

‘To Ray’

Josie, 2015

Ray has a thin face and black glasses and he plays the double bass and I don't know why I always found that funny, but I did. It suits him because it sounds like his voice, all low and gravelly and soft. He drinks five cups of coffee a day, and it's funny cause he never used to like coffee, not until he quit drinking and he needed something to get him out of bed in the morning, since Hattie wasn't there anymore. I meet him at the café on the corner and buy him one, well I borrow money from him to buy him one, every morning at seven-twenty. Seven-twenty to eight-ten, and then my bus comes and I go to work, if I'm working, and he goes home or goes to the bookstore if he needs something. Sometimes at home, when he goes home, he sits and reads all day. He likes Faulkner. If he's reading all day, he's reading Faulkner. Sometimes, sometimes, he gets the train out to the beach, like we did when we were kids, and just sits, not reading or smoking or even drinking coffee. Just sitting. Most people have more elaborate schedules than that, or at least more varied, but not Ray. Ray who's lived in the same apartment since I can remember; Ray who buys new shoes every three years and always buys the same ones. Ray, who keeps me grounded, if only because he won't come up to meet me so I have to go down to him.

Hattie, 2003

“Seriously, why is it so cold?” Maggie shrieks as we leave the bar, heading down Hunter street. The wind whips our hair in our faces, which are scrunched up in protest against the icy night. “No, seriously – why?” Josie throws back her head in a fit of laughter.

“Please. This isn't cold Mags! I'd wear a bikini in this weather!” As if to demonstrate, Josie's coat slips off her thin shoulders into the gutter. She doesn't even notice, leaving Wills

to pick it up, rolling his eyes. “This is fucking picnic weather!” She throws her arms towards the sky, spinning onto the road. “Ice cream weather...” She trails off, and stands staring upwards, breathing heavily, refusing to move until Wills actually drags her off the road out of the way of a very irritated cyclist.

“Jesus, can you at least try and make it home without dying, Josie?” Ray’s arm tightens around my waist; a warning. But Josie doesn’t even hear, or pretends not to hear, and skips out ahead of us. Maggie’s right – it is cold, but I hadn’t really noticed. Ray never feels the cold and so of course Wills won’t admit that he does. Josie stumbles around ahead of us, until Wills catches up and lets her jump on his back, like a freakin’ five year old.

Maggie stops dead in her tracks, eyes wide. “Oh god,” she says, “I have work at eight.” We all burst into laughter, like nothing in the world could be funnier. If there’s one person who can’t handle a hangover, it’s Maggie. Wills wrestles between amusement and disapproval – always the model employee – while Josie and I fall into hysterics, unashamedly. Ray just laughs softly, raising an almost empty bottle to his lips.

Wills, 2015

Life is so different now. Not completely worse; in a lot of ways it’s better. Nothing is ever as amazing as things used to be, but nothing hurts too much either. Nothing feels quite as fresh. When you’re young there’s so much uncertainty, too many possibilities in any given day. Now, I get up and I go to work and I know what I need to do and who I’m going to see, and I just... get on with it. My friends and I – those of us who are left, anyway – don’t live in each other’s pockets anymore; in fact we hardly seem to see each other at all. There’s just so much more to do now. I don’t remember exactly when that happened, but I guess it was to be

expected. You grow up, you grow apart. Especially given the circumstances. I make an effort to see Josie regularly, Maggie and I both do, just so that *something* in her life will be regular. She hasn't changed, I guess. But maybe those are your only choices – move on and lose things, or stop moving altogether. As much as I wish life was as interesting as it used to be, the alternative isn't exactly tempting. I could have ended up like Josie. Or worse – like Ray.

Josie, 2015

When I don't feel like going to work I just go down to Ray's studio near the beach. It's big and dark and cold, which suits him cause he's a little rough around the edges too I guess. I like to sit in the corner and watch him do his thing, trying not to get in the way. Mostly he doesn't even realise when I come in, he's so focused. When he's done we get pizza and eat it sitting in the gutter, then we get the train home together. Ray doesn't mind when I skip work; he gets it. Sometimes I go there for days in a row and then Maggie finds out and makes me go back to work. She doesn't get me like Ray does.

