



MONASH University

**Shifting territory: Using fiction to illuminate hidden narratives
in commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand**

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(BA Hons)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the complex and contentious topic of transnational commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand, through an exegetical component, *Shifting Territory*, and a creative component, the novel *Mother of Pearl*.

In the exegesis, I outline the three narratives that dominate public and academic discourse on surrogacy, namely, the neoliberal, abolitionist, and harm reduction positions. I expose the limited, at times contradictory assumptions underpinning these dominant narratives, and make a case for using fiction to shine light on what is hidden or erased in public and academic discourse on surrogacy.

Using the reproductive justice framework, I contend that in order to shed light on this complex terrain, fiction writers must engage with questions of choice and altruism, family and kin, and reproductive justice. I review existing surrogacy fiction in this light, noting points of synergy and difference between these works and my own. I maintain that fiction's unique capacity to engender empathy in readers provides a means of unsettling easy assumptions about transnational commercial surrogacy arrangements.

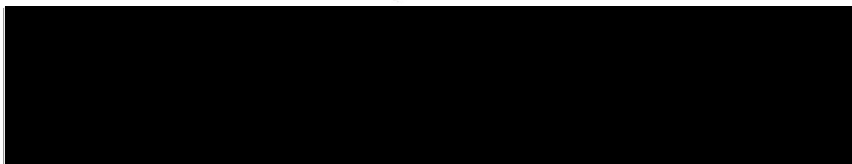
Arguing further that surrogacy's complex and contradictory narratives cannot be contained within a single account, I chose to narrate *Mother of Pearl* from the point of view of three characters, including the Thai surrogate mother. I address the ethical implications of representing a different cultural identity when writing fiction in light of recent debates about cultural appropriation, and propose an ethical framework for a creative practice.

The novel is presented as an alternative to the closed public discourses, a polyphonic narrative that aims to illuminate multiple pathways through the divided terrain of transnational commercial surrogacy. Set between Thailand and Australia, *Mother of Pearl* tells the story of three women, one Thai and two Australian, whose lives become intertwined in the unsettling and extraordinary process of bringing a child into the world across borders of class, culture and nationality.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

A large black rectangular box redacting the signature of the author.

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Two instances of copyright material appear in the creative component of this thesis which, in the event of the novel being published, would require permission to be reproduced. Source for the quote on p. 170, is Iyer, P 1989, *Video Night in Kathmandu And Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East*, 1st Vintage Departures ed., New York, p. 9. Lyrics on pp. 369-70 from 'Midnight Lullaby' by Tom Waits. Copyright: BMG Rights Management US, LLC.

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Introduction

My interest in commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand was sparked by a 2013 newspaper article noting a ‘sharp rise’ in citizenship requests for Australian children born in Thailand, and attributing this to Australians going overseas in increasing numbers ‘to find birth mothers for their children’ (Corderoy, 2013). In an era of globalised assisted reproductive technologies, ‘going overseas to find birth mothers for their children’ is shorthand for a complex and contentious process in which Australian ‘intended parents’, whether singles or couples, heterosexual or homosexual, hire women in other countries—the article mentioned India, Ukraine and Thailand—to be implanted with one or more embryos, paying these ‘surrogate mothers’ to gestate, give birth to and hand over the resulting baby or babies (Pande, 2009, p. 143). Embryos are created through in vitro fertilisation (IVF) using the oocyte (egg) and sperm (collectively known as gametes) of the intended parents and/or donor(s) (Everingham, Stafford-Bell & Hammarberg, 2014, p. 1; Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014, p. 124), resulting in an arrangement known as ‘gestational surrogacy’.

In ‘traditional surrogacy’, which has been practised since ancient times across a range of cultures, the surrogate mother’s own egg is fertilised (Pande, 2009, p. 143). By contrast, the intention with gestational surrogacy is that the surrogate mother bears no genetic relationship with the baby¹ (Millbank, 2011, p. 170), though depending on the use of donor gametes, and certainly for same-sex couples, one or other of the intended parents may not be genetically related to the child either (Millbank, 2012, p. 118). In clinical practice, gestational surrogacy is preferred to traditional surrogacy (Millbank, 2011, p. 170) due to legal issues (Rotabi & Bromfield, 2014, p. 124), and a widespread belief that surrogates who are genetically related to the baby are more likely to have problems with relinquishment (Millbank, 2011, p. 172), an assumption not borne out by the research (Imrie & Jadvá, 2014, p. 433; Millbank, 2012, p. 122).

