so innocent, that people looking at her couldn’t cope. Camille knew how to change her face to suit whatever was being handed out. She knew how to draw on a thick thread, the anger out of a person’s eyes, into the heat of hers. And because of it, some of her effect has waned. Camille spent too long absorbing what other people didn’t want, to give them what they did. She sorted it out for them. Made them feel calm when they were angry. Made them feel safe when they were scared. It wasn’t a direct power, she edged it with humility. Camille had to play the game. Back then, she saw this as her only option.

Camille had nothing in comparison to the girls she found herself trying to impress. They had so much of everything, and all the things that framed them made them who they were. From the well-cut clothes to the luminous cars. Camille arrived on a train.
The fact she didn’t really have a family of her own, just a damaged and absent mother, worked in her favour. Camille had to remain unframed because she didn’t have a place, any kind of stature that mattered. She couldn’t appear to be too much of anything because the other girls would have labelled her, marked her out as someone who could never belong. She had to remain pliable. Camille didn’t want to be like them but she wanted what they had. Camille was out of her league and she was prepared to do anything to forget it.

The first year was the hardest. Camille wasn’t used to the surroundings or the people. She had to appear consistently unfazed by the talk, by the perfect details of other girls who inflamed all the longings and the persuasive dreams she had running in her head. If Camille had never been granted access she might never have known, might not have felt what she lacked so keenly. But she was there and everything she wanted, everything she’d kill for, was just a detail someone else took for granted. So Camille waited. She listened and she watched. And because she knew what they were like, all those protected girls, she knew they were dying to rebel, to cut loose. They wanted downsides, dark sides, because they didn’t know what real cruelty felt like and that was how she hooked them. Camille had seen things they’d never see. Her past was a b-grade horror story. Cheap and addictive. She told them about what happens at night when no one cares if you roam around. About small apartments, and fights and city streets. She told them sordid, gritty details but omitted any connection to her mother. She mentioned the streams of alcohol, the fallacies of addiction and all the sorry men, but she never revealed just how close they had been. She told it like it happened to someone else. To other people she’d seen. Inside she remembered. And that secret memory drove Camille on, hell bent on getting a cleaner image of herself.

The wish would happen.

During the last three years of high school Camille managed to live the life she thought she’d always wanted. It was a life she was not born to handle. She didn’t actually
meet Jade until that life, that set-up, was well and truly over. By that stage another destiny had been mapped out for her. They were sixteen.

Jade’s parents managed a property, ‘The Dalton’, owned by a prominent Armidale family, the Westons. Jade’s family had been employed by the Westons for as long as anyone could remember. Jade’s father, Bob Baker, was respected for his ability to handle the Dalton, one of the biggest properties in the New England region, and more quietly for being able to handle Trevor, Mr Weston. Even though the Westons had come from a long line of successful pastoralists, Trevor and his brothers had cocked a lot of things up and people were intimating about the station being in trouble. It was touch and go, but the Dalton survived, and it was Bob, not Trevor, who was responsible. Jade’s father didn’t have the collateral the brothers had, but he had the knowledge. The Dalton was his whole life. And while the Weston brothers chased women and dodgy investments in other towns, in bigger cities, Bob just got on with it. He preferred it when they weren’t around. Things were smoother. He didn’t have to duck their attempts to ridicule or abuse him. While they were gone he was the man on the land and he liked it. Jade must have got her capacity to dream from her father.

Camille spent a lot of time at the Dalton in the last year of high school. Trevor’s wife June was a benefactor at NEGS, a school she had attended and revered as some sort of symbol of the best years of her life. Her marriage to Trevor was a farce but most people, especially older women, almost respected her more for it. It was her way. June was often quoted as saying all men should have a shed or a room under the house. Her complete disregard for the man that kept her, made her an inspiration to those women and girls who were too scared to step beyond the shadow of the men that endorsed their privileged lives. June had been a formidable presence at NEGS; the epitome of Camille’s material desire. Camille was in awe. She loved watching June entering rooms.
June had her eye on Camille from the start. As someone she could rescue, as someone who reminded her of herself. June had been a scholarship girl, but unlike Camille she never had any qualms about it. She’d been primed to snare, and she did spectacularly, by marrying the richest man in town. That was June’s talent, to convince people that what she wanted actually had something to do with them. When she’d convinced Trevor that he was in love with her, he ceased to matter. She just forgot about him.

In the early years of the marriage June had several miscarriages. Their only child was Denis. After he was born, the doctors advised her to have a hysterectomy. June had the operation.

On the property, men surrounded June. Trevor, his brothers, her son, the station hands. Camille became something of a surrogate daughter to her, the lack of which in her life seemed to be her only regret. She liked power generated by circles of women.

Camille met June for the first time at the annual school fundraiser. Camille was working. Handing out pamphlets to the nests of perfect families passing by on the way to drinks. It was a weekend and Camille tried not to notice how the fathers pushed their little girls forward, a firm hand on the small of their backs, while they sneaked looks at her. The girls always smiled politely. They were never embarrassed. They were tight units.

Camille watched June enter the hall flanked rather awkwardly by the principal and the deputy. June always took up the available space around her. She clipped ahead, and stopped suddenly, so the two women sent to guide were caught off guard, either racing or retreating too fast. Two steps ahead or two steps behind her. Camille knew who she was. Everyone knew who she was. Camille stood at the end of the long line of trestle tables, all presided over by boarders, scholarship girls and other kinds of orphans, the girls with no one to meet them and she waited. Waited for that moment, praying for that moment when June would stop and maybe notice her.
She didn’t know then that June had already done her research.

The deputy stopped at Camille’s table to wait for June who walked over, eyes locked with Camille. The deputy glanced between them anxiously unsure of the connection, unsure of what to say. She gestured towards Camille formally.

Mrs Weston, one of our prized pupils, Camille.

June said nothing at first, and Camille waited. She picked up one of the pamphlets glanced at it then threw it aside. She looked up at Camille and said:

There is always a prize.

And then she left. Camille never knew until much later exactly what she meant.

June must have laughed hard. She must have enjoyed how easily, how greedily Camille took her bait. Camille was easy but she felt special, she felt singled out. June fell in love with her own idea of Camille and forced her son to do the same. He was, of course, to be Camille’s prize.

All this time Camille had no idea who Jade was. She had probably seen her on the property from time to time but she certainly took no notice of her. Jade wasn’t part of the social circles endorsed by June. Camille had no idea, and neither did June, that Denis had been fooling around with Jade for years. They were discreet, but really, there wasn’t much need. A girl like Jade just didn’t register on that landscape.

Denis and Camille were June’s fantasy. Her son was everything her husband was not; Denis and his father didn’t get on and this was precisely why June loved her son. Trevor knew Denis didn’t really give a shit about the property and had tried to beat some sense into him. Repeatedly. Trevor’s only attempt to defy his wife was to demand the right to his son with his fists. But June knew every punch pushed Denis further into her corner. She would not flinch because she knew she would win. In her son’s defence she asked Trevor not to punch him in the face. Denis feigned submission until he was big enough and then on his
sixteenth birthday he knocked his father out. Trevor got to his feet but the subject of his duty to the Dalton was never resurrected. Denis knew as long as his mother loved him his inheritance was safe.

It was true that Denis was nothing like his father. He was kinder, more gentle. June admired his aspirations, which had nothing to do with land, but she didn’t really understand him. She didn’t want to let him go. She saw Camille as an anchor, as a way of holding her son close to her chest. Camille was everything June wanted her to be; she had a voodoo doll body and pliable mind. Every second day Camille sat in June’s parlour in that giant house letting June touch her, flatter her, give her gifts. Without hesitation or protest, Camille gave in to the courtship. She let June have her way with her because she saw this woman as a ticket. Everything was hanging by a thread. School was nearly out. She would have to go back, to the revolving rooms, to her sick mother, to the real world. Every time she thought of it she saw images of her mother: drunk, crawling into the single bed they shared when things got really tight; on all fours searching irrationally for stashes of white powder in the carpet; crying over the insane state of their tiny world. June might have had control of her but it was Camille’s mother who infected her with despair. Solutions were never positive; solutions only came naturally to other people. She remembered curling up against the thin curve of her mothers back in a vain attempt at love. Neither of them knew where her father was and their nerves were frayed with abandonment. Camille never wanted to end up like her mother. Alone. She never wanted to feel so much that she was just a broken chord, stuck in a rut, a scratch that no one heard. She would rather take tea with a woman with no soul. Camille was lost, unaware of the damage she was being made to wield.

In these ‘private’ times, the hours when June would work her alchemy on her, filling in the gaps with confirmations of her excellence, Denis would never hang around. He would come home in the early evenings, when the sun was setting, and June would scold him
playfully, as if she had no understanding that she drove him out of the house. And every second day his answer would be the same. He would have been riding or helping Bob or playing rugby with his mates. And Camille and June believed him, they were oblivious, they didn’t suspect he was in need of an excuse, they didn’t know Denis was always hiding out in some secret corner of the world with Jade.

Denis never showed his mother how he really felt about Camille. He wasn’t stupid. He would wait until they were alone. He saw her as a user and she felt his indifference more keenly than the possibility of his hate. That at least, would have been passionate. He never said these things with much venom. He was very matter-of-fact. Denis had Camille’s number but his mother had his. They were locked in the charade.

Camille never had a chance with Denis because he always saw her as the price he paid. They would spend long hours in silence, in his room lying side by side on the bed just in case June came in. She wanted them to be close and it was easier to appease her. Camille must have watched him for hours, watched his face getting harder as he got older. It was a beautiful face but one that June had chiseled with distaste.

Once, Denis held her hand and cried without making a sound. Camille let him do it, but she couldn’t see what was really happening, what he was trying to tell her. She was desperate for him, but only to like her. Camille wanted that not because she felt anything remarkable for him but because this would have made things perfect. They were nearly seventeen.

June made them go to endless rounds of dinners, dances, hometown socials, and all kinds of tedious outdoor gatherings. They appeared together and endured the small talk, the rich food and the barely-concealed competition. In public, Denis would touch her so that everyone else could see. He always did it unexpectedly, sometimes too roughly but people expected that from farm boys. The other girls thought it was sexy. Camille would shudder.
and pretend she couldn’t feel his skin crawling. She was the envy of every girl in town but they didn’t know when he leaned into her ear with a smile he said things like, Every time I touch you I fantasise about someone else. They didn’t see her cry in toilets. The other girls saw Denis as a catch even if their mothers didn’t. He was too fiery, too independent, and too strange in his outlook.

People suspected that Denis wanted to leave Armidale, that he had no interest in furthering the family legacy. But no one could really figure out the reasons. Most people thought he was crazy, to walk away from all that. It was the kind of attitude that fuelled rumour and made him less of a catch, but he was beautiful, and to the hoards of wearied girls, noses buried in the soft porn of soap opera, looks and an off beat reputation meant more than what their parents thought.

They had enough money of their own.

Camille was ready to unravel.

Her will to please stretched closer to the edge. She would have done anything to satiate June. Camille believed in June’s power, June knew things about men, she knew how to use them. She put Camille on the pill. She told her to do as Denis asked. She would have held her hand as Camille sucked her son’s dick if she could. She liked a cruel match.

Camille and Denis weren’t lying still in his bedroom anymore and they weren’t silent. Camille thought sex would get her closer to him and he thought it would get her back. They took things out on each other and their skin was often raw and scratched, hidden conveniently under heavy clothes. But June was pleased. She took a perverse pleasure of her own running her hand up Camille’s sleeve. She liked to touch the fresh marks her son had made.

The year dragged on. Camille moved into the Dalton homestead and special privileges were awarded her at school. Her grades sank, but June made sure she was marked
leniently, whispering about pressures and the stress of Camille’s ‘situation’ in the right ears. She floated through on high doses of Serapax also generously proffered by June. She was so doped up she didn’t take Denis’s comments or his increasing absences seriously. In fact, she barely registered them. There was no question she had to cope. Camille had all the pharmaceuticals she needed to endure. She thought the little things Denis let slip about someone else were hypothetical, designed to hurt her, excite her, or scare her off. She reasoned that if there had been someone else his mother would have known about it. June knew everything and she knew everyone. They weren’t expecting Jade. Jade was invisible.

Trevor was away for most of that year. Camille figured he knew what his wife was up to and wanted no part of it. With June locked in her own private parlour game, Trevor could stay in the city and get away with murder. Camille began to lose weight but June told her she looked fabulous. She tried to believe her but her beauty felt like a hexed thing. A stone, a chain, a bind that she couldn’t control. Her body was haunted. She started to shudder, to shiver involuntarily. Every second day June fixed her hair, thinning from the drugs, from the pressure, and she would pull it tightly into braids, into chiffons and old fashioned rolls, stretching and dragging at it so much that sometimes clumps of it would come away. Camille couldn’t feel anything, struck dumb by her foolish desire in a stiff-backed chair. Her face steaming by the heat of the fire as June’s hands primped every strand on her head. It made her look older.

June paid for manicures, facials, body wraps and vitamin injections. Sometimes Camille would pass out on salon tables while she was having her face done and June would cover for her. But still people talked. Camille was wasting away towards perfect. Every day she wandered around that beautiful house hallucinating on her future.

Towards the end of the year Camille noticed that Jade’s father was often ‘conferencing’ with June. Later she learned that his wife had run off with another man and
moved to Tamworth. It raised issues about whether Bob could stay on, because the job
description required a couple. Bob to run the property and a woman to run the house. June
described it as a most inconvenient situation. Suddenly, Bob had acquired a new partner.
Camille had no idea how this was impacting on Jade and thus why Denis was so furious with
his mother. He told her she treated the people in her life no better than cattle. The three of
them were sitting in the dining room picking at the meat, at each other. Denis said they made
him sick. He left the table and did not return all night. Camille was not bothered.

Preparations began for the combined school formal. Camille was to attend with
Denis. June wanted them to announce their engagement. Denis went silent. The next day he
told his mother he was taking someone else, there was no way he was going with Camille
and there was no way he was going to marry her. Camille wasn’t sure what part of Denis’s
confession horrified her more. June was so shocked that for once, she said nothing. Denis
raved about how much he hated his life, that his mother could shove her money. He said he
didn’t want any part of it, not the cash, not Camille, not this fucked-up place. They could all
go to hell. He was in love with someone else. When Denis left the house June went after
him. Camille should have got out then, but she didn’t. She just sat there, wringing her
napkin, nervously, like a child waiting for permission to leave the table. Waiting for them,
like she’d done for her father to come home, and for her mother to show up. Abandoned
this time to the silence of a house that wasn’t hers, a place where she belonged only as long
as she forgot who she was. But part of her did feel relief. She looked around and thought
about running. She should have. Everything from that moment was a blur.

When Camille woke up she was in hospital. June told her that she had tried to do
some damage to herself in the night, that they had saved her, brought her to the hospital and
pumped her stomach. June said it in a matter-of-fact way, as if this kind of thing happened
every day. But she looked over Camille with a resignation that let her know the ride was
over, and then she was silent. June stopped looking at Camille – she kept glancing at her watch.

Camille guessed she was in a private hospital because there was no one else in the room except for Denis, slouched in a comfortable chair in the corner. Unlike June, he looked tired, and for the first time he was regarding her with some sympathy. This look hurt her more than the idea that the game was up. Camille closed her eyes. June left.

Denis made a move. Camille hoped that he wasn’t following his mother, that for once he was headed towards her. Camille needed a small gesture, she needed a friend. When the pressure of his body on the mattress reached hers she opened her eyes. He held her hand; it was an apology for everything but for nothing in particular. Camille wanted to say so many things but her mouth felt soft, not connected to her jaw, her body felt far away from where she was. She knew it would be a few hours before she could talk. She listened to him instead. And that’s how Camille first learned of Jade, strapped down in a bed.

Denis told her that he was going to end it with Jade. He could see he had no choice. He knew his mother would destroy Jade if she ever found out and that was the last thing he wanted. He told Camille he’d assured June that there was no one else, that he’d invented the whole outburst just to scare them off. And June believed him because she had been scared. She wasn’t used to being defied but it was the fury in her son that changed her. She realised that in an attempt to keep him she had turned him into his father and June wanted to protect him from that. In the end she was his mother. The whole slate had to be wiped clean.

Denis swore Camille to secrecy. Jade was the only innocent one amongst them then, no light shone on her. He wanted to keep it that way.

We owe it to her, he said.
And Camille wasn’t sure if she wanted to owe anything to anyone anymore but she couldn’t speak to protest. She nodded instead. It was easier. Everyone else had played and everyone else had lost. June would have to make do with ruining her instead.

Denis told Camille she hadn’t taken the pills herself. June had done it, put them in a pot of tea and then Camille remembered. She remembered June coming back to her after what had seemed like hours. Denis had been with her. She remembered him hovering at the edge of the room. June took a scotch straight up and gave Camille her tea. She’d had a few cups because they weren’t talking. She remembered the only thing June said to her was everything’s going to be all right now.

It had taken quite a bit to knock her out.

Camille had failed. She was no longer required. She was a lost cause. Denis told Camille she was going to be committed because that was compulsory by law when someone attempted suicide.

It was usually only for a few weeks, he said, just as a precaution.

He promised her she’d be out in no time, that he would make sure of it, and Camille believed him because she needed to. But there was something about the way he said this that made her question his motives. Camille knew now that Denis’s white lies only ever protected himself.

He told her that if she kept her mouth shut, if she left town straight after her committal, she would get a very generous sum of money. It was her compensation and, he added, she was lucky June was willing to give her that. They would try to have her recommended to another school, but with her reputation now she shouldn’t really count on it. Denis kissed her on the forehead. The last thing he said to her was:

Take the money, Camille. You deserve it.
Camille arrived at the psychiatric hospital alone, in an ambulance. There was no one left to take her. Even if they could find her mother, it wouldn’t have made much difference — her mother couldn’t even look after herself.

Camille was under observation, in a place she couldn’t leave without permission and the bars on the windows and the coded entrances and exits filled her with panic. She could have said something. She could have tried to talk to the nurses, to the counsellors. She had played a stupid game but she wasn’t insane. She could have told them that she was okay, that there had been a big mistake, that she was basically a normal person, that she could deal with it. But she didn’t. The truth was she was scared of what June might do to her if she ever said anything, and somewhere inside her, Camille wanted that money. She was close to the edge, but instead of jumping, she stuck to the rounded curve of the pills they gave her, rushing them down gratefully with the water that arrived in the fragile white cups her bottom lip always seemed to stick to. Some days she felt like staying there forever.

Camille became obsessed with the hospital’s blue and white blankets. She would stare at the holes in them and rub the waffled fabric over and over between her fingers, her thighs, and her toes. It was the warmest thing she had felt in years. She registered nothing but the softness of those blankets and tried to wind her way back through the series of events that had led her to where she was. Under the blanket the world remained muted. The ward lights were softer, and shaped like tiny diamonds. At night they glowed. The shapes danced on her fingers and shifted across her cheeks. She stayed quiet enough to watch the recollections wash.

Eventually Camille was transferred. The doctors didn’t feel confident enough to release her, so she was placed in an independent mental institution in Tamworth. June must have paid for it. She probably would have liked it if Camille never recovered.

Camille never expected to see Jade in Ward 15.
Camille was sitting in a large vinyl seat in the common room. There were only a few people around – a group of visitors playing pool with their suicidal friend trying not to glance at anyone else – and at the end of the room a middle-aged woman spinning imaginary records on a desk, dancing and announcing; she was their unsound DJ that afternoon, mixing up the air. Otherwise there was just Camille and Jade.

Camille didn’t recognise Jade as anyone she knew. She never had. Camille crossed the room to take the seat by the window. She didn’t want to encourage talk. She was only just beginning to listen to herself. All she wanted was to gaze out at a small patch of the outside, just a piece of it. She thought if she could approach the world like this, in pieces, she might have a chance. Despite everything that had happened, Camille still thought the world was revolving around her. Even now, Jade may as well have been invisible.

Camille didn’t think anything of Jade staring at her. As far as Camille was concerned Jade was just another stranger in a peculiar place and she had gotten used to eyeballing. It wasn’t personal. A face was just a blurred image you saw in your head.

Then Jade moved.

She made her way over to Camille. A tall gangly girl, in a white gown just like hers, shifting across the room lightly like she was gliding – an illusion of movement created by Jade’s long narrow height. And something about that gait caught Camille’s eye. She had seen it before.

She had seen her at the Dalton, always out the corner of her eye, always from a distance. Always outside.

Jade sat down and stared straight into Camille’s face. Camille tried to turn her head away but the shrill sense of her own guilt drew it back.

This girl knew her. She knew who she was.
Camille swallowed hard and waited for something terrible to come. But Jade just sat there picking at her own hands with her head hung down. Then very quietly, so Camille could only just catch it, she said just one word:

June.

Then she looked up at Camille with her vacant grey eyes and said:

Denis.

Camille decided in that moment she would keep her promise to Denis never to say anything. There was something about Jade that made Camille want to protect her.

Camille could never be sure just how much Jade knew but from what she told her Jade knew enough. Denis had gone through with his plans. He had ended their relationship. He’d shot through. He’d left Jade, left his mother, left them all.

Jade had been found by her father. She was bleeding at the wrists. No one realised until later that she was pregnant. It was too late to save the baby, Jade had lost too much blood. When the doctors told her father about the baby, Bob knew it was Denis. Nothing went on at the Dalton that he didn’t have an instinct for, and he knew that on this front, it was best to keep quiet. He couldn’t bring himself to recognise that The Dalton, that June, had gotten to him too, made him pass over his daughter for land that could never be his. But he never said anything. He kept tending. He tried not to think about what might have happened if that baby had lived. He kept quiet. June never put it together. Trevor told June, and the counselors and the police, that Jade had missed her mother.

Camille sat with Jade every day for three weeks. She saw it as a kind of penance. Camille was in the bin because they thought she had tried to kill herself, but Jade really had tried and Camille felt responsible. Everything was worse for Jade. She just kept saying Denis’s name and Camille had to face the part she’d played.
Every day Jade and Camille sat by the window in the common room, in the common hour, trying to come to grips with the things that made them the same and the things that made them different. Camille studied Jade’s face, the face Denis had really wanted, a face so contrary to her own. Jade reminded her of a wild horse, with her long nose and legs, her lengthy body so buoyant, but at the time leaning more toward fragility than flight. She had the same strong blue eyes that Camille had noticed on Jade’s father; eyes that changed colour; grey when she faced the fluorescent room and sky blue in even the smallest shaft of natural light. Camille realised why Denis had loved Jade. She possessed some kind of artless beauty. There was no trace of the cosmetic in her. No trace of the bubble-wrapped solutions his mother and Camille had bought into. Camille felt like a done-up dressage pony, like a fake, with her faded matted hair and chipped nails. The game was up, but however injured Jade was she remained immanently and gloriously wild.

Camille got out first. She had been roused by the shock of seeing Jade to speak again, to face up to herself, to realising she deserved release. The counsellors were satisfied with her ‘progress’, and when they could no longer justify her presence they let her go. Camille refused to wear the clothes she’d arrived in. She just couldn’t face her well-stitched past. The carers at the hospital gave her drugs, prescriptions, a certificate for social security, and let her back into the world. She lied about having somewhere to go. There was no one there to pick her up.

Camille stood outside the hospital in ill-fitting jeans and a loose T-shirt holding an envelope addressed to her from June. She felt guilty about leaving Jade in ‘the White Manor’ – that’s what Jade had called it - not because it was majestic, or possessed some kind of ravaged decadence but because, she said, it made your brain white. Camille wanted to take Jade with her, but she didn’t. She turned around a couple of times half expecting her to come out, but she was alone. She had told Jade she’d come back for her; but now she was
free, Camille realised that would probably never happen. She was leaving, Jade was staying. She was recovering and Jade was getting worse. It was the weight of that envelope which propelled her forward.

She walked.

Camille took the main road in Tamworth following it to where it led her, wondering if Denis had known about what happened, whether he’d stuck round long enough to find out about Jade being pregnant. Camille reasoned that it was really only Denis that could have saved Jade. Maybe he did know, maybe it made no difference. Maybe it was just easier to walk away. She wondered what kind of promises he’d made to her. Camille hadn’t understood why Denis had decided to disappear from Jade’s life. But now she did. She could relate to it. Camille felt this need to leave her too, to get as far away from her as possible. Not just because June was insurmountable, and a potential danger but because the whole mess was something Denis and Camille did not want to explain. It was hard enough just looking at her. Everything was broken. They couldn’t tell Jade that abandoning her was the only way to save her. After everything that had happened it sounded like a cop out. And maybe it was, but saving themselves, Camille reasoned, was something they all had to do. They had to extract themselves from the Dalton, from June, from all this doomed and incriminating love. But it was a mistake not telling her. If Jade knew why things might have turned out different.

Walking down that road Camille felt uneasy. She felt liberated but she also felt guilty. Her blood was pumping but she could feel that tight knot of remorse in her gut. The counsellors had told her to take it slowly; to take one day at a time but Camille couldn’t stop her mind. She couldn’t figure out anymore which direction was a mistake. To move forward seemed like the only logical way – for the first time in her life she was not someone else’s
charge and she wanted to hold onto that. She wanted to own her future but she also knew just how much that future might cost.

Camille walked into a motel and booked herself a room. Inside she sat on the single bed, relieved to be in a space she would not have to share with her mother, with Denis or anyone else. She realised that in all her previous spaces, in the dormitories, in the Dalton and even caught inside the run-down rooms of her mother’s life, she had never owned anything, never been in charge, never decided why she was there. She opened the envelope. There was a letter from June’s solicitor outlining their agreement and a single cheque for ten thousand dollars.

It had started again.

Camille read the letter. It stated that the out-of-court settlement contained was non-negotiable and was on the table for only a few days. It was up to her. The letter stipulated Camille could maintain no contact with anyone in the Weston family or anyone associated with the Dalton. She was forbidden to speak about the Weston family, officially or socially – any commentary, statement or public release of information would be regarded as slanderous and a failure to comply with the terms set. Camille would be liable – and reading between the lines, she knew that if she did talk to anyone about what happened there would be rather more ambiguous consequences. She’d seen what happened to cattle on the Dalton that were no longer wanted, no longer useful. They got strung up, got sold for dog food and sent away in trucks or they got shot between the eyes.

Camille signed the agreement. She cashed the cheque. She locked herself in.

One thing heartened her, the agreement did not mention anything about staying away from Armidale. When Camille heard that the Westons had sold the Dalton, she decided to go back.
When Jade got out a year later she tracked Camille down. She was working in the Pink Pub. At first Camille didn’t recognise her. She looked good, she looked strong, and Camille fell for that. She was happy to see her.

In less than a week Jade had cleaned her out.

Camille signals to the maitre-d for another cup of coffee. He’s busy serving drinks to four well-dressed kids who have managed to extract themselves from their families and set up at the bar. Even though I don’t like the look of their puffy faces and slack mouths, I’m glad they’re here. Their noise is protecting us.

He brings the coffee. I don’t think Camille knows she has had three already, but I am counting. And I’m also seeing that she’s getting more unsettled as she speaks now. There are little intakes of breath. There is unreasonable focus on the sugar spoon. She doesn’t seem to know that she hasn’t stopped stirring.

Camille says that sudden apparition of Jade in the Pub was like watching a fast track film clip for the first time:

She’d changed so much. I couldn’t believe it. And it threw me. I don’t think I got the real meaning of anything she said. And she needed somewhere to stay so I said okay and spent the rest of the week in a kind of daze, unsure about where any of it was headed. But I was busy, you know, working long hours, and when I got home late at night Jade was usually asleep.

Camille clatters the spoon on the saucer beside the cup, then goes on:
When she first came up to me in the Pub, Jade said she’d been out for a few weeks but she was finding it hard to think things through. She felt pressured by her parents to find a job. They were practical people, hard workers. But you know how it is?

I’m not sure I do know, but I nod in agreement because I don’t want to contradict her, to do or say anything that might stop her. Camille tells me that Jade ate lunch in the bistro and that she watched her from the bar.

We weren’t busy. Jade seemed totally at ease, serene almost, and it made me uncomfortable. Somehow Jade and I had shifted places. I knew I should have felt happy for her, even relieved maybe that she’d managed to survive after all that time inside but something bothered me. At first I thought I was jealous, for a second I thought that maybe the sight of her had unleashed that mean-streaked girl in me again. But it wasn’t that. It was just my survival mechanism kicking in. I should have listened to it.

This time I know exactly what Camille is talking about. Jade has that sense of menace buzzing around her like a radar, even when she looks fine. You have to be quick to pick up on it, it isn’t something that flares up or makes itself known. It’s part of her. Menace comes with her.

When Jade finished her lunch she came over and asked me for tokens for the pokies. She told me she’d gotten a bit addicted to them – Passes the time, she said – and it must have, because she was in there all afternoon. Not talking to anyone. Just playing. And it looked like she had some kind of placement strategy worked out, because every time I glanced over she was on a different machine.

Camille looks at me – she knows I’m a dealer – she wants to know what Jade’s strategy meant. I don’t want to tell her. I shrug my shoulders and say:

Who knows. I’m not into the pokies.
But I do know what Jade was doing on the machines and I can already guess what she’s done to Camille. I can see it coming a mile away. Jade was rigging all her angles. And Camille’s hands are shaking. She doesn’t need to be reminded of how easily she’s been duped. Camille tells me she went over a few times; asked Jade if she needed anything. But she said she was just fine. I can see Camille isn’t. She’s sweating now, the coffee and the rush of her confession kicking in. I reach across the table for her hand. She isn’t expecting it, and I’m not expecting it to feel so good. It’s meant to soothe her but we both know I’ve started something else. Camille keeps her eyes on our hands, hers under mine, and I can’t help it, I start stroking her fingers.

She looks like she needs some coaxing so I say:

What happened when you got home?

Camille glances up at me, startled like she’s forgotten where she is. I smile at her and she clears her throat. The maitre-d brings the cheque over and places it to my left. He smiles at Camille too.

When you’re ready, he says.

Camille waits until he leaves.

Ah well, we didn’t say much. I didn’t want to talk about the White Manor or the Dalton so there wasn’t much to say but I wanted her to feel welcome. I felt guilty for not going to see her and I also felt weird that she didn’t bring that up. We walked home, I didn’t live at the Pub but then I wasn’t far down the road. At the flat I started fussing around her, so we didn’t have to slow down, to talk about anything heavy. I set up a bed, some space for her things, a towel. She didn’t know how long she planned to stay. This worried me a bit, I just didn’t think I could handle her reminding me of everything but I let it go. I wasn’t using the car during the day so I gave Jade the keys. And when I went to work the next morning, she went to work on me.
She went through all my personal documents, found out every password and
identification number attached to me. She didn’t need to look hard. I lived alone, there was
no need for me to hide all those things and I’d practically given her the go ahead. Anyhow,
she had access to everything. She got on the Internet, on my computer, where I’d set up
most of the log-ins to the bank, my mail accounts and other things as automatic. I also had a
list of passwords and pin numbers and stuff in my diary. I hadn’t written which ones applied
to which account but with trial and error, I guess, she figured it out. She must have logged
into my bank accounts electronically, to familiarise herself with my balances, the way I used
my cards, how many accounts I had – it was all there. I had the money from June in a
separate savings account to my main one. I never touched it. So Jade found all this
information and by searching through my apartment she amassed enough ID to prove she
was me. I never used to carry everything with me. I lived so close to work there was no need.
It was better not to take too much stuff. Things went missing. So a lot of my ID was just
around the house. My Medicare card, my passport, bank statements, cheque books, bills.
Jade found copies of my signature and I suppose she practiced it. She steamed off the
photograph in my passport and replaced it with one of her own. It probably wasn’t an
excellent job but it passed. I know this because when it all came out, I met with the people
who served her at the bank. They told me they had never seen anyone so convincing. Jade
had the story, the documents, the signature – everything down pat. They said she made out
that initially she was in there to report two lost cards. The cards for my accounts. She made a
big deal apparently about having her wallet stolen, and this explained why she didn’t have a
drivers license as ID. Jade knew what my last three transactions were, she knew what
company paid my wages. She’d seen it all on the net. And this is why she also knew that I
rarely used my keycard. She looked at how I spent my money. She knew that sometimes I
didn’t use it all week. I withdrew half on payday and lived off that. I worked most days
double-shifts in the pub. I got fed at the pub. I didn’t smoke. I walked to work. There was on most days no reason for me to carry money. I paid most of my bills on the net and she knew none of them were due. She knew I did my shopping on Saturdays. She’d thought all this stuff through and she did it fast. Jade knew what she could get away with, how much time she had. And she knew she could watch me, make sure I didn’t get near the trail. So while she was getting this all sorted, she casually threw questions to the teller about how to better manage her – my – savings. The ten grand that was sitting in the second savings account. They advised on a few things and eventually Jade decided to open something called a ‘Super-Saver’. It had better interest, but no card access. The woman at the bank specifically remembers that she thought that Jade wouldn’t have enough ID on her because of the wallet thing to organise it that day. And then she said that Jade said, Well, hang on… and started rummaging in her bag. She said that Jade was saying about working double-shifts and that it would be better to try and get it sorted now. She had my diary apparently, because the woman remembers noticing the name on it as Jade acted like she was looking for the rest of what she needed. Feigning surprise when she found something, the Medicare card or a bill stuffed into the pages of the diary. It was the passport that did it. She was able to open the account. They transferred all the money into it and all Jade had to do now was wait. The new access card to my main saving account to come through in three to four days. It was Monday afternoon, all she had to do was stall me till Thursday.

And she did. Jade came in every day after that to the pub, asking if I needed anything, if I’d be home for dinner, if I had any errands for her to run. She said she was happy to do it, like it was the least she could do for me letting her stay. So if I needed anything Jade bought it, and she waited up for me sometimes. If she was already in bed she always had some nice surprise out for me when I came home, a glass of wine, chocolate cake, the apartment clean – one day she even did my washing. I started thinking it was a
miracle that she had turned out all right, she was just the most lovely thoughtful girl and it made me feel worse about what Denis and I had done to her, and because of that I ignored the underlying fear of her that never completely left me. I didn’t know that she was just trying to distract me. That’s what hurts the most about it because I thought we were making progress that week, that things might even turn out ok. I was starting to like Jade, and she made out she liked me, that maybe she’d forgiven me.

By Friday evening Jade and the money from June were gone. Jade was smart enough not to steal the car. I didn’t know what had happened at first. I’d knocked off early so that Jade and I could go out. We’d made a big fuss the night before about planning where we were going to go, you know, have a girls night out. I’d swapped my shift. Before I went home I thought I’d get a nice bottle of vodka for us from the drive-thru. My card wouldn’t work. I tried it a couple of times, and the result just kept saying: Contact bank. I said to Paul, the guy in the bottlo’, that I didn’t know what was up. He said: No worries, Camille, just bring it in on Monday. Those cards stuff up all the time. So I get home, bottle of vody under the arm and Jade’s gone. And that’s when it hits me. I ring the bank. It’s a really weird conversation where they keep telling me about how I reported a stolen card, cancelled my accounts and started a new one. I spend some time trying to tell them that that wasn’t me. Then I ask them about the ten grand. They tell me it was transferred into the new savings account. I ask them what’s the balance now. And that’s when we both know what she’s done. The guy on the phone says that ten grand was transferred electronically yesterday. I say, Where is it now? He says, I’m not sure. Turns out that Jade went into the bank and withdrew five grand of it on Thursday morning when the card arrived in the mail. Then she used ATM’s over Thursday and Friday to take the rest of it out. By the time I got home on the Friday night it was all gone. She didn’t touch the money in my other accounts though – which was weird. She just wanted that money from June.
Camille looks away, exhausted. I can see that the maitre-d has just refused the kids a last drink.

Camille, I say, I think we should go now.

Where to?

Well… I could follow you home.

It’s a long shot but she smiles.

Really?

And I can tell she agrees.

Just tell me one thing, I say. Why didn’t you press charges?

How do you know I didn’t?

Cause Jade’s still using her real name on some things.

On some things? What do you mean?

Nothing, just that I’ve seen her real name on stuff, that’s all. If you’ve been busted for fraud you don’t do that.

I didn’t press charges because I was afraid to.

Why?

The solicitor, the letter from June. I thought I’d have to explain about the money. I didn’t want anyone opening that up.

But what about the bank – didn’t they freak out?

Yeah, they did, and they went on and on about it. But in the end I said I knew who did it, that it was a friend and that due to personal reasons I didn’t want a situation. They didn’t want to let it ride – so I just threatened to close my accounts and they backed off.

Camille stands up ready to leave. While I’m waiting for the maitre-d to bring me back my card I remember one more thing.