Maggie, 2015

Ray met Hattie on the first day of uni. She ran into him and almost saved him. For years they were practically one and the same, and that was how everyone knew them. Only Josie knew pre-Hattie Ray, and if he was anything like post-Hattie Ray we didn't miss much. Together though, they seemed perfect. She was tough and funny and he was dry and calm, and sure they had their problems, but who didn't, we were just 'working things out', right?

No one has the guts to admit, at twenty-two, that two bottles of red a night is really a symptom of something bigger and that people don't change, not where it counts. So I guess we had it coming. We should have seen it coming. We thought everything would work itself out, that we'd 'grow up' and everything would get easier.

One day she just packed up and left. I guess she just got tired of us, of him mostly, as much as I hate to say it. She said she needed space. Or was it time? Either way it's been nine years, 1000 kilometres and two lines in an email sincerely from Mrs Harriet Parker, and we know she's not coming back. I think maybe we knew that all along. But not Ray. It kind of broke him, I guess. He seemed okay, he did seem fine, but he just... stopped. He pressed pause, just waiting, patiently. And then he stopped waiting, I guess. For him, from what we saw at least, she was always just around the corner. Maybe getting on with his life would have been acknowledging that she was gone and he just couldn't do that. With Ray, we never did know how much damage had already been done. We did our best, but I think by the time he got to us it was too late. Still, she didn't help. When she left, that's when we really lost him. And I can't quite forgive her for that, whatever her reasons were. Maybe that's not fair, but that's the way it is.

Josie, 2015

I met Ray when we were just kids, when I was running and he was hiding, when I needed someone and he just needed to be needed. We were all we had and that's the way it was meant to be. I used to imagine us finding each other and saving each other in a thousand other lives, in every place and every time, always different but always fitting just right. He is, and will always be, forever, my best friend, my brother, my parent, my soul. And he

needs me too, when he's too quiet and too still and too wrapped up in his mind – that's always been his problem, see. No matter how deep he goes, he can always sink further. I pull him up and he pulls me down. It's physics, you know?

When Hattie left they all said oh no, this is too much, he can't handle this, but I knew he can't break in a way that I can't fix. It's like we were created together, and we can never be whole without each other and we can never be broken together. We may as well be the same kids way back then, the two of us, stumbling through. Sometimes I really forget that we're not.

Us against the world.

Wills, 2015

Back then we were practically extensions of one another. There was just the group, and the group was us, and no one questioned it. But now, looking back, I think maybe it was just Maggie and I who thought that, because it wasn't like that, not really. Josie and Ray were always on their own level, with a whole backstory no one knew and no one dared to ask about. And of course Hattie knew Ray in a way even Josie didn't. I think Maggie and I resented that; we felt that they were privy to some big secret that we weren't, so we desperately clung on the periphery, telling ourselves it meant more than it did. Maybe if it meant more to them, to Ray, it would have lasted.

Back then we were all so different. Maggie was so much more excitable; she'd laugh at anything. Now she's calmer, a little tougher maybe. Hattie was always tough, and stubborn too, but fiercely loyal. Well, until she wasn't. Ray, in those days, was I guess everything I wanted to be but without even trying. Everything just came easily to him. And me, well. I

like to think I'm more... sure of myself? That comes with age, doesn't it? Josie's the only one who hasn't changed, not a bit. Except none of it's so endearing anymore.

Hattie, 2004

"Here's to no more exams!" Everyone taps glasses a little too hard, and beer dribbles over the table.

"Until next semester anyway," Maggie says, laughing.

"Hey, that's future Wills' problem."

"That's uncharacteristically irresponsible of you Wills," I say, teasing. He tries to look insulted, but can't quite fight off a smile. We're all on top of the world tonight, with eight glorious weeks of nothing stretched out in front of us.

"Hey I cut loose! Look at me, I'm the picture of reckless youth," he says, unconvincingly, which emits a round of laughter from the rest of the table. "Anyway," he says, changing the subject, "When do you finish, Josie?"

"Well," she says, shifting in her seat, "I was supposed to finish next week..." Wills and Maggie exchange tired glances; Ray smiles, always humouring Josie's failures. Wills finally breaks the silence.