¹ Despite the intention, epigenetic research suggests the surrogate mother may make a genetic difference to the child she carries, as a foetus is susceptible to ‘genetic reprogramming’ based on the gestational environment and factors like nutrition (Nafee et al, 2008).

In accounting for the ‘flocking’ of Australians overseas in search of surrogate mothers, the article quoted Sam Everingham, founder of advocacy body Surrogacy Australia and Director of Families Through Surrogacy, describing a ‘perfect storm created by the lack of access to international adoption, women leaving childbirth later on, and the fact we are a wealthy country and women [sic.²] can afford it’. Also cited was Professor Jenni Millbank, who noted that laws banning commercial surrogacy in Australia and, in some jurisdictions, making it a criminal act to engage in commercial surrogacy overseas, were clearly not deterring the practice. Millbank called for the creation of ‘an ethical framework for compensated surrogacy in Australia’:

“That doesn’t mean a profit-driven system, or an incentive system, but one that doesn’t make it so hard to do it if people want to do it,” she [Millbank] said.

“Parents say the idea that they would ask someone to do that for free is abhorrent.” (cited by Corderoy, 2013)

As a writer with long-standing interests in sexual and reproductive health, and Australia’s relationship with Asia, particularly Thailand, my curiosity was piqued. I didn’t doubt the lengths that people would go to in order to have a child, having personally experienced a powerful urge to be a parent, and the grief of failed pregnancies. But I did wonder how intended parents arrived at a course of action as precarious as paying a Thai woman to have a baby for them. What could Thailand offer that Australia could not? Did their perceptions of Thailand play a part in the decision to engage in commercial surrogacy arrangements there?

I wondered, too, what might lie behind a Thai woman’s decision to gestate a baby for a foreigner. The research from India, where commercial surrogacy has been legal since 2002 (Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2010, p. 137), suggests that women are overwhelmingly compelled by poverty and financial pressures to become surrogate mothers (Pande, 2009; 2010; Karandikar et al, 2014). Did the same pressures account for Thai women’s participation in surrogacy arrangements? Or were there factors unique to the Thai cultural context at play? Was

² It is curious that Everingham singles out women, as he was a party to research that showed of 259 Australians considering or engaged in surrogacy in 2013, 49 per cent identified as homosexual men (Everingham, Stafford-Bell & Hammarberg, 2014, p. 2).

commercial surrogacy even legal in Thailand, or was this an example of an unregulated 'grey area', overlooked by authorities preoccupied with the country's ongoing political crisis?

I was troubled by the language used by the interviewees: the assumption that being able to afford something justified paying for it, and the linking of the strongest language—the word 'abhorrent'—with the idea of *not* paying for something. Did this indicate another triumph for neoliberalism in its effort to treat all aspects of the social world as markets (Couldry, 2010, p. 6) and commodify all aspects of human existence (Beeson, 2014)? Or did the word 'abhorrent' hint at the intensity of the emotions at stake (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014, p. 134), signifying the enormity of the intended parents' hopes and fears?

It was easy to imagine how readily transnational commercial surrogacy could be exploitative. Millbank acknowledged as much, saying, 'People don't want to go to a poor country and behave harmfully, but they work with the information they have' (Corderoy, 2013). But would the introduction of 'ethical' compensated surrogacy in Australia actually dissuade Australians from flocking to less wealthy countries in search of surrogate mothers, or simply legitimise the practice of paid surrogacy more broadly? Was ethical compensated surrogacy even possible?

The more I reflected on these questions, the stronger the appeal of the topic became for me as a writer. I had written about politics and social justice issues in three crime novels, set in Thailand, with a particular interest in how intimate decisions can have global implications (Savage, 2006; 2010; 2013). The desire to have a child offered a compelling and accessible narrative starting-point from which to explore the profound political, ethical and affective dimensions of transnational commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand. The creative component of this thesis, the novel, *Mother of Pearl*, is the result of my endeavour to shed new light on surrogacy's complex and divided terrain.

I began my research by investigating how transnational commercial surrogacy operated, and examining the arguments surrounding this controversial and still evolving practice. In the first chapter of my exegesis, 'Narratives, gaps and

concealments', I outline my finding that the narratives which dominate academic and public discourse on surrogacy in Australia and globally can be grouped into three camps: a neoliberal endorsement of the practice, an abolitionist opposition, and a pragmatic, harm reduction approach. I then document how the limited, at times contradictory assumptions underpinning these ultimately ideological positions were exposed when, four months into my research, the 'Baby Gammy' case broke in the Australian and international media. Capitalising on the timing, I discuss the case as a moment of social rupture that shone light on narratives hidden or erased in public and academic discourse on surrogacy.