Camille?
She just looks at me wearily. I say:

I know, I know I’ll leave the questions about you and Jade here but there’s something else that’s bothering me. I look away. It’s the kind of question that could tell her too much. I’m not sure if I should admit that the whole scene with The Lunatic is getting to me. Camille can see I’m uncomfortable. She sits down.

The Lunatic’s gone cold. Why would he do that? Did you and he have something?

What?

I mean, where you ever seeing each other?

Not exactly. Her indecision’s bothering me. I realise I’m jealous.

Why are you being all cagey now?

I’m not. She looks irritated. It’s complicated.

Is it cause of the pubs? Camille shrugs.

He didn’t always tend bar…

Or deal drugs?

…Yeah, well that’s probably why he doesn’t work for this father anymore.

Who’s his father?

His father wrote the letter to me. He’s June’s solicitor.
Splitting Pairs
It’s morning and I’m looking at Camille turned away from me in the bed. At her blonde hair tangled at the back, at the pale skin of her shoulder and neck not covered by the blanket; the slight rise of her torso as she breathes. We are in her room above the pub, a room on the first floor. A larger space and more private, I imagine, than the rest of the rooms rented out to a small but steady stream of backpackers below. I have woken slowly today, not used to the subdued light of an Armidale morning. At home the light burns, even at dawn. It rips through windows and blinds in the early hours of the day, as if all the water stretching between the city and the sun is a magnifying glass, funneling solar energy into white light. A concentration of white heat. Further south now and further inland, the light is tentative and less magnified. Not even all the white fabric wrapped around us can summon glare.

Opposite the bed, small rectangular windows run the length of Camille’s walls. In them a leaden sky hovers; branches scratch occasionally against the glass. It looks cold outside but here, on the inside, it’s warm. There’s nothing but Camille and the bed to suggest this warmth. This is an almost empty room. No television, no stereo, no kitchen and no gadgets, just a four-walled refuge, a simple room for a long line of employees.

Camille is wrapped tightly in her blanket, waffled like the one that saved her. I touch her arm under the soft cloth, letting my fingers slip through the overlapping pockets of air to her skin, thinking about how she escapes the music of her life and I wonder how much of that she does alone. Camille looks fragile when she sleeps and I know I have to be careful. I have no idea what I am going to say to her. Staying here wasn’t part of my plan, wanting to wasn’t either. The plan was a story, maybe a bit of fun, but something else has opened up between us. There’s all this gravity, Camille’s heavy secret. We’re inside each other – no longer just skimming in any direction, no longer just playing on the skin.

Usually I can’t stand this stretch of time, the gap between waking and leaving – can’t wait to diffuse the connection, the threads of what has been given over – but I’ve never felt
like I needed stay before, to lie next to a woman. It’s a foreign sensation to me. I’m not still
enough, untroubled enough, to just curl up to the back of someone and wait out the
morning. To be so aware of her, to be so drawn in.

Camille still hasn’t stirred. I lean over her shoulder to glance down at her face. She
looks peaceful; she looks like she might be smiling. I tell myself it must be the residue of last
night, the weight of her confessions lifted that’s allowing her to rest so heavily at last. I don’t
want to think that expression could have anything to do with me. I feel splintered – torn
between this need to protect her and the need to stay on track. I could wrap my arms around
her, she is so close – she is right here – but I don’t move. I just can’t bring myself to trust
her.

I have to leave before she wakes up, before she opens her eyes and looks at me, before
she has anything over me. I have to leave, I know, but I lie back down.

I don’t remember falling asleep last night but I do remember all the things we did to
counteract it. I tried to keep my eyes closed, tried not to look at her but I did, I listened to
her and I really looked at her, into her green eyes, and I was thinking about Jade, about Denis
and Camille and both of them fucking him and I was thinking most of all about wanting to
get deeper inside Camille, to know everything, possess everything, to get to the edges of all
their secrets. It was a kind of frenzy and it frightened me – how much I wanted to know.

The thought of it propels me, makes me get up, makes me want to get away from her
and the serenity of this moment, this morning and the way it makes me feel. I have to get
out of here to collect myself. I’m afraid of where a talk this morning might take us. I can talk
to her later. I tell myself that perhaps I should give Camille some space, time to adjust to the
idea of me, that I’m here and that I know. But really, it’s the prospect of her information
which compels me to act. I’ve got to test the things she told me last night before I allow her
to distract. I’m a Dealer. I can’t look away. The game just got bigger. I’ve never been able to resist undermining the promise of a new player.

I write Camille a note, I call her beautiful, I don’t hesitate, I sign it with love.

♦♣♠♥

Outside, some of my sense returns, the cold hitting me with the same relentlessness as yesterday. The chill inside my head clears out the honey of my morning, makes me crave the hot bitter taste of coffee and the darker cogitations of my mind; the ones I’m used to.

In a coffee shop on Main Street I share the smoky air with students from the local University, and I guess, some of the private schools. I’m not used to the sight of so many darkly-clad young people, intent on one space. On the Gold Coast, kids take to the outside, to the streets, the younger ones gathering in packs on main roads and bus stops, flying past on bikes, skateboards and scooters, sometimes with surfboards strapped. The older ones tour in cars, banking up on the highways or cruising esplanades along the strip. Their clothes full of colour and slogans. It’s all about skin, iconography and machines, powered by fuel and the body, and transport to a destination unspecified. Subsequently their rebellion, their image, is more American than European. Here, the mood’s more contemplative, more inside and more aggressively political. They stare at me openly, watch what I’m doing. Their dissident curiosity makes me uncomfortable; at home, I don’t register a glance. There isn’t time.

Into some of the faces I stare back; in my mind they are replicas of Camille. Sumptuous and blonde. With them, my attention becomes about the face, the cleanliness, the ice of eyes, so overtly sexual above the wrapped and covered body. Others in the room remind me more of Jade, looser of limb and more fierce.
In the room, I see all the evidence from last night, of Camille’s contrition, swirling in the gaps here between the rich and the poor. All these young girls come from the same schools that once housed Camille and Jade. The same lands and houses and families. I have to see those places; I have to find the spaces that have made them who they are.

At the Heritage Centre, the women are helpful. They find it charming that I am so interested in the history of the town. I buy books about Armidale, I invent the pretense of a move to fix their attention and I think of Camille awake, reading my note, written when I still meant it, and there’s something about that image I can’t reconcile.

The women tell me where I can find the schools I’m looking for, give me several pages of municipal lists and information. I feign interest with the lines of conversation, continuing others in my head. I’ve never found this difficult; my training results in effortless allegory. Running a rapid eye over the print, I recognise the places I’ve already been, the inroads I’ve made unexpectedly without trying. I ask the women about The Dalton.

Oh yes, they exclaim, alternating each other’s speech, a beautiful homestead. Owned for generations by the same family.

Can I see it?

Well, the family did relocate to more modern facilities, a new home, and the original Dalton was opened as a heritage trust property. Unfortunately, it’s closed for winter, but, they look at each other, you could probably take a wander around.

And the new homestead? I ask.

No. I’m sorry; we can’t help you with that one. A private home, not around here… They both look down to the display desk. Move papers around. I try to sound casual.

Where did the family move to?

One of the ladies leans forward when I ask, her head lifts, the eyes open.

Well, it was only Mrs Weston, really, by then and…
She wants to tell me but the older, sterner lady kicks her under the desk. She looks to me and says by way of conclusion:

The family has relocated.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

I've learnt the hard way not to look into a woman’s past, especially if I'm sleeping with them. It’s okay to hear about it, to hear the stories they choose, the ones they let slip, but I never visit. Being present in a memory changes things. I need to feel like I'm creating the women I touch. That it's all new. I don’t like it when the things I shuffled back as vaguely suspect show me up. When I'm left to sift through leftovers on a cutting room floor, I only ache for the innocent time, for the time when I didn’t know.

Sitting in front of Camille’s school in the car I know I shouldn’t have come. I'm five or six streets away from her, minutes away and I don’t feel anything. But I have to see, I have to check whether her story is true. Already I’m finding the realisation of the school hard to handle – the architecture, the well-groomed gardens, the make up of what she used to be attracted to, and it’s not a man, it’s a projection of privilege, a seductive series of walls that conjures all the things she wanted, all the things that I’ve never trusted.

In the reception area of the administration office I pretend well. I know how to assume an identity, to make myself appear older, or younger and here, to appear richer than I legitimately am. Being a Saturday the office is quiet and it makes my presence more obvious but noticeable only to a few. I’m glad of the quiet, it settles my nerves. A woman far too over-dressed for a secretary greets me. I always take this as a bad sign. She obviously has issues and will be difficult to work with. Her timbre is not warm. I have no idea what I’m
going to say, only that I have to do it well. I decide to convince her I’m in the market, a rich man in pursuit of an expensive baby-sitter.

We move through the basics of conversation, supply and demand. What irks me is how obviously she is attempting to size me up. She’s letting me know that I must prove my eligibility, dropping hints about scholarships and assistance funds. I tell her straight out, that money is no object. I’m flippant and deliberately impatient and it works. She makes a call. Apparently there is no one available to see me now but if I would like to make an appointment for this afternoon? I nod yes. She leaves the room to collect me some reading material.

I take a seat in the foyer and don’t miss the detail. Above me a sign says, *International Baccalaureate Educating Australia’s Daughters since 1895* but this school obviously isn’t struggling under the weight of an old reputation. The modern touches in the traditional space convince me that money is no object to them either. The Imacs, the expensive phone systems, the brand new lounges in the waiting area, the high gleam of a polished marble floor, the thickness of the rugs under my feet, all of it so newly acquired or well maintained.

A list of principle benefactors runs the length of one wall; my eyes are caught by a name, *June Weston*, in gold embossed lettering. On the wall opposite is a message from the principal.

*A school is but a world in miniature. The best powers and facilities through discipline and training are drawn out without repressing brightness and merriment. Girls are able to ride in their spare time and take lessons using some of the schools sixty-five horses and the superb facilities. A girl who leaves NEGS carries with her the habits of discipline, self-control: whose stay here has given her a stronger love for what is good, greater courage in resisting evil and a higher standard of duty; this girl, whether she be a prize winner or not, I regard as a credit to her school and one of its successes.*
I’m still staring in disbelief at the inflated words, at the idea that being here somehow makes evil resistible, when the woman returns. I have my back to her and time to compose my face. It is harder to control my body, to loosen the joints locking up in anger. As she hands me the pamphlets I notice my hand unravels from a fist.

You’ll find all the details of the various packages and options here. Would two o’clock be suitable Mr…?

Weston. And yes, two o’clock will be fine.

My choice of name has the desired effect. I turn my back on her open mouth and leave. I have no intention of keeping my appointment. I’ve seen it all before.

Outside I don’t register anything. My eyes are bleached with fury. Safe in the car, away from the wind, I let it out, whacking my head against the back of my seat several times because angers all I can muster for all the bullshit in the world.

In my lap, high-gloss promotional material. Identical schoolgirls in identical hats. I open it and immediately see figures. Full board $40 000 per annum. More than that woman’s salary, more than mine. So this is how much it costs to breed a bitch. Then again, perhaps that’s a fair remuneration for abandonment.

♦♣♠♥

If I opened my arms wide enough I could embrace the whole town. Uralla stretches sideways from the highway on the flat ground of the New England plateau. One side more populated than the other. A dot on a highway that leads to another place. Uralla is the first of Armidale’s poor cousins. Close enough to be considered part of the immediate family but forgotten enough not to be recognised, for it not to matter. Another small country town struggling to maintain its diminishing weight. On the main street efforts have been made to
entice the cars flying by to stop. I pull mine up but don’t get out. The outlook is not as bad as others I’ve seen, not as bad as Deepwater, but still I see no reason for me to leave the car.

Along the street there are small clusters of antique shops, heritage buildings, cafes and renovated workers’ cottages but the whole place is so deserted it feels like an abandoned set or a hastily-erected model. What adds to this feeling of unreality are all the references I see to a man called Thunderbolt. *You are now in Thunderbolt Country, Welcome to The Home of Thunderbolt, Thunderbolt Cafe, Thunderbolt Saddlers.* Everywhere this name and its subsequent image, a male figure riding high on a rearing horse. He’s the star of a broken-down show, a legend I’ve never heard of. I start up the car, and continue to move north along the highway. On my right a sign says, *To Thunderbolt’s Grave.* I decide to take a look.

Off the beaten track, the streets of Uralla remain deserted. The houses lining them are dilapidated. On identical square plots I’m slightly relieved to see signs of life: faded washing twisting around Hills’ Hoists in the wind, children’s toys discarded in front yards, garish blots of colour in uncut grass. My mouth is dry from the heater in the car and I pull over to a corner store for a drink.

Pushing back the wind-blown strips of plastic vertical curtain, my fingers come away covered in dust. Inside there’s no one at the counter and not much stock but you can always rely on Coke to find its way all over. A woman comes in from out back, stands at the counter, her dirty hand resting on the button that opens the register. She doesn’t seem pleased to see me. I smile.

Just this, thanks.

She doesn’t respond. Her mouth is intent on closure. She gives me my change and is back out the door before I’ve even turned around. In a town built on the prospect of gold, I guess some are destined to remain unlucky.

Outside, on the crisp wind, I hear machinery; somewhere the cogs still turn.
Further down the street another sign advertises the dead man. I follow it, realising by the time I’m near the hallowed site that it’s directly opposite the one I initially came to see, Jade’s school. I park on the road between them, draining my Coke. Looking at the low-set buildings of the school, I experience a strange wave of recall. The yellow aluminium louvers, the steel-covered walkways running between the white walls of identical, rectangular classrooms. I can picture myself walking under this generic architecture, hanging in these same strips of the public system, the walkways that never provided any real shelter. And I think about Camille’s school, of its manicured grounds and its safety, and the world away that it is from these humble blocks of learning. Something about this fires the anger in me again, and something about it makes me proud. Proud because Jade and I survived such a similar formative space, and angry because we had no choice.

I crunch the soft aluminum can in my hand and throw it on the ground, slamming the door of my car as I get out. I turn my back on the school and head towards the bushranger’s grave. My irritation begins to feel good as I cross the windswept road.

Thunderbolt lies in this old pioneer cemetery, in a relatively modest plot compared to the tawdry monuments erected to him in other parts of town. There’s no statue, no grand headstone; just a simple raised rectangle set in concrete. The top of it is covered in coarse grey gravel. A wooden sign next to the grave is the only indication that standing in this spot constitutes a tourist activity. It reads:

*Born Frederick Wordsworth Ward, Thunderbolt escaped from jail in 1863. For the next six and a half years he led an exciting career bailing up mail coaches, roadside inns, stores and private homes over a vast area of northeast New South Wales. At times he had a young accomplice but preferred to work alone. The police found him hard to track or catch. He was a superb rider and usually rode stolen thoroughbred horses. The public had a soft spot for him. He was never violent and usually quite courteous to the lady travelers. He would only return shots when being fired upon. Thunderbolt was shot by Constable Walker during a siege at*
Standing at the foot of his grave, I can’t help but smile in recognition. I’m real close to the skeleton of a man I would have liked to meet, a rule-breaker. I imagine I feel his spirit here, in the wind, wild and unruly. It rushes through this flat land as if still being chased. Did Jade feel it too, walking by his grave every day to school? Learning how to solve equations, to punctuate, to express herself under the squalling shadow of his irreverence, did she imagine that he heard all the wishing that went on inside the peeling white walls across the street? On long afternoons did she fantasise that she too could cut a crooked line through this town? Whether she was aware of it or not something of his lore slipped into her, I decide. She’s Thunderbolt’s ideological descendant; unlawful and hard to track. I turn to the car. The dust swirls in mad directions, I walk, enjoying the lick of the wind on my back.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

I head for the Dalton, site of rural dreaming, natural disaster. I have to drive back through town and take the Faulklin Road out past the restaurant of last night. Still in Armidale, the desolate yellow of the sidewalks depresses me. The day has turned gloomy, colder and the parched yellow of the earth ice picked.

I turn off the main road into a junction marked by a service station that signals entry to Dalton House and in the other direction the airport. Strange how these two icons, one of the past, one of the present, hold guard. A local walking a dog eyes me suspiciously. He knows the old homestead is closed. Soon the smooth bitumen gives way to rocks and orange gravel. I drive hesitantly along the dirt road in my unsuitable car, slipping and veering uphill on the larger rocks. A sign tells me I have one kilometre to travel.
Around me, I see nothing but stretches of fencing and the beginnings of grazed land. The wind seems to have dropped, but a still fog has descended heavily now, and it becomes hard to see any further than metres away. I start to feel uneasy. The idea that I am driving to a historical site in the fog, in the freezing cold, when it is shut, when no one knows I’m here, where maybe no one will find me until spring, is unsettling. It is the fog and the silence. Eerie and as enigmatic as the rest of this brooding country.

I reach the end of the road. Two locked and bolted gates mark the entrance. I notice the tall foreboding rooftop of Dalton House rising out of the trees. Its size authoritative and unforgiving in the landscape. For some reason I look around. Wary. Knowing I’m being ridiculous. Spooking myself out, being the real city boy. I lock the car.

Outside, the air is as cold as I have felt it so far. I grimace and stretch my jumper collar up to under my eyes. My shoulders hunch involuntarily to my neck, rigid, almost in pain. Now a foggy sort of rain starts, and I wonder why I’m doing this. The sheep grate at the gate reminds me of cattle I can’t see or hear. I step my way through it gingerly, not used to the navigation, and it makes me feel out of place and unprepared. I manage to jump over the gate with a bit more verve. I peer through the haze. Tall deciduous trees line the long drive, beautiful and seductive, drawing me down the line of more lost grandeur. The impressive remnants of pastoral power. Fog trails through the open space between them. Crows call loudly and my mind inflates with every movie I’ve seen where fog and wind-gusts and old houses presage fear. I can hear the soundtrack. Piano discordant. I am bristling. My senses heighten. Alone and freaking myself out in my own straight-to-video preview. I step guardedly over animal shit and tough looking thistles.

At the end of the drive the homestead comes into full view. Radiant in the wasteland, the site of all Camille’s twisted wishing. Fallen leaves bunch thickly under my feet, crunching and breaking, swirling orange in the gusts of wind. In the grounds of Dalton House, I don’t
bother to step lightly, I’m not authorised but that doesn’t cancel out my desire to leave an impression. I do it for Jade. I want to leave a mark.

A huge sundial stands in the centre of the lawn, pointing the way to a hide-and-seek sun. Every window is shut, every blind and curtain drawn. I’m disappointed. Wicker chairs line the veranda and automatically I superimpose white dresses in them, people in riding boots – dignified people, statuesque people, people like June and that guy, the bearer of bad news in Deepwater – milling around with power in their boots. I walk up the veranda stairs and around the corner of the house. The relentless silence. An open window. I peer in hoping I might see something of the parlour, the room where Camille used to let June touch her and do her hair but all I can see are armchairs and sideboards covered in calico sheets. Freeze-framed in time. I’m musing on this when I see her.

Paralyse.

Out the corner of my eye an old woman with a bucket. Moving without sound from the back of the house. I turn, incredulous. Stopped with fear. For a moment, I think she’s a ghost. I’m unsure of what to do. Unsure of whether I am breaking some law, caught in the act, whether I’ll scare her to death or she me. I call out, Hello. She doesn’t answer. I move loudly towards her, stepping hard on the veranda boards. She doesn’t hear me. Her back bends to the tap at the bottom of a water tank. I call out, Hello. Again nothing. I begin to palpitate. The sound of water falling into the bucket is the only confirmation that this is really happening. That she is real. I almost scream Hello this time, as much out of panic as wanting my voice to reach her. She hears me. She turns very slowly.

Hello, she says, not startled.

I laugh nervously and begin to babble about how the lady at the tourist centre said it would be all right even though the homestead is closed and I’m sorry for yelling and I’m just having a look around, for history, you know. Finally, she smiles at me.
Yes, she says, but just why she’s saying yes, I’m not sure.

I clear my throat. She looks me up and down. Asks me if I am from the heritage centre. I repeat my feeble story slower.

Yes, she says again. Not much to see at the moment. We’re boarded up for the off-season. Lots of people in the autumn. Not much to see now.

She is brutally old. Chilblains line her face. Her posture is stooped. She doesn’t move.

I thought you were a ghost for a minute there, I say.

She laughs.

Could well be.

And even though it is a joke, I don’t find it very funny.

You live here? I ask.

Yes. My husband and I look after the place.

In order to distract her I ask if the business is still running – the farming – wondering how she fits in, if maybe she’s the second woman who married Jade’s father.

Not so much anymore. Sheep yes. Couple of horses in the paddock there. Not good for much now and my husband and I have a cat. An old cat.

I pretend to focus my attention on what looks like a newer building behind her, and as she turns I realise she is far too old to be that second wife and I remember Camille telling me that Bob had to move on when the Dalton was sold. He kept quiet, he did everything right but he never belonged here, he never owned it.

The woman follows my gaze towards the building and tells me it’s the old strapper’s shed. That they’ve been restoring it. That I can look in there if I like. I’m not sure what to do. I just want the woman to disappear, to leave me to it. I take a few steps away from her as
if to look around. I see the horses, just beyond the fence line, in the paddock. Motionless in
the cold. I stare at the horses.

You can pat them if you like.

Do you mind if I have a look around?

No.

I thank her. She nods and turns away from me. I walk towards the horses. When I
reach the fence I look back, expecting her to be watching me, but she is gone. I look for her
near the house, on the steps. Anywhere. But she’s gone. No sound. No trace. I shiver and
grip the fence. The horses stare at me but do not move and I keep staring back because now
I feel like I am being watched. I have to work out my next move. The horses look just as
haggard as the old woman. They look cold without blankets. They don’t respond to me. Not
a foot stamp. Not even a neigh or an absent wander. They just stand still, their heads turned
to me. Waiting. Watching the stranger. I find their vigil contributing to the feeling I get from
the house and the old woman – a feeling of loss in time. As if they too are statues, museum
pieces. Everything in this place feels like it’s been hexed into stasis, like some sort of curse
has passed over it. I take solace in that; it’s a good feeling. All this majesty, all this legendary
power like so much history just crumbling in on itself. And Jade doesn’t know it but she
started all that. She started it with innocence but it cost her her own. And the tragedy and the
magnitude of that moment hasn’t really hit me until now, standing here at the beginning of
the end, at the Dalton, at the locus of her revenge. Only those responsible, only Camille and
June and Denis could ever really blame her for that. I want to applaud her; I want to help
Jade make it happen fully.

I realise the old woman probably meant for me to walk into the paddock, to
approach the horses, but I won’t bother. It’s their stillness, their connection to the past that
turns this whole thing into a kind of stand-off. Even the animals here can tell I’m an
outsider. Looking at me as if they know what I’m up to. This, and the fact that the woman with the bucket and her old man are somewhere in the house makes me want to keep moving but it’s not enough to make me want to bail out. None of it, not Camille, not the weight of this place, no ostracism or consequence is going to stop me now. I look out past the paddock, over the horses’ heads to the surrounding plains stretched tight with fog. And as if she can hear me, I say:

I understand you Jade. I understand what you’re running from.

I walk past the paddock to the other side of the house. A sign directs me to a garden. *June’s Garden*, it reads. I head into her hundred-metre-square grove along a rickety path lined with stones and I am happy that it is a failed garden, an English garden gone to seed. A garden that has not survived without manicures and perversions of all the hard truth around it. I doubt June ever even touched it. She would have paid for it to be kept.

Now the tiers of stone, the intricate detail, are all invaded and over-run. I kick stones into what would have been a delicate pond – now gangrenous with fungi and mosquito larvae, the sickness she left behind – tucked away in a corner, a forgotten dent in the landscape. *June’s Garden*. A faded miniature. A homage to gentility passed over by the greater gravity of this landscape, which seems to mock all of her intrusions. Now without June’s steely and persistent guard, nothing in this place can be protected from the wild.

I turn back towards the house. No sign of the caretakers. I almost expect to see Jade younger. Staring at me. Wandering in the fog, around June’s garden, around June’s property, around this stolen country. This was how Jade grew up. Always on someone else’s turf, someone else’s terms. Her family had no lineage, no claim, and I recognise the same rootlessness in me. A desire to carve a life at any cost out of our anonymity.

Coming full circle to the front of the homestead, I cannot resist the temptation to sit in one of the wicker chairs on the verandah. A spot where Camille might have rested. From
here the perspective is different, looks out not in, and I realise how easy, how predictable it
was for her to fall into wanting this position. This command. Everything that swirls in the
direction of the homestead would have looked at her too, affording her a moment of
belonging. A fresh taste. I imagine people arriving for one of June’s events, her rent-a-crowd
companions and from here Camille would have enjoyed it. Posing as if for a photograph in
her chair. The flash and dust. The scramble of a latecomer rushing to join them. A moment
where a bleached dress enters through a door. And Jade passing by on the perimeter,
through the trees, on the other side of the fence. How many times would she have watched
Camille and Denis leave for other places, other parties? Would Denis have looked for her as
the cars rounded the drive, across the shoulder of the vacant woman by his side? Would he
have even bothered?

The enormity of Jade’s exclusion makes me furious. I feel like wringing Camille’s
neck for being so stupid. I want to hurt them all, or at least help Jade cause some harm. I
don’t take the stairs; I don’t exit as I should. I jump the metre or so off the veranda into the
garden, dragging it with me on my boots, wishing I could pull all of it down; the house, the
lies, the plays and the counter attacks. Drag the whole lot down and through the mud.

I know the old couple are probably watching me but I don’t care and I don’t look
back, experienced in the ghostly sensation of eyes, eyes boring into my back, watching my
hands and my movements always. My back prickles as if latched to ice. Each step breaks me
free, a little further from their scrutiny.

Returning to the long drive, I notice the mist has lifted, passed out of the valley.
When I arrived, I couldn’t see much further than the tree line. Now the land stretches out.
The Dalton property, impressing itself for miles and miles on the landscape. In every
direction, it affects. Open yellow. Ashen grey. Empty land. And this speaks to me more
spectacularly about history than the homestead does. Buildings do capture and they do hold
time but it is only land that passes with it. And to see this land centuries-old passing with me compounds my insignificance, the jack-in-the-box frivolity of my own passing. The land here carries with it a hunted look. Perhaps it is just the colour of the day. Perhaps it is my untrained eyes, my city-boy attention spans, casting aspersions. But to me this great property looks ravaged. There is sadness. An unwarranted stillness. It gives me the feeling that I too am hunted. That this land that passes with time is waiting for me to vanish.

I turn away, look for the car. On the other side of me, a flock of sheep stand motionless. Staring. I am struck by the image of them, by the amount of them, and nearly lose my footing in the grate. I face the sheep. I hadn’t noticed them watching me. They are as still, silent, and grey as the land. I take a step towards the fence that separates me from them. As if on cue they move; turning away from me and disappearing quietly into the colour of the paddocks.

♦♣♠♥

In the dark, in a big city in a small town, two pairs of people commit crimes, against themselves, against each other. Camille and The Dealer, PJ and Jade – two pairs splitting open. Nothing is ever hidden for long.

In the apartment he keeps for this kind of thing PJ has Jade where he wants her, underneath him. And Jade is mistaking that power for lust. When it is over, when he is finished, he asks her to leave. But Jade takes no notice. She tells him she’s got an idea. He says impatiently:

Okay, let’s hear it.

Jade fills him in on the telemarketing scam even though she shouldn’t. His power and his arrogance are making her want to. She wants one up on him, she
omits The Dealer. PJ just laughs at her - undercuts her cheerfully on the chin. His finger moving into her mouth, the top knuckle hooking behind her teeth, pressing her bottom lip open so he can see inside, into the hole he makes of her mouth. And it hurts but she lets him do it. She hates his laughter. He doesn’t notice either her pain or her danger.

Sorry Jade, he says, not interested.

In Camille's room The Dealer kisses her hard, pushing her and shoving her with all the left-over ferocity he feels for what she has done to Jade, for the absence and the longing of her past which he knows now he can never fulfill. And she will take it for passion. She will take it and she will give it back not knowing any different, not knowing how considerable the gap between them is. Different positions, different meanings, different images. What they remember will always be different.

For her it will be him slipping inside her for the second time that afternoon and how his face was kind of lost and beautiful – the moment when she decided she was going to ask him to stay.

For The Dealer it will be watching her naked body caught in the mirror – the sheet, thankfully, a tangled bunch of lace at her feet. He will remember how good it felt to watch her, to fuck her, while all he could think about was going away.

And none of them will remember what they saw with their eyes when they actually departed. It’s easier that way. Not everything looks good when you look back on it.
Pinch and Press
Camille and I spend three days caught in each other’s orbit. It only takes me twenty minutes to undo it.

We are in the public bar when she asks me to stay. I can smell the stale floor. We sit rigid with a sudden shyness in the heavy chairs by the window. Her face is luminous, even in this murky morning light and when I say no, she wants to know why.

I’ve got a life there, Camille, a place to live, a job – the Casino’s like a part of me. What am I gonna do here? Stack up the fruit machines for you in the pub? I’d go nuts. I need the tables, Camille. I need that…

I can’t explain why I need it so much. She doesn’t respond. She doesn’t know why my reason isn’t good enough. I go on.

It’s just like all this, like, Armidale is for you. You know why you came back and now there are reasons why I have to go.

She looks at me sadly:

There are always reasons either way, she says.

And she’s right but I can’t do it, I can’t tell her why. It would only crush her. Camille and I are just built differently. She’s the type of person who admires grace. She likes people who lose with dignity. She values that. She serves people their drinks and their tokens but she doesn’t admonish them because deep down she’s playing the same game. She knows what she did to Jade. And this martyr-act, this self-inflicted penance, is meant to deflect blame. To disguise losing, to redefine it as something dignified, to proclaim it as an inherent way. But I work in a Casino. I know about winners. Winners are made.

Camille keeps pushing me – making the reason I’m leaving harder to ignore.

Just give me some time, I say.

But she looks away, knowing that I don’t mean it. Her body, set so stiffly in the chair; her beautiful body which only hours before had moved so freely with me, around me,
above me, now locked into this pointless resistance, into this starched silence and I realise I’ve made a big mistake. I’ve been careless with her, with myself, because part of me probably even loves her but to me that doesn’t mean forever, it doesn’t even mean tomorrow. But to Camille it means something else, something bigger. I can’t look at her; I stir the ice in my drink.

I would come with you, you know, if you wanted me to.

No. I don’t think so.

All I can think about is Jade, the kind of girl who would never walk away, head held high, and let you take the prize. She’d bleed, she’d rage. She’d come back for you. No matter how much the odds were stacked against her. She’d come back for you and she’d keep coming back. And that’s what I want, I tell myself. Fight not survival. Sheer force, sheer relentlessness. Because nothing I’ve seen has ever convinced me there is anything gracious about loss.

I want to get back to Jade, to follow through the thread I’ve started with her. Already I feel that I’ve left her for too long. For a moment I think Camille’s buying my story but then she says:

Just promise me you won’t get mixed up in anything with Jade.

I drain the watery dregs of my drink and when I grab her hand she flinches from the cold residue on my fingers.

I can’t promise anything, Camille.

She looks down, wraps her hand over mine and holds onto me. I don’t feel anything but her grip. I put up with it, the pressure of that light hand, because I think it helps her. Then, without warning, she lets me go.

I get in the car. I’m leaving a woman I could love because the play excites me more. Sitting behind the wheel, I can already feel the split. Love is so fragile in the morning, so
fragile in the face of the world, kicking our neuroses back at us. And nothing can justify me; nothing can mask the resignation in Camille’s face, the defeat in her eyes, outside the Pink Pub as I pull away.

It seems to me that you are either lucky or you aren’t. You either meet someone and reach an agreement or you meet someone and you don’t. I’m not sure which is luckier. Camille and I knew too much to ever pretend so there was nowhere left for us to go. I should have known she wasn’t going to relinquish me that easily.

Driving away, walking away, the last kiss, a few rushed words, are not agony. It’s only twenty percent of it. In these moments the residue of your friction and intimacy still hovers. It drags after you with the turning of a key, the descent of a lift, the slip of a boarding pass; and you let it. You ignore it. You feel so good, good feels indefinite. You’re still used to your lover being there, so much so perhaps that you are glad of the break, the freedom of departure. Already you’re dying for the chance to gather yourself. To remember quietly and on your own the rapid everything. You want to recall each second of it. Play it over in your mind. In fast-forward, in slow motion, with additions even. A different cut, on your own and wearing that stupid grin and a sigh other people envy, remember or fail to recognise. And you’ll recollect things you can’t believe you’d already forgotten. You’ll suffer blissfully more shivers and smiles. And you’ll want to call and say I love you or thanks or something entirely inappropriate now that you’re away and maybe you do. But does it make a difference in the long run? When she doesn’t call? And you don’t call? When you settle back into your life and that sweet halo of connection is broken down piece by piece. Until you get to the stage when sweet nothing is nothing but absurd.
When The Dealer looks back on the moment he left Camille, their actions, that scene, will always resurface the same. There’s the frozen morning so vivid. The ice of her eyes. He will exaggerate the fog caught in the valley. The damn fog between them in his head. He will not realise until later the significance of that moment. He was just following the thread of another day, knowing he was leaving, but not knowing just how badly he would regret it. He thought they would always have another chance, that there would be many more times they’d cross-stitch the New England and Pacific highways that separated them – sometime in the future when Jade was gone and it was all over. But there was only one more time and all that did was confirm Camille’s suspicions. Suspicions she had even then, that The Dealer was not ready to let go of what twisted him and attracted him to Jade. He would never accept the fact that life could be simpler.

Camille’s tolerance of her place in the world frightened him. He wanted to run. He had run from that kind of complacency all his life. He didn’t want to become content like she had. To be still. He wanted someone to run with. Camille was presenting him with a puzzle. She was waiting for him to work it out. She expected him to. The Dealer was looking at the exhibits on the tray, at all the evidence staring him in the face, but he refused to recognise a sequence. He remembered what he wanted to and discarded the rest. He missed the ultimatum hidden inside her warning. All Camille wanted was for him to look her in the eye with a little understanding, to be true to her, to not be alone. But solitude would be The Dealer’s wrap. No matter what they do to stall or prevent it people like The Dealer and Jade never change, they just have to keep running.

In big cities he can be tempted by the idea that something is happening even if it isn’t. There’s scope for pretence and business. He can look like he’s doing
something even when he’s doing nothing. This is how The Dealer feels about the world. In small towns he can't fake it and he can't make it happen. Camille’s refuge, her love, makes him obsolete. He’s not contributing in any other way. He’s just there. Locked down in a country he hardly knows. He hadn’t expected to feel. Why he needs to turn his back on this love – only Jade knows – the only woman in his life at this time who functions in the world without sympathy; floating over the enormous canyon of her treachery. Jade senses that he will follow her, and just like two late-night birds calling and answering they will learn to imitate the encroaching chainsaw. But at least they’ll know who they’re dealing with, even if they don’t know just how badly it will affect them.

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Do people choose places or do places choose them? I wonder this as I round Point Danger at the southern end of the Gold Coast. I like to take the coast road in, the old Pacific Highway, so I can edge round that point. I’ve done it many times day and night, and it always sends shivers through me.

Is this how you know you are in the right place? When coming back to it feels like a combination of pleasure and relief.

There are always reasons why I leave, reasons beyond me; but the reasons why I stay are synonymous with who I am. The Gold Coast is an outcast city; a refuge for exiles, misfits and players. When I glide my car along that skinny stretch of bitumen, so close to the edge, my windscreen seems to disappear, become the blue ocean, and my parched thirst for extremity, for difference, for insubordination, is satiated by this city’s remorseless nuclear flash.
Under a UV or fluorescent ray, the built city rests in this burning picture; an intoxicating slur at the end of a long and glistening line.

It’s even better from the air. No other city in Australia has quite the same aerodynamic entry. A city built for the sky always looks best from it. It’s the combination of colours in the Queensland light. All the lush green of the mountains meeting the sea, separated spectacularly by a thin line of towers competing in their stretch for attention along the sand. Planes fly in lowline over the ocean. The view from up high – a picture taken a thousand times – flattened and two dimensional. Live, it is something else.

After Armidale, I’m amused by the lunacy of it all. I wager these are the same reasons why Jade’s here.

I would have enjoyed seeing her arrive. Like watching someone view the ocean for the first time. Does she see it like I see it? A city of surfaces, an ocean of seamless blue fanned by frivolous edges. But what’s underneath, does she see that? All the endless covert possibility.