"But?" We all know what's coming. Josie's dropped out of three TAFE courses in the last eighteen months. Ray told me once, casually, that she actually has a photographic memory – they were in the same year at school because Josie was accelerated. I think Maggie and Wills still assume she was at TAFE because she dropped out, since she was only sixteen when we

all met. She could pass any course she wanted, but I think that's just the thing – she doesn't want to.

“Well I didn't technically complete all the course requirements.”

“Oh Jose.” Maggie leans back in her seat, staring at the ceiling, trying not to laugh. “What are we going to do with you?”

“Gosh I'm sure you'll work something out Mags! Anyway, I'm going back next semester, I promise!” – her standard line – “Who needs another drink?”

Wills, 2015

Maggie and I take turns picking up the scattered pieces of Josie's life. Whether it's giving her a place to stay when she gets evicted (every three months, almost like clockwork), or getting her an interview when she's quit/been fired from yet another job, or covering a debt to whatever dodgy new friends she's already fallen out with – we take care of her. We've tried to make her settle down, pay bills for once, hold onto a job for more than a few months, but it's more complicated than that. We know she could – hell, Josie's always been smarter than me, her and Ray both. But she gets restless, she always has. So she stumbles through life, causing chaos, bringing everyone else down with her. She's getting worse too, more isolated. She's always had a universe inside her mind and I think now it's getting further and further from the one outside of it. She lies to cover the difference, and it's starting to catch up with her. I don't know how we can help her with that.

Maggie, 2015

We were in second year and everything was really good. Not perfect, but that really good that's just close enough to normal that to convince you that it might last. We had such a routine then. Monday coffee on campus, Cheap Tuesday's at Jerry's, Thursday "study" night, then on Friday whatever dingy club we could get Josie into, since she was still underage, followed by the best hangover cure breakfast at the cafe on the corner. And the pub pretty much every other night. Who needs to study, right? Hattie and Ray were settled into their new flat, all to themselves which we thought was pretty much the coolest thing ever. Josie was at TAFE, doing some animal course two days a week. She was actually going alright then. She'd just gotten out of a really shitty relationship and she was heading in the right direction. I had a distinction average with almost no effort and was working too, at a little bookstore near the beach. The owner was a little drug-fucked and payed double what Wills' boss did, while letting me do whatever I wanted.

I had no idea it would never be that good again. There was a brief period about six years ago when it looked like it could be, only lasting a couple months, when Ray had his little studio on the beach, and Josie was working for a friend of mine in the city, and we were just starting to get where we wanted to be. We got a little taste of how it was back at the beginning. But hey, nothing lasts forever, right?

Josie, 2015

Sometimes we go down to the beach, just the two of us, like we used to before the others came. We still have our little spots for just us, places the others would never find, places only kids wandering the streets in the early mornings would know about. Only most of them

are gone now, torn down to make way for coldly clean apartment complexes, leaving us to head out to the rocks, underneath the lighthouse, watching the waves. Or sometimes, around the other side, to see the tanker pile-up waiting to come into the harbour. Sometimes we talk; sometimes we don't need to. Sometimes, we say how it seems everything is moving but we stay still, unchanged, as if the beach forms a safety bubble around us, impervious to the storm time rages outside. We are eternal, like the sea or the wind. And there are cracks in time all over these streets. We could be walking down Parnell and suddenly I'm ten years old again, barefoot, like we always were and still should be. We'll let Maggie and Wills get old and boring, and stay just as we are. We don't worry it might mean we are getting left behind.

Maggie, 2015

We started with Ray. He brought us together, way back when. He and Josie were childhood friends, and at uni he met Hattie first, then Wills, then me. One day we all had coffee and that was it. It's strange to think your future can be determined by a flat white and a smoke on a seemingly unimportant March afternoon. We didn't really have a choice in it. Then again, Hattie left. As mad as I was, I've always kind of admired her for that. It's the one thing the rest of us would never have been able to do. Ray and Josie, they'd never have wanted to, or so we thought anyway, and Wills and me? We're just cowards I guess. Even now, when everything's gone to hell... The devil you know, right.