Chapter 2, 'Surrogacy and fiction', begins with an explanation of reproductive justice, which emerged from my research as an important framework for analysing surrogacy's troubling political and ethical elements. Noting how feminist scholars have applied this methodology to disrupt the rhetoric that both justifies transnational commercial surrogacy and shapes public policies, attitudes and beliefs towards it (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 146), I use the reproductive justice framework to review contemporary fiction on surrogacy. Specifically, I analyse how authors of existing surrogacy fiction engage with questions of choice and altruism, family and kin, and reproductive justice, arguing that these are essential considerations when shedding light on this complex terrain. The points of synergy and difference between existing surrogacy fiction and my novel *Mother of Pearl*, are noted. Major works reviewed are dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) by Margaret Atwood and *When We Have Wings* (2011) by Claire Corbett; crime novels *The Night Ferry* (2007) by Michael Robotham, and *Origins of Love* (2012) by Kishwar Desai; and popular fiction, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015) by Meera Syal and *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016) by Amulya Malladi. I conclude the chapter with a discussion about fiction's unique capacity to engender empathy in readers, arguing that narrative empathy, not didacticism, is needed to unsettle easy assumptions about who is right and wrong, and who has agency, in transnational commercial surrogacy arrangements.

Recognising the impossibility of containing surrogacy's complex and contradictory narratives within a single account, I chose to narrate *Mother of Pearl* from the point of view of three characters: the Australian intended mother,

Meg; her disapproving sister and aid worker, Anna; and the Thai woman, Mukda, who ends up carrying a baby for Meg and her husband. Chapter 3 addresses the ethical issues raised by my creative choices, specifically my decision to write from a Thai character's point of view. I consider these issues in the context of recent debates about cultural appropriation, notably the controversy sparked by Lionel Shriver's opening address to the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival. I bring together Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2009) concept of the respectful transcultural conversation at the heart of cosmopolitanism, with the notion of 'authorial responsibility', to propose an ethical framework for a creative practice as I applied it in writing *Mother of Pearl*.

In part 2 of this thesis, the novel is presented as an alternative to the closed discourses outlined in Chapter 1, a polyphonic narrative that aims to illuminate multiple pathways through the divided terrain of transnational commercial surrogacy. Set between Thailand and Australia, *Mother of Pearl* tells the story of three women, one Thai and two Australian, whose lives become intertwined in the unsettling and extraordinary process of bringing a child into the world across borders of class, culture and nationality.

Notes on language

The language used to discuss surrogacy is hotly contested, as values and attitudes towards the practice are embedded in the choice of terminology. As I discuss in Chapter 1, for opponents, the very term 'surrogate' is objectionable, because it distances the 'birth mother' (their preferred term) from the child, and devalues gestational labour and the carework of parenting. A person who engages with 'commercial' or 'compensated' surrogacy (terminology that also contested) generally prefers to go by 'intended (or 'intending') parent', with its connotations of affect and aspiration, rather than the more businesslike 'commissioning parent', a term used by those critical of surrogacy's commercialisation.

While the Australian government's inquiry report, *Surrogacy Matters*, attempts to accommodate these sensitivities by using multiple terms (Christensen et al, 2016, p. 2), for brevity and clarity, in the exegetical component of this thesis, I have been selective. I use 'surrogate mother' to refer to a woman

who gestates and gives birth to a child on behalf of another; 'intended parent' to refer to a person who enters into an agreement with a woman to carry a child on their behalf; 'altruistic surrogacy' where the surrogate mother's costs may be reimbursed but no fee is paid; and 'commercial surrogacy' to refer to arrangements where the surrogate mother is paid a fee on top of costs. My use of these terms is intended to be indicative, rather than definitive. Ambivalence in the language of surrogacy is addressed in the creative component of the thesis, as signposted in the innuendo of the title, *Mother of Pearl*.

Further to the topic of language, there is no standardised system for Romanising the Thai language. As a result, the use of different conventions can produce different transliterations for the same Thai words. For example, the name of the Thai mother of 'Baby Gammy', Pattaramon also appears as Pattharamon, her surname Chanbua as Janbua, and nickname Goy as Koi. Unless citing other authors, I have transliterated Thai words using the system of phonemic transcription, minus tone indicators, developed by the well regarded online Thai language resource www.thai-language.com, which I find more accurate than the alternatives. My use of italics to denote transliterations of Thai words follows conventions in the *Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (Snooks & Co., 2002, pp.148-9), and preferred by my publisher.