I’m thawing out. On the highway, my tension melts. At dusk I slip along my imitation Sunset Strip. Mould myself into California in miniature. This is the shooting hour. At five in the morning and five in the afternoon the light is best for pictures. I drive by signs and skyscrapers glowing yellow in the small space of the day that takes your breath away. In the shooting hour it all works. The hard edges of the city soften and you can believe the imagineers.

I signal The Casino as I pass it at Broadbeach. Curled in on itself in the afternoon. Shielding its players from illumination and waiting patiently, for the onset of night. I don’t expect that Jade is in there and I’m not ready to think about her yet. Right now I need the anonymity of my apartment, away from the sky needles and the endless provocations of the strip. It is too soon, too light and too close. I need to check myself.
I cross the Southport Bridge. I’ve heard people say, in trendier avenues, that they would never live further than the bridge. The bridge that links the suburban body of the Gold Coast to its infamous face. But there are downtimes when I prefer the body with all its dimpled curves and back-street surprises. Times when I feel like I’m holed up in the city’s neck, sucking on the pulse, the mainline to the head. I need the respite it offers from slippery surfaces. It reminds me why I’m here. It reminds me how the head works, how it abuses the body. How the body suffers to feed its relentless fetishes and imaginings. Here I see the evidence of this city’s manipulation, not its product. The forgotten things I have to take stock of. The old surfaces tarnished with use. The body releasing all the waste, the fingerprints, the grime, the backlash, the record of games, the same maneuvers played over and over again. These are the suburbs where people lose, where the buildings and the people are stained.

Over the bridge I’m local and as close to being centred as you can be in this city. I follow the water. I still live on the edge of the ocean but here it laps quietly. On the calm side the tourists still come. Working-class clans looking for cheaper alternatives to the surf spray and so they nestle into the dog suburbs, into the Tuscany-inspired complexes next to me and laugh into the night. The bay water in front of them shining still but not too clean. Climbing the stairs to my flat I listen to them. See them multiplying in pools. The kids calling for Marco Polo, or shrieking for their fathers to catch them. Sometimes I watch them through windows, sitting in clumps in front of cable TV. Sometimes they watch me, and I think I see in their eyes a sad recognition. My kitchen, my life, my presence is not in the brochure. I wonder, when they get the free buses to the theme parks in the bright blue mornings, whether they stare up at the towers and want to be in them. So high up you don’t have to look sideways at people like me.

I think about these tourists, how the city tries to seduce them and then wishes to make them feel guilty. I see them walking in the Casino, in Surfers Paradise, along the
esplanades, their children clinging to their legs, grabbing at them, overloaded by the spectacle and the relentless pressure, the idea that everything here has to be paid for. I watch these package holiday families dividing up the budget. And I watch the cream moving in-between. The world-weary families from other countries and other cities. Japanese, Middle Eastern, American, Australian. Whatever the accent, they own this city. Their wallets, their Cartier, their Louis Vuitton and their Billabong bags bulging. These are the people who hover in the towers. Who buy one hundred and forty-eight T-Shirts for the wedding party back home in one sitting. These are the people the head likes and the body works for. The ones who will never watch me outside my front door fumbling for my keys.

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The Dealer’s shore. Populated by sea eagles and the pedestrian poor. Unloved kids with shaved heads on bikes. Young men with no shirts on, running barefoot, screaming out at the empty night: See you in hell, motherfucker.

Even their rage is celluloid American.

On one side, black bitumen runs past him, into the strip. On the other, dirty water runs between him and the islands. To his right the cars never stop. Passing by quickly. Fluid. Uninterrupted. To his left, a paddle-steamer moves through the slipway. Out and back at the same time every night. Every night outlined by fairy lights. Fluid and uninterrupted.

The Dealer watches the sun set, he tries to stay still in this buffer zone. To calm down the adrenalin in his body, to still his ragged mind, full of confusions, the connections, the dangers of Jade, interrupted by flashbacks of Camille, of her quieter grey city. Of her soft body. He wants to get back on the game. He wants to sort
through every detail before he lets Jade see him, he wants to control every variable, have an answer for every question. He tells himself he must anticipate. But nothing’s coming through. Nothing’s computing right. For once he isn’t even sure he wants to know or influence or control what is going to happen next. His hands are edgy. He wants Jade to decide.

The city rests at arm’s length. Hovering on a more easterly point, he looks at the phosphorescent strip, an architectural trick of light. He feels an ache of recognition. He lets the city lure him – limp to the wash of its relentless wave – the will to go on and on and on. He takes a deep breath. He feels like light. He feels like going, he feels like arriving. He feels like wanting everything all at once.

The Dealer’s wavering lasts less than three hours. Everything can be predicted. Jade is waiting.

He flies over the bridge in his lowline car attracted to the light. To the diamond city. Light on the water clear. The moon clear. The reflection back, clear. Glass, water, mirrors, skylight. A sugar, candy, crystal diet. He parks outside his first hunch and it is right. Inside Aces Jade is not alone. She is with the other dealers. Gambling in free time. Gambling serious and unallowed. The Dealer knows his place here – on the other side of the table. He smiles at Jade and everything is forgiven. They do not tell each other what has happened and neither of them asks. Their separate ways mesh back together, as easily as doing up a loose zipper. The Dealer sits next to her and they play up till the morning.
The Joker
In her room Jade tells me to be quiet. It’s 7:00am and we are cashed up and drunk. Jade and I make a good team. The other dealers are starting to get suspicious of her, not just because they’re onto her but because she’s with me. I’m too fresh in their eyes to be pulling up stunts like Jade. Together we clean up. Jade hasn’t mentioned my absence and I’ve managed to pull away from it spectacularly. It is only now I’m in her room that I think of Camille, briefly, and I do feel some kind of guilt. I can picture her working, her picturing us, but her tiny expressions are no match for the loaded idiosyncrasies of Jade. Will Camille even suspect, let alone fathom, how far I’ve come in less than twenty-four hours? I want to grab Jade and jump around, to scream in my enthusiasm for her pace. But I don’t, because she’s counting our money on her bed. She counts out loud but she’s not excited, just efficient.

I scan her room.

We’re in here because there’s a new girl sharing her apartment, someone Jade calls safe, another new arrival equating to a waitress. Now the place has more furniture in it but nothing can help the holiday-unit resemblance: lots of new white surfaces and cut corners. There isn’t much more decoration than what the landlord provides. Between the two girls there are few personals, no displayed memories, just another couple of exiles caught in a gated community, runaways imitating residents imitating tourists. But I know it’s a good place for Jade: a place where you’re not encouraged to leave an imprint. And a place where I am not confronted with any indications of who she really is.

I look at her on the bed. She seems to occupy a lot of space. It is her length stretched in the dramatic black of her dress against the pastel floral explosions of her cheap bedspread; her image hits me from the other side of the room. Her hair looks black also, slicked into the nape of her neck so that the angles of her face are intense. She’s not wearing enough make-up so that I can tell. When she looks at me her bright blue eyes seem to slip back into the typical seascape print behind her head.
Four thousand, she says, and holds it out to me.

I take it and ask her what’s next. She rolls her eyes at me like I should already know.

From under the bed Jade produces a large wooden box. She rests it on her lap, unlocks the cover and opens it towards me so that I cannot see inside. Drawing out a yellow business envelope marked Anthony, I see that her handwriting is precise. I had expected it to be messy. Jade closes the box, locks it, and places it back under the bed. She invites me to sit next to her. I cross the room eager to engage in her next move. She empties the contents of the envelope on the florals. So far there isn’t much to Anthony. A few sheets of paper and one photograph. Jade hands me the picture first, stolen, she says, from his desk. I nod and study Anthony. He seems familiar, which is probably not surprising because he looks like a bastard. His smile’s too smug. He’s carrying a bit of weight, but making the best of his looks that have probably endured a rough twenties. Anthony’s got that puffed-up look of someone who consumes well and often. His eyes appear shafty, but he comes across as slow. The slack jaw. The weakness for temptation. Perfect.

I smile at Jade and she hands me another piece of paper. She doesn’t like to explain things, to talk too much. If you don’t get it you don’t get it. I read a clipping she has taken from the classifieds. An advertisement for tele-marketers in Surfers Paradise. Company: Eagle International. Contact: Anthony Burgess, Manager.

I started yesterday, she says.

The other sheets of paper she hands me are notes about Anthony. Already she’s profiling him, but I’m more interested in what we’re going to get out of it. Reading me well, Jade hands me a photocopy of company records. I see there isn’t much cash, not the kind that would keep us interested for long enough. Jade senses my disappointment.

Don’t worry, the company’s just a front, she says, there’s plenty more where that came from.
And Anthony?

Yeah, he’s fair. Enough to play with anyway.

Good.

I give her back the papers and there it is, a deal done. It’s not like she said: Do you want in on this? She just assumed. I know her deal is never a real deal. I know I’ll probably never see my share. But that isn’t really why I’m in. I like the process better than the fruits. At least I tell myself I do.

I make a move to leave and notice a vase full of oriental lilies by her bed. I hadn’t registered that their bright magenta was real. They’d slipped into the colour scheme.

From Anthony?

No, Denis.

I pause. Jade is putting Anthony back in the box. She isn’t looking at me; she hasn’t expected a reaction. I try and sound flippant.

Who’s that?

Just some guy who wants to marry me.

She’s looking at me now, and there’s no hint of the lie. I stare her out to see if she’ll break but she doesn’t. It’s almost as if she believes, that at some point Denis actually did take the time to dictate the card dangling from the edge of the vase. I open it.

The message: Thinking of you darling, love Denis.

I turn the card over and see that it has been sent from a local store.

That must be annoying, Jade. Someone pestering you like that.

She sighs; looks away, and I feel I should tell her. Tell her that I know about it all. She reaches over and touches the petals of one lily, falling open and soft like a melting flute. She fingers the deep orange of the stamen.

Annoying flowers really, their pollen stains.
She shows me the burnt orange bruise on her fingers. I’m not happy about the bruise, about the flowers. It puts an ugly spin on things. It conjures Camille and her warning and it conjures a pair of fragile wrists. It’s the frailty that scares me. I need Jade to be strong. I don’t move to touch her or kiss her goodbye, as if her secret distress is contagious. Instead, as I close the door to her room, I say:

Keep me in the loop, Jade.

And I mean it, now and tomorrow and always. Don’t fail me. Keep me in the loop Jade.

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Anthony.

Basically, the overview. A girl came to work here, nothing special at all, very plain Jane, dressed down. Dressed as if she knew she had come from money. Carried herself well, very well brought up, very quiet and just got on and really did her job and in fact she was the best tele-marketer in her particular project that we’d had in ages. She saw the job in the paper, she came to the interview, I don’t actually remember her in the interview, we do group interviews, she didn’t sort of stand out at all. Took her on and she stuck around which was unusual. It’s the young ones who get bored. Out within the week, they can’t hack it. But Jade just seemed to settle in quick, one of these people that just works hard, head down and just does very well.

The first time I really remember her, apart from that, was she came to me here one morning at eight o’clock, it was only about a week since she’d started but it felt like she’d been around for longer. She had that kind of part-of-the-furniture thing about her. I’m normally the first in, and she said there was a panic, she was flying to her sister’s graduation, could she borrow eighty dollars cause there had been a muck-up on her flight, she had to go from Coolangatta to Sydney. Um, she got
paid the next day so it wasn’t a particularly risky thing for me to do so, yeah; so I lent her the money.

What stood out was that the next day she came in, she told me she had flown down, the flight back had been full, so she’d hired a car to drive back and she came in with the money and a thank-you card. Right?

So she did all this in 24 hours. Yeah? You know she’s flown down eight o’clock in the morning and she’s driven back at seven o’clock at night, got back at seven a.m. and come into work at nine. Okay? But with the money and a thank-you card and again sadly in this day and age, not many people operate like that. You know I lend money all the time to people and it rarely comes back the next day and never with a thank-you card. So, I thought, this girl’s really nice, you know? And didn’t think anything of it, and just carried on working.

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The seduction of Anthony is not subtle to the trained eye, but then, he isn’t a subtle guy. Jade’s working on building edifices of trust. She’s very patient at living out that double life. Her persona at work is gentle. I meet her before my shifts either in the early hours of the morning or for a late lunch in the afternoons. We always go to her place or to Main Beach for lunch so there’s no chance her workmates will see me. Sometimes when I meet her, there’s still some gentle residue. She’s like another girl; her voice tempered with a slight lilting shift not there most of the time.

Jade is making me tea, telling me about her day. For a few moments we could be a couple like any other; both tired of routine and relieved by sensitive ears. But as the traffic builds on the streets another Jade surfaces. Her talk turns inevitably from small to strategy. Stories about people become stories about codes. She changes out of her work uniform
then. In her head and on her body. The long shorts and linen shirts she wears to hide her skin from Anthony morph into the clothes she wears for me. Always tight, always black. I’m not confused about the clothes. Jade’s just bluffing, playing her charm down to give herself time. To make him feel comfortable. Like the change for me, there’ll be a change for him and it will be timed to perfection. There’ll be another voice, a different gait, and a few hasty drinks. Just like later tonight. Except our association has never led to sex. Later we’ll meet at Aces, if I’m free. If I’m not, Jade never tells me her plans. Sometimes, this bothers me. I’m getting itchy for a sting. Jade’s dangling all this potential in my face, but we haven’t made a big move yet. It’s been all set up, all prep and I know more than anyone that waiting can be dangerous. Pausing. That’s when you lose everything to the flippancy of a second guess. One too many moments to think she might be small time. When the hours and the days roll out calmly and without any real incident, it’s easy to forget what she’s capable of. I’m hungry for action and Jade’s got me on tenterhooks. I’m the instigator. She’s the tease.

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Anthony has screwed fifteen women on his desk. Laid a high turn-over of staff. A stream of backpackers on cash. He’s not paying much attention to Jade. Jade talks all day into the receiver. She sells squares of space. Advertising for placemats in clubs and RSL’s. She’s good. It happens in the first few seconds. It’s the voice she uses. She knows how to coax. There are totals every day and Jade wins. Jade likes talking to strangers. The managers of small businesses. Struggling so much for dollars they get sucked onto placemats. She has never seen the placemats. She does not even know if they exist.
Every second Jade is in two spaces. She is there live in her cube, talking down the line, but inside she is calculating. Thinking through her manoeuvres. Watching too, for opportunity. There’s a gaggle of old ladies in the cubes. They have sold for years. Women with big hearts, and outsides all crusted and hard. They’re tired of lying to people for a living. Tired of the endless pressure of persuasion. Jade wins them over gradually, these queens of the cubes, she knows she must be sweet, that she must not gloat over her commissions and her victories. She must convince them that she’s not a threat even though she beats them, so Jade offers small things every now and then; coffee, the emptying of a bin, candy. She listens. She makes peace.

Jade is not like the other young girls, distracted by the constant stream of young male muscle in the room, the temporary prospects. She feigns shyness with the men and refuses invitations to drink. The queens come round to her.

In the cubes Jade is playing on hearts. It’s a slow and steady trust. Tomorrow she’ll buy a present for one of the queens’ daughters who is ill and word of her thoughtfulness will start to spread. When she holds the queens and the hearts Anthony will not be immune to her strategies of kindness.

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Jade is getting ready for her Christmas party. Eagle has it in the spring because, like so many businesses in this city, there’s too much going down in summer.

I don’t know why I’m here in her bathroom, watching her. Is it that tonight I know she’ll sleep with Anthony? That tonight he’ll be some kind of king in his arena. Buying drinks for his workers and touching the women up. It’s not that I want to fuck Jade myself; it’s just that I want her to myself. To listen to me and scope with me. I’m clinging because I
know that when this thing starts to open up between them I’ll be on the periphery, that time between us will contract. She is too close. She is taking too much pleasure in the small things that align herself to Anthony. And she is enjoying my unease.

Jade has put on a black dress, one she has never worn for me. Tight and thigh-high. The Gold Coast is hot even in spring and he will see how long she is and how when her hair is down her face is less severe.

In her bathroom Jade leans toward me and lets me feel the softness of her hair. I take the auburn handful and twist it in my fingers. She looks me in the eye, smiling at how well the conditioning has worked and how for a moment I want to kiss her. I drop my hand. She turns back to herself in the mirror. I’m perched rather uncomfortably on the ledge that separates the bath from the shower; surrounded by all the products it will take to shock him. We’re alone in the house and it’s filled right now with Jade’s collection of electronic beats and bad lyrics. Pop about Friday nights and long lost Saturday mornings. She will not be home tonight.

Jade is dancing between applications. The twist of her hips and her lightness depresses me, all this frivolity, because she’ll never be this for me. Never average and carefree. She dusts the back of my hand with the leftovers of the after-sun shimmer she has applied to her décolletage and I stare at the ridiculousness of my glittered fingers. I wipe it off. I’m in a foul mood and body tinsel will not console me.

By twenty to seven Jade is transformed. Her eyes are intense with anticipation. She has turned on the light inside. Her hand shakes as I pass her a drink. All signs that when it comes to the seduction of men, she’s betting blind. We’re sitting in the lounge room, me sunken in the couch, her on the edge, knowing that this moment cannot be delayed forever.

The beats pump as rapidly as her heart; the delicate fabric of her kohl dress, I notice, is pulsating slightly across her chest. I want to cushion her, to keep her from the impending
night and its element of ruin. But I can’t, I’m on the rail. Watching not playing. I touch her knee and ask if she wants me to drop her into town. It’s a short walk, I tell her, but hard work in those shoes.

No thanks, she says, I think I’ll call a limo.

And I leave, pissed off that she sees the pimping of herself as some kind of cause for celebration.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

All over town Anthony’s people are getting into taxis, buses and limousines. Made-up in heels and ties, they peel themselves away from the day, from the back end of winter. The prospect of a night on the house leads to perfume and shrieks, and a few messy steps from pre-dinner drinks. From all over town they gravitate to the sea, with the sun setting slowly behind them, casting a lolly-pink haze on the high rise towers. They zigzag towards the strip from the driveways of quiet suburban nights.

Jade is in a limousine alone, looking at the water to her left and thinking about Anthony and, like all the others, thinking about the probability of flirtation and sex, of rolling out of their cocoons.

Anthony is always thinking about the probability of sex. He is standing on his balcony, surveying the city and looking at the same water. And everything is right with the world. He has good whiskey, a big house, a big dick and the big enough bank account to prove it. He is even attracted to the idea of being a better man now that he has made all this money, but thoughts like that, can wait.

Tonight Anthony is not thinking about Jade. His mind is filled with other data entries and potentials: a more obvious catalogue of fresh skin into which she
does not yet compute. Anthony racks up the possibilities that as yet do not include her. He has an absolute advantage. He knows that tonight his wallet is full and that later one or more of his people will go down on him. Perhaps not as well as one of his whores, but coupled with a flirty chase, always a better option. Tonight in an easy money town, Anthony is on top.

I felt like Jade was one of these secretaries that have got their hair up and you always think about what they’d be like with it down, you know, maybe sexier. She reminded me of a secretary from the point of view that, you know, I felt she was a pretty girl but, you know, she didn’t have the best skin and she really dressed very manly almost, you know, nothing special. But once she came in a tight T-shirt and I actually paid attention cause I hadn’t actually seen her as a woman, yeah? She made no effort. Then, a couple of other nice things, you know, she came across as a nice girl, then at the Christmas party she turned up looking stunning. She had a black sort of party dress on. She had dark hair. She won an award. I gave her a prize for doing well at the marketing. Anyway, at the Christmas party I’m like, you know; I really like people with good upbringing, class. I’m attracted to those kinds of people and she looked so lovely compared to what she normally looked like, plus I’d been out with a string of sort of models and that kind of thing and everyone was saying to me I should go out with a nice girl and I really thought, look, this girl’s really nice, and so I walked her where she had a limo waiting and in fact I’m to blame for some of this because I said to her something like:

If only you were older.

And she said,

Well how old do you think I am?

I said,

Aren’t you eighteen?
No, I’m twenty-one.

Well, that’s okay then.

We got together that night. We started dating and it was really funny because, she was such a nice girl, and everything she did fitted in with everything she said, and she was really worried what everyone was going to say and things, and in fact when she told a group of friends here they were stunned. They just didn’t see the two of us together, that kind of thing, but I really went for her goodness, yeah? Her honesty. That’s why in retrospect it’s so mind-blowing.

I don’t know about you, but when I meet someone they need to be a good all-rounder, they need to meet certain criteria of intelligence and this and that and the other, but normally there’ll be one of those things that stands out and makes them dazzling. They might be stunningly intelligent or they might make you laugh so much or they might be incredibly beautiful, but with her she was just such an almost old-fashioned good person, yeah? You know, someone you could trust completely.

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Jade calls me in the morning from a number I presume is Anthony’s. She’s in his house and before I can speak she’s rattling off a list of his assets and bankroll, excited by the fact that we’re in, that he’s falling for it, that it’s started. And I’m relieved. Something else in me ignites when I hear her. Anthony has gone to buy them breakfast while she wanders around in his beach house checking out his value and she’s woken up to the idea of me. And there’s an edge to her voice I haven’t heard before. She’s playing it sweet but there’s something else. There’s shame. And it’s comforting to know I’m the external factor contributing to this sudden vulnerability. Jade obviously feels no guilt in response to Anthony. She wants to confess to me, and she wants to make me feel that she’s not there for real. To reassure me that it is, in fact, just an act. Anthony does not threaten me, but it suddenly makes sense,
now that we have entered this dangerous and somewhat perverted ménage a trois, that she feels the need to do this. I hadn’t expected her to care.

The chemical make-up of the three of us has contributed to a kind of entropy in Jade’s system. She’s attempting to project her sense of shame onto me by reinforcing the fact that we are in it together. By tempting me with Anthony’s capital she knows that I too have to accept responsibility for where she is. That I’m as guilty as she. But I’m happy to share this with Jade because I know the biggest part of her enjoys it. I am connected to her in a way he will never be. Jade is free with me.

There’s no image to uphold in my eyes, no act. I know her secrets. I know what she is capable of. I know what makes her hot. Now Anthony is here but tomorrow there’ll be another guy and then another. The fact that she needs to share this with me means I will always have these small times; times when she reaches for me. When only I can understand her language. Small occasions where we create our own meaning in the face of a regretful morning. And I realise why. If Jade and I are capable of accepting each other’s humiliation our secrets will be safe. We will conduct our own reparation. We are not obligated to anyone else. Jade and I cancel out the world. We’re rolling full bloom.

♦♣♠♥

The Dealer prefers it when their talk is soft. When they know the consequences of their actions but they pretend they don’t. When they act just like normal to keep things sane. Their talk is soft and they pretend. Dance around the edge of knowing. Knowing that all this can end by tomorrow, the end of the year, or perhaps the next. They talk as if the world can’t see them, and never will. It’s a benign language bereft of guilt. Not touching on their secrets but made blissful because of them. To all
appearances theirs is a harmless communication: to any outside ear the complex codes and derivatives come across as standard, as nothing. They play unfazed because every move they make is rendered immune. Its weight does not register. They test the water with each other, the limits of reference, convinced they occupy a space where such serenity will always exist. They act like there will be no retribution.

But if anyone should know about odds it’s The Dealer. He knows that eventually a good run runs dry, that the house always gets the better of the player, but he’s letting his instincts on these things slide. Like a child plying an adult for a sweet, this pantomime with Jade is contained merely for the pleasure of dragging it out, of not merely coming out with it. Sometimes it’s good to play innocent with your collaborator.

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Jade tells me that I can’t ever say she’s mad. I must call her plenty of things but never ever mad. I hide my reactions well and this is why she likes me. Face-to-face there is never any hint of recall. It’s only when she turns from me that I distrust.

The major part of my role is to follow her. To watch over her with Anthony. To tail them in downtime, when they are in public. And on the Gold Coast that means long aimless strolls along shopping boulevards, along beaches, and endless coffees and lunches and dinners in the places to be seen. I’m always eyeing them through the chimera of the city’s commercial centres. The retail splendour. The Oasis. The Chevron Renaissance. Pacific Fair. The Dolphin Arcade. The Galleria. Marina Mirage. The Paradise Centre. I watch her weaving him around these high-roofed constructions with their shiny reflective floors, their
white sails, and seascape details. I watch her through water fountains and bird aeries, next to hollow monuments, trucked-in palm trees and mass-produced Statues of David.

Today, Jade holds Anthony’s hand and leads him from the Marina towards the faux classic surfaces of the Versace Hotel. Outside, the hotel architecture is unexpectedly understated. Low-level and stretching along the narrow land of The Spit. But it is the opulence of the circular drive, cobblestoned and hand-paved, the crisp sound of new tyres turning effortlessly, the bellboys in their jet-black Versace suits, that tells you you’re in an exclusive place. Somewhere otherworldly. In the foyer hundreds of tall white orchids rest singularly on their stems, seemingly floating in thin air, but I notice these perfectly-mounted exotics are held up by glass so fine it is almost invisible, save for the light that bounces off it. I follow Jade and Anthony discreetly along the curved lines of the Hotel – our way outlined by trails of identical white-flamed tea lights.

But it is the mosaic ceiling, the intricate detail of the Versace trademark, which really overwhelms. It’s the kind of cracked-open extravagance which reminds me of an acid-laden skin. I try not to look up. Anthony’s form too seems to shrink from the grand portraits, to hunch under the Hotel’s looming opulence – the gold ribbing edging everything – all this split-apart history, the imported scenes held together by the thin signature of an old Italian master. But Jade seems to open up underneath it, to allow herself to glow – architect of her own movement – clearly able to manipulate the multi-faceted shades of her own moods and demeanor, to alter the stances of her body, so convincingly, that it is sometimes difficult to recognise her.

At first I didn’t realise the girl she was playing for Anthony was modelled on Camille, on how I imagine Camille used to be: assured, convinced of her own worth, but edged with fragility. The more I watch Jade the more I realise it’s Camille she’s reminding me of; she moves like her feet are weighted more firmly to the ground. Her hands have a graceful flow
to them not normally there and her speech comes over naturally despite the fact she’s making an effort to contain her usual tone. She never swears with Anthony. Never cuts short her syllables or sentences. Sometimes she becomes very playful, imbuing the charade with innocence just to convince Anthony she’s been shielded and protected. She is very affectionate towards him but never hangs off his arm or body. The effect is perfect. People like her; they trust her because even though she dresses very casually her gestures and her posture imply a genuine mannered taste. It’s wonderful to watch, and I like this game we’re playing with Anthony’s ignorance.

Jade sends me signals, tiny signals, indications of her state of mind and the state of the play. She keeps me in tow as she leads Anthony along. She gestures to me, like a baseball pitcher, her intentions to strike. We have invented these signals not just for the fun of it but so she can warn me of changes of direction, changes of plans, when she wants me to come closer or when I should pull back. It’s easier than trying to get away with it on a mobile phone, though that wouldn’t be hard. Anthony has his own ear on one half the time. His business requires it. But calling Jade would only leave a trail to me that he might find.

I follow them around however I can. In my car, on foot and yesterday, because they were taking a long walk, I tailed them on a bike. Anthony’s life seems to be filled with these pockets of recreation even during the week. Nearly every evening they venture out. I watch them mainly on weekends before I head to work, shadowing them on the languid days they spend circulating in a world full of people who look like model citizens, with their expensively-cut clothes and cars, but who are actually all crooks – because that’s all it takes to make money in this city – guts and a good-looking front.

Anthony and Jade decide to take lunch at Vie, Versace’s signature restaurant on the Marina. They are shown to a table on the open plane of the wooden deck stretching out over the water, parallel to lanes of expensive moored boats, rocking gently and glaring white in
the sun. I sit further inside, my back resting against a wall sheathed in suede. And even
though I’m more protected in here I can still see them clearly. All my sightlines are open.
Jade has chosen our venue well. Cut out walls and planes of glass. A Saturday, a late lunch.

Jade’s having the prawn salad with Kaffir limes, Anthony’s having Sichuan pork with
capsicum, and I’m enjoying a whole steamed fish. Anthony has his back to me facing the
water. Jade can see me five tables away over his shoulder. I never know if my presence is
going to result in a score or if I’m just here for the fun of it. From the look in Jade’s eyes,
taunting me over the rim of her oversized wineglass, a score does look likely.

The ‘dining filch’ as we like to call it, is my favourite scenario. It’s not really big-time
but I find it excruciatingly pleasurable anticipating the flavour and design the score will take
as the textures and the tastes in my mouth meet the anxiety in my gut. With every mouthful I
speculate on how Jade will maneuver. Whether she’ll exchange some of Anthony’s cash with
me at some point, send a waiter over with a present or slip something into my hand, maybe
one of his credit cards will come my way with instructions or without. Once I found
wrapped in a napkin the keys to his house with a drill on what to take. For every angle, the
desired result can vary. Either Anthony is made aware of the robbery or he might be led to
think he has merely lost something. What is called for depends on Anthony’s blood-alcohol
level, the setting, the time factor and the risk. Jade can conjure anything and she doesn’t
really need me to pull it off. She’s capable of staging these small-time heists on her own, and
I’m sure she does when I’m not around; it’s just that we have so much fun doing it together.
Anthony’s the kind of guy you just love to rip off. A local con man with an international ego.

The waiter delivers another bottle of wine, and begins to uncork it. Jade reaches for
the white napkin in her lap and folds it slowly, then places it beside her partly-finished plate.
She stands, and I lay down my knife and fork and wait. Zigzagging her way towards me,
Jade’s body begins to take up more and more of the light. Her movement mimicked by the
moored yachts swaying in the current beyond her. The sound the rigging makes as it hits the masts tinkles like the movement of cutlery against china, the clink of glass inside the restaurant. She passes by my table so closely I can smell her and her hand motions subtly for me to follow. I wait. Anthony stays facing the Marina. The waiter pours more wine into his glass.

I follow Jade down a hallway that curves out of view. At the end, a tinted glass door leads outside to where the restaurant joins the eastern side of the Hotel. She is waiting for me. In the fresh air she pulls me away from the door, and from out of her bag she produces a set of keys.

Anthony’s car, she says. In the boot’s Anthony’s briefcase. It’s unlocked. The yellow folder. Inside there’s twenty-five cash cheques all signed, all blank. Take three. Not consecutive numbers. When you’ve got them put the keys in the ignition and lock the car.

I give her a quizzical look.

I drove so it’ll piss him off, give me an excuse to get away.

Okay.

And don’t come back; pay your bill before you leave. I’ll meet you at my place in two hours.

She turns and disappears back inside.

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In her apartment I give her the cheques and I get the story. As it’s coming out I realise we’ve switched roles. Jade is in the driver’s seat and I’m tagging along. She has the thread to Anthony and we rely on it. I haven’t asked her yet what she’s working towards, Jade seems to have stalled on this joker and I’m not convinced he’s the right cause. But as
she fills me in on the cheques, the tone of her voice starts to reassure me, keeps me quiet. I’m always worried she’s going to slip but her efficiency swings me back every time.

As yet Jade hasn’t been able to get near the cheque book. Soon, she tells me, Anthony’s going to promote her to head office. Working side-by-side with him as his very personal assistant. By then she’ll be administering the cheques herself. This will give us ready access to money when we need it. But in the meantime, these first three cheques – which she has laid out on the couch – are a good start.

Just think of them as petty cash, she tells me. No receipt required.

Jade explains that the cheques are used to pay employees of Eagle International. This kind of payment system means that they’re not technically employees but private contractors, responsible for their own tax. Anthony doesn’t usually bother to explain to those ‘contracted’ that this deems them self-employed. It’s too much hassle and besides who’s going to fess up anyway? Most of the people working for the company are tourists, backpackers, welfare recipients or transients of one form or another. Usually they don’t last longer than a few weeks. Only management and a handful of staff are on the official payroll. Once a week everyone else gets a cash cheque administered by Anthony. These cheques can only be cashed at the Commonwealth Bank in Surfers Paradise. Eagle International has a deal going with the bank and they are aware of the general volume of workers and when payments are due. Cheque recipients aren’t required to sign or produce any ID. Nor do they, Jade says, take a record of who’s cashed their cheque and who hasn’t, all you have to do is sign the back of the cheque.

Why this is going to work for us, she’ll explain to me later. First, she says, we have to decide how much money we want. It’s good, obviously, to keep it close to the figure that someone could earn in a week. The workers operate on a retainer commission basis; the
most successful marketers usually clock in around eight hundred weekly. The bottom line’s about two hundred.

We decide to write two cheques for eight hundred and one for six-fifty. Jade tells me I’ll have to go to the bank on Monday to cash the cheques, she’d prefer it that way, she wants to protect her image in the bank and she’s been in there with Anthony. The fact that they’ve never seen me before is not a problem. We’re talking about a telemarketing business; they’re used to new faces. By the time Anthony’s worked out the money’s unaccounted for, there’ll be no trace and no recollection. We know his current relationship with company books and records is, at best, elastic. Jade tells me he takes money out of the accounts all the time using fake names so his partner doesn’t know. He uses the money to run his whores. Even if he does report her fraud, the last thing he’s going to want is thorough investigation that might highlight his own suspect activity.

This is what I like about Jade’s gaming logic. She’s not cheating thinking she’s going to get away with it. It will come out in the end, but it will only come out so far. Jade reasons that when someone eventually does find out, the best way to play it, to avoid getting stung, is to play off other cheats. You can protect yourself by making sure that your operations are plugged into other covert systems. Every system is protected by another. The key, Jade says, is to remain peripheral but connected.

There will always be assemblages bigger than your own, systems you can’t see because they encompass you, but conversely there will always be sections of the grid you can see, places where you can operate.

You never warehouse, Jade says, in a white elephant.

She seems excited. She lies back on her floral couch in a very sensual way, as if telling me all this is has given her pleasure. I’m impressed by the sophistication of her planning, of her strategy.
Jade says that in the scheme of things, it’s best to keep a perspective, remember your place. To make sure that if you do go down you’re connected to a system that will cut you some slack, regenerate you, to guarantee flow. And I realise quietly, with a private smile just how much my girl’s blossoming into the professional.

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Jade is beginning to do things for Anthony. Things that are not necessarily required. The Dealer isn’t tailing her tonight, she has made sure of that, and he doesn’t know of her plans. Jade will never tell him everything. She must protect him from his own fantasy and his own jealousy. Tonight Jade will beat Anthony at his own game. She will dress it up as a gift. An indulgence. She will take him to a different strip, one he’s not connected with, and reel him in.

Jade drives him south, just over the border. She takes him in a sports car, one of her father’s favourites, she says, to a place that has traditionally catered for the red-light tastes of its neighbouring state. First, there’s the swanky restaurant, once again, one of her father’s favourites. There she’ll warm him up to the idea that for a good girl she has some funky predilections. And only after enough wine will she broach the idea of the brothel. She’ll tell him that she has found her father’s membership card, left, she says, in the car. Of course she’s made sure he won’t know about it. And all the connection to the man that made her will lend the night some high class. This is not like Anthony knows it. This is where the real money goes.

Jade will tell him that when she found the card she thought it might be a fun thing for them to try, away from their scene. Alone. She’ll tell him that she doesn’t know what’s gotten into her but it might be the Gold Coast, the way it’s all so out
there, that makes her want to try it. And all the time Anthony will not be able to believe his luck. The whole night has taken Jade two days to set up. She hired the car, did her research, locked in the spot. Paid for membership in her father’s name, a fake name, no questions asked. She bought some lingerie, a dress and two of the best girls from a catalogue, and all up it costs Anthony a packet but of course he doesn’t know it.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

Jade and I are in a video store. We’ve decided tonight to invest in some clean living. The kind of activity that couples do everywhere, except that we’re not a couple, not in any conventional sense. Last night Jade spent with Anthony. I was suspicious when she said she needed to go ahead alone, that she needed to treat him because he was starting to lose interest. I didn’t buy it then and I don’t buy it now but I’m willing to let it slide cause tonight she looks like she needs a rest.

We’re in Surfers near Jade’s house and we’ll go to her place tonight because we always do. Jade has never been inside where I live. I’ve never invited her and she has never expressed any interest, though I suspect she does have some. It is the tacit rule between us; we will only ever hang in the spaces that remind us of nothing. My place is too established, too long-term and too close to me. Hers is the venue for floating.

Early evening in the store and the air-conditioning is ice cold, freezing our skin as the summer sun sears orange against the tinted windows. From the outside no one can see us, pacing the long aisles while a car chase is played out above our heads. Jade covers ground faster than me, intent on working the room as if the maze the aisles make is so simple there
must be a trick to it. Occasionally something will catch my eye, the images of something I have already seen, reminding me of old scenarios and lap-times before her.

After passing a few times we pause with the other customers in New Releases. We check out the levels of intimacy on other couples, watching them watching the wall. Looking for clues on how to behave. Jade whispers comments like, He doesn’t love her, in my ear while we review how often and where they touch, if they share secret smiles, if they speak at all.