And Ray was just so – there was something about him. Something strong, steady. Back then he radiated stability. He seemed grown-up, like he knew something we didn't. He was like a god to us, in some ways. But distant, always just a bit removed. Back then I always knew what Josie was going to say before she said it; I could see Wills' mood in the set of his

shoulders and jaw; Hattie and I could have a conversation with our eyes alone. But Ray was unreadable, almost unreachable, in a way. Wills said to me once, that none of us really knew Ray except Hattie, and that was why she left.

Looking back, it's easy to see why it all hit so hard. I think we always saw each other as a surrogate family. Hattie and Wills were both country kids, hailing from way out west, practically on the border to South Australia, and they both got out as soon as they could and never looked back. I left my mum in Townsville and haven't seen her since. Only Ray and Josie are actually from here, out near Nobbys Beach I think, but god knows where their families are, if they've got families. For some reason we always assumed Josie was a foster kid, but that was just a feeling. She never actually talked about her childhood. For her, I think, her life started the day she met Ray. And if that's true, maybe it ended when he left.

Hattie, 2005

"I can't believe it. I mean, I really can't believe it. Look at us – we're university graduates!" We laugh at Maggie's face, dead serious. "Dude, we're like *adults*."

"Dude, really?" She knows I'm teasing, and flicks me on the shoulder in response.

"Seriously though Wills," I say, mock-serious, "what are you going to do with your time now that you've got nothing to study for?"

"Ha ha. Some of us actually had to try to do well." This is directed at Ray, whose version of studying is using an open textbook as a coaster, but still managed to match Wills' marks in every assignment he bothered to hand in.

"Well you got the medal buddy, so you can brush that chip off your shoulder." Ray says, smiling, flicking his cigarette into the gutter.

“For real though,” Maggie says, eyes wide, “we have to, like, get jobs now.” Ray and I look at each other and laugh.

“Um, Mags, we all have jobs? We have for a while in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Yeah, but *real* jobs. Grown up jobs. Not waitressing or working at the pub.” Maggie’s voice is straining under what we’re all feeling, half excitement, half dread, and of course that typical Maggie neurosis underneath.

“I don’t know... I reckon I’d be alright to work at the pub forever.” Ray says, pausing in the middle of the footpath, just to look around.

Wills, 2015

It’s been ten years to the day since we finished uni. None of our families came out, so after the ceremony we all headed down to Jerry’s, this little bar we used to practically live at because even though it was underground and smelled like stale smoke and piss, drinks were half price for students and it was only five minutes’ walk from each of our places. We sunk deeper into our regular table as the hours passed, talking with mock-dread about the future, about ‘real life’, that fantastic, ambiguous thing. We were terrified, we said. Who were we kidding – we all thought it was going to be this mighty, enviable thing, we were going to be ‘successful’... We stumbled home at dawn – Hattie and Ray leaning into each other facing west, Josie trailing after them, and Maggie and me heading east, with the sun in our eyes, looking anywhere but at each other.

God, when I think of us back then. Who would have known within a year Hattie would be running off to Sydney without a second glance, Ray passing out in some gutter every other night, Josie crashing on couches and bouncing from guy to guy and job to job, and Maggie

and I, just... watching. Always witness to the train wreck, close enough to watch but too far to do anything about it. I guess that's how we've always been. Even now.

It's been ten years.

It's always seemed strange to me how large those years loom in my mind. Four years, not even that. Three years when it was good and nine months when we could almost pretend it was. And then it was over, and everything went to shit.

Josie, 2015

Maggie and Wills, they're different to Ray and me. So they think we're broken. Jobs and rent and bills and doing things the Right Way – that's important to them, that's what they think matters. They go through life like they have no choice, like this is just how it has to be. Like if they pretend they're happy for long enough they might actually start to believe it. They want me to live like that too. They need all that shit, things they think keep you happy and sane and whatever you want to call what they think they're appearing to be. They think if I start to live like they do, become bored out of my mind working in an office and staying in one place, that I'll be fixed. They think they can fix me.