Chapter 1: Narratives, gaps and concealments

1. Surrogacy's shifting territory

Surrogacy in general and commercial surrogacy in particular remain highly complex, contentious and still developing fields of inquiry. Using the dispassionate language of legal scholarship, O'Byrne and Gerber (2015, p. 1) suggest surrogacy is controversial and contested because it is situated at 'the intersection of science, law, ethics and human rights'. However, I contend that the flesh-and-blood side of surrogacy makes it equally complex: the contiguities of maternal and infant bodies, desire and risk, grief and gratitude, poverty and privilege.

While altruistic surrogacy is permitted in Australia, historically, state and territory governments, which regulate surrogacy, have opposed commercial surrogacy (Millbank, 2011, pp. 176-7). At the time of writing, commercial surrogacy remains prohibited in all jurisdictions (Johnson, 2015); and it is illegal in New South Wales, the ACT and Queensland to engage in commercial surrogacy overseas (Stuhmcke, 2015). However, these laws have not deterred Australians from engaging in increasing numbers in transnational commercial surrogacy (Christensen et al, 2016, p. 31; Everingham, Stafford-Bell & Hammarberg, 2014); and to date, the extraterritorial criminal provisions against commercial surrogacy have not been enforced (Stuhmcke, 2015, p. 70).

During the course of my research, the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs (hereafter, 'the Committee') undertook an inquiry into surrogacy arrangements for Australians (*'Inquiry into surrogacy'*), ordered in response to a roundtable conducted in the wake of the 'Baby Gammy' case (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015a; 2015b). Whereas previous inquiries expressly excluded discussion of commercial surrogacy in Australia (Millbank, 2012, p. 125), the Committee's terms of reference included 'issues arising regarding informed consent, exploitation, compensatory payments, rights and protections for all parties involved, including children' (Christensen et al, 2016, p. ix). However, the first recommendation in the Committee's report, tabled in May 2016, was 'that the practice of commercial surrogacy remain illegal in Australia' (Christensen et al,

2016, pp. v, 6). Of the 91 submissions made public on the inquiry webpage³, 52 per cent (n=47) wanted the prohibition against commercial surrogacy to remain in place, and more than half of these (n=27) called for a ban on surrogacy in all forms; by comparison, 34 per cent (n=31) of submissions explicitly supported commercial surrogacy in Australia. Tremellen and Everingham (2016, p. 560) conducted a survey in which 58 per cent of respondents 'who held a view regarding the current ban on compensated surrogacy in Australia ... felt the ban was unjustified', although the actual number against the ban comprised 42 per cent of the total sample size (n=500). As indicated throughout the following discussion, surrogacy remains a polarising and divisive issue in Australia.

As I discuss in section 2, the narratives that dominate academic and public discourse⁴ on surrogacy globally, as in Australia, can be loosely grouped into three camps: the neoliberal position occupied by proponents of commercial surrogacy; the abolitionist position occupied by opponents of surrogacy in all forms; and the harm reduction or 'pragmatist' position, whose occupants may support altruistic surrogacy alone, or support commercial surrogacy, subject to effective regulation (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014, p. 134; Storrow, 2015, p. 193). These three discursive positions exist on a spectrum, and are not mutually exclusive, so much as mutually reinforcing. Notably, prominent Australian scholars in the different camps frequently write for, and/or are quoted in mainstream media.

Over the course of my research, several high-profile commentators on surrogacy in Australia have shifted their positions along the spectrum in relation to the issues. Alice Clarke, famous as the first baby born through IVF-assisted gestational surrogacy in Australia in 1988 (Kirkman & Kirkman, 1988), writes that in response to cases of babies commissioned through surrogacy being abandoned overseas⁵, her 'stance [on surrogacy] has evolved' in favour of

³ See http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Social_Policy_and_Legal_Affairs/Inquiry_into_surrogacy/Submissions

⁴ Following Millbank (2012, p. 102, n. 6), I use discourse as defined by Norman Fairclough (1992, p. 3), as 'simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice'.