Jade and I could pass for heavily-committed in our comfortable clothes and shoes, evidence of our low level of effort, but we don’t fit in because we don’t touch and we don’t function properly as a unit. We exhibit the same cloistered talk but Jade makes a lot of extra noise, the kind that attracts stares. I think she’s reacting validly to the monotony in the room because only I can comprehend her, translate her signals. She’s checking in from the outer edges, so this place and these people, caught in the flow of the everyday, are to her absurd. It doesn’t matter what they might be really like; she doesn’t want to know. Jade has to believe that everyone else is not in on the joke, that she is operating in ways that they cannot believe in or see. The catch-phrases that explain the Fiction for hire are never as creative as the one’s Jade mimes in her head. And of course she laughs at me, relishing my role as partner. Leaning into her like I see the others do, mulling over the options, but I don’t push it because there’s a limit to how close she lets me go.

While Jade is blatantly checking out the porno section, I muse in Foreign Film about doing this with Camille, about how it would be different. With Camille I would be like the other men in the room, conscious of how much I wanted her and conscious of other things that I wouldn’t necessarily want to know. Like how she is in the morning, how long we have been together, how we’ll fare in the future, and aware consistently of the contracting space between us, how every day I would be becoming her. For the rest of my life is a prerogative I’ve
always resisted. Camille is the only woman who has ever made me consider it and she keeps on trying to. There are two letters from her sitting on my desk at home that I have decided to keep from Jade. Invitations, gestures of forgiveness she has sent me because she wants to know if we can make it, despite what happened. Letters written on plain white paper sitting on my desk unreplied to.

In one move I could change everything. I could respond to Camille and rearrange my life, but I would have to give up Jade. I cannot do that.

Nothing’s changed.

It’s not the risk that puts me off; it’s the idea that my reward for breaking the game will not be enough.

I look over at Jade, and I’m happy to fold on Camille’s marital fantasy. What reassures me is the reverence I experience seeing Jade. She’s not normal. Just watching her reassures me that what we are doing is not simply what it is, what it appears to be. With Jade there’s always room for potential.

Still, I wonder if I could feel it without her. If I were alone, if she was taken from me unexpectedly, would I slip into contemplating the sound, the healthy and the customary, to wanting what they tell me to want? The idea worries me and I put back the video I’m holding. We can’t settle on anything so Jade buys a life-size cut-out of Arnold Schwarzenegger after haggling over the price with the teenage kid behind the counter. We leave, walking down the street still searing with heat with his 2-D brawn hanging between us.
Absolute Advantage
Indy Carnival. Saturday Day 2. Jade is there with him. Across from me in another tower. She
told me where they would be. I, of course, was not invited. Jade has bought tickets for the
inner circle at Eagle. They are holed-up opposite my balcony in the aquamarine matchstick.
A building so thin and blue it looks like a wafer made up of waves of transparent glass. How
fitting the girl I can’t see through has left herself so exposed.

Jade’s smiling. Running the show. The apartment she has secured is in the centre of
the racetrack, circling Main Beach and its million-dollar-a-square-inch real estate. All
afternoon people have been descending and ascending towers. From the seventeenth floor I
watch a cordoned-off area become the focus of this city’s attention. Gradually people are
filling Jade’s balcony and every other. Underneath me and above me stereos pump out
eclectic beats. I’m alone in one of the older residential buildings, full of young people on acid
and ecstasy, jumping up and down on rock-solid terraces. Occasionally their bare arms
stretch out into the open air around me like fertilised plants growing rampantly towards
noise and light.

The scenes in Jade’s building are comparatively decorous. Leaning more towards
Long Island iced tea than VB. Across the track a gang of bare-chested men hang a makeshift
sign off the side of a building. *Indy, Indy we’ve got the view, one more beer and we’ll hurl on you.* A
gang of hardly-dressed girls responds with a one-word painted sheet. *K-Indy.* The fusion of
their two apartments seems inevitable.

The Indy track is a fever pitch of punters and heat. I switch view from my naked eye,
to the telecast, to the magnified view through my binoculars, to the giant screens that
accommodate the on-ground crowds with shots of tight chicanes and pit-stops, and I can’t
help but feel charged in this carnival of high-speed voyeurism. Jade is on Anthony’s knee.
Jiggling her cocktail. She too is charged. The hostess. The queen of her castle, paying for the
stocked bar and caviar, generously entertaining the company with its own money. I don’t
bother with the race or the drinking; the sight of her well-orchestrated farce is entertainment enough.


The machines drag down the strip. Pushing the decibel limit. Screaming centimetres past slowly-moving skins, held back by concrete slabs and inverted cages. Black and white checks, corporate boxes, scaffolding, children in trees. Necks craning for a glimpse of heralded steel angels, moving, almost too fast to see. Fireproofed men guard the edges, while everyone else hyperactively anticipates accident. In the sky helicopters weave between buildings and terrified birds, stuck in the vortex. Three times today three super-slick jets will scorch the sky with methane. Rocking the foundations of the city. A coastal earthquake delivered from up high. It will take them only seventeen minutes to fly the length of the eastern seaboard. Stopping only for a five-figure refuel at each end for the thrill of a ten-second flyby. One jet will twist its way between the people in the towers. A little boy will reach out of a window to touch the surreal grey bird of his console dreams, and his tiny body will shake in its savage aftermath. The smell of methanol. The crowds will scream. Bring it on, Bring it on, Bring it on. Messages will litter the sky, written in smoke. Slogans will compete for pole position until every inch of this carnival is subdivided by big guns. Watch the corporate catherine-wheel pirouette. Lock the brakes. Chop off a full second. Laugh at the guy who feels stuck on the periphery yell, yeah talk on your little two-way fudge packer.
I get the impression that Jade’s party is about to move. The races have wound up for the day and the punters are piling onto the edges of the streets – beachside and riverside. The track lies empty, coiled around this pumped-up suburb, like a tired black snake. Thousands of people are swarming en route to another scene. In the late afternoon the onset of night takes them out of the race zone and into the Avenues. Tedder Avenue for restaurant pretension or further into the bars and strip clubs of Orchid Avenue for the chase. Not once has Jade tried to call me. Several times she has stood alone on the western side of her balcony, as if trying to signal me. She doesn’t know exactly where I am but she’s more than aware I’m not far from her vicinity. I watch her and Anthony making moves, clearing tables and emptying drinks. I head downstairs to follow them.

From inside the darkened plate-glass walls of Mano’s I can safely watch her seated alfresco on the pavement opposite me. I like the fact that she’s outside and I’m in. I like the relative subtlety of Mano’s, one of the few restaurants here that doesn’t expose itself like the overrated contents of a sealed section. Inside it is private and more subdued. Protected from the high-strung antics of the look-at-me sidewalk brigade Anthony and Jade have reservations in. They are joined by Anthony’s partner Abbos, his third wife and another high-rolling couple I don’t recognise. Jade is facing the street and thus me. For the first time all day I can see her face unmagnified.

Having not eaten I decide on the oysters kilpatrick and steak. My waiter is sensitive to the fact I am alone on a night like this and doesn’t engage in small talk. He seems embarrassed when he delivers me a drink, compliments of the well-oiled race-day ladies at the table behind me. I send it back. In the plastic surgery capital of the southern hemisphere I’m in no mood for the cheap charity of its demigoddesses. I stick to the soothing comforts of my young merlot instead.

It gets late.
The closed-off streets of Main Beach fill with drunken people. It becomes increasingly difficult for me to see past them to Jade. The sidewalks and the streets are thick with bodies. Every now and then I catch glimpses of her. Quick flashes of her face, her arms raised over her head, or her hand reaching for Anthony’s leg. His head leaning into her neck, hers thrown back in laughter. Abbos’s hand on her elbow, her kissing his wife. At ten o’clock a live band starts up on the Avenue and Jade drags an unwilling Anthony onto the street to dance. I watch her wind her hands around his neck then I can’t watch anymore. I can’t watch out for someone who has stopped looking for me.

On my way back down from the toilet my path is blocked in the concrete stairwell by one of the women from the table behind me. She’s having difficulty negotiating the stairs. When we meet to pass, she laughs. Her eyes roll back slightly as she steps up towards me, her sinewy arms bracing the narrow walls for support. There’s a slight sweat on her stretched-back forehead. She grabs my crotch, and pushing past her I tell her to fuck off. There and then I decide to blow Jade off and this whole damn Avenue, and head for the chase.

♦♣♠♥

Inside the club on the strip The Dealer leans into a woman a bit like Camille, not a lot like Jade. A big event weekend equating to anonymous sex. Strangers on strangers. Locals high on the interstate. The interstate hell-bent on lasting the distance. The Dealer temporarily relishing his plethora of never-to-be-seen-again mates. Bodies revved-up and motor-charged. On Orchid Avenue everyone’s a driver. He likes how far away this girl is from Jade’s sun-kissed sin. She’s white Victorian. Drunk on frivolity, on this city, on the fine edge between sarcasm and fashion.
Tonight thousands of people in a diminutive space entwine. A number that includes the four bodies wrapped up in this story. Anthony and Jade. The Dealer and The Girl. Simultaneous stroking. In a penthouse, in a hose-down room.

See Anthony pressing Jade against an expensive wall.

See The Girl slipping a hand into The Dealer's, on a walk that takes them from the room to the street. The loaded stroll home just happens.

Anthony's running his fingers through that hair he likes down. Jade, his good secretary, his nice girl, unraveling in his hands. He takes her dress over her head and her pants underneath them until she is naked in his territory, in front of him. In the bright light of his cream apartment he rolls on the balls of his feet. Holding his arms out, watching the moon-chromed waves on the water, feeling her tongue.

The Dealer finds himself in a room with a stranger. With other girls and other strangers. So many, the Dealer calculates, there aren’t enough beds. They get to the pretense of drinks but all hardly touch the sharp juice in their warm cans. Instead the newlymets commune on a verandah watching other parties and wonder, now that the talk is not so one-on-one, if they have made the right choice. The Girl is on The Dealer's knee, laughing in the faces of her friends.

Two blocks away Jade watches Anthony’s face in the mirror over the table he has her on. Watching him fascinated by the spread of her legs and his own rear-view entrances and exits. Watching herself buck up against him.

In either space no one’s looking into any eyes.

Couples start to peel off the balcony. The lights go out inside. The Girl turns around on The Dealer, leans onto him, so over her shoulder he notices the empty beach. Their hands make way. They fuck sitting up on a li-lo advertising paradise. Even now, The Dealer thinks of Jade. The idea of his revenge against her adding
aggression. He meets The Girl on top of him, her thrusts, with a passion that is not
transferable. He’s not imagining this woman is Jade. He’s seeing her as she is. He
sees this act as his response, his come-back. See you and raise you. But The Dealer
knows he’s holding onto a bluff. That Jade’s call will always be bigger. Jade’s call
tonight will mean the rest of their lives. The Dealer’s will register as nothing more
than a cheap, below-the-belt shot. Jade is not thinking of The Dealer. Jade couldn’t
care less. Such a fatal difference between them. The Girl and Anthony are, as they
say in casinos, just birds, just suckers who seem to enjoy giving themselves away.

♦♦♣♠♥

Indy Carnival. Sunday. Day 3. I wake up on the floor of a racetrack hotel next to a beautiful
woman. I can’t remember her name and am not sure if I ever knew it. I lean down to kiss
her goodbye and she smiles, half asleep, and reaches for me. I think about it for a minute but
my heart is pumping no longer with lust, only panic. I watch the door – ease myself out of
her embrace and the room that reeks of us, and it’s not until I’m outside the apartment that I
realise I’ve been holding my breath. I turn back to steady myself, taking in great chunks of
the salty air whipping into the exposed corridor of the hotel, staring at the number 11 on a
red door.

Somehow I get stuck in the basement and a cholesterol-clogged family let me out.
On the esplanade I have no sunglasses on and I badly need a coke.

♦♦♣♠♥
Horizontal on the white fluffy carpet of my hotel room, the clamor on the last day of racing is now unbearable and relentless. I lie stuck in the white noise disengaged from my life in this anonymous beige-walled box. Waiting motionless while contracts in speed continue to be played out around me. Every twenty minutes or so I check to see if Anthony and Jade have returned. Their rooms remain the same. I look along the track corridors to see if I can spot her; the outline of that tall frame I know so well, does not appear. I draw back the heavy glass door, it sucks onto its seal and the room is without wind again. The race rolls on, wave after wave, lap after lap. The fan above my head spins and I watch it counting down the seconds on the day that I have lost her. By the end of it I’ve endured too many false alarms and false hopes. Finally the machines stop.

The only thing worse than the sound of the cars is Jade’s mutual silence. Nothing worse than waiting for my phone to ring and thinking of her with him. I pour myself a drink, neat. Check for messages. I step out onto the balcony carrying an empty message-bank in my hand. The city is full of detritus. Jade’s partying somewhere with VIP status while I remain uninformed. Erased but not forgotten. Purposefully ignored. She knows what this is doing to me. She knows that it’s a challenge. Jade’s testing me to see just how much I’ll allow her to take. She’s acting me out of the game. Stealing the scene. She’d never admit it, but having me sit here alone, would be what she wanted. It would reassure her. The epitome of a big carnival winding down. Fuck that. I drain my drink and decide to head for the chase. If I could only just see her. Catch her in action. Not blow my cover but get in close enough to remind her, that the party’s over.

♦♣♠♥
The Dealer walks along the track already being disassembled. He breathes in the still-hot, scoured-rubber smell of the race aftermath. Trucks bank up on the streets, orange lights flashing. The sounds of things in reverse. Bands of men cut wire, haul steel, shift concrete; unpinning the puzzle that transforms the city into a playground. The illusion taken down, taken away in the night, so that tomorrow evidence of a circus come to town will be slim. Skeletal grandstands, ripped flags, piles of fencing. A discarded armband. A party months in the making taken down, like all things, faster than it ever goes up.

The Dealer picks his way through the rubble, past the empty tents knocked about by a southerly on-shore wind. Inside he sees mounds of wasted food, half-emptied drinks and barely-touched platters. Spoils discarded, left out in the open. Glass and china piled hastily against dormant mobile refrigerators. Vendors and customers not so long gone, but eerily, miles away. The only people who share this trek with him are small groups of wasted men walking into the strip, and paired off people walking out. Young punks on skateboards take advantage of the still-cordoned-off area to bust tricks. Their wheels squeal, take over this playing field now in an abandoned state of emergency.

On Orchid Avenue The Girl of last night walks past The Dealer and cannot believe his indifference. Right now his eyes are full of Jade. The Girl consoles herself with the fresh arm she's on. The Dealer stops in every bar for a drink. He small-talks with the Sunday-night collection of those who don’t have to work tomorrow but doesn’t stay long once the arms start going round. He scours, he haunts, but Jade is all the time absent. At four and five in the morning The Dealer keeps lapping the strip, refusing to acknowledge her checkered flag.
Just before sunlight I get a cab. Every new move I make starts off a chain reaction; unwittingly I engage in another set of hopes, another strategy to try and see her. I can’t bring myself to small talk. I pay the driver and get out without waiting for my change. I take the lift up to my rented room knowing that at the end of this ride is another slim chance. Another moment when she might be there. The door whacks shut.

The place smells stuffy and faintly of burning rubber. I swipe the binoculars off the glass table as I cross the lounge towards the windows. I train a line to Anthony and Jade’s rooms. The sun is rising now. My eyes squint to ward off the glare; the mockery of this shiny morning, surfacing cleanly, out of the ocean and over all these buildings. In their rooms there’s been another party. The verandah doors are flung wide open, a curtain flaps outside caught by the wind. There are empty glasses on the tables. And the general litter of good times. I refocus the binoculars inside. I can see one bare leg hanging off a couch. Female. Not Jade’s. I can tell because though the rest of her is hidden from me by the long length of the chair, the hair peeking over the closest armrest is blonde. There are other feet too, attached to a pair of naked legs. Male. Too fit and too thin to be Anthony’s. I can’t see the rest of this guy, hidden by furniture and a bad sightline. There are just these feet and what appear like strong calves splayed out on the floor about a metre away from the blonde. I shift the view to the next room.

There he is.

The mighty Anthony. Sprawled out on the bed and he’s not alone. I can see maybe three other bodies messed up in those sheets. One of them has dark hair. Please, please, please, I say to myself, don’t let it be Jade. I rub my eyes. Retrain the glasses. Refocus. The dark haired girl is on the left. Her thigh hooked over Anthony’s but her face is buried in the
pillows and covered over by her arm, probably trying to keep out the sun. I can only see her leg because the rest of her is blanked out by the sheet. Just this one thigh is not enough for me to tell. It looks long and drawn tight like Jade’s. It could be Jade’s…

The other two I can see more clearly. They’re on Anthony’s right. Spooning each other. One platinum head and another dirty kind of blonde. They’ve both got really big tits, the kind that almost seem bigger than their heads. These people don’t look at all like the set who were here last night. This is a different crowd. A trail from the Indy Undy ball? Or is this cheap posse just another round-up, another get-together with his whores? Whatever the make-up, it means surely, that the dark form next to him can’t be Jade. She wouldn’t do this. She couldn’t be seen to approve of it, a foursome doesn’t suit her, doesn’t suit the role she’s playing for him. Would it? No. Something else has happened here. Something else has happened in the course of the night. This is a long way from the happy couple. A long way from iced tea and all the politesse of yesterday. I don’t wait for confirmation. I know it isn’t her.

♦♣♠♥

The Dealer is happy. He thinks he knows where Jade’s at. He drives fast with a mind made light by the scenes of the morning. He drives fast with a foot heavy and flat. Along the few streets it takes to get to her he doesn’t even see the grandstands coming down, the street cleaners, the city’s tested morning traffic, the unlucky punters, the visitors walking slowly home still wearing their day passes, wishing the carnival wasn’t over. He doesn’t see all these warnings of wild weekend fallout.
He bashes on her door. Waits. Heart pounding with the rush of a gambler’s secret language; prospect and sleep deprivation. He hears a noise inside. The locks shifts. He takes a breath.

It’s just the waitress. Hair shaken, eyes half open. Not impressed.

She’s not here.

Oh.

And he’s so disappointed that she says:

You can wait inside if you like.

No, thanks, I think I’ll just wait in the car.

She gives him a funny look.

Whatever.

Sorry.

Yeah.

She closes the door.

The Dealer heads back to the car, hunkers down in the seat. He can’t sleep. He keeps checking at the sound of every vehicle movement. At every form walking down the street. He turns the radio on and then turns it off. He blasts himself with air-con. He fidgets with his sleeve. He’s been wearing the same shirt for two days now. It reeks of sweat and ash and nightclubs.

In the rearview mirror he sees the taxi. Turns, straining to peer inside as it rolls past him. A woman in the back seat. Dark hair. It stops outside Jade’s place. It’s her. The Dealer jumps out of the car, jogs over to the cab. But Jade isn’t moving. The cabby’s getting out. He knocks on the window. Jade doesn’t stir. The cabby sees him.

You know this girl?
Yeah.

Well, give us a hand, mate. She’s not too good.

The Dealer opens the door on his side and the cabby goes in the back from the other. He lifts her legs up and kind of pushes her over. Jade falls to the left.

You got her?

Yeah, yeah. He says to the cabby. Then he looks to Jade. Jade, wake up, come on, lift your legs, that’s it.

The Dealer hooks his hands under her shoulders, dragging her out. Her feet, one shoe missing, whack against the door frame and fall limply into the gutter. He puts her on the sidewalk.

The cabby comes over to him, Jade’s other shoe in his hand.

She ain’t paid me yet.

He takes a twenty from the Dealer and gives him the shoe.

She's all yours, mate.

He drives off. An old couple out for their morning walk eye the Dealer suspiciously as they pass. He ignores them. Picking Jade up and staggering slightly with the dead weight of her up the set of stairs to the front door. He puts her on the floor. Jade groans and tries to curl in on herself. All this movement seems to be waking her up. She smells like stale perfume and a bit like vomit. The Dealer rummages in her bag for her keys. He finds the right one, pushes the door open, turns around to see Jade trying to stand up. He reaches to help her but she pushes him away. She pulls herself up on the metal railing, outside the front door. The Dealer leans back on the door frame, watching her, sweating and out of breath with his efforts. Jade turns around towards him. She looks awful. The expression on her face is not what he expected. He isn’t sure anymore what it was he expected. Not
this. Not this pain on her face, or her black-ringed eyes or her recklessness. She steadies herself.

What the fuck, she says, are you doing here?

He ignores her.

Where have you been, Jade?

The Casino.

How much?

What?

How much did you do? How much of our money did you do Jade?

Jade scowls at the question, swaying on her feet.

Get the fuck away from me.

She tries to push past him into the apartment but he blocks her way. Puts a stiff arm out to steady her. She tries to push it back but ends up falling into him instead. Her face hits his chest.

I don’t want you following me anymore.

What? I can’t understand you?

I said…I don’t want you round anymore.

The Dealer feels a rush of panic. He knows she’s wasted but there’s a finality in her tone, a sense of statement. He tries a different tack.

What happened with Anthony? Jade?

This question gets her. Jade pushes off him, her hands on his shoulders. She looks into his eyes. He can see everything in there, the hurt, the ruin. He wants to hold her, to try and get her to be still, but Jade’s unfailing. She won’t stop.

You don’t know anything, she says.

And The Dealer knows what she means but he can’t help himself.
I know he’s in bed with three whores.

So what?

But she doesn’t say it quick enough. Her head bobs down.

Jade, it’s time to cut him loose, okay?

Jade lifts her face up to him, trying to muster some dignity, in the over-exaggerated way drunk people do.

Let me pass.

Are you listening to me, did you hear what I said?

I said let me through, I’m going to be sick.

The Dealer steps away. He thinks about staying inside but decides to let it go.

He watches her narrow frame bouncing like a pinball between the walls of the hallway. Jade doesn’t look back. She gets to the bathroom.

Just leave, will you.

She goes in. The Dealer doesn’t move, listening for what she’s going to do.

Delaying the moment of departure. He hears the shower start. The rest of the house is very quiet. The waitress back in bed. Jade gone from him. He can hear birds. Things happening in the street, some kids next door are singing; just a normal morning.

That’s the thing about this city, he thinks. No matter how perverted things get, the sun still comes up, and the salt washes out everything and makes it clean.

On the Gold Coast there’s always room for another beginning. Anything can be forgiven in this city of perpetual fresh starts.

He leaves her shoe on the hall table and closes the door. It should make him happy, this thought, that today isn’t likely to be the end. The final time he sees her. Not even last night could spell that out for him. But the idea doesn’t provide any
solace, doesn’t make leaving any easier because he knows last night doesn’t
necessarily spell it out for Anthony either. Caught as they are, by the spin of Jade, by
the same restless token.
Across The Board
Jade and I play the game of not calling each other. For me it feels like an eternity, for her I’m not so sure. I don’t like the way the world looks or the way the world runs without her. I go to work. I go back to doing everything I normally do. But inside I shut down. I can’t even gamble. The knowledge she won’t be able to hold out for long keeps me going but sometimes the idea that she might not relinquish her stance on us makes me panic. I start shaking and I have to sit down. I find it hard to breathe. The act of will it requires to not call her is exhausting, all these long drawn-out conversations I have with myself, the berated thoughts, the circles, memories and distractions, the rationalisations and the strategies to stop myself. All exhausting. I start to hate the silence of my phone. I look at it all the time. At the unchanged screen. I pretend that I don’t jump and flare up inside every time it rings. I pretend not to sound disappointed when it’s never her. I find it hard to cope with the idea that she doesn’t need me.

And when you can’t call the person you need, it follows that you might call the person you don’t. I call Camille. Because it makes me feel better. I don’t think about what it means to her. I think about how good it feels; because it feels like revenge against Jade and it feels like self hurt. Because I like having something to pay for. I told Camille not to take my call as a sign that things could change between us. She would have. But I tell myself that saying it should exempt me. It’s not like she didn’t know.

And of course none of this means that I have stopped following Jade, that I don’t know what she’s up to or that she’s back with Anthony. Holed up most nights in his million-dollar shed. It doesn’t mean she knows I’m doing it. It’s easy. She taught me how to wait. She taught me how to hide all the real reasons why I tail her. And when it comes to Anthony, Jade’s manouevres have never been hard to trace. She’s all action, I’m better at stakeout.

On the Noosa freeway I follow a discreet distance behind them. Two or three cars
back. Jade doesn’t know I’m here. I’m probably too close but I would prefer to be able to see her. It’s not necessary for me to do this, I already know where they’re headed but I do it anyway. I don’t want to miss a thing.

Anthony is driving the gold Mercedes Jade hired this morning. I can see her right arm is draped across the space between the two seats, touching him probably, behind the neck. Jade knows how to spoil. A flash car, a dirty weekend. Golf. Anthony’s a pig in shit. The trail to this weekend wasn’t hard to find. There was the hotel booking, the deposit on the car. Jade’s not expecting that I’ve got the need to know. She thinks I’m finished with her, she thinks she’s finished with me. She’s not covering her transactions. Jade doesn’t think I’d have a reason to remember the access codes to her accounts. We set most of them up together but she never trusted me enough to openly share the information. I watched her punching the codes, on keyboards and on screens. She forgets I’m a Dealer. She forgets there are reasons why I get paid to have a head for fast fingers and random numbers. She forgets that I have reasons not to rely on her versions of balance.

Jade’s been bringing in a lot of cash. Cash I’m no longer getting a cut of - and this is just in the accounts I know about. Playing happy families has been good for her. Anthony must be just about rung dry. It’s another key moment which is why this weekend away seems both strange and crucial. This excursion is either a wind-up or a wean-off. I’m here to make sure that, for Anthony, there will be nothing further.

The traffic on the freeway to the north coast is steady. On this hot November morning half of Brisbane city is heading to the north coast, the rest to where we live in the south. One day these two coasts will probably meet, as Brisbane spreads itself to the water. Already I can see the dug-out evidence of housing developments creeping along the edges of the highway. Every year a new enclave protesting its innocence on the wetlands. Sea-change properties writ large on billboards, tempting Sunday drivers to commit to the prospect of a new life.
Leaving out what’s written in between - long commutes, midgies and quarter-acre swamp blocks.

But the north coast is a welcome change today, the drive to it already so different to the Gold Coast lead-up, littered with billboards, petrol outlets that look like space stations, and too much big business. The Noosa-bound freeway is narrower than the six-lane Brisbane-to-Gold Coast superhighway. Along this stretch north the invasions are less evident and the roadside attractions lean more towards honor-boxes than theme parks. Of course, people do exactly the same shit in Noosa as they do on the Gold Coast, it’s just that Noosa makes people think they’re doing it better. A healthy public rivalry about lifestyle which is actually, like all things, about money. Where the Gold Coast has its two-o’clock shadows falling from its tall buildings onto the beach and its trashy 24/7 hedonism, Noosa enforces a five-story building cap and a dead-after-ten town center. And it all fits perfectly into Jade’s plan. Anthony’s the king of the strip on the Gold Coast so Jade will take him to somewhere more secluded and more exclusive, somewhere she’ll convince him is more her scene; a playground for the southern rich, dangling the carrot of legitimate money, of old money, in front of Anthony’s wind-up face.

Left and right kilometres of government-sponsored pine plantation combine with my speed to create a domino effect of light and perspective. The sunlight is running alongside me through the gaps in these symmetrical trees. I watch it jump between the shadows, between the trunks, trying to keep up, and it seems to be trailing Jade, this light, trying frantically to stay in her line of vision, trying to tell her to slow down, to stop this charade with him in fleeting intervals, back home, in our own perpendicular forest.

When Anthony pulls into the long driveway of the resort I decide to drive past, to check-in later, I don’t want to jeopardise anything by being in the foyer with them. Further up the road I pull over, my heart racing. A sign next to me says Welcome to Magimba. So the
Hyatt Regency Coolum technically isn’t even in Coolum, but I guess the Hyatt Regency Magimba just doesn’t have the same ring to it - the first white lie of another risky weekend. I wait fifteen minutes then drive back casually to reception.

Behind the resort I notice a mountain looming. I have never known its name, but when taking this drive north my eye has always been drawn to it, the largest of a series of rock formations rising curiously out of this otherwise level country. As a kid it used to scare me, because it looked not just like a mountain but like something else, like a face, like a thick giant form, curled in on itself. The head and the breadth of what I imagined were the shoulders, was something part-animal, something Neolithic, something bigger than a man. And it seemed to be looking out too, like it was watching over the land. Up close, it casts a cool shadow over the resort.

I drive back to Reception. I take a villa suite. At three hundred bucks a night it’s the cheapest on offer and I don’t have anyone to impress. I easily find out where Jade is staying from the girl on the desk. I say I’m a close friend, that we just arrived together. She seems to like me, the body language, the act works. There’s not much chance that Jade and Anthony will come in contact with this particular girl again.

The girl tells me that Jade and Anthony have checked into an Ambassador’s residence, the Mosman. I tell her I’ll stick with a villa; it’s just me after all. The girl seems happy with this. I wonder if Anthony would be digging the Mosman so much if he knew he was actually paying for it at nine hundred bucks a night.

I’m being delivered to my suite in an oversized golf buggy. The guy driving offers to take me on a loop of the resort, to show me around. I decline, saying I’m tired and would like the suite straight away. He looks me over in the rear vision mirror. I avert my eyes, deciding to avoid any curious questions. I can see from the map that my friend at reception has placed me in close proximity to Jade and her private enclave in the Ambassador’s club.
area. I’m in suite 674 at the southern end of the resort and Jade is just a short walk away.

There are no cars in the resort and everyone seems to be getting around in these complimentary carts driven by handsome tanned men in palm-tree-embossed shirts and tight navy shorts. It’s like summer camp for rich families, not really my scene, but I remember that Jade is catering to Anthony’s taste.

Outside my villa I tip the guy twenty bucks and ask him if there are any gambling facilities. He gives me a knowing smile and says only of the private kind.

That’s too bad, I really need a bet.

And he waves me off with a laugh.

Safely inside the suite I pour myself a drink trying to build up the courage to take a walk.

Two hours later, with the bar-shelf looking untidy, I’m on my way to the Mosman on foot. Several buggies purr past me or stop to offer me lifts, but I prefer to be a free agent. There are too many people of the kind I don’t like cruising around in those things. I enter the closed society of the Ambassador’s club. The ‘residences’ fan out on the periphery of an oversized cul de sac - a looping road that keeps them together and focused on themselves.

There are no numbers on the residences, instead names appear on signs: the Brisbane, the Ballina, the Tamworth, the Killarney, the Atherton and finally I see the Mosman at the bend in the road. I pause, pretending to clean my sunglasses while working out the best way to take it. In the centre area I notice the pool, massive and lagoon-like stretching along the diameter, full of lush landscaping, reasons to be there and enough spaces to hide. I decide to go in. I figure this pool is reserved for the people in the white mausoleums but no one seems to register my
presence or care. I leave my shirt on the ground but take my glasses with me. I’ll need them.

I dive in. Glad of the water. I swim casually down the curved length of the pool, dodging the blurred forms of kids blowing bubbles underneath me, and climb the ladder at the far end. I find a deck-lounge in a palm-treed spot not so far from their door. I rest my head back on the cushion, re-situate my sunglasses, look sideways and listen.

I can’t see signs of any movement in the Mosman. But the front door is open. A couple of other windows too. One upstairs, and the two glass doors that run the length of the front terrace, have been pushed back. Jade and Anthony haven’t settled altogether yet and the upstairs window bothers me. It’s probably a bedroom. I concentrate on the feel of the sun on my face, my skin drying tight under a film of chlorine.

I don’t have to wait too long. A buggy pulls up. I tilt my head to the side as if dozing and watch as Anthony emerges in the hall. He’s carrying something - golf clubs. His hair’s wet. He’s just had a shower. I can’t see Jade. He emerges onto the porch and pulls the door shut behind him. The guy on the drive offers to take Anthony’s clubs but he loads them in himself. I turn my head back languidly and listen to the sound of the buggy pulling away.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

Water drips over my face from my hair. I run a hand through it. Liking how the rush of liquid feels running down my neck and further as it trickles on my back. My senses heightened by the drink, refreshed by the water, kicked up by the sun. I take my glasses off and wipe the condensation that’s building from the combination of heat and droplets of water on my face. Putting them back on I notice the door to the Mosman swinging open slowly in the breeze. Anthony hasn’t shut it properly. An omen.

Upstairs, through the bedroom window, something catches my eye. It’s Jade. I can see
just her arm at first, struggling between the heavy curtains and all the white gauze. She pulls
the fabric to the side and for a moment I stiffen, aware that she might notice me. I make no
sudden movements that might attract her gaze. My head stays back. My eyes adjust to where
she is. Knees drawn up to disguise my frame.

I see her body from the waist up. Her hands drawn over her naked chest. She leans
down on the sill of the window just for a second and I get a flash of her pale breasts. I
squirm, surprised by the immediate effect her bare skin has on me. I look around the pool
area, no one else seems to notice.

Jade rests her head on the ‘v’ her arms are making on the sill, head tilted away from me
to the left. I take the opportunity to drape a white towel over my head as if for protection
from the sun; shaded from her. She stays as she is for a long time - maybe ten minutes. I
wonder what she’s doing. Her head shifts back to the right and she seems to be just staring at
the surroundings, at the pool and the people. Her stillness unnerves me because I want more
of a sign. I want to know what she’s thinking - that she is thinking - that she isn’t just post-
coital serene. I also want her to move. I want to see her hands on her breasts again.

Jade pulls away. Too quickly. She draws the gauze curtains closed but I can still see her
standing there. The outline of her tall body, the hand curled over the sill holding on tight,
gripping rather than resting. She doesn’t move. Then quite suddenly she’s gone. I look to the
vacant hall downstairs, in all the windows, anxious for her movement. I want her to appear.
Finally, she does. This time in a white slip of a gown - obviously thrown over, I wonder if
she has any underpants on.

Jade is in the window adjacent to what I imagine to be their bedroom. She is throwing
open the curtains on all the windows, airing the place out, but something about the way she’s
flinging them open and running, it seems, between rooms unnerves me; shoving the
windows back flinging the curtains out; Jade, full of aggressive movement, and I can’t figure
out whether she’s happy or angry or drunk. My eyes search the building and she keeps
surfacing in places I can’t pick. Her movements aren’t organised. She keeps switching
between floors. Downstairs now, the sight of the open door startles her. She stops. Looks
around. I smile; pleased that she suspects something - that’s my girl - still attuned to danger.

Jade walks slowly down the hall towards the open door. I can see the negligee is short,
shimmering slightly as she moves through patches of filtered sun. At the entrance she grabs
her arms as if suddenly aware of her near nakedness. My head spins, must be the whisky; she
is gorgeous, fragile. I stare at her over the tops of my knees. I won’t make my move until she
closes the door.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

When the door opens Jade is still wearing the white slip and I’m standing there in a
complimentary white towel from the pool wrapped around my waist. Our mutual semi-
nakedness could be commented on but we seem to cancel each other out. I tell myself it’s
because we both like the view. Jade doesn’t seem surprised.

Well, she says, drink?

I could use another.

She ushers for me to come in. Waits till I pass and closes the door.

I don’t suppose this is just a case of good timing? she says to my back as I turn from
the hall and survey the sweeping open-plan room.

Not exactly.

She comes past me, heading for an elaborate cocktail bar at the far wall, and brushes
her body against me. Maybe drunk, maybe on purpose, maybe both. As she prepares our
bourbons, I watch her for signs in her face, in her hands, in her movement, for things that
will tell me where I stand. The only thing I notice is the slight aversion of her eyes. I’ve no
doubt she’s just fucked Anthony - her nakedness early on and the way her hair is kind of
matted at the back suggests it. Getting caught out like this shouldn’t really make her coy. She
is trying to seduce me, at least that’s what I keep telling myself. I fight the converse image of
her and Anthony fucking. I take small solace in the fact of her dry hair. At the idea she hasn’t
extended the connection between them enough to get in the post-fuck shower with him.

I lean against the glaring white marble of the kitchen area counter trying to ride out the
urge to push up the white edges of Jade’s flirtatious slip, to reach under it and run my hands
over her just-hidden body. I close my eyes. Grip the bench. It feels cool and dry against my
skin. Jade won’t look at me. She hands me a drink shyly and I realise with surprise, but not
without satisfaction, that the deference in her eyes is for me. She’s never seen me like this
before and I’m glad my skin’s still damp, that it’s darker than his, that my body is drawn tight
over my bones. I bet she never comes with him.