They don't get how it is for us, that we're totally separate from them. We exist in a different dimension. We don't need food or water or sleep, let alone work and bills – we sustain each other. There is no end to me or beginning to him – we have the same core. Wherever he is he is here, and there is no here without him. We orbit each other.

We just can't survive without each other. Maybe we aren't strong enough to stand alone – but I don't think so. I think we were just designed that way, like those trees that can only

grow around the trunk of another tree. Separate us, and you cut off our blood flow, our life force. We fall.

Hattie, 2006

“Jesus, what time is it?” It feels late, but the sky is dark with clouds and it’s hard to tell. Ray is passed out on the bed, the smell of gin oozing out of his pores, and hardly stirs. Josie’s stuff is scattered around the apartment, but she’s nowhere to be seen. Maggie and Wills lie on the ground a foot apart, facing each other. They’re both asleep. I can’t remember who’s working today, who I should wake up. Where the hell is Josie?

Maggie finally lifts her head and looks around, disorientated.

“Where’s Josie?” She says, after a minute. “Did she come home with us?” No one can remember. Outside, it starts to rain, heavy and all at once. Maggie and Wills leave together, not looking at each other. Ray still doesn’t wake.

His bass lies awkwardly in the corner, beside the desk, a long scratch down the side, the bridge broken off completely. No doubt the cause of the loud crash at about 3 AM. Not that he’ll even notice – he hasn’t played in months. His hands shake when he tries.

My whole body aches, my eyes hazy with exhaustion, physical and mental. The phone starts to bleep obnoxiously – I let it ring for a few extra seconds, out of spite, but Ray doesn’t even stir. Through the foggy window, even the trees look cold, hunching over in the wind. This city is fucking toxic – it’s rotting us from the inside out.

We should all get out while we still can.

Wills, 2015

Hattie left at the start of spring, when everything should have been starting fresh, growing, and instead everything was falling apart. By summer Ray was a total mess, even Josie could see. That shook up our very foundations. We were invincible, we were impenetrable, and here was Hattie just up and disappearing, and here was Ray, our leader, our pillar, crumbling. It took him a year, but he picked himself up again, quit drinking, started working. Got his shit together. We had a couple years like that, when everything was almost okay again, and even Josie was growing up a little. And then he was just gone. I guess Maggie and I tried to hold everything together, for Josie's sake. Not that she needed it. She has her own version of reality. Sometimes I think she doesn't quite have a normal sense of time. The truth is, at the time it hit us worse than her. Suddenly we were on our own, and we were fucking terrified. Sometimes I think we still are.

Maggie, 2015

Ray disappeared a lot in those in between years, after Hattie left and before he did. He'd just take off for a few days, sometimes longer. We never knew where he went, just that he'd come back eventually, smelling of gin and stale smoke and something else, like dust and longing. But then he didn't come back. One day, without warning, he was just gone, flat untouched. You'd think he would have left some sign, some hint of a bruise. But all we were left with was a dull ache with no clear cause. That's what really did it, that uncertainty. Maybe if it was more dramatic, if there was some finality, it wouldn't have been so bad. We wouldn't have been just ... waiting. We waited for *years*. He was never really gone, as long as there was some faint hope he might come back. Days turned into weeks, weeks into

months, and suddenly half a decade has passed and we still don't really know where we stand. We don't talk about him anymore, at some point there was no reason to anymore, but sometimes I still wonder... Even then, though, he's not coming back. I don't know about Wills. Like I said, we don't talk about it. There's nothing to say now. But Josie won't ever let go. We'll probably never know why she needed him so much, but the effect is clear. She can't move without him. With him gone, she's fused to the ground. Stuck.

Wills and I don't really talk anymore, not about anything. After all, everything started with Ray. Once we couldn't talk about him, almost everything was off-limits. He was the glue that brought us all together, the very foundations of our lives here. Without him, everything fell apart. We tried, for a couple of years, to pretend we could fix it, that we were strong enough without him, that we didn't need him to hold us together anymore. But it's pretty clear we were fooling ourselves. We talk on the phone, or email, about Josie mostly, like divorced parents organising custody of a troubled child. Sometimes it's hard not to blame Ray for that. Not to think he didn't try hard enough. But maybe it's more our fault. We didn't watch closely enough, and anyway, we didn't know how to help him. We failed him. Sometimes I let myself blame Wills for that. He was the one who said to go easy on him. He needed help and we couldn't see it. Blaming Wills lets me off the hook and gives me an excuse for everything that could have been, not being. I like to blame Wills for that, anyway, because if it was Wills' fault then it wasn't Ray's. I don't like blaming Ray.