⁵ Clarke refers both to the Baby Gammy case, and also to the abandonment of a male twin in India by his Australian parents (see Hawley, 2014d; Hawley, Smith & McKinnon, 2015).

introducing commercial surrogacy in Australia (Clarke, 2015; see also Clarke, 2014). By contrast, Chief Judge John Pascoe, having suggested on several occasions that regulated commercial surrogacy should be introduced in Australia to deter Australians from pursuing commercial surrogacy in unregulated overseas environments (for example, see Han, 2012; Pascoe, 2014; Whitmont & Michelmore, 2014, para. 176-7), recommends in his submission to the *Inquiry into surrogacy* that ‘until a common position on surrogacy is achieved ... all commercial surrogacy is banned with extra-territorial application’ (Pascoe, 2016, p. 23; see also pp. 13, 15). Professor Mary Keyes, who once suggested that ‘careful consideration ... be given to decriminalising commercial surrogacy’ (2012, p. 49), contends in her submission to the inquiry that permitting commercial surrogacy in Australia is ‘unlikely to solve the problems associated with international commercial surrogacy’ after all: cost, regulatory requirements, and a preference to be distanced from the surrogate mother mean intended parents will continue entering commercial surrogacy arrangements overseas (Keyes, 2016, p.3; see also Riggs, 2015). In a lecture in April 2015, Family Court Chief Justice Diana Bryant said:

as a society we’re not living up to the ethical and moral obligations that we have toward children and surrogate mothers in third world countries in our region, where so many Australians go because we do not allow commercial surrogacy arrangements in Australia ... [O]ne of the suggestions I put forward is that we could regulate much more, for much more ethical behaviour, if we legalise commercial surrogacy within Australia. (Bryant, 2015, min. 4:10)

But Justice Bryant was candid about not being seen as ‘the public face for a push for commercial surrogacy in Australia’ (Bryant, 2015, min. 4:03). In her own submission to the inquiry, she notes only that ‘[i]n order to protect all of those involved in surrogacy ... the law must catch up with the realities technology makes possible’ (Bryant, 2016, p. 11), although the Committee’s final report cites her as supporting ‘limited’ and ‘regulated’ commercial surrogacy in Australia (Christensen et al, 2016, p. 6). Meanwhile, leading advocates of commercial surrogacy in Australia have increasingly adopted the language of harm reduction to argue their case (compare, for example, Everingham, 2011a; 2011b; with Everingham, 2014, pp. 78-9).

The various positions taken on surrogacy in Australia are founded on what might be described as shaky empirical grounds. In my survey of mainstream media reporting on surrogacy, I found multiple claims that Australians are the largest per capita users of commercial surrogacy in the world (see for example, Corderoy, 2013, Cornish, 2014; Snow & Murdoch, 2014), claims reiterated in a speech by Chief Judge Pascoe (Pascoe, 2014) and cited in *Hansard* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015b, p. 5); yet I failed to find documentary evidence to substantiate this claim.⁶ Clinical data on surrogacy births in Australia (see for example, Harris et al, 2016, p. 46) do not capture unregulated arrangements (Everingham, 2014, p. 71), while data on Australians' use of international commercial surrogacy is indicative at best (Johnson, Blyth & Hammarberg, 2014, p. 147): 'the Department of Immigration and Border Protection estimates that it deals with approximately 250 offshore surrogacy cases each year' (Christensen et al, 2016, p. 22).

Scholarship and public discourse are further hamstrung by the scarcity of social science research on Australians' use of surrogacy, both domestically and offshore (Millbank, 2011, p. 168; Everingham, Stafford-Bell & Hammarberg, 2014, p. 1); while an absence of studies on the outcomes for children born through international surrogacy arrangements is, as Cressida Limon (2013, para. 10) notes, 'not surprising given it is a relatively new practice of family formation'. Surrogacy advocates cite the findings of longitudinal psycho-social studies from the UK as evidence of surrogacy's benign impacts (for example, Gerber & O'Byrne, 2015, pp. 97-8; Kirkman, 2010, pp. 21-2; Millbank, 2012, p. 103, n. 9 & 10), while other scholars question the generalisability of these findings to offshore surrogacy arrangements, given the small sample sizes, young age of the children, and the context of regulated, domestic surrogacy in which relationships with surrogate mothers are generally maintained (Frame, 2010, p. 27; Johnson, Blyth & Hammarberg, 2014, p. 151; Limon, 2013). Against this patchy and

⁶ Data commonly cited to demonstrate Australians' use of surrogacy can be traced to a combination of unpublished data based on consumer surveys conducted by Surrogacy Australia in 2011 and 2013 (Everingham, Stafford-Bell & Hammarberg, 2014, p. 4), a Families Through Surrogacy industry survey 2015, and the results of a FOI request regarding Citizenship by Descent Applications 2008-2011 made by Surrogacy Australia (Tremellen & Everingham, 2016, p. 559).

contested backdrop, public and parliamentary debates remain susceptible to what Millbank (2012, p. 103) calls ‘narrative and anecdote’ (see also Keyes, 2016, p. 1).