Not bad, is it? Jade says, waving an arm around, trying to shift focus.

I sip my bourbon, not bothering to cover up my indifference.

Very nice.

There’s four bedrooms, you want one?

I’m sure that’d go down real well.

I guess. Not as well as this, she says shaking the ice in her glass. Another?

I nod. There’s too much white in this place for me. The white on the inside infusing all
the outside light and Jade’s white gown. I’m starting to feel dizzy. Sensing my distress Jade
says:

Let’s go upstairs, to the deck.

Sure.

I follow her, wishing I didn’t have the urge to grab her from behind as she moves up
the stairs, her hips level with my face. We step out onto the rooftop terrace. And it’s a little better. Jade slips off her robe. I don’t look away. Naked, she steps into the spa nestled in a raised section of the deck, painted a demure blue. I try not to think about her body because I’m getting freaked about this new vibration between us. The same deal but all charged with friction. Jade’s acting like it has always been there but, in spite of the alcohol, I’m not used to wanting her, instead I look out over the manicured green of the golf course, looking for Anthony. I sit, and slide my cane chair out of the view.

Don’t worry, she says, he’s blind as a bat.

And this, of course, is amusing but I feel slightly panicked not just because I’m in danger of being busted but because I’m worried that Jade is slipping into this charade, this life. She’s coming across too natural. Like she’s stopped looking at the bigger picture. I’m trying to remind her that there are other agendas, and trying to contain myself at the same time but she’s continuing to act unfazed. The more she ignores the issue the tenser I become, watching her splashing in the spa, smiling at me, I know my presence has affected her, but when will it ever be enough?

Jade sits up in the water slightly so that her breasts are visible in intervals above the shifting bubbles. She’s trying to distract me. I find it arousing but also annoying.

What are you doing, Jade?

What do you mean? She looks at me with the same modest expression I’ve seen her use on Anthony.

You can cut the bullshit. I’m not him. Your little schoolgirl Lolita thing is not going to work.

She looks over at me, slightly surprised at my tone and I think a little excited that I’m so worked up. She shoots me a little grin. I can’t hold in my anger any longer, can’t contain it. Jumping out of my seat I storm over to the spa, boiling with rage, towering over her. I feel
like tearing the damn thing off its hinges and tipping her out. I let rip.

What’s up with all this fucking shit with Anthony, Jade? Where are we? You’ve just about got him, haven’t you?

My arms fly about uncontrolled and the frustration of my stupid gestures is getting me even more pissed off.

What’s left, what else has he got that you want?

She has gone rigid and alert in the spa now. She speaks cautiously, her mouth just above the bubbling water:

Nothing, it’s all there. I’ve got the money.

She looks at me square on, the sexiness fading and I fight the urge to ask her how much.

So, is this the way out? I gesture around to make my point.

There’s a pause. Then she says:

I’m sick.

What? I kick the edge of the spa.

Jade eyes me nervously.

Not sick-sick, but he thinks I am and this is taking time out. I didn’t know how else to play it. She looks over at me pointedly. And you weren’t around, you’d gone away.

I never went anywhere, Jade. You basically told me to fuck off.

Did I? I don’t remember.

Jade says this straight out but I’m not convinced.

You’re such a stupid bitch. Do you think I don’t know what’s happening here? I can’t believe you’re falling for all this shit.

I lean in to her:

This is what you’re running from, remember?
I’m so out of control I can’t look at her. I go to the edge of the deck and stare defiantly out over the course, my back to Jade, thinking about Anthony pottering around with his little putter. No balls of his own. She is quiet behind me. I listen to the bubbles frothing. I take a deep breath but it doesn’t do anything to calm me. I can’t fathom why she’d want to go any deeper. Without turning around I say:

Why a bloody illness? Shaking my head in exasperation. He’s going to feel guilty now, he’s gonna be hanging around.

Jade raises her voice, it gets shrill, she sounds genuinely hurt:

’Cause I’m in too far. You were right, okay? There’s too much heat on me now if I walk, can’t you see that?

Jade stands, clearly distressed, all the water slipping off her.

Pass me a towel, she says.

I don’t move. I turn around to look at her, not smiling.

Get it yourself.

She looks me in the eye but I don’t hold her stare, I make a point of looking instead at her long legs, at the dark patch of hair between them, at her small pretty breasts. For the second time this afternoon she makes a futile attempt to cover herself. I watch as she steps awkwardly out of the spa, reaching for a towel.

Covered now, she seems to regain some of her composure. I lean against the waist-high wall of the rooftop, unmoved. She bunches the towel at her breasts, deliberately raising it a few inches so that the tops of her thighs are in view. She smiles apologetically but I know what she’s doing. She moves towards me. The towel just held together.

I can’t tell anymore, whether I want to fuck her or hit her. I run a hand through my hair, rub my head searching for clarity, for some kind of solace. She gets in close. I ignore her. Standing just inches from me. Her head hung low-level with my chest. I can see it rising.
and falling quickly with the pressure of my heart, beating fast and strung out.

I'm sorry. She says it so softly I almost believe her. I look away, dismissive.

Don’t apologise to me, Jade. Just fix it.

She lifts up her head and I realise in disbelief that she’s making a move to kiss me. I grab her shoulders because I want to throw her, to shake her, to get her off me – but the shove I give over is harder, quicker than I thought and her head snaps back, sharply. Crack like whiplash. The force of my aggression surprises me; how I like how hurting her feels. Jade wrestles to get out of my grip.

Let me go! She thrashes out - really frightened now but she’s no match for me, her fear won’t make me stop.

No, Jade. You listen to me. I twist her around roughly so that she’s looking over the edge of the wall. My body pressed up against her. One of her arms twisted behind her back. She grips the ledge with her other hand for support. I’m pushing her, ramming into her. I want her to know the trouble she’s caused. She starts to protest. I cover her mouth with my hand. I want my finger in her mouth. I want her to stop speaking. I lean into her ear. I can’t stop myself.

No more games, Jade.

She squeals in panic, wrestles her mouth free. What do you want from me?

Get rid of Anthony.

Jade stops struggling but I maintain my hold. Both of us still.

Right, and then what?

Jade, stop fucking around. I think we both know who we really want.

And I can’t quite believe I’ve said it - can’t help it - Jade’s ambivalence in the spa, in this place, about Anthony, has driven me to say it. She goes limp, finally realising what could be the full extent of my program.
She turns her face to me, a slow look of pleasure on it, of admiration, I think at first – but then I wonder, is it a look of fear, of resentment, of being found out?

How did you know? she says.

Jesus, Jade, you’ve never given me enough credit.

I give her one last thrust and a little bite on the ear.

You’ve got till the end of the weekend to end it.

I let her go.

The towel falls off. I back up. Jade reaches for cover, crouched up against the wall. I stop at the top of the stairs. She looks at me imploringly. I don’t budge. I shake my head, say:

Get it together, will ya?

Then I turn around and leave.

♦♦♦

All night I worry about what I’ve done, staying in my room, making a complete mess of the mini bar, just in case she calls. But she doesn’t. I’m anxious that even for someone like Jade I’ve overdone it. By eleven-thirty I’m walking again, reluctantly, rather haphazardly, along that trail that leads to the Mosman. It’s like Jade’s inside me, like her madness has migrated. I can feel her in my skin. I can’t stop thinking about my hand on her mouth, my finger brushing against her wet lips. About what could have happened. The fine line between wanting to be inside her and wanting to take her out. There’s no way I could sleep with Jade. Just touching her hangs me out over the edge.

Their lights are on. I head with shaky purpose along the perimeter of the pool, keeping my head down, worried about where my feet might take me, concentrating on doing one thing at a time. I don’t look up because I can hear her voice, worse than it sounded today.
There’s not much peripheral noise at this hour but not quiet enough, unfortunately, for me to discern exactly what she’s saying. I pass the Mosman and continue to walk round the edge of the pool, taking a deck-chair and shifting it rather noisily into a position that allows me a direct line of vision.

There’s a bunch of teenagers swimming and getting it on in darker areas of the water. They don’t take much notice of me, I’m far enough away from them not to be a concern and anyway, they probably think I’m drunk, which I am, but I’m glad the kids are here, they give me an excuse; anyone passing will most likely assume one or to two of them are mine.

I cast my eyes toward the Mosman. Most of the curtains are thrown back haphazardly, white gauze awry. Privacy not an issue. When I see her, I groan inwardly. Jade is coming apart. Her arms flailing about.

Just like her to overdo it, I think, trying to absolve myself from blame.

Anthony is moving in closer attempting to grip her hands as she nudges and pushes and prods him. They are in the lounge area. The white gauze billows and it’s like their moving in and out of perspective to my breath and the drink coursing through my body, and the curtain as it shifts, revealing and shadowing them. Part of me wants to get in there and save her, to neutralise this moment but I know this drama is what I asked for. This is the scene I wanted. This is the fallout of oversight and departure. Anthony moves to the couch, head in his hands. Jade towering over him unsteady on her feet. I like what’s happening to Anthony but, I dread what might be coming.

Ripples of light bounce off the pool and run along the outside walls of the Mosman. The concrete seems to move. From inside I can hear Anthony’s muffled voice, raised, but not as high as hers. I listen, straining to hear the words as the pitch of their fight builds. Their anger coming over sharply. He stands up, gets in her face. My hands grip the edges of the deck-chair. Jade flings something at the wall. Glass breaks. The sound of it shattering like
a flash. The faces in the pool pull apart, into the white moonlight, searching for the source of
the noise, looking, in the same direction as I do. I stand up, anxious for her. She drops to the
floor. Cowering. Again.

For a few seconds there is the kind of quiet that comes after any kind of smash. We
wait. Then I’m gradually aware of the water trickling through the filter. Someone in the pool
giggles. The faces in the water turn back to their own business.

Jade doesn’t move. Anthony stands over her. Not amused, not helping. I can see just
the curve of Jade’s back rising and falling, wracked with what looks like heavy sobs. He leans
over her, their talk is muted now. Calm. Everyone has lost interest. But I know that look, the
stance, the power over her. Whatever she’s done, whatever she’s said to him hasn’t worked.
He reaches out, pulls her up roughly, her back held tight to his legs. His hand holding her
head up. Jade is trapped by his weight. Trapped by this place. Trapped by the play of his
hands and mine.

I can’t watch this anymore.

I make a move to leave and a wave of nausea rips through me. Before I can contain it,
the vomit rises in my throat, comes out in a torrent, splaying all over the pavers and the
tropical garden. Some guy in the pool yells out:

That’s gross, man.

But I don’t care. I stumble pass the pool, looking in his direction.

So what? I say, to no one in particular. Go tell your daddy.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

There is a man’s silhouette in a window. A faceless man watching Jade inside a tall building
full of blank white rooms. I am trying to protect her. To stop him from seeing her. I reach
out but the windows won’t close. The windows are thick, heavy, like aquarium glass. I try
and signal for Jade to move but she can’t hear me. She is in the final room, he is getting to
the last window. The only one not open. A black hole. I am between him and her – her last
defence. He breaks straight through me. Flinging myself up on the bed I wake to the sound
of shattering mirrors, shattered glass.

Twist around frantically, looking for Jade, trying to see her. Slowly, I realise the gravity
of the dream - the reality of where she is. I can still taste the sick in my mouth. Fully clothed,
my legs are locked in the twisted sheets. The effort to get out of them is almost too much. I
need water desperately. I need food.

In the ‘Village’ I order a late breakfast. I sit alone in the outdoor cafe feeling jittery and
out of place, not attached to the world, wondering where Jade is and how she’s doing but
I’m not well enough to work it all out. I try and concentrate on the huge bottle of mineral
water I have ordered, considering something harder. My head can’t process the information
of yesterday, of last night - not here - not in this bright morning where my thoughts are
clouded over with the nightmare, with the recurring dread that Jade might be playing me or
that she’ll do something stupid. I can’t think straight in this place. I am an oddity; a single
nocturnal man scowling through his sunglasses at the decorous scenes.

There are families everywhere, and arrogant teenage kids; their indifference, starched
white, is purely economic. I see this is a place where a rich man, smoking a cigar, brings an
estranged daughter and doesn’t talk to her. A place where guys from interstate, clad in white
linen shirts, take out their wallets to impress their weekend wives and flick their noses
nervously as if embarrassed by the lack of walls. A place where a woman might bring a man
to cage him or undo him. A place that’s ultimately doing nothing for Jade and nothing for
me, it seems. I finish the water, too weak to eat, and head back to the safety of my
anonymous room.
Ante Up

I am woken by a knock on the door. It’s light inside my suite and glancing past the thin gauze on the windows I realise the day is still running. The knock continues and I rummage on the floor for my clothes. Pulling on my shirt to open the door, I’m glad to see Jade but on closer inspection I can see she looks awful. There is sweat; a thin film of it still resting on her skin, her hair is wet on the roots closest to her face and her eyes are the strangest I’ve ever seen them. Wide and vacant. She doesn’t say anything and as I reach to pull her inside she steps away from me. I can see she’s carrying something, wrapped in a light soft fabric. I look at her quizzically and she pulls back the material to reveal a tiny sleeping face.

A baby.

It takes a couple of seconds for me to convince Jade to come inside, when all she keeps saying is, Let’s go for a walk in the garden, let’s go for a walk in the garden...

Finally I entice her inside. She sits on my ruffled bed and unwraps the little baby: so young I can’t tell what it is. I move around the room. Too hyped up to be still. Trying to appear casual, not wanting to instill panic; trying to control my own panic. I want Jade to register that I think this is okay. That I can cope with her.

She’s not touching the baby, only staring at its closed eyes, its peaceful face. I had anticipated some kind of collapse, I’d pushed it, I was ready for it, but I wasn’t ready for this. I try to make my first question to her seem relaxed.

Where did you get this kid, Jade?

It’s theirs, Susan and Andrew’s. Anthony’s sister.

Jesus, what are they doing here?

They came for lunch, they live up here. Anthony invited them - to show off, I guess.
And I can’t hide the relief I feel that the baby isn’t some stranger’s. It makes things a bit easier, but we still have to get it back before any of them realise. I look at the clock, it’s nearly 3pm.

Where are they, Jade? Do they know you have her?

Jade ignores the question.

They call her Samantha, she says, but I don’t like that name. I don’t like them.

Right. Okay, but where are they, Jade?

They’re taking a nap. And she says it to me but she coos like she’s talking to the baby. They’ve drunk a bit too much, she says. We had a nice big lunch at the villa - lots of drinky-poos. They won’t be waking up.

The baby-talk really alarms me. So does the faint idea that she might have drugged the lot of them. All the complications of her bringing this damned bundle to me here start to open out in my imagination.

Even so, I try to say calmly. Even so, don’t you think you better go back? We don’t want Anthony to suspect anything.

But Jade doesn’t look like she’s in a hurry. She seems pretty drunk herself, and has that glazed-over look she gets whenever she’s remembering, and I wonder if she’s thinking about Denis and the baby she lost. Maybe she’s trying to tell me something but why has she chosen this act to do it? Is this baby in my face because of yesterday? Because I rejected her? Because I couldn’t tell if I wanted to hit her or fuck her? Because I damned near lost the game for both of us?

I move over to the bed, thinking that if I lie down with her for a moment Jade might agree to take it back. We lie in silence. I’m trying to hide my panic; Jade’s entranced. I’ve never seen her like this; so still and so moved. I’m aware of her breath, the steady exhalations coming from her bottom lip, fallen slightly open in wonder. I find her emotion frightening.
What’ll we call her? Jade asks me.

I don’t know. What do you think, Jade?

I keep glancing at the fluorescent minutes ticking over on the clock radio behind her.

Let’s call her Rouge, she says, like a bet on red.

I wince because even now Jade’s turning this offense into speculation, merely a spin of the wheel, nothing else and nothing more. But it’s harder for me to hold up in the face of such innocence. It’s all these families here. Jade’s not used to it. I’m not used to it. It reminds me of responsibility, of tangibility, of our crimes. We’re charged guilty by this brand-new life between us. Jade’s trying hard to remain exempt but she’s coming close to the source of her pain. Toying with detection just to share something real with me. Something so real I can touch it. We have to steal everything in order to feel it.

I am close to tears - of rage, of frustration, of being affected by Jade’s losses, painful and untapped - I don’t know which. I’m looking at this strange creature, that belongs to someone else, and I’m watching Jade, and I’m realising this is probably the closest we will ever come together - and probably the moment of us being blown apart. It’s like Jade has wired herself to a baby that is also a bomb.

Jade takes Rouge’s arm in her fingers. The whole wrist fits in the concave space of her palm just like a token. And now it’s time to play my hand.

I’ll come with you. I say to Jade. Let’s take her back.

♦♣♠♥

It’s so damned risky, but I know me coming is the only reason she agrees. I tie my shoelaces hurriedly, praying that Rouge will spare us and not cry before we can get there. I couldn’t handle that. There’s no change in the scrunched little face, she seems to be quite happy.
Outside I can hear the noise of one of the buggies on the circuit and people coming and going, opening and shutting doors. Jade asks me to carry it. The bundle. The baby. The bomb. I hesitate but I can see that’s what she wants me to do. Jade opens the door and we step out into the afternoon sunlight. The adrenalin really kicks in now. I’m all wired clarity.

Sticking to the leafier side of the road I attempt to look casual but Jade is walking so strangely, either from the drink or her state of mind, I can’t tell. She falls back a few steps. Behind us I can hear the sound of a buggy approaching. I shift Rouge into my right arm and stop, waiting for Jade to catch up. I put out my free arm as she reaches me and wrap it around her. I try to pull her up straighter. The buggy slows.

Hiya, you guys need a lift?

No thanks, mate. Just having a walk.

No worries.

I wave to the rest of the family in the buggy as they roll past. A middle-aged woman looks at Jade caught in the crook of my arm, and catches my eye. I can see her head turned, still watching us as the buggy rounds the next bend. Finally, they’re gone. I let out my breath but I don’t let go of Jade.

Rouge is becoming heavy in my arm. I look down, startled to see her watching me. My movements must have woken her. I pray for her to stay calm, and try to make my steps light. Her eyes are green like Camille’s eyes, green like Jade’s name. All these women in my life infected with the stain of envy. Jade’s shoulders square up under my hand and she says,

Let me go.

I let her pull away from me. I don’t want a scene. We keep walking, my eyes and ears attuned to any approaching thing. Veering off the main strip onto the long drive to the Mosman, I lose my footing on some gravel and I hold my breath because the baby’s eyes squint, showing concern. Righting myself, I shift her inexpertly and notice with dismay that
ahead of us a scattered procession of families is headed our way. Jade sees them too, and mercifully, decides to join me again. She keeps her head down. I look at the baby as I imagine fathers do and then I pretend to be looking at the scenery. The children get to us first, running ahead of their clans which I register only as a collection of sunburnt faces and white T-shirts bobbing in the near distance. The kids don’t look at us but the parents do. The mothers smiling and acknowledging the way I’m holding the baby, like they know it’s our first. I nod in a friendly way to the fathers. One of them says, Glorious day. Jade’s head twitches but she doesn’t reply. I say, Yes, perfect isn’t it? Putting my arm back around her and for a moment it makes me consider how much Jade and I have gained and lost in the space of this weekend. And for once it isn’t about the numbers, it’s about something bigger than that. Something about the past and the present. When I look back I realise it isn’t our history that is irreconcilable, it’s our future.

The terracotta trail that leads to the ‘residences’ is littered with leaves. The wind has come up. We pause at the start of the circular drive and I’m glad that the Mosman is the last in the line, curled out of sight.

This is as far as I go, Jade.

Rouge starts to whimper and finally Jade seems able to admit to the pressure of little time. We exchange the baby, eyes focused on each other. I kiss Jade on the cheek in an attempt to comfort her, and feel only the tautness of our skins. We have never dealt with something like this before, something so fragile, so dangerous. I leave Jade to enter the villa alone and hurry back to my room via the trees.

♦♣♠♥

Half an hour later Jade is back on the edge of my bed, this time alone and with every trace of
tenderness and confusion in her face gone. She’s leaning on her hands, spread arrogantly
behind her. The look she gives me suggests that she doesn’t want to talk about the baby or
anything that has happened. Her feet twitch like her head, continuously tilting away from me
in anger as if she’s blaming me for her remiss. But I don’t let it get to me; I’ve got other
angles to cover. I don’t ask her why she did it. I know she wouldn’t consider it a valid
question. To Jade everything is available for the taking; a baby is just another thing she
shouldn’t have to ask for. But I know the reasons why she’s angry; it’s not about me. It’s
about her baby and that boy, the one who left her. It’s about Armidale.

I take a risk by sitting very close to her on the bed. I put my arm around her and am
relieved when she relaxes into me. She begins to talk:

I don’t try and stop it, you know, from happening to me. I used to be able to control
it, now I just think that something’s gone wrong inside. That something doesn’t work.

I know, Jade.

Her softness makes me brave. I decide to use it to broach the subject of Anthony.

Don’t you see that’s why you’ve got to leave him? He’s making it worse.

Some things are worth holding onto for a bit.

And I think she might be right but I don’t answer because the look on her face and the
comment is full of resignation. For once I don’t want to say anything that might sway the
moment.

Jade stands up suddenly.

I need some action.

This is more of a command than a statement, so I say:

Yeah. Let’s get out of here. What’ve we got? A few hours?

I move because I want to go with her, and because in Jade’s world, the beauty is,
nothing’s sacred.
In twenty minutes Jade and I find ourselves gambling in a rundown club in a nearby small town. It’s not our turf and it’s not cool, but we’ve had enough of the Hyatt resort. This is just the kind of trashy venue we need to shake the suffocation. On the overhead televisions the club has seen fit to play re-runs of COPS. I don’t know why. Maybe they think it adds an edge. LAPD brutality boosting their own K-Mart, government-endorsed brand of vice. No one’s really watching it except me. I can’t tear my eyes away. I know why Jade doesn’t flinch. While I shudder at the images I can’t hear, at the prime-time persecution, she just laughs and shakes her cup. They still have those cups here. I guess they figure the place isn’t big enough, nor the clientele hard-core enough, to piss in them.

Jade’s playing the machines cause that’s all that’s on offer. All around us people stare intently at screens, while above them the white faces of redneck L.A. cops grin large in close-up. Not even breaking a sweat, twenty of them swarm on a suburban street in Los Angeles, to one house where a Negro woman in an old dress raises her hands in a doorway to protect her life. The camera pulls in sharply on her face as her sons are taken away.

Jade laughs because COPS is just like gambling, she says. And this is why it’s here, in a room full of amateur punters. All of them obsessed with tactical maneuvers. And the images beam in, sending the message that a button on a fruit machine can be replaced easily with a trigger. That the faces that fall are just cards ground into the bitumen. Public servants addicted to the rush. And just like The Casino they’ve been funded to win. And this is what pisses me off, but it doesn’t seem to matter to Jade.

Jade doesn’t hunch into her machine like other addicts do. She doesn’t cower in front of it, nor press it tentatively. She faces it square-on, straight-backed, strapping something
bigger than her, but dumber than her, in for a ride. And though she can’t beat a relentless
and rigged system she can control how that makes her feel. It never beats her. Jade’s above
the machine, she doesn’t even play it for kicks, she plays it because it’s there. When she looks
up at me her eyes roll. And I wish I could say I was playing it up, this contempt I feel for the
low end of the game on the machine and the high end on the screen, but I can’t. I can’t
separate myself completely from the surfaces that hide and the surfaces that reveal. Not
when she’s beside me, laughing all the way and slipping in-between. Not when there’s a guy
next to me staring into a fruit machine that isn’t even on.

I keep watching her and the dance of pixels all around. And despite the fact that I’m
working myself up this feels like we’re back on track. Jade keeps pressing and I keep
watching the totals on her screen veer back and forth. Two steps forward, two steps back.
But Jade is patient. She waits until the total is big enough and then she wages it. As soon as
she cracks the machine we move on.

Jade likes the machines best which sound like the jungle. She loves the shrieking of
monkeys when she hits a round of free spins. She sits back. She laughs and her hand reaches
over to squeeze my leg. She wants me to hang off her, to scowl at everything around us and
turn back.

Eventually Jade’s cups start stacking up. I take the walk to the cashier to swap the gold
for notes. I give it back to her. She doesn’t look at the cash or count it. She just slides it into
her back pocket. When the totals start dwindling, Jade knows it’s time. And it’s getting dark
outside. Anthony will be wondering, but could never guess what’s kept her.

Jade drives us back to the resort, she never takes it slow. The Merc glides on the coast
roads, carving through the wind.

She pulls up outside the resort. Just in case. I make a move to jump out but she
reaches for me and says: Wait. From her pocket she draws out the cash and counts it. I look
away. She holds out what looks like a couple of hundred and says,

    Not bad, considering.
    I hesitate and look at her, not sure if I should accept the payment.
    Take it, what’s the matter? Not enough for you, hey?
    No, it’s not that. I just didn’t think…
    Shut up. Fifty-fifty was the deal. Still is the deal.

    I thank her and get out. Walking back to my room I realise that everyone needs a
frisson of fear to remind them they’re real, but this interrelation is no pinch on the skin - my
moments with Jade have become more than a series of exchanges I enter into and retreat
from. I’m not stopping at her accident. To lend a hand. Camille knew that was bullshit and
now I know it too. I’m in the accident. I’m riding shotgun.

♦♣♠♥

In the morning Jade looks tired. Standing in the resort Reception, she and Anthony look like
the farce they are. There’s no hint, no breath of desire between them. Jade leans on the
counter, sunglasses on, unamused. Anthony turns away from the transaction, hands in
pockets, uncomfortable about the fact he’s not paying. I watch him. He stares out the giant
plate-glass windows of the foyer, blankly, as if even they are saying something about the
stretch of emptiness that is the thin film of connection between him and Jade.

    I sit, pleased and comfortable, on the lower mezzanine holding a newspaper that may
as well be upside-down. That’s how interested I am in what’s happening in the rest of the
world. How interested I am in what anyone else has to say about it. To me, Jade is the world,
the microcosm, the absolute tragedy and triumph that is the merger of commerce and
invention. She’s going to leave him. Has already left him. It’s fixed.
Anthony used to pay attention, he used to get off on her, now he’s dragging Jade behind him like a well-bred but disappointing greyhound as they cross the foyer towards the main doors. Anthony will be attracted to the potential of her money for a while longer yet, he’s still in it to win it, but not so sure anymore that he has backed a sure thing. I smile over what I could tell him. How much he’s lost on her. But inwardly I’m smiling more at the thought that’s swelling and growing inside me - the thought of the bigger fish to fry, the level that Jade and I can move up to.

I turn towards the mountain rising beautifully beyond the plate-glass windows, the scene Anthony no longer looks at. He’s not the type of person to see the meaning in a picture even when it’s right in front of him. If he was a superstitious man he might be disturbed by the scene’s ironic proximity. I know this because I have just learned the name of the mountain from the legend, written on the wall behind me:

*Long ago in the Dreamtime a young warrior named Coolum loved a beautiful maiden named Maroochy but another warrior, Ninderry, tried to steal her away. The two men fought and Ninderry killed Coolum. The watching gods were so moved by Coolum’s courage that they turned his fallen body into a mighty stone mountain to stand forever by the sea, gazing down on the river formed by the grief-stricken Maroochy’s tears.*

The resort sees the mountain as an accessory; Anthony doesn’t even see it. Just like he can’t see the focus of Jade’s attention now, why her head’s turned around suddenly because she’s exchanging glances with me. They’re walking out the doors, his hand on the small of her back. A gesture that disclaims. This is the right thing to do, Anthony. Say thank you and usher. Look for the source that has attracted her but see nothing. Don’t see me and turn away with a quickly-hidden frown and the agitated need for a plan. Gotcha.
Carte Blanche
At parties, in clubs, at drinks after work Anthony tells people who ask after Jade that she just got too weird for him, too unreliable.

Jade just went off the boil, you know, she just spent more time chatting. The big boss questioned some of the things she said, but in the end she wasn’t doing the results that she had done and they decided to sack her. Part of that was she was so ridiculously rich anyway, they didn’t think she would mind that much but when she got sacked she went a bit mad, she was hysterical. I didn’t have to do it. She wasn’t working for me directly; she was working for someone else. Um, she started to change at that point. She dyed her hair, she cut her hair. Her skin had cleared up a bit and she started to wear skimpier and skimpier clothing. Um, to a certain degree she started to become like this bimbo, this Gold Coast sort of bimbo. She dyed her hair blonde and I don’t know, when we were rowing, and we were rowing a lot in those last two months we were on and off, we split up like four or five times, um, I’d say,

Look, if I wanted to go out with a Gold Coast bimbo I would have picked a really pretty one, those aren’t the qualities that attracted me to you in the first place.

When she got sacked from here she made up all these things about all these other jobs she was going for, all these interviews that again weren’t true. Um, and she ended up working at a nightclub. Right? Again all this was covered by: her father was furious; her father wanted her to live a normal life for three years; she was meant to take over the company as soon as she was twenty-five, he wanted her to get experience; he wasn’t going to let her sponge. She had to do all this, live in a normal house, normal car. Though she always spent tons of money. She bought me four hundred-dollar wallets. Anything and everything. Cash most of the time. She took me away for the weekend to the Hyatt Coolum. She paid for the whole weekend, took me in a fancy car. And said, you know, that her dad had actually coughed up the money in the end and that was her father’s car. Turns out it wasn’t. It was rented for the weekend.
She stole.

We now know that she stole cheques from here and no one ever suspected her. We had a big deal with the police here and everything. Because firstly she was stinking rich, secondly she was such a nice girl. This isn’t just me, this is every manager here; this is, you know, everyone. I mean, she’d send flowers to people she hardly knew in hospital. She would buy presents for one of the manager’s little daughters, you know, she’d just run around doing everything. All that kind of thing she did automatically. Um, she stole the cheques from here, she’s admitted to it. I had a burglary at my house. She lost a necklace and a watch that she told the police, on a police report, was worth a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. Original Cartiers. And I lost fifteen hundred dollars cash. So she’d actually staged the whole robbery. There was a necklace and a watch but they weren’t worth anything like that money, just to steal my fifteen hundred dollars cash. Several other times I’d go out and get drunk and think I’d lost money, cause I’m pretty careless with money and it was,

Oh four hundred bucks missing, oh you must have dropped it.

And again never suspected her one moment because she was so good. We’d go out to eat five nights a week at top restaurants and I wouldn’t pay all the time. I’d say,

Listen, I can’t afford to go out again.

And she’d say,

Oh no, don’t worry. I’ll pay, I’ll pay.

So never once was she short of money. And then oh, she took us to the Indy; she took us and the other manager. Eight hundred dollars a ticket. We saw it on the invoice; they faxed it through, right? She took everyone, ten of us to a lunch at the Marriott, a corporate lunch; she said her father had already booked it, we might as well go. At the lunch, at the auction, she bought a heart-shaped bed from the Variety Club, a thousand dollars. She said her father told her to buy whatever came up at auction for charity. The bed is still at my apartment, the Variety Club are going to come and get it, she never paid for it. She then took ten people to the Indy Ball at the
Marriott. A hundred-odd bucks a ticket. Um, again said her father did it so they might as well go.

Ran a six hundred-dollar bar tab as well and hasn’t paid for any of that.

Yeah, I mean, she bought, I don’t know if she did pay for it, they haven’t been phoning me so she might have done, but two and a half thousand dollars for a dress for the ball. Had it made on Chevron Island and if she ever was short of cash, there’d always be some excuse about her cheque book was stolen, her father’s cheque book or whatever. You know,

I’ve got to get money transferred and it’s a real pain.

Oh, and she told me a story about a friend stealing fifty thousand dollars from her account two years earlier. She told me, all of us, a story that where you get your cars registered, someone had taken her credit card and taken a thousand dollars an hour all weekend. Sixty-four thousand dollars. The police were wanting to talk to her about it, and she was crying about this money that had been taken. On another occasion there’s something else and on another occasion something else. We’d decided that this was the unluckiest girl in the world.

So we got to the stage where, as I said, I just didn’t even really like the girl, you know, she’d changed. She never lived with me but she’d stay over quite a lot. And in the end I just didn’t really want to go out with her anymore, but still occasionally she’d turn up at my place, four o’clock in the morning drunk and we’d sleep together, because what can you do, you know?

Back home, the call I get from Jade comes quicker than expected.

I’ve done it. I’m out. I need a new name.

I try to calm her:

Slow down a minute! What are you saying?

My car won’t start and I’ve gotta get to the cemetery. Now.
Sounds like she’s wired. Confused, I say:

What the fuck do you wanna go to the cemetery for?

You’ll see. Come and get me.

I pick her up and we drive west through the suburbs. I want her to talk about the bust-up with Anthony, but she won’t. She waves her hand at me. For her it’s behind already, reduced to a dot, inconsequential. Clearly she’s wrong, but I go with her renewed urgency. All Jade wants to do is explain the new deal to me. I tell her, Fine. What’s happening?

I found this out, she says. The government departments that register births aren’t linked to the departments that register deaths. Only in Queensland, it seems. So you can get a birth certificate, from the birth registrar, of somebody who’s already dead and no one’ll ever make the connection. It’s easy. The most difficult thing, though, is finding the dead people who’d be your own age if they were still kicking around. So, we need a cemetery.

Her premise sounds logical; however, the fact that she’s wearing black is a tad over the top. But I don’t comment; her energy excites me.

We pull up on a side street alongside the cemetery. There’s no other cars here but I’m pretty sure we’re not at the main entrance. Jade pulls out a note-pad from her bag and a pen.

Jesus, you look like a reporter. Whatta need that for?

There might be a few options, she explains.

When I don’t make a move she adds,

You coming?

And the mild amusement on her face is enough to motivate me out of the car.

I hang back from her because even though I can’t see anyone else, she’s moving embarrassingly too fast to be in mourning. Putting my cigarette out on the bark of a tree, overly conscious about the fact that there are thousands of dead people rotting in the earth under me, I figure they deserve some dignity. Jade doesn’t seem to have the same concerns. I
watch her, amazed and enchanted, as she walks directly across tombs and patches of grass in front of headstones, intent on closure.

I think this is the old bit, she says. And signals with her arm for me to follow her up the hill.

I feel like I should at least read the headstones as I pass, not overlook anyone, certainly not trample on anybody. But at the same time what I really want to do is dig to the depths of Jade. What’s going on with her? Where are we headed?

Most of the tombs disgust me, so much lingering pretension. But one, for a baby, is particularly sad. Jack Burnsforth born 1985 died 1987. His resting place is a little mound, as if his belly’s still sticking up in it. The ground isn’t even covered by cement. His parents have made a cross out of wood and it rests precariously within a bunch of sticks. Around the makeshift grave are small toys and trivial things he must have loved, coloured pieces tied with string to the remnants of fallen wood. A hand-made arrangement of love and grief so powerful that the surrounding tombs – giant, black marble, soft lens photographs, gold-leaf appellations, pastel images of Christ – mean nothing.

I find Jade foraging through a mass of tall grass that has sprouted metres high, out of a raised grave. She’s trying to cut through it to read the headstone.

Must be fertile, this one.

That’s not funny, Jade.

My serious tone surprises her and she looks up at me, quizzically. When I don’t elaborate she shrugs her shoulders and says,

Whatever.

I look away because I can’t watch her. It’s not that I don’t recognise that I’ve done worse things to people alive, it’s just that in the finality of death your name is all that’s left.

Jade reads,
Cassandra Higgins,
loving daughter of Margaret and John Higgins,
died by accident,
1991,
aged thirteen.

She starts to write down the details. I hear the baby first. Its cries echoing in waves off all the cement. Coming closer to us. I grab Jade’s arm roughly and pull her off the grave.

Fuck you, she says righting herself on the slanted ground. I drop my hand but she’s wary enough not to turn back.

You got what you wanted, let’s go.

I don’t want anyone to see us, to be a witness to her scavenging, so I start moving off. Jade storms past me, not content to follow. The sound of the baby crying hunts us downhill. I can tell it unnerves Jade because her shoulders are pulled tight in defence against it. It’s the only pitch that can pierce through her disaffection. At the bottom of the hill we come across a couple – the crying infant in a stroller. The mother is tidying up a grave, placing flowers on it. The father is push-pulling the stroller, trying the get the kid to shut up.

Safe in the car I feel better. But Jade is still pissed with me.

What was that all about? Jesus, if I’d known you were going to freak out I wouldn’t have asked you.

Yeah, sorry.

Jade looks at me, confused by the soft tone of my voice. The crying in the cemetery has made me think about endings, about damage, about her bleeding in an outhouse with a dead baby in her belly. Such stuff.

I’ll tell you about it sometime, she says.