Wills, 2015

He's been gone over five years now. We know he won't come back, we're way past that. But... There's always a but. What if. Maybe he just got on a bus to Sydney, to find Hattie,

to start fresh. Maybe he's living there right now, reading the same old books, giving music lessons. Maybe he got his masters after all. Maybe he's living it up in a mansion on the harbour, not giving us a second thought.

Or maybe he just wandered off, hitchhiked to Byron or Brisbane; maybe he's one of the nameless men who wander the streets of the city, lost, not quite able to remember who they're meant to be. Maybe we'll see him in twenty years, grey and thin and unrecognisable.

Maybe he's fish food, salty and grey and lying at the bottom of the ocean. He did always like the beach.

I guess that's our curse. We'll never really know, not for sure. They never found a body or a note; he didn't leave a clue. We thought he would have said something, left something, so that we'd know. But Ray was like that. Private, quiet. And he did always have his issues. I guess we didn't see them at first, not really. His problems were so quiet compared with Josie's. It was only after Hattie left that they really came to the surface, when the drinking got out of control, when he would board himself up in his flat in the dark for days on end. But that was Josie's really bad phase, so it still seemed fairly tame, in comparison. It's easy to see how Maggie and I were always the sane ones. Really though, our dysfunction is just harder to see. We're both drawn to dysfunctional people. That way our problems are always eclipsed by someone else's.

Josie, 2015

Ray is tall and willowy and reminds me of the moon, white and cold, with a scar on his cheek like a crater. He never eats breakfast; sometimes he forgets to eat at all. He has a lot on his mind, you know. He likes ice cream though – chocolate, that's his favourite, mine too. We

get it down at the beach, with warm Nutella on top, that's the best. We eat it in the sand and don't care when it starts to melt and the sand sticks wherever it drips.

He owns more books than anyone I know; he never throws them out. He doesn't have bookshelves either, though he could fill a dozen. He just piles them on the ground, all around his apartment. He takes a book everywhere he goes. Really, sometimes he doesn't even take his wallet or his keys but he'll still have a book. Those little pocket editions, that fit in a jacket. He always says he could be stranded anyway in the world and if he had something good to read, he'd be just fine.

His hands are rough, like sandpaper, from blisters turned callouses turned permanently thicker skin. From his bass, see. He doesn't just play double bass though, he plays trombone and drums and piano too. He's a real jazz fan. I've never really gotten it myself, it just sounds like noise to me. But Ray, he just gets it. It's in his bones.

And he's so so still. He's like a tree. So steady. Sometimes I want to rip him out by the roots so he can run with me, but I need him how he is. I just move around him. It's how we are.

‘To Ray’ – Reflection Statement

My major work 'To Ray' is an exploration of how and why certain people fail to progress through defined life stages as a result of an emotional trauma, and how this can be accentuated or even triggered by dysfunctional relationships. My intention in writing this story was to allow my characters' voices to speak for a generation for whom the lines between adolescence and adulthood have been blurred almost past recognition, with teenagers rushing into adulthood and adults remaining in an 'extended adolescence' well into their twenties and even thirties. 'To Ray' can also serve as a warning for my intended audience – my peers – in its depiction of a group of people who, by chance and through their own faults, have somehow missed the boat to adulthood, and instead linger anticlimactically in the promise of their fading youth. Through the characters of Josie, Maggie and Wills I have tried to illustrate the dangers of unhealthy group relationship dynamics, informed by my research into interdependent and co-dependent relationships, and the lasting effects on a person's psychological wellbeing when these kinds of relationships either break down – shown when Hattie left – or are unexpectedly ended – shown in the results of Ray's disappearance.