Indeed, frustrated by the lack of empirical data on Australians’ use of surrogacy, Millbank (2011; 2012) combined a survey of Australian media stories from January 2007 to December 2010, with an analysis of parliamentary debate during the same period to explore ‘the role of discourse and narrative in shaping ... reforms to surrogacy law and policy around Australia’ (Millbank, 2012, p. 102). Similarly, Damien Riggs and Clemence Due undertook discourse analysis of Australian news media reporting on commercial surrogacy between 2009 and 2013 (Riggs & Due, 2010; 2013; 2014). I am indebted to the work of these scholars in informing the discourse analysis in this chapter. Like them, I draw heavily on mainstream media sources to analyse public discourse on commercial surrogacy, particularly in relation to the ‘Baby Gammy’ case.

If there is a ‘dearth of empirical data’ on Australians’ use of surrogacy (Millbank, 2011, p. 168), there is also scant academic material available in English on transnational commercial surrogacy specific to the Thai context, which is my particular area of interest (Hibino & Shimazono, 2013; Nilsson, 2015; Whittaker, 2014a). Everingham, Stafford-Bell and Hammarberg (2014, p. 3) suggest that Thailand rose in popularity as a commercial surrogacy destination for Australians as recently as 2011, before the practice was banned in 2015 (Allan, 2015, p. 129). Given this narrow window, it is not surprising that inquiry specific to commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand remains largely on the journalistic level (see Abboud, 2013; Whitmont & Michelmore, 2014).

For the purposes of the discussion in this chapter, I do not analyze the merits of the various positions taken on surrogacy. Rather, I explore the discursive implications of all three dominant positions—neoliberal, abolitionist and harm reductionist. Specifically, I am interested in how each position requires the concealment or erasure of other perspectives, indeed, sometimes multiple and contradictory erasures, in order to deliver a cohesive narrative.

In section 3, I explore how the ‘Baby Gammy case’, which broke in the international media on 1 August 2014, shone light on what is excluded or hidden

in these three dominant narratives, using this as the starting-point for the creative component of my doctoral thesis: my choice to use fiction to further unsettle these narratives and expose the shifting territory that emerges as a result of this moment of social rupture.

2. Dominant and hidden narratives

Surrogacy in general and transnational commercial surrogacy in particular are discursively polarising in both academic and public spheres (Keyes, 2016, p. 1). As noted, the narratives that dominate the discourse can be grouped loosely into three camps: the neoliberal position, which sits at one end of the spectrum, occupied by proponents of commercial surrogacy; the abolitionist position, which sits at the other, whose adherents oppose surrogacy in all forms; and the harm reduction position, which hovers between the two, whose supporters advocate for better regulation of commercial surrogacy. In what might be described as an 'overlapping' group are harm reductionists who advocate for the abolition of commercial surrogacy, particularly transnational commercial surrogacy, while supporting altruistic surrogacy. For simplicity's sake, and because my primary focus is on transnational commercial surrogacy, I include this 'overlapping' narrative in my analysis of abolitionist discourse, noting where relevant divergences occur.

I outline these three dominant positions in the following sections. In light of the scant scholarship specific to transnational commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand, I draw heavily on scholarly work focused on India and the USA, two countries where commercial surrogacy operates as a for-profit industry (Harrison, 2014, p. 146). I also note that as abolitionists tend to oppose not only transnational commercial surrogacy but surrogacy in all forms, some reference to work on surrogacy in general is required. I provide examples of narratives concealed by the different positions, before suggesting, in the final section, how the 'Baby Gammy' case shone a light on what each of these positions obscures.

2.1 Neoliberal position

Elizabeth Scott (2009) traces changes in the public, political and judicial responses to commercial surrogacy in the USA, from the infamous ‘Baby M Case’⁷ in the late-1980s when surrogacy was perceived as ‘baby selling’, to the neoliberal (though she does not use the term) re-framing of surrogacy some twenty years later. While she attributes the changes to growing familiarity with assisted reproductive technologies (ART), the move from traditional to gestational surrogacy, and the withdrawal of feminists and liberals from public debate (Scott, 2009, pp. 136-45), I would equally argue that this re-framing of surrogacy is evidence of the ubiquity of neoliberalism, particularly in the USA. Nick Couldry (2010, p. 6) describes neoliberalism’s pervasive power not only in terms of the way it dominates contemporary economic, political and social systems, but as a doctrine that normalises and embeds its rationality into everyday life, presenting ‘the social world as made up of markets, and spaces of potential competition that need to be organized as markets, blocking other narratives from view.’