We sit in the car for a moment, both of us looking straight ahead. The long dirt road that runs along the edge of the cemetery doesn’t seem to end. Jade stirs first.
Well, I only got one, but that’s cool. Cassandra Higgins.

She looks at her notepad, then looks at me. For my approval, I decide.

Perfect, she says. A forgotten accident.

I start the car, and as Jade slips into contemplating her new self-image, I say:

Cassy, hey?

Later that night when Jade walks towards me across the floor of the Casino I almost don’t recognise her. She is launching Cassandra. A blonde. A woman in a cheap blue dress. A dress cut so badly that she looks fuller, rounder. Her eyes hover brightly above it mirroring the fabric’s sheen, its obvious iridescence. A lot of work has already gone into Cassandra. She’s wearing very, very high heels. She towers over the crowd. It’s the kind of effect that commands eyes: colour, shine and a dress thigh-high. An attitude of potential danger that also commands the attention of Security.

She stops two tables down at a group with a higher minimum and a broader range of men. My eyes keep shifting toward her. She shoots me looks, taunting me over her bare shoulder. There’s nothing subtle about Cassandra Higgins, our new woman.

An older man offers her a chair, but Jade says she prefers to stand. I can hear her from here. The shrill voice of impropriety. She’s acting drunk, she’s acting fun and the circle starts to close in around her. She throws notes on the table like they’re inconsequential. She wins just enough times to keep the crowd interested. Someone buys her a drink; a cocktail the same colour as her dress. I keep dealing to my table, the one hard-core player sensing a loss of interest.

I’ve created a monster.
Seeing this apparition of her is like watching the metamorphosis of a butterfly in reverse. Just the sight of her is making me feel queasy. Even the way she’s holding her mouth is like an open invitation. But I can’t look away. When Jade shifts she doesn’t shift lightly, I now know. I pray she doesn’t extend her hospitality to my table, indicating to my pit boss that I need a break. He signals no.

I shouldn’t complain, I asked for it.

Over the course of the next thirty minutes I watch Jade lose six grand. And she knows I’m watching when she walks off with some guy who wants what’s left in her handbag just as much as what’s in her pants. I don’t care about her body but I do care about the cash. I’ve got the feeling Jade’s not coming clean with me, fifty-fifty’s sliding into a much less advantageous equation. She’s keeping money from me and losing it cause she’s not playing innocent anymore, she’s playing the bitch, spending reams of it to turn herself into a whore. And she’s watched enough of them in this town to know what that’s all about. But I can counter. I’ve always got a come-back, a wild card, a see-you-and-raise-you to keep this exaggerated comedy afloat. I think about the money dwindling in my account, how the deposits keep on lessening. Before she left with that stiff she was hovering over red more than black. I decide I need to reel her back in, get her to calm down. Get some control because this new Jade is going to make us a lot of money. It’s going to be less subtle, it’s going to be fast and dangerous, but it’s going to be a lot.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

It’s the new version of Jade that signals the shift. The renaissance. Everything on the Gold Coast has more than one chance. The Dealer decides to meet fire with fire. He
decides he’s been too soft. Jade as humble little rich girl he could handle but Jade as Cassandra, as white-hot light, he’s struggling with.

At home he looks at himself in the mirror. Grips the edge of the basin. His face splashed clean and awake with water. He looks and he says to himself: Just say what you really want.

Just say it.

He looks hard into his own eyes, so deep and grey and he knows what it is. He knows what he wants. He wants everything he shouldn’t have, everything he’s never been given, and everything that he never had the guts to take. Just admit it, he says to himself.

The Dealer’s been getting around like a prizefighter itching for a fight. Been hiding how he really feels. What he really wants. Trying to be somebody better. Letting people like Camille round out what he thinks it means to be real. But The Dealer knows he doesn’t want certainty now. He never really wanted it. He wants to crash through his indecision, he wants to stop hanging on the edges. He wants to get on the inside. He wants Jade.

And the city is saying, Yes.

And the city is saying, Go to her.

You know there’s nothing behind anything, that everything’s just a lie. Go to her and tell her that you know. That you know where to go, that you know where she’s headed.

And the city is saying, Forget about your history.

Forget about your lineage. And your birth. Look at everything you don’t have, look at everyone else who’s got it. Look at all those things that have been taken from
you. Look at all those things you’ve missed. Stop dealing and start taking. Start
listening to who you really are.

And the city is saying, Go to Jade.

Go to her. You know how much you want to. You know you’ve always wanted
to. Just go to her. Just go to her and start running.

♦♣♠♥

It takes nearly all my effort to hold myself together. I feel like my skin is no longer keeping
me in, I feel like I’m everywhere. Driving away from my apartment, from the dead-ends, and
the false starts I’m crying and laughing and excited and it’s all so mixed. Driving, loud music
in the car, inside my head. Listening to the rounded-up sound of myself. Thinking of her. I
speed through lights and the city is letting me in. Its heat and its sugar and its signs all
coaxing me to believe and I feel swallowed and hungry and spat back out. I love this city, this
city that looks like her. This place that promises so much but can never be still. And this is
why it’s home, a place where I will never know where I stand, a town that will never
recognise me, a place where I will fade always into the switch and simmer.

I revel in the claptrap highway, all the signs and tokens that distract, the motels, the
hotels which promise and remind me of sex, the burger huts, the sushi trains, the revolving
restaurants I will never eat in, the tourist buses that turn into boats, the canals that have no
tides, The Casino that keeps reeling me in.

Driving fast over long bridges I notice peripherally the subtle turn of the Gold
Coast’s inlets and coves, the sight of a single boat traveling out to sea. With the windows
down I can hear the rush of the car and the rabble of seabirds filling up the trees. I can see
everything. This city’s relentless and indifferent beauty. I will not put it in a box - fall down
to the obvious - the plethora of shonky deals, stings, and cash. I have always known that the things I think I understand - this city, Jade - are always more complicated than that.

♦♣♠♥

Fuck women. It’s PJ’s birthday. Fuck ‘em all, he says, all day, into the phone, to anyone who’ll listen. It’s his birthday and PJ wants to get back to basics, to fucking women, lots of women. No risk, no respect. He wants to pay for it, he wants to watch other guys pay for it but most of all he wants to watch them, the women, paying for it. Fuck women, he says and decides to throw a party.

He invites ten of his mates and five guys he doesn’t even really like to beef up the numbers. He tells them they’re in for a treat, lots of girls, lots of coke and an ocean view. The kind of nice evening only money can buy. He organises two of his girls to provide the entertainment. The ones that need it the most.

8:00pm and the boys are rolling in. There’s a tension in the air because they know what they’ve come for but they can’t see it. PJ has hidden the girls; one in one room, one in the other. PJ lets them all sweat. He works the room, ring-leading, talking dirty to the ones that look nervous, telling the ones that don’t that there are no limits, and telling the ones who are married that getting them to suck your dick doesn’t make you a cheat.

When the punters are smashed PJ explains the game. Every guy picks a straw, short straws get the fat ugly chick, and long straws get the babe. One on the right, one on the left. PJ will not play, he owns them.

Fifteen black straws in his fist, PJ watches rapt as each man pulls up his fate. He loves to see them eating out of the palm of his hand. How they groan. How they
cheer. How they stare at him, in horror or in awe. PJ prefers dread because he knows they’ll still go through with it. They can't resist. And when they do his maxim prevails. Fuck women. Fuck em all.

PJ checks on the girls. When he opens the door to the right room the boys scramble for a preview. Pawing and pushing each other. PJ tells them to back off.

Go grab a drink you animals, he says.

Inside he tells Girl One to take off her clothes. Girl One is seventeen, blonde, fake tits, comatose eyes. He gives her a few lines of coke to wake her up a bit, cooing at her, telling her how hot she is.

I want you nice and wet baby, he tells her, these are my friends. That's a good girl.

He slaps her on the arse. Girl One used to be good but six months working for PJ has taken its toll. She used to command the cash, the better tricks, a flashier life, but PJ makes sure even his best girls develop diversions. Drugs make them cheaper. More work on the low end means a bigger cut for him. There will always be additions but no real changes. Girl One still looks the way she did when PJ first met her, her body's still young enough to spring back but all its energy has dissipated. The white powders he gives her make all the moments behind her closed eyes safe, her body self-propels itself slowly on the bed as PJ backs out of the room.

In the left room it’s a different story. PJ knows this girl can fuck. She has to; her youngest kid’s asleep in the ensuite. Girl Two is approaching forty with big habits and little kids. He doesn’t need to coax her, she knows the drill. PJ is going to pay her four hundred bucks to fuck seven men. He tells Girl Two to take her clothes off. He dims the lights.
We’re in a sportscar. We’re driving around the Indy Track. Top down, the tops of our heads blown off. I’m so fucking high the windshield’s like a space shuttle. I quit my job today.

I god damn quit my job today.

And Jade looks at me her eyes wild like a crazy woman’s and she shrieks and stands up in the car full of adrenalin, pumping her arms at the city in excitement. She loves me. This girl fucking loves me. I speed up down the straight and she falls back flat against the leather, her body whacks down and she laughs and rolls over towards me groaning with pleasure.

Here we go Jade, here we go.

And I lock the brakes to fly into what would be a chicane but it’s now just a corner I’m not supposed to cut through. The tyres screech as we slide sideways into the oncoming street.

Oh my god, Jade says, and flips her head up to see where we’re headed.

We fly down past Narrrownneck in the shorter straight, the water lit up, the waves glowing by the moon and the lights on this flat stretch of street with no buildings. No marker but the shallow curb between the car and the sand, the car and the ocean and it’s like flying on a knife-edge. Ahead of us the buildings rise, warped towers full of light, the street gets narrower and I pull a hard left into Breaker Street, chunk down the gears, fly one-handed through the twists and turns in Main Beach. And Jade is screaming now, sometimes her arms above her head, sometimes gripping her legs as they fling upwards with speed. We come round the bend, back to the Gold Coast Highway. At the intersection a string of cars are taking off. I speed up towards the on-road that winds us onto the highway.

Ante Up
Go, Go! Jade screams and I straighten up and flatten the pedal. We lurch forward and the car grunts with the pressure but then rights itself and we fly three lanes across the highway cutting them all off.

Sucked in! I yell back at the cars stalled in shock behind me.

Jade throws her head back on the seat and laughs, her hair flying wildly over her face. We cruise into a fast-forward motion and she reaches for the volume on the stereo, cranking it: the deep bass of the music throbbing the seats and bouncing out into the lit-up world around us.

Yes, I tell her but voice is lost in the rush of beats and air. I nod my head at her frenetically. She moves the counter up. 13, 14, 18, 25.

Ahead the lights of the city swirl, the tops of buildings sway, the night and the music give way to the movement of the car and speed of our passing. Neon swirls over our skin. This is the city, this is its music; a track of light and velocity and heat; an electric relentless beat; the smell of the tyres as they burn and screech; everything so quick and beautiful and fast. Jade is my race partner, my dance partner, my loose-cannon girl.

Coming out again at the curve of Main Beach the lights are green and this time I swing the car right, over the bridge away from the city. I want to find a dark pocket to take her in. I swing left at Queen Street, let the car slide left into the curve that rounds down around the seaway parallel to the bridge. Above us the Rivage Royale looms, resplendently curved and pastel pink. Lit up and primped and primed. Just behind it, a dark park. And on the other the decrepit crash zone of a demolished shopping center. This is the place. I hit the brakes, swing the car around, park on the left where the lights have been taken out by bulldozers and look over at the lush grounds of the park, so green and rich and running to the edge of the water like a black velvet sheet. Beyond it the high-rises in Paradise Waters glitter and send shivers of coloured light across the water. I turn off the ignition. We exhale.
Come on, I say to Jade and she knows what I have in mind.

No, she says. Put the top up, let’s do it in the car.

I press the button. The roof unwinds, we wind up the windows, wind down the seats. I push play. Jade takes her underwear off. Pulls her skirt up, the dark downy hair caught in a flash of light. I pull my jeans away to my thighs and in one move she straddles me, so wet, so alive. Her right knee hits the door and her other leg is splayed out wide. She pumps me almost faster than the beat. She groans and in this moment, in this street, witnessed by the city, this is all her and me. This is what we want.

♦♣♠♥

The Dealer is doing well. The Dealer has quit his job. The Dealer has found his way inside.

He takes an apartment with Jade on the edge of the city at the top of a tower, and starts dealing it out. Jade is meeting people in the nightclub where she serves drinks. Her eyes outlined in black, her hair wet and slicked. Her mouth a gash of burnished red. There is something about Jade that tells them she knows something. That she’s got something to offer. And The Dealer watches. Watches her move in the tight t-shirt knotted high above the waist, the smooth curve of her flat stomach twisting and turning as she leans and pours and purrs to the punters in front of her. He likes watching her. He gets hard.

The bar is a hovel for the nouveau riche, the perennially bored. They always think she’s a seller and when they ask about drugs Jade tells them about something else, she tells them about the cards. The Dealer and Jade buy a beautiful red felt table, round enough for eight. They buy The Dealer an expensive well-cut suit. She
gives him manicures and ends up licking his fingers. They buy Jade barely-there
dresses, crystal-cut tumblers, an ice machine and a well-stocked bar. They host
private parties at the top of their tower for people who like a high minimum. The
Dealer shoots the cards and Jade shoots the juice. Slipping tablets into drinks,
rubbing backs to distract. She invites a couple of girls from the bar to help things
along.

In the nightclub Jade lines them up and The Dealer sidles in on signal,
presenting their card. It’s a perfect match, a life that suits them. During the day they
count the money they’ve taken and take a stab at making more. In the daylight hours
Jade sleeps with the men from the card tables, in dark anonymous rooms, where they
think it’s a secret, and once is usually all it takes to scope out their houses, their
credit lines, their wallets. They drop twenty grand on The Dealer's table and then
they want to drop their pants. The Dealer knows fucking Jade grants them revenge
but he doesn't mind. He’d do it too if it paid but generally the women in the city are
a harder sting. Any one of them rich enough to be an option, no matter how dumb
she appears, will drop her pants well before she drops her guard. The men are easier.
The Dealer finishes the job. Jade steals access codes, pin numbers, keys, jewelry and
cars. And what can they do? Blackmail is a predictable but very useful thing. Besides,
these punters have only got themselves to blame; they gave her the backstage pass.

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What’s this like? Jade asks me.

And she means her and me, and I tell her it’s like moving and eating and talking and
thinking and fucking and drinking it all in at the same time. I tell her it’s like joy spread so
big out across her and me that the world’s just bouncing off us. Like turning around in my own locked-down fantasy, loving and holding onto every minute; forgetting about the world, about the rational and the staid; the comfortable. This is just like letting go, like no resistance or consequence. Like saying every word that comes into my head and not doing anything I don’t want to do. Ever.

And sleeping with her is like trying to catch a runaway train, like running towards something good, blood pumping with the joy spread out over my face. Kissing her - like holding something wild, like biting into a sultry and sweet fruit, one I’ve never tasted before, a fruit without a seed and I roll it over my tongue and when I swallow her the substance changes and it’s like static in my mouth full of sharp corners and explosions and unexpected turns. It’s like eating everything I like all at once. Saturated with her and it’s so beautiful I have to scream. And the feeling never ends, never drops down below ground level, always lands on high. And I think this is what God would want us to be; untamable and unstoppable.

This is what it feels like to be with her in the clean city full of hot salty breath, full of long languid lines and clipped-back surfaces, frayed on the edges with palm trees and a gold embossed night. This is what it feels like to be with her - inhaling a pure white line, so crisp, so perfect it stings. Like plummeting into an oblivion that feels right. This is Jade’s world, her Chinese-stone-of-heaven mind, glowing through the city like a sonic neon light. This is what it feels like to let go and lose control but to find a focus I never thought possible; honed in on sex and money and joy, in the city that has no foci, no rules and no centre.

Jade and I are in a parallel reality. We’re not thinking about the houses, or the cars, or the furnishings or the pleasant things that the money we make can buy us. We don’t need something to show for it, something to make us feel better because we waste all our time in
cubicles, in swivel chairs, behind tables and desks or pouring concrete to build the dreams of other people.

No. Jade and I are cruising. We just came to play. Play the game in the city where people come to think again, to unwind their minds, and let loose their bodies, and ours have completely unraveled. We know what it feels like to say no to the things we don’t want and to say yes to whatever our urges tell us. Not thinking twice, not looking over our shoulders, not considering our value or the next guys or thinking foolishly that anyone is innocent. Not remembering what our parents, what our forbears taught us save the things they left us by accident - our propensity for harm and displacement. We feel nothing but the sun and the fast car and this rapturous joy.

This is what it feels like to have Jade next to me, so different to Camille. This is not a love that makes me feel grand or noble or safe. This love feels like an iridescent gorgeous pain; like a crushing mix of excess and self-mutilation. Like a scratch you just can’t help but itch. This feels like the thing I’d do if I only had moments to live. Like being tickled till I cry, like laughing till I’m hoarse, like being cut till I bleed profusely and without shame.

How many times, Jade asks me, have you wanted to be free?

And this is what it feels like to do the things we shouldn’t; with no one left to answer to. Like doing something bad and looking into her eyes and seeing nothing but validation and desire.
Double Zero
And what does this feel like to Jade? It doesn’t feel any different. This is how she feels all the time. For The Dealer, extrication is a novelty, a bolt out of the blue, an exquisite shock, and a sudden surrender. For Jade the fact he feels this is just an unexpected bonus. Now she’s got someone to fuck and run with.

Jade likes how he touches her, how he looks at her, how he moves faster now and without recourse. She likes bigger possibilities but it doesn’t change anything. Jade is just the same.

Jade is driving alone: a tourist pamphlet in her lap, open on a page full of local attractions. In the right-hand corner a woman in a black and gold bikini is brandishing a gun. She has a headband on. Jade is driving to the place where you can shoot at cardboard people for a price. She is driving there alone because The Dealer thinks she isn’t.

Jade pulls up on the short manicured drive, brand new bitumen and low-level plants struggling against the salt air and the hot sun. Out of the car she can hear the sound of shots, of rounds blaring out, popping off in the distance, and it reminds her of her father and of her home town. She recalls him shooting a lame horse in front of her and how she closed her eyes. She remembers calm afternoons watching the farm hands, young, slender, dusty boys cleaning guns and lounging out on the long porch. Happy and exhausted talk punctured by the sound of scraping metal. Kills left to die or brought home and strung up. She remembers a door propped shut by a longarm and she remembers fearing these things as a girl - guns changed men and they changed atmospheres.

The boys took no notice of her. She would listen to stories about killing out there in the bush where she couldn’t see them, where she wasn’t invited. In the houses the boys were quieter, more respectful, but Jade could feel something boiling
underneath. Their control was just a code. An unspoken law. You never left your gun lying around in the house. You never pointed it at someone’s face. You never…

But here, at this shooting-range advertised in tourist brochures, the reasons and environments for violence are a little different. Here the measure of your manhood is paid for and controlled. Here you don’t own the gun.

Jade walks under a sign that says *ASA Australian Shooting Association* and pushes open the door. Inside, the shooting gallery is different to the ones she went to with her father. Back home the ranges had no walls and the men shot at targets under the sky. They walked in with their guns over their shoulders or wrapped up in wooden boxes and they walked out with them again. She would watch as they lined up, five by fifty metres, and cover her ears as the call was made. They fired together, six shots each, and then they moved up to twenty-five and fired six more. And again, at ten metres, alternating aims around wooden fire poles. At seven metres there was nothing to aim with and they shot ‘back alley’ style, gun held down steady and straight from the hip.

At this shooting gallery the distance is always the same. Here the roof covers them all and the surfaces are clean and unnatural. Here there is no meeting hall for members. There is a cafeteria blaring out music and large brightly-coloured posters. There are boys and families and groups of tourists shooting for the fun of it down crisp, clean alleys, all identical and all running the same way. There are no guns for sale and no leaves on the floor.

♦♣♠♥

With his story of Jade, Anthony can keep a half-willing ear entertained and a warm
body propped up on a bar stool for hours. It’s better telling people who don’t know her. Who don’t remember her. Who aren’t swayed by ideas and their own memories of how sweet she might have been. Because Anthony can see the one’s that do remember look at him with too much sympathy. They reckon it sounds like he’s hurt. Anthony isn’t hurt, that’s what he tells himself, Anthony’s just blown away.

In retrospect we figured out lots of things. Jade told me that she kept feeling dizzy, she’d get up and feel dizzy... She thought she might be pregnant, so she went to the doctor’s and came back and said she got to go for more tests, she’d got maybe a rare blood disease. She eventually said that her white blood cells were killing her red blood cells and that if the doctors couldn’t stop this, she’d die. She would make out that she was being brave and not want to talk about it for lots of periods of time, but on the odd occasion when she did, she’d say things like,

He actually said to me I’ve got a fifty-fifty chance of being alive this time next year.

She would say that she was going off to have this treatment, once a day or once every other day, and all sorts of things and this, that and the other.

She wasn’t taking any medication. Not as far as I know. The one thing I would say that did pan out sort of is that I don’t believe she was taking any birth control. I never saw, I mean, she would stay over mine four or five times a week, and I never saw her take the pill or use anything else. She claims that she can’t have children. Which may be true, I don’t know what the history on that is.

So we got together with some friends of somebody here about this illness because they’re naturopaths and all this, to try and talk to her, you know, they were worried about her and all this kind of thing, and she’d sit there and say all this... She’d have huge panic attacks, um, not panic attacks, I mean in illness terms. She’d slide down the wall going,

It hurts, it hurts, stop it!
But then later she’d go out and get drunk and we’d then have big rows because,

Hold on, you told me the doctor said that you really must do this, this, this. Why are you doing this?

All these meaningless rows... I was having rows with Jade cause I’d never met anyone, I’d never met any of her friends who she said were all here. She always had some excuse about it. But I don’t know. I thought maybe it’s because I’m old or something, she’s worried. She doesn’t want to introduce me to her friends, because it’s the age-gap or whatever it is. But it started to annoy me. She had an answer for everything.

And then I became suspicious, not overall suspicious but thinking about it a bit, you know? I mean, she told me she’d only slept with one person. She’d been dating this one guy, Denis Weston, for a couple of years, who owned the property next door. They grew up together, very rich, a just-graduated doctor, played rugby for Australia B, all this kind of thing. On Christmas day he sent her a diamond, a one-carat diamond from Cartier, asking her to marry him. She said no, she gave the ring back, but he wouldn’t accept it. In the end they took it back to the Cartier shop and gave the money to charity, forty-five thousand dollars. Um, I was pestered then for the next three months by the presence, the memory of this guy. Again we’d have rows about him. He’d send flowers here. He’d pester her, supposedly. And he was forever just, you know, there. I never met this guy, obviously.

Yeah... So she was sending the flowers to herself maybe, um, and all sorts of things. In an attempt to make me jealous? I don’t know. Maybe she might have been trying to live the life she might have had if she had married this guy. It’s hard to say. She said she had only ever slept with him because they had been going out for three years, and she was such a good girl and all this.

Eventually I got her to crack and admit to one personal thing. We had a row because like everything else I really struggled to believe that all this was true. I said,

I bet you have...
And she said,
No, I haven’t.

I said,
I bet you have, I’ve just got a hunch. Tell me the truth or…

I had this hold over her at that time, she knew I was getting close, you know, and I was just trying to get her to tell me the truth about everything. I said,

Look, you just tell me the truth, then maybe… But if you carry on lying to me...

And then she admitted,

Okay, I did sleep with someone else.

It was some guy she said she met when she arrived. Nothing weird about that. She said it was just the once, just cause she was lonely and that she didn’t like it and that it didn’t happen again. I don’t know if she did sleep with anyone, maybe she just said it to shut me up. Um, then again, what’s the likelihood of her not, you know? Also I would have thought it fitted in with the pattern. I got the feeling she desperately wanted to be liked by everyone. Which is why she would send thank-you cards and that sort of thing, just because she wanted people to like her. And normally consistent with that is that she would have slept around a lot. Again wanting people to like her and not wanting to say no and all that kind of thing. Then again, being as young as she was, if she’d been at home all that time out on a property somewhere, maybe she hadn’t.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

Jade and The Dealer are watching TV. Jade flicks through the channels, obsessed with her aversion to settling for what’s on offer. On the selection, on the world, on him. A slogan, a cue-in for some movie, flashes across the screen. Life is hard, choose wisely. Jade’s in the mood to take everything she witnesses as a sign. The
Dealer berates her indecision playfully, not really interested in anything else but her proximity, however cold it might be.

See what’s on free-to-air, he tells her.

Jade reaches for the other remote, leaning forward over his legs spread across her and the glass-topped coffee table which, the Dealer jokes, is nearly the same size as his whole apartment. His cheerfulness, his readiness to understand her black moods, to even enjoy them, makes the restlessness inside her worse.

The Dealer doesn’t have the faintest idea of what Jade’s really thinking or what she really wants.

Jade mistrusts the closeness of their bodies, their blood and flesh. She thinks that lying down with people is an opposition to love. To her, the heart is merely a territory that bypasses the brain. To The Dealer, resting on her now is a comfort and something mildly exciting. A comfort that will build slowly, languidly, possibly to sex, or even to loving her. To Jade, his leg just gets heavier. She finds the gesture imposing, presumptuous, too familiar. Pinning her to the couch uncomfortably. His leg thrown over her. She doesn’t move. She puts up with it for the sake of maintaining her control. It is her thoughts which turn away from him.

Her attention caught now by a familiar face on the screen.

At first The Dealer isn’t watching, he’s playing with the fine tendrils of hair that catch around her face, but his head turns at the sound of that voice. For a moment they are both silent. On the screen, in talkshow format, a question is put.

But you do admit, PJ, your role in the affair?

Of course. But admission of guilt and feeling shame are two different things.

How so?

Well, most people, don’t they, fear exposure for something they’ve done
because of the shame it might bring? The media, the media today, plays such a big part in the trial, the public circus. But they’re not acknowledging guilt, they’re declaring public shame. There’s no choice in that. Given the choice, the admission probably wouldn’t come.

So you’re saying that you’re guilty but that you’re exonerated in a way because you’re up-front?

Exactly.

Jade sits up quickly. Alert. The Dealer pulls his legs off her, frustrated, in mock disgust. Not really angry yet, but wanting her back, wanting her to turn back to him. He says:

I can’t stand this guy, Jade, to hear him going on. Turn if off.

Sssh!

He looks at her. The little spark in her eye. He looks at the screen. The little spark in PJ’s too. The way he’s leaning back into his chair, comfortable, affable. Only a dealer or maybe a cop could pick the slight aversion of PJ’s eye, how it shifts under the lid as if checking sideways for who or what’s coming. The Dealer can see it and also that familiar hardness, the blankness in the boyish face. The interviewer, frustrated but obviously charmed, pushes on.

Some people would say, though, that you’ve hurt a lot of people, that you’ve ripped a lot of people off. Both here and overseas. That in effect you’ve made a career out of lying, and a lot of enemies?

PJ smirks:

‘Any fool can tell the truth but it requires a person of some sense to know how to tell a lie well.’

The interviewer is quick:
I would never have picked you as someone who read Oscar Wilde.

Well, that’s the thing, isn’t it, mate? You should never presume anything. And it’s not Oscar Wilde it’s Quentin Crisp.

Jade laughs, the interviewer laughs, the studio audience laughs on cue.

Everyone laughs but The Dealer. He looks at Jade. She puts her hand on his leg in a vague gesture of complicity, acting like she’s completely unaware of how he’s feeling. He looks at Jade and knows she’s buying it. Knows she wants to suck the guts right out of him. The screen goes on:

Who would have thought the man with a predilection for page three girls would be reading Crisp?

Yeah, it’s amazing what you pick up in jail.

Everyone except The Dealer laughs again. Jade raises her hips on the couch. A move that’s sudden. She wants his legs off of her. The Dealer swings them down, trying to ignore PJ’s voice. He sits, perched on the edge of the couch wanting to move but wanting to watch her. She lifts herself up again, like she’s hot for him, the Dealer thinks. PJ continues:

But if you want something from Wilde I can give it to you.

Go ahead.

He said that recreation, not instruction, is the main aim of conversation. And that the truth is rarely pure and never simple.

Interviewer laughs again, slightly uneasy:

Well, this is quite the English lesson. But what about you, how do you feel about those people you might have damaged?

That’s the thing, see. That’s what I’m trying to say. Lying, if you want to call it that, only applies to words. You can’t be held responsible for someone else’s lack of
comprehension.

Jade jumps up off the couch. Punches the air with her fist.

Brilliant, she says, looking wide-eyed at The Dealer. Fucking brilliant.

The Dealer leaves the room in disgust. Jade doesn’t care. She doesn’t even follow his back. Such simple maneuvers don’t work here. She knows he’ll come back to her, he always does.

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We are holed up in our apartment. It’s still our favourite tower, the Moroccan, a curved white palace that looks like a Mediterranean dream. It’s the place we use for our carpet joint and the place Jade uses to sleep with the police. Jade acquired the apartment by pretending to be one of them; an officer with the CJC. I remain her decoy, a voice on the other end of the phone vouching for her worth and her legitimacy; wondering for how long the management will buy it.

Jade doesn’t look like a CJC officer. She tells the managers she’s working under cover and it goes some way to explaining me. It covers the late night jaunts and when she brings the real cops in, it all looks clean. Cops are always cops whether they’re in uniform or not.

The garb Jade uses to attract the police isn’t exactly a staple uniform of honesty but some of them like a bit of wayward downtime. The ones she chooses are generally cadets, young men with big arms and dead-fish eyes drawn to a bit of errant R&R. Young men fired up on the power and sexiness of their own muscle. Jade tells me it’s hard work. They speak in staccato. They are not amused by the things she is. She sticks to the loud corners in dark
places and lets her body do the talking. She tells me they come in two types. Efficient or kinky.

I look at her next to me, at her hair sticky on her head, piled up in a loose bun with the box peroxide; the colour of the thick blue liquid starts to fade to white. She’s going for that cool acid-blonde thing, the platinum beacon. If you want to get things moving you can’t be subtle in this city. You need to pull focus, to reel them in quickly. It’s not an image I think Jade will get away with easily, but she does. And it reminds me of a documentary I saw once on Marilyn Monroe. Not the hair exactly, or how she’s holding herself, but how she can turn the light on. Jade has this chameleon ability, this internal switch. But I guess selling sex is never as difficult as selling anything else.

The policemen Jade brings here are not aware of her impersonations; they think she’s easy, but edgy enough to turn them on. And just like all Jade’s maneuvers, what she’s offering them works for us in a number of ways. These boys are tired of the usual red houses. Jade offers them free tricks for protection. They’ve seen our wheels in here, they’ve seen my table, some of them even play. When they fuck Jade it’s like having sex and not paying for it, because turning a blind eye is better than choosing from the same old line. It feels like a date. It feels mutual, and Jade acts like she likes it.

She’s developed a fascination with being very close to their law.

Once she got a copper so pissed that she stole his badge and was able to convince him that he must have lost it and while he was sleeping she took the last fifty bucks he had, just for the fun of it, out of his wallet. And I bet that guy thought twice about another loose night on the juice. But the badge comes in handy. She flashes it a lot. Sometimes she even uses it to go through people’s bags. We created a special forces ID from the one in the dickhead’s wallet. We scanned the document in, changed some of the details, the division, and the section and up close you can tell it’s dodgy but not many people have actually seen a
copper’s ID let alone a CJC officer’s up close, so it passes under a vague eye. Even under the watchful gaze of moron caretakers and management-rights holders it works well enough. Doors open. Doors unlock.

The other less tactical reason why we’re here is because the girl Jade was living with kicked her out. The Girl had been swapping stories with Anthony. Anthony out and about, on his own trail of amateur investigation. Jade’s new-found associations with cops have left him uncomfortable. It makes him think she’s covered and that he’s a little closer to being exposed. She still goes to him occasionally late at night drunk, to fuck him, to keep him in line, to keep him guessing. And it’s buying us some time.

But Anthony’s not the only one our charades are pissing off. Word gets around quickly. We’re eating in on a lot of turf - exactly who’s turf is something we never mention. But I’m aware of it and Jade’s aware of it. Lines to PJ run underneath every decision we make. We’ve got our own reasons, but every goal we set has got his lining on it.

Sometimes Jade and I amuse each other with ideas of getting out, talking like neither of us remembers why we’re here.

Once we’ve hit half a mil’, she’ll say. Or when the town starts closing in.

We never defer to another agenda.

I tell Jade we should head to another town where no one knows us. Another town like this one. We’ve talked about Miami, Los Angeles and Las Vegas. We’ve talked about that paper trail, a trip overseas, a way around the world, in fast money towns, in fresh new frontiers.

♦♣♠♥

These are the nights. Full of the unseen. High up in the Moroccan, The Dealer ring-
leads. The punters who form the arc around him are all of a kind. No sharks, no slickers, no silver tongues. He and Jade aren’t looking to run a premium house, they’re looking to fill a void. A nice up-and-up carpet joint for those who feel funny about being forward in public. She always makes sure the mix is just right. Couple of paranoid pollies, rich kids with straight parents, married men, public people, famous figures, and a bundle of uber guys and gals. The kind of people who gamble with everything but shouldn’t be seen doing it. A shaker of respectables that need catering to. Cashed up but hard to hold onto and even harder to please. The night must be right. Win or lose the night must make them want to come back.

This crowd wants a show. Real rollers would be happy with a high minimum, a fresh deck and a wide-open game, but these people want the full trade. They don’t care what they’re playing. They want the bright lights, the range, the rush, and someone well put-together or someone big-time to raid. They want the private game. And like everything else in this town, word about good downtime options in the right circles gets around. So Jade and The Dealer serve up the cut with enough noir style to conjure cool and enough edged-up naughtiness to reel it in. And reeling isn’t hard. These people might be rich, but in the end they’re cheaper - just a collection of low rollers, monkeys and hunch players.

Jade and The Dealer meet demand. They bring in a couple of rookies as wheelrollers and some young blood to stir the room. The Dealer is the only card cutter. They don’t trust anyone else. The eight seats in front of him are coveted, available only on request, lending one-night kudos and gravity. Generally the women, hired or hovering, prefer roulette. Two wheels roll on either side of The Dealer’s table, whether it’s the poker table or the blackjack table - roulette is the catalyst.

Tonight Jade is casing, circling the room - all worked out - the set scene...
perfect. Humming with effortless control. She takes a moment to the side, a moment to watch. The Dealer looks over at her, at her young flesh obvious and outlined against the black of her dress, against the wide night behind her and the balcony. In the foreground she is light yellow skin, the light yellow light that flickers in the city beyond. He smiles. Jade can see herself shimmering - a perfect apparition - a perfect sheen in the window. Their perfect world caught by the light in the glass.

Gazing, as if out to the city, she watches The Dealer standing reflected, the practised white dance of his hands, the red black whir of steel wheels on either side of him as they spin, the movement of women in shiny dresses, jewels flickering, male hair slicked and heads turned, everything burnished, everything lit, captured and overlaid on the pane, on the black of the night sky and the dark empty sea.

Jade steps back into the circle. She sidles up to the roulette tables, takes the young guests, one by one, by the arm, leads them to the room adjacent where the toys get laid out. She offers them a kind of friendship, a camaraderie, a sense of quiet ritual before she offers the drugs. It’s important that the moment has some class. Clean line mirrors produced from heavy draws and powder split from antique boxes, cut with Jade's deft hand. Already split tabs if they prefer. The portions are always non-threatening, always small. Jade gauges as the night wears on, not how much they want, but how much they can take. They mustn’t lie on the floor, they must remain upright, they must remain able to play. The invitation to enter the room means Jade controls the dish. If she left it self-serve, then that underlying sense of decorum they require for a few good hours would slip away. Jade knows who'll come into the room and who'll prefer the juice, delivered with much more verve. Because what goes on at the top of this tower, and in what ways, always depends on who has come up to play.
Sometimes Jade will cue the bartender to slip in some amphetamine residue. It's usually the politicians, the bosses, the professionals, the self-made, the people under too much pressure, with too much power, the people who secretly hate the daily garbage-compact of their lives, who tend to get too pissed. Jade and her girls keep them buzzing unawares. Jade pays her tight crew well. Tells them to keep their mouths shut, their legs open or their dicks hard on request. They must like everyone. And their motto: some people need to be shown. Great parties and great profits are always about super orchestration.