I believe the form and structure of my major work, decided with the help of my investigation into the short story form, have a large impact on the realisation of these concepts. The fragmented discontinuous plot and use of multiple narrators – largely influenced by William Faulkner's 1929 and 1930 novels *The Sound and the Fury*⁵ and *As I Lay Dying*⁶ – have enabled me to convey the message almost entirely through the melancholic and nostalgic tone, rather than through plot, which I feel reflects the slow process of growing up which is described in the story. As in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* the multiplicity of unreliable narrators serves to both confuse the plot (mostly through Josie talking about Ray in present tense although at the time he has been missing for many years) and fill in missing information from the other perspectives. Although I had initially decided, after reading Franz Kafka's

1924 short story *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*⁷, on an entirely reflective narrative with no definite plot – which remains in the narration of Maggie, Wills and Josie – I felt that this form left too much conceptual ambiguity, which led me to introduce the Hattie sections, largely influenced by the fast-paced narration of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*⁸. As well as clarifying the purpose of the story, these sections provide more immediate action and therefore interest for the intended audience, with the contrast in the tone of these sections preventing the story from becoming monotonous. Writing these sections as flashbacks was an attempt to explain more explicitly certain plot points, to counteract Josie’s unreliable narration.

The concepts in my story have been informed and solidified by my extensive independent investigation, mostly in the form of academic articles and websites. My early research into various grief disorders and the phenomenon of ‘arrested development’ in young adults provided the basis for my concept, but my later findings on ambiguous loss helped me to link the two ideas – grief and its effect on personal and emotional development. My main challenge in this research has been that the studies on grief and loss I have read – most notably Ray and Prigerson, ‘Complicated Grief: An Attachment Disorder Worthy of Inclusion in DSM-V’¹, and Boss, ‘Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections After 9/11’² – have been concerning the death of a family member, and family psychology as a whole, and the relationship between my characters is not of this kind. However, given the unusually and unhealthily close relationships between them and the importance of the group as a basis for identity and emotional wellbeing – which has been a sub-focus for me throughout the process of writing the story – I decided that these articles are in fact relevant to my work. Pauline Boss’ research has been particularly influential to my story, providing the basis of my final concept. One creative decision I have made as a direct result of reading her articles is the writing of the flashbacks from Hattie’s perspective, which

I added relatively late in the course, to highlight Ray being “physically absent and psychologically present”, in that he is constantly referred to but he is the only character who never actually narrates. I believe this is crucial, because his perceptible absence is essentially the core of the story.

The characterisation of Josie was informed largely by my research into dependent personality disorder, particularly Robert F. Bornstein’s book ‘The Dependent Personality’³. He describes dependency as “a normal developmental phase through which all individuals progress”. His view of dependency – which is a key part of Josie’s character and behaviour and the reason behind her inability to move on from Ray’s disappearance – as childlike and, in adults, a form of arrested development was a key part of my investigation into my main concept.

My extended investigation from the Advanced and Extension 1 courses have provided the basic concepts and ideas I am working with, the main influence being the Preliminary identity course, looking into where people gain their identity and why, and what happens when that identity is taken (like Lear’s loss of his roles of father and king, and my characters losing the group that gave them their perceptions of themselves). The HSC study of modernism through the poetry of T S Eliot has also been influential to me in the process, as the change and uncertainty felt by Eliot and his contemporaries heading into a new era in the early 20th century is similar to what was felt by Gen Y (i.e. my characters) almost a hundred years later during the Digital Revolution. The HSC Extension 1 Romanticism course has informed my understanding of the importance of the individual mind and imagination, reflected in the first-person reflective narration.

The main difficulties I have had in the completion of my major work have been to do with finding the balance between subtlety and clarity. I wanted to maintain the ambiguity of the plot while ensuring the reader was not too lost as a result of the unreliable narration and non-

linear narrative structure. My solution to this problem was the addition of some explanatory sections narrated by Wills and the flashback sections narrated by Hattie.

Overall I believe that I have achieved what I set out to at the start of the course, although with some slight changes as a result of my research. My major work, in my opinion, effectively explores the impact of disordered grief on the developmental process, while expressing the complexity of young adult relationships and their impact on individuals.

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