In neoliberal narratives, commercial surrogacy is seen as a market, within which individuals exercise choice (Scott, 2009; Spar & Harrington, 2009). Demand for this ‘baby business’ is generated by ‘infertile couples ..., same sex couples, genetically-at-risk couples or individuals, single parents, gender selectors, and fertile adopters’ (Spar & Harrington, 2009, p. 44), among locals, diasporas and outsiders (Harrison, 2014, p. 148; Whittaker, 2011, p. 110). Globally, the supply side in surrogate mothers is made up of socially and economically disadvantaged women in relatively economically disadvantaged countries, generally young, largely lacking formal education but with proven

⁷ Working class mother Mary Whitehead was paid US\$10,000 to be inseminated with William Stern’s sperm in order to give birth to a child for Stern and his wife Elizabeth. After giving birth in March 1986, Whitehead refused to relinquish the child, known as Baby M, and sought custody (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014). She was sued by the Sterns and lost, but won her appeal in 1987: the Supreme Court of New Jersey ruled the surrogacy contract was unenforceable because it violated public policy against the ‘sale of a child’ (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014; Scott, 2009), affirming that the birth mother is the legal mother. Nonetheless, custody was granted to Stern and visitation rights to Whitehead (Storrow, 2015, p. 195-7). The case had a profound impact on shaping public policy and legislative regulation in the USA in the late-1980s and early-1990s. However, the rise of gestational surrogacy has since led to changes recognising genetic parents in legal parentage arrangements (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014; Scott, 2009).

fertility (Bailey, 2011, p. 716). Writing from a critical perspective, Denise Cuthbert and Patricia Fronek (2014, p. 63) describe commercial surrogacy as a market 'enabled by new technologies, underwritten by old inequalities'.

In neoliberal academic discourse, surrogate mothers are recast as 'gestational carriers' (English, Mechanick-Braverman & Corson, 1991) who, in the case of American women, perform 'a service of great social value for the benefit of others' (Scott, 2009, p. 139); and in the case of Indian women, 'actively enact[-] "choice"' as a means of overcoming poverty' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 138). The neoliberal narrative attributes problems, where they occur, to inadequate regulation, with stronger legal frameworks advocated to enhance market functioning (Scott, 2009; Spar & Harrington, 2009).

In popular discourse, the neoliberal narrative deploys 'the language of autonomy, choice and liberty' to frame surrogacy work (Bailey, 2011, p. 721), portraying transnational commercial surrogacy as a 'win-win' scenario and a case of 'women helping women' (Harrison, 2014, pp. 153-4; Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2010, pp. 139-41).⁸ Cuthbert and Fronek (2014, p. 63) note the emergence in the Australian media since 2009 of 'pro-commercial surrogacy narratives', which combine the language of choice and economic opportunity, with the language of humanitarianism. In these neoliberal narratives, proponents are unapologetic about paying for surrogacy services, and may express a preference for commercial arrangements (Jackson et al, 2017, pp. 28-32; Millbank, 2012, p. 128). As the Australian mother of twins born to an American surrogate put it on the SBS current affairs television program *Insight*,

we felt very comfortable paying somebody for their time to enable us to have a child. We felt it was an excellent business arrangement in the sense that if you wanted to, it could be clear-cut. You would never have contact with that person

⁸ In October 2007, a story entitled 'Lisa Ling Investigates: Wombs for Rent' about an American couple who hired a surrogate mother in India to carry their child, aired on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, moving the host to describe the practice as a 'win-win' scenario and an example of 'women around the world ... helping other women ... a beautiful thing' (cited by Harrison, 2014, p. 153). Given the popularity of *Oprah* in the USA, Harrison (2014, p. 150) suggests the program 'can be read as both a barometer of popular opinion as well as a source of knowledge production capable of showing the public response to the ethical and moral legitimacy of hiring a foreign surrogate'.

again. They knew prior to the arrangement what was involved. We rented that womb for a short period of time. ('Baby Business', 2011, para. 1).