Jade creates the play proffering subtle and not-so-subtle distractions. The Dealer works the players. His tactics, like Jade's, will depend on the weaned and weakened positions of the privileged. He outs all the tricks. Belly-stripping, trimming cards so that some of them are wider at the centre than they are at the ends. And the mark is so tiny only his expert hands can feel it. Sometimes he writes the signals he needs onto the decks blocking out sections on face cards or in turn embellishing designs. Sometimes, if he knows the players coming are fast or instinctually good, he’ll prepare a cold deck. Arranging cards in a certain order for the purposes of switching later for the deck in play. All his maneuvers will depend in equal parts, on bunny-eyed players, Jade, and his unique sense of facile grace and faultless preparation.

No one ever wins by accident.

♦♣♠♥

Jade is in bed with another rookie cop. She has no need to remember his name or anything about him. Running her hands over his angular frame, his tanned skin. His
body, nice to look at, the skin and the muscles under it all carved and sharp, but impenetrable she thinks - cold - like refrigerated chocolate. She is asking him questions about PJ. She is asking the questions as if this young man’s illusions of grandeur, his naïve leanings towards PJ’s capture, mean something to both of them and are what she wants to hear. She is working this soft moment after fucking, the moment closest to human concession and injury and this cop will never forget her. Years later when he’s ensconced in a three bedder in Robina, with a rock garden, neatly kept bushes, a wife, two kids and a peach coloured automatic door, after all that stuff, he’ll still recall her. She will have forgotten all about him. He will remember how she fucked him sitting on him backwards and how much he liked it and didn’t know she did it so she wouldn’t have to look at him. And her listening to him like she is now, front up and both efforts so convincing. This cop will always have a weakness for young girls breaking laws.

Jade will ask him where PJ lives. She will ask him when he’s telling her about PJ’s house, how big it is, how they know where it is, how he’s always right there under their nose. She will ask it innocently and he will tell her, explaining and saying, you know the one?

And Jade does.

Jade will go to PJ’s house buzz the buzzer and find him not in. The voice that informs her is male and brusque. The not slow in coming forward sound of voices that speak for him. Jade knows PJ’s there but she concedes. Her presence is not enough. PJ watches her leave from the upstairs window, intrigued.

On her second visit Jade is armed with a spiel. She’s realised she’s got to give PJ something other than her body and her name. She’s got to give him what she thinks is something big.
She gives him The Dealer.

She tells The Voice that she knows The Dealer, that she’s working for The Dealer, that she has some information about what went down all those years between PJ and him and what The Dealer’s thinking.

The door slides open.

Jade tells herself walking in that giving PJ The Dealer is not a real trade. That because the information is kind of a lie, because the history is only surmised, then the deal makes it smart and makes it less of a betrayal. She tells herself that it will be worth it, that in the end her and The Dealer will win.

She tells herself all these things but because that door opens and because she is walking down the long curved drive looking up at PJ’s house full of wide panes and eyes, her mind is changing. She is not Jade Baker anymore she is Jade Weston. She isn’t thinking about endings or consequences, she is thinking about getting inside, getting listened to and getting time. Right now, standing in front of his colossal white wood and frosted glass door she isn’t thinking about money or how they are going to sting him she is thinking about what sitting across from PJ is gonna feel like when she’s got the cards and what he thinks might be something on him.

They have the meeting alone. In PJ’s study with the clean glass wall holding up all the blue sky behind his head and PJ knows enough this time to act convinced, to act like he gives a shit. Acting like he has enough acquiescence to make her feel special. He lets her think that this time he’s in, he’s interested, she’s got him. And he makes her think that he was maybe waiting for her to come back, that he’s been thinking about her when he hasn’t, that her being here was only a matter of time. He listens. After some time he asks her what she needs and Jade says, just some time, some money and a key. PJ looks at her square in the eye and for a moment she thinks
he isn’t going to buy it but he stands, making a move towards her. He shakes her hand and then he takes it, leading her slowly out of the study, opening up the door, saying something about things between him and The Dealer remaining unfinished. He wants more than what her hand has offered him. He nods at The Voice and then he takes Jade to bed.

Later when PJ emerges from the bedroom, minutes after Jade has gone, he says:

Nice girl. Follow her.

And The Voice knows exactly what he means.

Anthony doesn’t tire of telling Jade’s story. His version, his side. It’s so good he wonders if he could sell it to the newspapers, but he doesn’t because he knows the cops would like it too, would probably give him something for it. He keeps that thought in mind, that Jade could still work for him, could be his get out of jail free. And why not? He already tells it like she cancels him out and grants him immunity.

Jade never bragged about money but very slowly things would slip out like,

Oh, my parents own a couple of those.

Somebody actually went to her bank account which backed it up because it was independent and said she had a ten thousand dollar balance. They asked her for her cash card to get some money and they were whispering saying,

She’s got ten grand in her bank.

She would never ever boast about anything, you know, just a normal person, normal car.

Bit by bit it turns out that, I mean, I’ve jumped a bit, this came out slowly over a period of a couple
of months, it wasn’t as if she ever said,

Oh, guess what my father does?

But supposedly they were amongst the wealthiest people in Australia. Two sets of parents, they split up when they were very young. She said that her original mum and dad were married, had her, then met this other couple and in fact they swapped partners and one went off and married one and one went off and married the other and they’d been together ever since.

I’ve spoken to her mother and her father and this is not true. They have separated, that was true, but the fact that they met these other partners and swapped and that kind of thing was just another pointless lie. That’s the scary thing. We all lie under pressure from time to time but just to invent pointless stories...

So, it’s all come out to the level that we were talking about business deals that needed ten million dollars and she was on the phone. I was listening to her end of the conversation and basically it was like this,

He was very suspicious, right, but he said what I’ve done is I’ve put ten million in our New Zealand bank account, you can transfer cheques from New Zealand if it doesn’t pan out, I’ve just put it there in case.

So ten million to them was no big deal. They could just have it spare. She would talk to all these imaginary people with me in the room and it was just nobody.

She said amongst other things that her mother, that they owned the property called The Dalton, a famous Australian property. They did actually live there, but they managed it, they never owned it, right? So they own that, the largest property in New South Wales, and her father ran a building company here that was ridiculously, ridiculously huge. Okay? And she had amongst other things spent a year in France modeling with her friends. She had gone and seen the 1996, whatever it was, World Rugby Cup Finals in South Africa. She had spent a month there. Long in-depth stories about the parties, what South Africa was like... She’s never been there, never been. She’s
never even left Australia. Um... about the final, David Campese coming up to her and telling her all this stuff. About in France the little cafe they used to go to for breakfast. Not just I've been there but long, really in-depth details. I mean, she made out that Tim Horan and the rugby boys, the rugby union guys, grew up together on these properties, they were properties next to each other and they were like brothers. I guess there might be some truth in that but Jade certainly never knew them.

Even New Year’s Eve, I’d only been seeing her for a few weeks so at that time I wasn’t... it wasn’t necessarily any big deal... So New Years Eve I was kind of going to go out with the guys anyway but she phoned me a few days before and told me, and I don’t know if any of this is true, that Tim Horan’s brother had been run over by a tractor and was on life-support in Brisbane. She kept updating every day and then on New Year’s Eve she said to me,

He’s died, we’re all going to Brisbane, you know, to be there and everything.

So she wasn’t with me on New Year’s Eve. Later I said,

What did you do New Year’s Eve?

She said, Oh, I don’t remember. What did I tell you?

And I said, It doesn’t matter what you told me, what did you do?

She said she thought she might have gone to a party.

She would always be on the phone to these people. She would have half-an-hour phone calls with Tim Horan. And she can’t of been speaking to anyone cause she’d say things like,

Tim, you played great last night. I watched the match. When you went past that guy it was wonderful, what a try!

Jade is back in the shooting gallery. She goes there nearly every day, every chance she can to get away from The Dealer and his new fun-but-fettered ways. The contact
she’s made at ASA, a young punk by the name of Baulko, tells her, when he sees she’s back, that it’s just like therapy this is.

He sets her up with a .22-gauge automatic handgun. He shows her how to load it. He collects the shells that drop out of the case as she fires cause that’s his job. It’s not his job to lean into her, to rub himself on her when he’s showing her how to fire: steadying her aim. But Jade lets him because he’s going to get her her very own gun.

Baulko thinks Jade’s a bit of a horny secretary, a bit of a Gold Coast slut. A bit of the kind of girl he wouldn't mind giving it to somewhere dark on a Saturday night wasted on E. But he doesn’t push it. Baulko just thinks about it while he’s getting stoned in the back room. Sometimes he jerks off imaging it’s Jade’s face on top of the ripe bodies on the posters his boss ripped out of some hardcore porn and put in the room for their mutual amusement. Baulko makes a few calls to get her what she wants and then he waits. They haven’t talked about how she’s going to pay.

It takes two weeks. It costs him eight hundred and fifty bucks and he throws in some ammo for free. Baulko can’t afford it but if it means having her in his grip he’s willing to risk it. He waits impatiently for her to turn up. She won’t give him her number. All day his leg twitches under the counter and he smokes an extra joint to try and stop it.

As soon as she walks in Jade’s knows she’s got him. She’s been coming in later and later and now it’s near closing time. Baulko goes through the motions of selling her a session pass and they retreat down the fluorescent hallway to the simulated ranges. The fire in the air, in the galleries around them, is winding down. He tells her that it’s all sorted. The gun he produces - hers. The ammunition - hers.
He watches her load the gun thinking about his payment, his cock nearly busting out of his pants.

Jade shoots like her taught her. Her hand steady. A steely eye. The alleys empty and Jade keeps firing. Baulko hovers behind her waiting for everyone to clear out. His boss calls to him from the registration desk. Tells Baulko he’s leaving. Tells Baulko to lock up. The Boss grins at Baulko, like he’s doing the kid a favour. He gives him a thumbs-up sign, makes a few lewd thrusts with his hips and walks out.

Jade waits for the echo of the heavy doors. She lowers the empty gun.

Baulko is impatient. He gets in close behind her, wraps his hand around her, goes straight and without ceremony to her boobs. Jade can smell his young sweat and the faint scent of stale cannabis. She tries to ignore it, pushing her ass back against him to keep him in. He makes a move towards her pants and Jade says: No, not here.

She knows where she’s taking him.

Baulko would have liked to fuck her in the shooting range but he’s not about to argue. She walks in front of him, gun still in one hand, bullets in the other. His eyes are transfixed by the swing of her hips. He rubs his cock through his jeans, worried about coming too quickly. When they reach the counter Jade turns to Baulko, puts a lingering hand on his shoulder, smiles and says:

Okay, let’s see it.

Baulko grins, just seconds away, he thinks. He fumbles with the buttons on his jeans. Jade watches him, liking the sleek heavy feel of the gun in her hand. He pushes her backwards towards the counter. She puts down the gun and the ammo. He pulls her top up hurriedly, shoves her bra without undoing it and starts licking her tits. Jade sighs, with boredom and exasperation.
She turns around and sticks out her arse so that Baulko can concentrate on her rear end, her hands flat against the counter. He gets one set of fingers between her legs, the other around the front of her thigh. She reaches for the packet of ammunition, unlatches the safety, releases the cartridge and loads it. Just like he showed her. He presses himself hard against her and asks how she likes it.

Yeah, it’s good, Baulko.

And he asks how she likes holding the gun.

Yeah, I like it, Baulko.

She whacks the cartridge in place, spins around suddenly, points the gun at Baulko’s head and tells him to step back. He looks at her about to laugh and then he stops. Jade aims the gun at his face.

Get in the office, she says.

Leaning forward, Jade pulls the ring of keys from his undone pants. She doesn’t have to ask him twice. He backs up. His hard-on dying. Eyes for the first time locked on her face. Jade shuts the kid in the office with all his dirty porn, turns the key, adjusts herself and leaves.

♠♣♥♦

We are east, in the canals. Jade is inside PJ’s house and I am outside, waiting for her signal. When my phone vibrates in my jeans I’ll know it’s time to come in. Jade’s explained everything to me but I don’t tell her I’ve been here before.

The computerised key I use to open the gate rests flat in my hand. Jade gave it to me. A new style of key, one I don’t remember. It opens a gate that’s twice the size as me but just as quiet. A high-tech slide against undesirables but still, I’m here, standing on the inside this
time uninvited; in his manicured garden, outside his peach monument to money because
what PJ has decided he desires just let everything else in.

I know what to do. I use the key to deactivate the sensor system on the front door.
From somewhere behind its solid brass handle, the lock kicks and a single red beam flashes.
I hold my breath. Crossing the threshold of a past I always try so hard not to remember.
Prepared for it, walking quickly by the tangible things I think might remind me. Trying not
to look. As I do I realise I need Jade’s directions because everything in PJ’s house has
changed. I recognise nothing. All of it is different - the furniture, the artwork, the appliances,
the floor coverings, even the bloody light switches are different brands. New insides for the
same shell. New toys for the same man. New sights and no expectations. The absolute
erasure starts to make me nervous but not enough to make me stop. I concentrate on Jade’s
voice in my head.

_Cross the white marble entrance hall and around the internal fountain. Take the hallway veering to
the left. Go all the way past the ballroom until you see the statue of Buddha. Take the second
staircase to the third floor. When you get to the top go directly into the room on the left. Do not shut
the door._

I continue to move through the house quickly, as if it is still a blueprint, trying not to
pay attention to the sensation that my body is shrinking. I have to ignore the fact that the
pictures on sideboards and walls no longer contain images of me and that I was expecting
them to; I don’t want to register that he used to consider me as family. I don’t want to look
at the new faces, the blondes, the big nights, the heavy friends that seem like incarnations,
the evidence of PJ’s recyclable human trends. The personal that isn’t personal, the fresh
details of his life lend so much gravity to my displacement. I don’t feel guilty. I feel replaced.
Everything in this house highlights his power and my subordination.
Upstairs now, I can hear the sounds of PJ and Jade fucking. The loud rhythmic crash of the bed-head thumping - the master bedroom at the end of the hall - the only room in this house I’ve never seen. PJ’s really giving it to her. Grunting like a dog. I don’t want the sound of it in my ears, the pictures in my mind. His gut hanging over her. The way her face goes when she’s coming. It sounds like she’s coming.

It sounds just like she does with me.

I turn right into the generous spread of PJ’s study. A bay window. The memory of him sitting sentinel at his desk kicks in. The back wall full of glass. The vision of me as a young punk. Invincible. Greedy. Stupid. I gaze down at the perfect blue of the pool, listening to the over-exaggeration of Jade’s moans. In the light reflected on the window I catch my eyes full of jealousy and a hard-edged desire for revenge. If I had a gun right now I’d kill him dead. Breathe. Hold something.

I grip the edge of PJ’s mahogany desk, look at the pool. The water is so still it gleams like blue glass. Everything in his world is just surface waiting to be cracked. Damage that comes like a smash in the night. Loud and visible by morning. Damage that ripples through lives like a body crashing through water. Like my body then, like Jade’s body now, like my head held under water by hands he had ordered till I thought I was going to die. The idea of smashing him back, smashing him apart has entertained me since but it has never been enough. And now that I’m here, in his new-fangled house, I see I was right to leave it. To wait it out. PJ has always been buffed by the protective film of his own surfaces. If you’re going to get him you have to get inside. A punch is just material, would undulate without any definitive impact. Like a rock thrown into a still lake. A hole that wouldn’t leave any trace.

Jade might want his cash - might want to prove her point - but I want to make PJ remember.
I need to move. PJ and Jade still going at it, like dogs, I decide, or lab rabbits. I take the stocking out of my pocket and pull it over my head; just in case, push back the wood paneling on the bar and reach for the safe. Punch in the new combination. Wait for the dull click of released steel. The door pops open an inch. I rest my hand on it, listen.

Fuck me, Jade is screaming, fuck me.

Like a porn star. And PJ is grunting, harder now, faster. The sound of it making me sick. I haven’t got much time. I pull wide the door of his safe. Waist level. Look in.

And the money is all there just like she said it would be. Tightly-packed bundles of twenty grand, two piles stacked. I want to take the lot but I stick to the plan. Reach for the top two from each stack, lift them off and stuff them down the front of my pants. As I do a flash of white catches my eye. I bend down slightly to get a better look. Reach in. Where the money was resting the edges of two playing cards stick out. My heart fires up, beats madly. I pull them out. Turn the first one over. A Queen. The second. A Joker.

I freeze.

Feel the hairs on my neck stand up, expecting hard hands. The rush of fear down my spine. Not watching my back.

I put the cards back hurriedly, trying not to notice the shaking in my hands. A thousand thoughts rushing. The noise of Jade and PJ dying down. Too quiet. I do everything quick but it feels like slow motion, like I’m stuck outside myself watching. Thinking about the end with every sound and I can’t get out of this plush white strip of a hallway fast enough.

At the gate I’m so panicked about the silence of the house, about the cards, about the sound of it opening that I wait for a car to go by. Then I dodge through. My hands twitching. Hardly breathing. The fear in my back.
I take side streets and mad diversions, hide in front yards and lush bushes, the money moving around uncomfortably in my pants. My eyes scan everything, taking the long way to my parked car, freaking out and not knowing whether I might have just successfully landed our first sting on PJ - or cashed in a death wish - underpaid.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

Outside PJ’s place Jade gets into a taxi, familiar and white with the yellow palm-treed doors. He watches her from the upstairs window. Makes a call. The taxi pulls away. A dark blue car rounds the bend, following her. PJ tightens the straps on his robe and walks calmly to the study. When he opens the door he knows. He is attuned to difference, to the smell of invasion. He opens the safe. Just two baggies gone and the cards left. He smiles. Curious.

The car follows Jade to the Moroccan, watches her exit, parks and waits. A call is put through to PJ. He answers on the third ring. The driver tells him where she’s at. PJ nods, puts down the phone, tightens the grip on his robe for the second time and laughs.

Upstairs The Dealer is frantic. Out of his mind. He yells at Jade. She asks him for the money. He throws the cash on the glass table. He’s sure PJ is on to them. He knows, he knows, he says. He knows it’s me - I mean us.

But Jade doesn’t listen. Jade is looking at the money and smiling. Post-fucked-him serene. She picks up the money and walks into the bedroom. Tells The Dealer they better get ready for clients tonight. That he better get it together. The Dealer follows in tight behind her. Jade splays herself out on the bed, exhausted, triumphant, a baggy of cash in each hand. The Dealer sits on the edge. His face full
of regret and a secret remorse - for what he has done, for what he hasn’t told her - his eyes close tense with the memory of his own unsaid past.

Jade’s head is turned away from him and her eyes are wide open. She is relishing her triumph over PJ in secret. She is pretending to be in this moment simultaneous with The Dealer. She is pretending to listen, to be vaguely sympathetic. To acknowledge his pain and his panic. But she isn’t. Jade just doesn’t register it.

Jade is concentrating on his finger, on the slow path it is making on the skin of her leg, at the things such a movement is telling her. Jade can tell The Dealer has lost the edge - that he has sprung back to a slacker tension. It’s all in his hands. Not what she wants but she lies there and lets him do it, she lies there like a pacified animal watching the light change and thinking to herself - acutely aware of everything - the late afternoon sun falling below eye level in their soundless vertical village, the bed washed in a gold haze, the darker corners of the room moving towards a liquorice blue night.

Finally The Dealer tells her about the cards. His hand clenching her shin.

Jade’s eyes flicker.

The Queen and the Joker.

She tells him she put the cards there. Just a little joke.

No need, she says, for you to get so upset. I thought you’d get it, thought you’d think it was funny.

Jade sits up, puts her arms around his back.

Silly man, she says. It was just a joke. You used to like my signals. I wanted you to know I was thinking of you. That I was there with you and not, she lowers her head for effect, in that other room.

She lies.
The Queen and the Joker.

The Dealer lets out a long breath. Relieved but not quite ready to believe her. Nevertheless…

And she knows he wants to leave.

She knows his fingers are soft because he is afraid.

The Dealer tries to persuade her to close up shop tonight. Jade says no. She would rather stay. She wants them to come.

And outside a dark car is parked, the passengers unhurried, waiting patiently for the catch to fall out of the tree.

♦♣♠♥

By eight o’clock I’m still feeling low, not up for the night ahead of us, so Jade gives me a pill to pep me up. I don’t ask her what’s in it or how much I should take, I just pop it whole - wanting a new headspace, needing different thoughts in my mind to shake off the niggling doubts of the day. I take a drink by the still empty bar waiting for it to come on. Jade sidles up to me occasionally, between getting things ready and chatting quietly with the slowly arriving crew. She rubs my back and whispers in my ear, and I like it but I don’t react. I want her to comfort me, I expect her to, but I’m not ready to forgive her - for making me do this tonight - for everything she makes me do. I want her to feel my distance, my quiet and removed capability, and I want the crew to feel it too, to shut up and slink around in deference, eyes averted. And they do; sharp enough to know something’s up without knowing what it is. I want them all, Jade included, respectful and on their knees. I want her to think, to consider just for a moment, how this place would be without me.

I look at them moving in the mirror behind the bar, wondering where they’ve all
come from, how I happened to be in charge of all of this so quickly, avoiding the hunched
form of my own reflection. Jade can’t hide how good she feels. My eyes flick over her, she
looks so beautiful tonight, radiant, serene. Like she’s gliding over the floor. Like she’s been
dusted off and buffed up. I won’t tell her how she looks because I don’t like her fresh aroma
of secrecy.

Jade gives me the ten-minute signal and I move on cue to the table. I won’t play the
host role. I want them all to see I’m serious, that I want a challenge, that I haven’t come to
do anything else but win. I get out the decks, cut them twice. Place them ready for the lead-in
display. The music kicks in. Startles me for a moment. I lean over, two hands resting on the
curved lip of the table, at home on the fake iridescence of green felt, ready, liking the feel of
my suit, the power of being here, in this arc, behind this table as the lights dim around the
curve slightly, leaving me in the light. Glowing in the corners of my eyes. Ready now. Ready
for anything.

♦ ♣♠♥

It’s a raucous night. The kind of night where we let things roll out. We stack up a fair stash in
my drop box, but I’m perked up, feeling generous enough to the open faces in front of me to
tip them some joy. Letting them win hands just to get them high. Not that Jade hasn’t been
doing a good job of that. Taking punters by the hand. Letting me and everyone else drink
much stronger and with much more juice than she ought to. Jade’s letting everyone off the
hook tonight.

The spread is good. Lots of skin. Jade’s girls are circling tonight tops down,
shimmering tassels dangling, tight black skirts hooked on their hips. Young girls with happy
eyes and eight blokes at my table with not enough sense to keep their hands off. We let the
I deal at a cracker pace watching Jade move as she turns suddenly towards the foyer. We’re not expecting anyone else and the doors are locked. I make a mental note to install another surveillance monitor near my table. The guy in front of me blows two grand on what I know to be a sure 22 and I like watching his face, how it flickers with regret before he buries it. I rake the chips with exaggerated swiftness into the box, before the sucker’s last move gives them all second thoughts:

Game on now, people. Who’s up?

I’ll play.

I glance over, startled by the voice. PJ is walking towards me. My vision vacuums. Tunnels on his form. He’s alone. I can see Jade a few steps behind him signaling me. She’s calling for a shut-down. I nod, gesticulating too quickly for the girls at the table to peel off. The punters notice my sudden distress, attuned as they are to the flow of my movement, but I’m too wasted and too disturbed to hide it or care. I know they rely on my resilience and my predictability, but this is too much. Heads turn, caught unawares by the hard direction of my gaze, by my shaking hand, my sudden movement. Why, I think, did she let him up?

Jade reaches my side at the same time PJ stops in front of the table. He greets a couple of people, in a fatuous way, ease oozing out of him, making everyone instantly uncomfortable, everyone self-conscious. Everyone knows him. There’s no one in this city is as infamous as PJ. I watch out the corner of my eye, turned slightly to Jade, relieved that he’s pulled focus.

He was talking a raid. I had to let him in. He’s got more friends than we do.

She seems excited. I don’t believe her.

I don’t suppose there’s any point in asking how he knows we’re here?
Jade shrugs off the insinuation and says,
Do you want to call it in?
No, not just yet, let me handle it.

Jade looks into my eyes with concern - not for me, I think, but for how far I’m gone.
I’ll be fine, I tell her. Tune everything down.

PJ is watching our exchange with interest, still standing behind the stalled forms of the other players.

So, is there room for me?

I baulk as every player on the table makes a move to accommodate him. So willing to relinquish their spot that I put out both my hands in an effort to try and to stop them. PJ raises an eyebrow. Jade springs to action.

Now, everyone, settle down, she says. Neil, Grant, why don’t you come with me - you’ve been avoiding me all night. PJ, you take front and centre and the rest of you, do you need anything?

There’s murmuring and shaking of heads, and some people even laugh nervously with her, but just like usual no one wants to speak up around PJ.

I come in on cue:
Let’s play, I say.
What’s the game? PJ asks, making no suggestion that he knows me.
Blackjack.
He sniffs, contemptuous. Do you mind if we shift to Poker?
We only do Caribbean Stud.
What is this, kindy?
He looks around, but I know the comment is meant for me.

No one responds. The punters know the Stud call’s not true. We play other versions,
Texas Hold ‘Em, High-Low Split, Razz, Omaha Hold ‘Em - whatever - but I don’t think anyone in this room wants a stand-off with PJ. They want him facing me. I’ve got the feeling PJ knows his twenty grand is in my drop box.

The atmosphere at the top of this tower has irrevocably slumped. PJ’s always had this effect, the ability to switch scenes and change rooms. People on the roulette tables start to peel off. I can see Jade ushering them out, hands on backs, proffering handbags and small hugs.

PJ looks at me:

Any limit on the wager?

I’m wary of what he’s doing so I tell him that it’s standard, double the ante.

He laughs and looks around. No one contradicts me.

Jesus, he says in exasperation, reaching for his first hand.

And I’ve got some idea of what he’s got. PJ hasn’t questioned the deck but I’m not happy about the switch, playing Stud gives me less chance to roll him, and less chance to pump up my own stock. It does, however, lower the likelihood of a major sting from him. I have to hope he gets bored quickly.

The first few hands run smoothly, fairly quiet. PJ bets small, feeling his way around and watching me. He keeps looking at the chips as they fall into the box. My hands cut into action, rifle the cards into the game, maybe too fast, liking that he’s watching, that he can see the swiftness of my cuts and shifts and plays. Trying to control the shockwaves of juice as it rips through me. No distractions in the room now. Jade hovers on the periphery with a few people who can’t contain their interest at the bar, sensing what passes for history between this town and the three of us. Ice in their glasses clinks. Chips down.

On the fifth round PJ ups his ante to one grand. The other players remain steady. Five in, I announce. Tap the table. Deal. I can see the two guys on either side of PJ have got
nothing. No trump cards which are all marked, slightly on the back. I don’t wait to watch them in their hands, I watch as they go in. They need straights, or flush runs and I can see by their eyes that this isn’t happening. They fold. Give up the ante. PJ, I know, has four trumps. A likely three. The rest of us one to two high cards each. They sit on the ante, PJ wagers the double. My burn card’s a seven of hearts, I use it to reveal the others the old school way. Flicking the hand over with the card and not my fingers, one by agonising one. A pair of tens. Three kicker cards. I raise the tens and line the side cards in order of concession. PJ lays down his hand. Three nines, a jack and a king. Three to one. Lead in two grand. The fear and the juice up my back.

I pay out, rake to the rack. Check and scramble the cards face up then face down. Moving in rapid fire and thinking about the last time PJ spoke to me about water under bridges and how the water caught in my throat. Thinking about the last time his eyes looked like they knew what was coming. I call the antes up. Sweat between my legs. PJ laughs. We cut, wager, shuffle and play seven hands in what feels like seven minutes, fast racks in, and the shaking starts. PJ’s chips stack up. He only sits once. I keep dealing, Jade in the corner of my eye burning like a vision, burning into me trying to keep something, some part of me on her when the shaking hits my chest. Heart throttling in over time, paying out big and flailing. PJ front and centre getting bigger in my mind, the glare of his loose white shirt like a fever in my head. Paranoid that he’s reading the cards, that he can see through everything, the backs of the cards, the front of Jade, all of me. Feeling that he’s reading me, that he’s looking to where my eyes drop. Sensing my reactions, the blink of my eye to wagers. The twitch in my fingers. PJ seeing through me. I drop the ruck. Grip the edge of the table and call out:

Clock request.

A time-out that’s met with silence. And no one knows what I mean.
The breath comes out of me hard and fast. I don’t look up. And the room is spinning. See Jade coming over to me. And what I mean is that I want all of it, the drugs the cards, the showdowns to stop. I hear PJ laughing.

A single bead of sweat falls off my downed forehead and onto the discards. His laughter. Her hand on my back. Rubbing up and down. All the players except PJ peel off and Jade is cooing at me, asking me if I’m alright, asking if I’m okay. And do I want to continue? And all I want is for her to shut up. This has got nothing to do with her. This is about PJ and me. Whoever speaks first loses.

One hand, he says. For everything in front of me and everything in the box.

When I don’t answer he says:

And let’s just say the ante’s her. He points at Jade. I turn to look at her, flicker in her eye.

Get everyone out.

Jade ushers. The room rings with the sound of their procession and the unspoken. I walk to the bar avoiding eye contact, grab a towel, catch my eye in the mirror. See PJ in the background, not watching me, head fixed straight. I wipe myself down, steel myself for the stakes. Turn around, watch Jade walking back into the room purposefully slow, like she can’t contain her excitement. The clipped sound of her shoes mute as she hits the soft carpet, and I wonder who it is exactly that she’s rooting for. And I don’t know if it’s against the odds or not, but I’d like to think she’s in this for me. For me and her. That’s my play.

Jade stands mock serious at the right-hand curve of the table. PJ doesn’t look at her. I look at them both and feel suddenly calm, in the eye, in the core centre of our storm. I join them. Produce a new deck, a pure deck. I want the gods, wherever and whoever they are, to decide it.

I shuffle the cards three times. Then box them. Placing ten cards off the top of the
deck on the table, running it until the deck is done, protecting the flash. I put the deck on the
table, clearly and obviously release it, then cut it onto the cover card with one hand. I deal PJ
first, then myself. My burn card’s a Queen of clubs. I place her face up on my stacked hand.
PJ looks at his cards. The wager already set. I can’t read him but he moves enough cards to
suggest he’s got something. Jade doesn’t move an inch, eyes boring - like she can hardly
contain herself - into the centre of the table. I can almost hear her racehorse heart beating.

I shift the cards into order. One clean, beautiful, heavenly straight. I don’t smile. Notice a
faint shiver run through Jade.

PJ looks at me and drops his hand. Two pair. Sevens and twos.

Straight wins but I don’t make a move to rake. Inside the relief is like rapids, like
white water running through me. Water that I’m not afraid of, water that I’m bobbing and
bouncing on with joy, loving the spray in my face and the fact that PJ’s given us back his
twenty grand and then some. I keep the kick internal. It’s hard to tell what Jade really feels. I
can she she’s tight all over.

PJ stands. Leans in to kiss her. She lets him, but only proffers her cheek. He puts his
arms around her, looking at me. His hands are in the small of her back. Jade presses against
his forearms as if to push him away, gripping her too tight. I don’t rise to the move.

The money’s nothing, he says over her shoulder. There’s always been other ways to
beat you.

I stay stoic, say nothing. He releases Jade and she looks at me curiously, both of us
wondering about last words. We watch, Jade and I, from the centre of the room, from the
right side of the table, from the red eye of the place we run, as PJ saunters away, and it’s not
until the door slams that we acknowledge the space between us. Jade jumps into my arms
and screams:

Ante Up
Let’s go out and celebrate.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

I look in the rear-vision mirror at the dark blue vehicle pulling up behind us two cars back. A Statesman with tinted windows. In the front I can make out the rigid forms of two men. I look at Jade. Her eyes are round with worry despite a weak smile. The night is clear and fresh, but that thing behind us is dark. I lock the doors. Jade jumps at the sound. I should have known.

We are on our way to Aces but I decide to back up, making a quick right when the light turns green so we can loop back along the highway towards home. The car follows. We drive in silence, Jade hunching down in her seat, her gaze locked on the passenger mirror. I try not to misread the faint gleam in her eye.

I drive slowly and they stay deliberately back, wondering if heading home, back to the tower, might not be the best choice. There’s good security, but we have to get in there first. As if reading my thoughts Jade says:

Where are we going?

I’m going to drop you off, okay? At the club. They won’t go you there, there’s too many people. I’ll turn around.

No way. I still have to get out.

And she’s right. At some point she’d have to find her way home.

A hotel then, I’ll drop you at a hotel.

That’s not gonna work either, they’ll just follow me up.

I look at her, grim with apology.

Jade, this could get ugly.
I don’t care. I can’t leave you.

But we can’t just drive around forever.

I know, I know, just relax and let’s think of something.

I pause.

I should have let him beat me, I say.

Jade doesn’t answer. The car turns off the highway to the right.

They’ve gone.

Are you sure?

Jade cranes her neck, trying to discern the car from the group of headlights behind us.

Maybe it’s just another warning?

Don’t even say it, Jade.

I speed up.

If they really have gone, I’ve got to get us back.

I promise, Jade says to me almost in tears, we’ll leave tomorrow.

I turn off the highway, cruise slowly through Surfers Paradise. All the people on the sidewalks make me feel better. But our street runs off the northern end of the highway, the quieter, darker end. I cruise down slowly, coming at the Moroccan from the esplanade side, both of us keeping an eye out for the car. I go round the block once and there’s no sign. I pull into the drive, taking the garage card off the dash. I let the window down. My hand shakes and I drop the card.

Damn.

Quickly, Jade says turning frantically around.

I put the handbrake on and open the door, lean out and grab the card. The security gate clunks open and we watch it, eyes bulging, as it slides slowly open.
Come on, come on, I say, hitting the wheel.

I see the headlights before the car. It happens in fast motion. The dark blue frame pulling up behind locking us in. My foot reacts before I do, ramming down hard on the accelerator, then braking hard to get round the first pylon; Jade lunges forward and hits her head on the dash. She screams. I realise I should have reversed instead, but it’s too late. I’m in the carpark now trying to find a space to turn but all the residents are in and there’s nowhere left to go but forward. Our space is at the end of the narrow gap, too far down. I can’t see anything behind me and then there’s a smash and glass rains down the back of my neck. Jade screams again, covering her head. The exploding sounds seem to come in waves. I shield my eyes. Another smash and this time the windscreen collapses in a cascade of cracked pieces, an iron rod comes through it hitting me in the chest. I gasp for air.

I shove the car in reverse and try and back up. The wheels squeal and the tyres crunch down on the smashed pieces. I go back but the gate is closing and I hit the wall at the end. The back of the car crumples. I can see them coming towards me, big, dark figures. An iron bar. My gearshift sticks. There are men beside me. My door bursts open. I’m dragged out of the car. I fall on the floor under the door. I try and fight them off but the driver’s window smashes and the glass comes at me again. Stinging my eyes. I can hear Jade calling for help. I’m dragged upwards, and I move my head to try and see her but a fist slams into it from the left and then another on the right knocks me back. I hit the car, bounce forward into something black. A chest. A wall. I can’t see anything.

A weight comes down hard and heavy on my back. My eyes are full of glass and white light. I try and throw a punch, kick out at them, but they’re moving me around, and there seems to be more of them and I can’t work out where anything is and the blood is pouring from somewhere on my head into my eyes. Another blow takes out my legs, a hard thing, the thick rod, and I fall down on the shiny concrete, feel my mouth smash, my head
split. The blood. I hear Jade screaming and I try and call out to her but my mouth’s not working. I cover my face and they go for the body, each blow like thunder. And then another.
Coming in One High
On the fourteenth floor Jade and I survey the pacific rim of our world. Straddled over the Pacific Ocean and too used to it. We have spent the last 24 hours cowering from the city, from its light and its people. Shaking off the claustrophobia, the stench of humanity and doctors and injury. Getting caught up inside some serious, sheer elevation. The metres of space we sit in are worth close to two million but the comfort doesn’t kill the fear. Doesn’t wipe out the strains of paranoia.

Jade has a single red cut on her cheek from hitting the dash. I haven’t fared so well.

I spend most of this day on the modular lounge suite, its deep suede cushions lush and comforting. The painkillers are starting to run out, I’ve thrown them down so quickly. I drink bourbon straight, through a straw, lots of it, to keep the throbbing down. I find it hard to talk. My jaw has been wired back together with steel and pins and sometimes I feel like the metal is grinding inside my head. Like I can feel it scraping against the bone. The skin around my eyes is turning a nasty shade of technicolour blue, red and yellow as the black fades out. I tried not to look at my face when I took a shower, but I can’t avoid the reflection of my body in the mirror; lean and fragile and full of red cuts, shiny under the hot water that runs down over the bruises so big they appear like squashed purple fruit spattered over me in patches. My right knee, knocked out of its socket, stays wrapped and tender. Jade rubs cream into my bruises, warming it up in her hands, and running it over me softly. I lay back and let her do it. I lay back and think about our next move.

Jade strokes her tentative fingers over my skin and I run scenarios, options and preferences through my mind. I want to take Jade to a new place where the coordinates will be different, where her desire to alarm me will not be as strong; an old city, a small town, anywhere where the future is more amenable to the past. And it seems possible - looking at her now, at her pale face without make-up, soft and natural and young - that she could learn to move on and forget. But with a woman like Jade you can never be sure.
She is looking at me tenderly, acting like she cares, fawning over me in remorse, but I can’t help thinking that part of her enjoys my hurt. That she wants it to happen. I have to keep telling myself this is not Jade, this is not her, this is merely a pacified version of a running hot girl.

I think about taking her to the kinds of cities where outlooks would be conventional, more dependable, more constrained. Places that would not persuade her or egg her on. But then I realise it was an old city, a small town that made her what she is. That taught her about hierarchy and the privilege of acquired power. An old city that showed her the danger present in the ingrained. That system scarred her and now the consequence of that history has been written onto me. And the Gold Coast knows how to use fallout, how to ameliorate injury; here all Jade’s pain has new uses. She is annihilating her history, all her uncomfortable baggage in fast-track time along the clean slate planes of my city.

The situation is hopeless.

I lay my head back on the cushions and close my eyes, failing to see where I can take her. Is there a place where the geography of her past wouldn’t make a difference? Where her plans for the future weren’t effusive? If I take her to the old cities will she fall again into a painful cycle of recollection, remembering what it was like to be overlooked, to be used, to be invisible? That would hurt her. But if we run to a new city more people will be hurt, I will be hurt and we will come to this point again: to a fated impasse where, bruised and battered, we find ourselves no longer able to fit into the world.

Jade tells me she keeps dreaming about sand, about it sucking her in.

♦♣♠♥

At night The Dealer sleeps in the next room away from Jade. His body needs time,
breadth and stillness; he dreams to the sound of the sea throbbing. This high world, disconnected from the ground, has rounded off Jade’s past. Inside they build a fortress of forgetting; bubble-wrap themselves in the safety of air and wind as if, being caught up high in this static simulation of flight, the world will never catch them. Hostages to their own cause held tight. Never venturing far. They lie packaged in these white rooms, caught in the glare of the horizon, meditating on the sun. Watching it rise, watching it fall. The blue sky turning to black. The windows in front of them, a drive-in world; a giant blue screen that everything disappears in.

In the daylight she tells him about waterfalls. Waterfalls in her home town and how the people went to them, religiously, to listen, to be near the power sound, power light of water. In the country or on the edge, here salt, there fresh; everywhere it beats infinite and fluid making us feel, she says, everything we’re not.

Jade tells him, living in a high-rise is like standing behind a waterfall. Your ability to see anything clearly is clouded by the spectacle of water. She tells him how lucky they are. That back home there was always a time when she had to leave, with the sound of it tinkling through her, shifting memories. Here she says the water is home; from the lounge room they can walk straight into it.

In the mornings when the sun is as bright as it gets here, the glass in front of The Dealer is full of blue. Through the broad clear panes it comes, like a hand through a waterfall. Searing retinas. The Dealer stands fragile and pale, steadying himself on the black marble benches in the kitchen, cold under his fingers. He always expects them to be hot in this white heat. But they are protected in here. He remains pallid and the benches remain cool. He hasn’t swum in weeks.

He imagines throwing himself in the water, not from the edge of the shore but from up high, from up here, flying out over the sea and plummeting; dropping into
its vast blue plane like a black and white sea bird; vanishing without trace into the salt sea depths below. Feeling it sting his wounds and cleanse him. But such simple mercies are not possible. Everything is just beyond them.

Jade will come to him, standing there on these burnished mornings and understand his thrall. She knows about the power that moves along surfaces; the ocean’s surface translating her secrecy and his fear.

At night the sea disappears and the city gains ascendancy, turns into a wonderland of light. From their three-hundred-and-sixty-degree windows they watch it switch on. Towers and floors of light. Swirling neon signs and the soft miniature glows of landscaped beams. Glowing apartments full of dark shadows, the black forms of women and men, moving through their rooms like dim apparitions. Fairy lights tinkling in trees. Seen from above. Streetlights and headlights and yellow buildings. Luminous gardens on roof tops. The heavy trunks of palm trees lit up in red, blue and green, sharp frond shadows climbing over walls and falling onto streets. The very edge of the ocean, reflecting back the light, like a wild iridescent flame licking at the shore.

And The Dealer and Jade will stand there missing it, gaze longingly at the cars and the people and the lights moving along the streets. Wanting desperately to be turning around kaleidoscopically inside it.

They do not know this bright white night will signal a shift, that inside secret fluorescent rooms data is being compiled, evidence is being tested. Investigative offices working after hours on a file that has Jade's name on it, triggered by complaint. Complaints rolling in, her house of cards set to fall. Every card with a number, a picture of her and a story. Police taking the cards off the piles and turning them over. Slowly adding up the numbers, aligning the suits, reading the
combinations. Getting closer by the minute to accounting for a full deck. Words like misappropriation, fraud, identity theft and impersonation are entered into notebooks, typed up on official sheets. The process of her unraveling, methodical and effective. A thoroughness that buys her nothing but time.

The Dealer can smell them coming. His back is developing a taut ridge of fear, but he knows Jade will do little to save herself. She will register arrest as only a tight restrictive film around her, continuing her charades because they are the only things she knows how to play. Jade isn’t in it for the money, she’s in it for life.

♦ ♣♠♥

Jade and I are sitting in the lounge room when the police come for her. There is a knock on the door, heavy and authoritative and it sparks our attention. I get the feeling this is not the Mormons, or the Salvos, or some geek from the Cancer Fund. I signal to Jade and her eyes narrow. We spring into action without any speech. As we move quickly, silently, a second knock echoes through the apartment but it doesn’t scatter our focus. I grab my coffee cup, my shoes and socks from the floor, and Jade smoothes the space my body has made in the couch. She sends me into the master bedroom. I am shutting myself in the walk-in robe when I hear her open the front door. The projected voice of one cop, a woman, reaches me easily. There’s no sign or sound from the second officer. The woman is informing Jade about allegations of fraud against her and to assist in their investigations they would like her to accompany them to the station for questioning.

And if I choose not to?

We have enough evidence to arrest you.

There is a slight pause while Jade considers this.
I’ll have to change and collect some of my things.

Do it quickly.

There is a pause, and then Jade appears in the doorway in front of me. She winks in my direction as the frames of both police officers fall into view behind her.

Go in with her.

The direction comes from the second cop. A tall guy with a hard voice and a disinterested air. And I can’t help but wonder if Jade’s fucked him.

The woman cop comes to the door as Jade starts rummaging through bags she hasn’t fully unpacked yet and the woman watches her every move. Beyond the doorway the male cop is surveying the apartment. Neither of the officers touches anything, but you can almost hear the shutters opening and closing in their photographic minds. We’ve been careful to hide most signs of the kind of place we ran up here, but the half-arc of my dealing table and the two circular wheels covered in calico kind of give things away. Jade likes to refer to them as the Bermuda Triangle of evidence, because she always figured her connections would protect us. But it seems the knife-edge balance between turning her on and turning her in has finally shifted. Someone’s woken up unhappy enough to rat her out.

When Jade removes her shirt the woman looks down, turning in the direction of my cover. My face, hidden behind the robe’s wooden slats, is tense in the effort of holding my breath. The cop’s face is responsive to nothing but I wonder how many red faces there’ll be when they haul Jade into the station.

Jade is ready. The female cop gestures for her to leave the room first. Jade hesitates and the woman says,

Go on.

I have to resist the temptation to call out to her, to let her know I’m here, but I know I can’t, I have to stay silent. From the hallway I hear the door close and the muffled sound of
Jade’s keys clanking up against each other as she locks it. The latch falls. I wonder for a moment if the apartment is being watched but decide her alleged crimes wouldn’t really warrant it. I stay where I am for a moment just in case one of them comes back. I don’t have much to fear - few of my things are in this apartment now.

I listen, ears pricked to the eerie sound of the wind lashing against the building. The rooms inside suddenly so quiet. Just the wind whistling as it rushes and curls through the wide gaps of the long balcony, pushing up relentlessly against the glass doors, trying to get in: the force of a strong afternoon southerly. I push open the cupboard door, step out gingerly, my heart racing. I walk quietly, lean my head round the door and peer into the lounge room. Empty. I move faster now straight to the front door. Squinting one eye to look through the peephole: the hallway is long, distorted and deserted. I breathe a sigh of relief but I know I don’t have much time.

I walk down the endless hallway that curves around the south end of the apartment to get my things. I put everything I have into two compact bags, strip the bed and put the sheets into another. I take the bags to the front door.

Inside the ensuite I collect all the bits and pieces I may have touched and throw them in a garbage bag. In the cupboard below the sink I remove the bandages and dressings and pill boxes and take them to the bin in the kitchen. I put all the dishes Jade and I have used in the dishwasher and turn it on. Then I get a soft cloth and begin the task of removing any trace of my fingerprints from around the apartment. I don’t rush it, going over all the areas diligently, erasing myself. And it’s like going backwards in slow motion over the past few months of my life. Wiping away all the traces of the good moments and the bad, remembering all the things that happened and wondering about the things that haven’t.

I find the vacuum in the hall cupboard and scrape over the floors, then I take the bag off it and put it in the bin. I take the ashtray off the verandah, empty it, wash it, and put it
back in the kitchen cupboard. In the centre of the room I look around, thinking about what’s left of me, about Jade and things ending. I take the rubbish out of the bin and wheel out the trolley from the spare room. I load it up with my stuff and the rubbish, unlock the door and back out slowly from the apartment, pulling the trolley behind me. The door whacks shut.

In the bright light of the elevator I look at my nearly-healed face in the mirror. These scars could be all the reminders I have left. The skin around my eyes is still off-colour and I rummage in the bags for my sunglasses. No one else gets in and the elevator hits basement level. I push the trolley out into the carpark, feeling a rush of anxiety, like there’s always going to be a hard-edged body round every corner. I pack the car hurriedly.

♦♣♠♥

Jade and her bail tab are picked up by PJ. The Dealer’s phone doesn’t ring. She knows she has to cut him loose to protect him. Jade decides to call PJ because he won’t turn her in and he won’t turn her away. He likes to participate in ruin.

When Jade has explained a tweaked version of her story, PJ cuts her a deal. The house he takes her to is one of his own. A rambling beach shack on part of the cramped gridlock of streets running between Surfers Paradise and Broadbeach. The first thing Jade notices when they pull up is that the windows are blacked out. At the front door PJ turns to her and says,

None of what you see or do here goes beyond these walls.

And Jade nods to show she understands him. PJ presses the intercom and to identify himself just says,

It’s me.

A moment later a buzzer sounds and does not stop until they are inside. Here,
two walls running either side of the internal staircase block any access to the lower levels of the house. The steps they take lead to a third level. From the narrow confines of the entryway Jade now finds herself in a huge room of which a bar is the central piece. It forms almost a full circle around the top of the staircase. There are thirteen other people in the room. Six men and six women paired off, and a woman decked out like Miss Tropicana behind the bar. The men are dressed, the women in various states of undress. There is enough music to smother intimate conversations.

Jade notices the windows only block the view one way. Outside she can see cars and families passing on the esplanade. From the edges of the building in front of them white caps of surf are rolling in on the beach beyond; the regular traffic of a summer evening. Through the tinted windows it looks and feels to her like another world.

PJ greets one of the couples at the bar but he does not introduce Jade or refer to her. She stands uncomfortably just behind him, staring at his shoulder, remembering other times. Every woman not held in PJ’s esteem is relegated to his whore. In return for Jade’s services he won’t add to her list of criminal charges and he’ll leave The Dealer out of it. She can see that the girl on the arm of the man is trying to catch her eye but, caught cold in an agonising moment, Jade has the sudden urge to cry, to touch PJ on the arm and say:

It's all been a mistake.

But it's too late for simplicity now. Instead, she looks down at her feet.

PJ shows her the bedrooms, to the left and right of the main room. He takes her to the back of the house and down an external staircase. Jade can see through windows as she descends. Brightly-lit rooms with women moving in them. Glimpses of running showers. All the time PJ moves in front of her as if he is barely aware she’s
there. He takes her through this section of the house so fast Jade scarcely registers it. First, a room with a series of couches, coffee tables, magazines, and a huge television. Mirrors on the tables for reflections and the cutting of white powder. Next, a long hallway and on either side, a series of small rooms with single beds. Some rooms occupied, others dark. Inside these pigeonholes, women sleep, curled in bland bedding. At the end of the hallway, The Dressing Room, a wide rectangular room covered in mirrors. On the edges of these mirrors bulbs run in fluorescent lines, some of them cracked and full of dust. PJ leans his weight on one of the chairs facing the mirrors and begins to talk to Jade:

So you can live here, or you can come in, whatever. It's up to you. You'll make more money if you stay though, and considering, it's probably your best bet. The cops are cool. The girls will show you how it all works…

Jade stops listening. Her eyes have been distracted. Her mind infected by colour. Colour reflected back and forth in the mirrors, caught in every movement of her eye. And she realises it's everywhere; the colour and the cloth. Hundreds and hundreds of costumes stacked on racks, thrown over chairs, hanging from hooks in the walls and dangling from brackets bolted into the ceilings; innumerable fantasies waiting for carriages to fill them; a theatrical invasion of gloss and glitter; a kaleidoscope of black PVC, hot pink mesh, rayon and rose lace revolving against whitewashed walls. The Dressing Room. The place for make-believe.

PJ starts stroking her breasts. She doesn’t pull away, soothed by the prospect of so much pretending. She guesses that even if she worked here every night for the next year she would never get through them all. This is how she sees it. Disguise as solid preparation for cruelty. PJ leaves, suddenly, and Jade is so enraptured she forgets to enquire about the rate of pay let alone the rate of his interest.
I get back my job at The Casino, and I’m caught in the downside of false advertising.

Without Jade, there’s no fun anymore in this arena of money. There’s no laughter in these people who wrestle with their abilities to stop, no spark in these punters who look more harrowed to me than they ever have before in their stupid and relentless pursuit of chips. I watch, impassive, as they dump whole towers of them in frenetic randomness, driven by their own bizarre rituals and superstitions. Anything to have an edge. And when they get what they want it only justifies the pursuit of more. They never know when to stop.

I search the tables, desperate for laughter. For women that look like her. Not Jade Weston or Anthony’s Jade or Cassandra Higgins. But the girl I know. Jade. Jade Baker. I focus on any resemblance. Wind up women who laugh, have fun in honour of her spark, but eventually the bug bites the best of them. Even in the bright faces of those who revel, the serious battle flickers, none of them play like she does.

The days drag on. I see or hear no sign of her, more and more convinced she’s gone. Gone like my inspiration for the game beginning to waver. My pit boss tells me I’m becoming unimaginative. Jaded. And he’s right on the mark. I’ve lost sight of her and the reasons I ever exalted risk. Even in the two-up ring, a place I usually enjoy, the punters are coming over abusive. Protecting their antes like babies. On the gaming floors they swim around me like maternal whales with dead calves hooked under their protective arms; carrying those stashes until they disintegrate.

Sometimes, I pretend she might come back. That she’ll walk across the floor like she did that first day and ask me to hit her. Just like she always does. Sometimes, when I look up, the world is spinning above me, and in the circles of mirrored roulette wheels I watch the
distorted faces and bodies twist. The Casino, the carnival, cut up and flipped on its back. And always on the edges the fruit machines taunt me; the people playing them, zombies to the light, and when their cups are empty, they try and return the goods they bought before they sunk their losses; cigarettes, magazines, clothes; their fingertips black from handling the coins that slide endlessly into steel slots. Their upper bodies, arms and fingers, so sore they find it difficult to open their wallets.

Things get more desperate when the night starts to slide to morning. Peripheral tables shut, the outlook gets dismal. Now it’s the punters and the croupiers trying to pick up, but I go straight to my car. And drive around the streets looking for her. Looking until my eyes, until the black, start closing in.

♦♣♠♥

At 2:00am in the morning she calls. Her voice like a ghost at the end of the line. She asks me to come and get her, so I pick her up outside the house with the black windows. I don’t ask about the house and she tells me to keep driving. I drive until her heart calms down.

We check into a motel over the border. I have to work in a few hours, but like everything else this pales in significance to her return. I would have gone anywhere with her but now there aren’t many places left for us to go. Maybe for us there never has been.

Inside the cheap room Jade breaks down. I hold her in my arms until the tears subside, lay her on the bed, take off the silver high-heel shoes she wears. I start to rub her feet, but she flinches and says,

Don’t.

She looks tired. The thick make-up she wears is smeared across her face, mixed up with the residue of her tears. Under the paint her eyes are ringed in grey. Her hair and her
dress reek of cigarettes, cheap perfume and secondhand sweat. Her body is motionless, flopped on the bed like a rag-doll, her face intent on reading the ceiling, and it all points to PJ. Jade’s silence is one of shock. I don’t have to guess at the things he’s made her do.

I'll run you a bath.

Thank you.

I try to make the bath hot, thank god, the motel plumbing is up to it. And I find a complimentary sachet of bath gel, or whatever, and swirl that into it. When the bath is nicely full, I leave it for her to get into. In the room, I don’t turn on the television or make any noise to disturb her. In a little while she calls for me. I take in a cushion and sit on the floor, my back resting against the basin cupboards, slippery with steam. Jade looks better. She’s ready to tell me, but I’m not sure I want to hear why there’s so much history in such a young face. But if I’m going to help her I need to know what we’re running from.

He was there, she says.

Who?

Denis.

And this I’m not prepared for. I had expected her to tell me about the cops, about the charges, about the crimes of PJ, about the house I picked her up from, but not about Denis. When I don’t say anything she looks into the gel bubbles I made for her and blows some off her chin.

I know you know about him.

And I nod because that doesn’t matter.

What happened?

We had a big party coming in. All the girls on. A group of guys from Sydney. Big time. When they hadn’t arrived by ten PJ started getting pissed off. He’d blocked off other stuff for this. Finally, about twelve, they arrived. Drunk. Out of control. We could hear them
from downstairs smashing things and they were wrestling on the floor. PJ threatened them with a no-show and they quietened down, a bit. We had to wear those ugly fucking shoes, and masks - masquerade half-ones that left our mouths free. At first I didn’t want to wear it, but thank god, I did. We went up and I didn’t see him at first. They all look the same, you know. When I did see him, it was too late.

Jade stops, and I reach over to her. Run my hand on the back of her dripping head. Her body starts to shake and tears fall. She sits up in the bath to hug me and the water comes with her, soaks through my shirt, drips down my chest and my back, forms puddles on the floor where I’m kneeling. A cloud of steam rushes off her body into the air above us. She cries into my shoulder and it feels like all the water in the world is here. And I think about how this substance, this water, has always been between us, in front of us, surrounding us, staining us, making deeper the colour of our eyes. Making her slippery like she’s always been, but soft like never before. Tears and water, salt and skin. Our city and our time in it. The canals, the beaches, the endless ocean views. Over my back her grief washes from her clinging hands, and I feel like it’s dripping inside me, into my spine, unraveling vertebra by vertebra in slow-release relief. For me the weight of many months is giving way; for Jade, it’s been a much longer vigil. For too long we’ve paddled on the edges of Jade’s broken water. Finally, now, we let it go, we let the dam break…

He fucked me, she says, and he didn’t even know it.

Drenched, in a damp room, I think about this, about him on top of her, inside her, without knowing. Her teenage love, her lifetime prospect. His sometime after, Gold Coast good-time girl. And I wonder how that would all feel. Sex with a lover made a stranger. Your body faded from their memory. Your body older, less pubescent, less fresh than even you remember it. She was sixteen. Things moving backwards. That memory had her on a string; everything she did, everything that defined us led back to it, the same string he had snapped
clean long ago. The realisation that the thread, which coiled itself so dramatically in her mind, meant nothing to him, no longer led to him, was predictable, but shattering still. She hadn’t expected ever to face it.

And now, hugging her wet in this motel bathroom, I can’t help thinking what might have been if she’d spoken, really told me about it, about Denis and the whole of it. If I hadn’t had to go and find it out for myself.

It doesn’t matter. It’s the end of the road. Jade has chosen the mask as she has always done. Waiting for recognition that will never come. For Denis, her real face was never enough.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

Later, when the bath has drained, taking with it all the dirt on the outside, and we are seated on the shabby couch in the threadbare room, I hear about the rest. The stuff that can’t be wiped away.

It’s serious, she says. Forty-eight counts of fraudulent activity.

And Jade believed in every one of them.

I listen to her talk about everything she’s done, and it doesn’t concern me. What does worry me is that she has no place to land, that she has forgotten her way back. Everything Jade has set up is winding, coiling back on her like a hot wire. She can’t stop it, but she can’t let go.

All of Jade’s stories, all of her words, are coming back to her in the dark. Jade doesn’t know why they’re mixing up. She can’t see where she’s supposed to stop and gather them. There’s no place for her to collect herself and all her nervous names. Jade is thrown over her words, caught in a void where everything has become so real it has vanished. Jade has run
out of space; now there is just this endless pathological slide. She tells me fifty grand is all she needs to put it right. But she can’t start again, can’t strike herself up again against a brick wall. Jade’s run out of fire. It takes something red-hot to steal. To make it seem like a happy accident. Nobody will remember how she was before; they will only remember her afterwards, after the end of the slow burn. A whole town will never forgive her.

Jade’s fragile state should make me nervous, should make me panic, but it doesn’t. I’m beyond fantasising that what I have to say to her, or what I could do to help her, might make any difference.

Nothing Jade plays with ever forms a recognisable hand.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

In the late morning, Jade decides she wants to plead insane, so we pack up the small amount of stuff we have and check out, closing the door on our last remaining vacancy. In the car I try not to think about what this is going to mean for her, and I just keep driving south and west. On the way back to her mother. Along a lonely highway full of travelers on route to somewhere else.

And this is what people do, I think, when they’ve had enough, when they’re fed up; they take a holiday from the familiar so they can cope with going back. Jade and I share this road with these holiday-makers in their loaded-up cars and caravans, but there’s no joy in any of it for us; the crucial difference is: we’re not taking time off, we’re running out of it.

Jade sleeps, and we speed along the coastal stretch of road which unravels the eastern side of our country, all those towns I’ve forgotten until I’m passing through them again. It seems everything I have done since I met her is related to running away. From who she was, from where she was born, from what she’d become, from where she might end up. All this
running, to change the circumstances of her name and everything it meant. I sigh with resignation. Wondering why it has to be like this, why after all this time the only option left for us is to take her back. I don’t bother to think about what it is I have always run from.

Jade wakes up. I don’t tell her what I’m thinking. I wager she won’t want to hear it.

But she knows. She has always known.

Jade turns her face to look at me and I move my left hand, my dealing hand, towards her. This time, all my fingers are offering is a truce.

♦ ♣ ♠ ♥

In the middle of her mother’s town I stop the car. I make a move to take her in my arms, awkwardly in the bucket seats of the Celica, and kiss her. She doesn’t kiss me back. Her mouth is numb, her lips dry from the dusty wind, and her hands on my shoulder are shaking. Jade pulls away from me and uses my mobile to call her mother. I try not to look around at the place I’m leaving her, at the tired greyscale streets. She hands the phone back to me and says,

She’ll be here in ten minutes. You should go.

I pop the boot. Jade steps out of the car, and when I start to join her she says,

No, stay there, I don’t want anyone to see you.

And so I wait. Jade puts her bags on the kerb, and then she comes over to the driver’s window, a wrapped bundle in her hand. She passes it to me. Something heavy, in a soft cotton pillowcase. I open it.

A gun.

Can you get rid of it for me?

Why?
I decided not to use it.

I don’t like the connotations of the gun or what she’s said, but delving into Jade’s motivations is just not worth it anymore. I can’t ask her to explain. I just nod my head.

Jade looks at me with a pair of smiling eyes, and then she walks away.

I U-turn the car cautiously. And it will be as if I was never there.

Driving away on the long road out of town I can still see her standing on the kerb, sunglasses on, a bag in her hand, looking so harmless and innocent and young. And the vision is always the same; looking at her you could never know just what she’s capable of. I think about it, all the lies, the delusions, and the gun - sitting under the passenger seat, full of bullets probably, and unexplained intentions. I wonder if it was it set for me. Perhaps for PJ? What’s worse is the idea that she could have had it set it for herself.

I drive north, wanting the main road.

I wonder what changed? I wonder most of all about the stuff I never knew or will never know, and looking straight ahead, I realise people never end up resembling their stories, what happens to us is never a climax. Our stories are never finished, ended or rounded.

They fade in, they fade out.

I reach the juncture to the highway. Two green road signs with white words point to my choices. There’s no one behind me and for a moment I stay stuck and I know why, I know what’s going on. My pain is willing me left, to head south to Camille; to that cold town full of her warmth, all her languid and placid comfort.

It’s a simple choice, but eventually I choose right.
The Element of Ruin

And the forgetting defines me that's what defines me.

– Ani De Franco
No one can shut Anthony up. After a few cocktails, a few good shots, a bunch of beers, even wine - whatever's going - he'll stay on that bar stool, till he feels like he's finished; the time on his watch-face playing him all sorts of tricks. He'll stay on and tell you the whole story no matter who you are. Rabbiting on and on; not worrying about how he comes over, what the stakes are or just who might be listening.

It was actually the Variety Club woman that actually, eventually started the tumble of what happened. She'd been chasing the money and we kept telling her all these excuses. Jade made these stories about, oh the cheque book this and her father that. And eventually she said to me, her father's meant to own Masterman Homes, and the Variety lady said to me,

> Look, her father's meant to own Masterman Homes?

I said,

> Yeah, yeah, Masterman Homes.

And she said,

> No, he doesn't. She goes, I phoned them. They did know somebody of that name, he'd worked there three years ago as a building supervisor.

I confronted her. I said I'd checked loads of things, which I hadn't and um, she stormed off and said,

> I can't believe you don't believe me.

All along in the relationship she'd say things like...

> Look, I don't know what kind of people you're used to going out with but I never lie.

...you know, and put this huge guilt trip on me if I ever doubted anything. And so she ran away from the confrontation and then later that day I phoned her and she came clean to some stuff.

It was her Father. Yeah, he was a building supervisor three years earlier. There is no money anywhere. Either parents. Just normal people. So she came clean to some of it. We then realised that...
she must have taken the cheques because that was one place she could have got the money to live the lifestyle she did.

I said to her,

Look, we’re going to the police. I’m just letting you know.

I said,

But if you come clean and tell me that, you know, you did it, we won’t go to the police, you’ll just have to repay the money.

Thirty thousand dollars worth of cheques.

She eventually said,

I did it.

And she admitted it.

But all the rest is true, she goes, because I was just trying to impress you. I wanted you to think...

This, that and the other...

But my mother does own all this, but she’d die if she knew. My father is rich but he’s a drug dealer…

Was the next line right?

…So his money’s bad.

And this that and the other. Um, it turns out then, she paid some money for a couple of weeks, then she doesn’t and doesn’t answer calls and things. Then we start getting hundreds of calls; people chasing her for money. Um, I stopped seeing her at that point. I mean, she offered...

She came to me one night late, drunk, saying that she couldn’t pay back the money. She had no money. She’d be a prostitute for us, to pay off the debt, do anything to stop us going to the police or something. And then, as I said, all these phone calls started happening and I phoned her mother. I phoned both sides of the family. This was the final thing before we were going to report it to
the police. Because we still believed, she said,

This is a one-off, I just wanted to, you know, I never been in this situation, I can’t believe what I’ve done.

So we thought, we don’t want to ruin the girl’s life completely. Phoned her parents and they both said,

I’m not surprised.

The story on it as far as I know is she tried to commit suicide when she was about sixteen. We can’t really see a particular reason why, her parents seem nice enough, though separated, and she’s got a sister who I’d never met because Jade told me she was a pilot in the RAAF and that’s why we never saw her. Of course, this isn’t true, but she’s quite normal and all that kind of thing and her mother says she’s fine. A really nice girl. If you gave her ten dollars to go to the shops she would come back and say,

Oh, it only cost eight dollars fifty, here’s your dollar fifty back.

So Jade’s really different from her sister. But I don’t think, as far as I know, that she was mistreated or anything, but I don’t know enough. And then she was in psychiatric treatment for a few years. And then she moved up here. And they said they weren’t surprised. It turns out that absolutely nothing at all, in any way shape or form was true. From her age, to insurance documents in one age, and different licenses in this and that. I’ve had the detective here who’s got a big file on her now for this fraud and that fraud. She’s got finance from about ten different places, fraudulently. I don’t know what they’ve diagnosed her as. She then started...

The CJC are after her and have got her because she’s been impersonating a CJC officer. This is the story. This happened after we split up, in about six weeks before it all fell apart for her. She was going through people’s handbags. She took an apartment and told the people that she worked for the CJC and there’s a phone number to check her references. They phoned and yep the guy who answered said she works, she earns thirty-whatever a year. The manager was still
suspicious, be actually called the CJC out of the phone book and it wasn’t true. So she obviously had some friend in on it or something. After she split up with me she dated a lot of policemen, she became like a police groupie. And then she was seeing rich guys, and a pretty dangerous rich guy who actually coughed up a load of money for some stuff. She um... And literally she was wearing the shortest skirts you’d ever seen in your life now and it was mind-blowing. She went to this place, moved in. She was then arrested eventually there. Um, and she told the arresting officer she worked for the CJC. She was due in court again last Friday. There is umpteen stolen things, fraudulent this, that and the other. Plus all the CJC stuff. But she left. The day after she was arrested she phoned me to say good-bye. Car had been repossessed, all sorts of things. And she went to Tamworth and checked into the mental hospital there.

Um, we got a note from her recently saying she’s going to be there four weeks. Then she hopes to get a job and start repaying the money. I mean, I don’t, it’s just, if it wasn’t so... You know, when I tell anyone the story, yeah? It’s like we must have been so, I mean, you think what sort of gullible idiots are these people to believe what she said? But Abbos, my partner and I, have been in all sorts of sales for an enormously long time. We’re incredibly street-wise; we deal with people all the time, yeah? And all three of us were taken in absolutely hook line and sinker. Steve, even when he found out she’d lied about stuff, I said to him,

You realise this means she stole the money?

He went,

No way. She may have lied but there is no way that that girl would ever steal.

But that’s all she did. I mean, from people who cared about her, not just strangers, yeah?

But then again, to a certain degree, I mean, she took seven hundred dollars from my apartment one day and she bought me three hundred and fifty dollars worth of clothes the next. So to a certain extent the money she stole from us she spent on us. To a certain degree.

It’s strange, I mean, I didn’t need her to be rich to go out with her in the first place. It
started before me as well. There’s nobody she won’t take the money from.

Amazingly, I spoke to the detective and there’s like thirty or forty things in consideration.
I said to him,
What’ll happen to her?
And he said,
Oh, she’s done so much she could even end up in jail.
And it’s like wow. I mean, in my mind she’d have to go to jail and be’s like she could.
Sure, you can do a lot in Australia and especially here in Queensland without having to go to jail but I was actually saying that she obviously is mentally unstable, completely. And I don’t know how it works but I would expect that she would be evaluated, rather than at the moment she is obviously under voluntary treatment, that she would be under compulsory treatment. So then again her mother said that the hospital isn’t really suitable for her because they are all real whackos. From the point of view they don’t function, yeah? Whereas she functions very well...absolutely, you know; fine, if you didn’t know that everything coming out of her mouth is a complete lie. I said to her when she phoned to say good-bye,

Do you realise what you are doing, are you lucid, do you believe you’re rich?
She said,
Oh no, it just got a bit out of hand and I only need fifty thousand dollars and I can put it right.

She was still worried about how she was going to put it right rather than facing up to what she’d actually done. Once I said to her early in the relationship,

What’s the worst thing you have ever done?
She had to think about it and then she said,
I went to New York to see my friend and I told my Mum I was in Sydney.

You know, this was like, that was the worst thing she could think of doing, right? Plus it
was completely untrue anyway cause she’s never left Australia. Even when she said she was coming clean she wasn’t.

She’d go,

Oh, that bit’s true.

But it wasn’t. Even now her mother was saying she got a computer from somewhere, we think she’s rented it and she sold it for twelve hundred dollars. And they’re going to her,

Where is the computer?

It’s at my friend’s house.

But they know for a fact because they know the guy who’s bought it.

They’re going,

No it’s not.

And she’s going,

Yes it is!

And they’re going,

No it’s not. We know the guy who bought it.

Oh, okay.

But it’s a bit ridiculous anyway cause they know twenty-eight million things worse than that she’s done. Do you know what I mean? So if you’re worrying that someone is going to think badly of you, I mean, once it’s all collapsed you’d want to purge yourself. It’s collapsed so listen, oh by the way I did this and I did that and I did this and I did that. But that’s definitely not her way. She will stick to any lie that you can’t actually disprove.

I’m overdue to call her mother and find out if she did go to court. Find out what happened, and find out what the doctors are saying. Her mother was saying that the doctors were saying treat her as an outpatient. The trouble is, at the moment, like you’d let out a violent person, they’re going to go and hit someone. If you let her out, if she wanders around, she is going to scam someone, you
know? She’s going to suck somebody in and do something.

Her mother said to me, she goes,

When we first phoned her she said we're not going to bail her out, we've done it too often and we haven't got any money.

And all this kind of thing, but she obviously did have concern.

She feels lost as to why, I think. She said to me,

I would never admit this in court or something but she is just not there. There is a gap somewhere.

Right? This is her mother. I mean, I'm a gonner. I am. I mean, how am I going to trust anyone ever again? You know, I deliberately went for a girl who was safe, lovely, caring, kind, old-fashioned, good values, etcetera, etcetera. And was one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees burnt, completely the reverse. So I must admit I'm seeing someone now and I have to really be careful not to become really suspicious and read through their mail. Just to find out, just to know.

I've got this speech,

Do anything you like, be as horrible as you like to me, but please just tell me the truth about it. You know, that would be fine.

But um, I said to Jade,

Next time I'll read about you in the newspaper.

And she goes,

I don't think so. Maybe in the obituaries.

But she never struck me, you know, she was never even particularly depressed. It wasn’t like she was, you know, the change as well from when I first met her to even the month before that to now, if you saw her in the street you wouldn’t recognise her. People don’t.

She said,

Oh, I saw Timmy.
I asked him and he said,

Oh, that was her? I said to my girlfriend is that? And she goes no, no.

You know she didn’t use to smoke and she started smoking.

He goes,

She looked like a prostitute. That was never Jade.

So I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going to happen to her.

♥♥♥♥

The longer I am without Jade, the more surreal she becomes. I remember her like the spin of two dice, variable and too close to call. I turn her into my music, my movies, my escape. I think about her in celluloid. Read her spread out like a tabloid. Have conversations with myself about where we’ve been and where she’s at and how much those two things might go together. I try not to picture her as someone committed. As someone on the inside. I picture her as someone given over to her own kind of bureaucracy - a star system - her own studio and movie lot, where the only executives in charge of her ability to work are the ghosts of men who still send her flowers.

There are no refunds here.

I think about all of Jade’s scenarios, all her lonely monologues, honed and delivered in The Casino, in the emptiest theatre in the world, because I understand that the finest illusions are actually real. She is the best live act I had ever seen. My head’s like her scrapbook. Now Jade is just an autograph in my hand.

Every time I roll a dice, every time I turn a card, every time I flush chips down a hole, I think of her, especially. I move automated now. Take away Jade and you take away the risk. Take away risk and you take away the impetus: to gamble and to live. All our lives
roll back to before her. She remains infamous.

Jade: an inferior or worn out horse, in reprobation usually a playful woman. Something you wear out with hard work.

Jade’s back in the white manor, Camille’s back behind the bar, Anthony’s headed for jail and I’m back at the table, getting behind the stick.

No more bets.
Camille struggles with her bags to get out of the taxi. She has, she thinks, brought too much. How brown and dirty her luggage seems here, how covered in dust. Camille rights herself under the glass mezzanine of the resort. Stands still for a minute. Looks up. Looks through the glass longingly, up and up, following the sheer elevation of the building rising like a bullet. Gazing in wonder at what she thinks could be the tallest tower, anywhere, ever. Her head stretching right back, swaying on her feet, just to see it. The building pierces all the salt air, and the salty sky. Camille smiles, wanting, more than anything, to be on top.