Neoliberal narratives imply commercial surrogacy can be 'liberating' for women in developing countries (Cuthbert & Fronek, 2014, pp. 62-3). In a second forum on surrogacy on *Insight*, filmed in 2014, an Australian woman whose child was gestated by a surrogate mother in India says,

Well from the clinic they [Indian surrogate mothers] probably got maybe \$7 or 8,000 which is equivalent to about three or four years of wages for them. Ah but we also paid our surrogate a bit extra afterwards to go towards her family. She was doing it for her family to have a better life and put her kids through education and everything so we offered her more money to be able to do that. ('Surrogacy', 2014, para. 73).

The commercial surrogacy arrangement is portrayed not only as a financial opportunity for the surrogate to improve her life, but also as a humanitarian act by the intended parents. Another illustrative example is found in a 2011 interview with the Australian parents of a daughter born to a surrogate mother in India:

Both are distressed at negative comments about so-called Indian "baby farms". "The surrogate women are just happy women. They come out of the rooms and smile and shake your hand ... they are pleased with the choices they have made ... They [the detractors] are assuming everyone who is a surrogate is being pushed into it or exploited, which is condescending because these are all women who have made informed choices." (Barlass, 2011, p. 3)

Cuthbert and Fronek (2014, p. 63) maintain that the 'humanitarian argument', together with narratives of economic benefit and choice, are put forward by neoliberal proponents of commercial surrogacy 'in order to neutralise the taint of baby trading'.

Noting the significance of mainstream media in both reflecting and shaping public opinion, Riggs and Due (2013, p. 960) also document a shift in Australian news media reporting on commercial surrogacy between 2009, when the focus was on the ethics of the practice, to late-2011 when "feel good" stories came to dominate. They suggest the primary focus of reporting has become 'the redemptive narrative of agency overcoming vulnerability', on the part of both the intended parents—whether heterosexual or homosexual—and the

surrogates in developing countries (Riggs & Due, 2014, p. 872). This focus on neoliberal notions of agency serves to obscure the vulnerability of all parties involved offshore commercial surrogacy arrangements (Riggs & Due, 2013, pp. 965-6).

Riggs and Due (2014, p. 871) found that the neoliberal narrative 'that depicts vulnerability as something to be overcome via agency significantly underplays the ongoing role of vulnerability in regards to parenting'. This observation speaks to the place, or rather, the absence of the child in neoliberal narratives: while the 'much loved' babies are shown as the happy endings to the feel-good media stories about surrogacy, there is no sense of that baby growing into a child who may face challenges as a result of being born through commercial surrogacy, particularly in cases involving either or both anonymous donor gametes and an unidentified surrogate mother (Quartly, Swain & Cuthbert, 2013, p. 129; Smerdon, 2008, pp. 60-1). Indeed, by using the lexicon of the free market, neoliberal discourse obfuscates the profound structural, cultural, embodied and emotional aspects of transnational commercial surrogacy more broadly, while at the same time drawing selectively on certain affective elements as marketing tools. As Quartly, Swain and Cuthbert (2013, p. 138) note, 'the needs of commissioning parents are placed clearly front and centre'. In media reports, the suffering of white, middle-class infertile women is privileged (see for example, Corderoy, 2012; Dunlevy, 2014), alongside the struggle of same-sex male couples and single gay men to become parents in a repressive environment (Brooks, 2013; Crouch, 2014; McMahon, 2011; Miller, 2012). The grief of childless couples in lower socio-economic circumstances, who are disproportionately affected by infertility, seldom features (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 136-7). Also absent from these narratives is the risk that children born through transnational commercial surrogacy will experience 'intangible losses as a result of being cut off from some portion of their origins' (Smerdon, 2008, p. 61).

A 'selling point' for contracting surrogates in low resource settings such as India and Thailand is the perception that the surrogate mother is less likely to lay claim to the child than a surrogate mother in Australia or the USA (Arieff, 2012, pp. 33-4; Everingham, Stafford-Bell & Hammarberg, 2014, p. 2; Harrison,

2014, p. 148; Millbank, 2012, pp. 108-9). Emphasis is placed on the ‘gestational carrier’ as ‘not the “real” mother’ (Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2010, pp. 141-4; Harrison, 2014), allowing the grief of surrogates in transnational settings, if it features at all, to be rationalised as the price they pay for the opportunity to earn ‘life-changing’ amounts of money (Arieff, 2012, p. 37). As Doctor Nanya Patel, described as the ‘(in)famous ... medical face of India’s ‘womb for rent’ industry’ (Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2010, p. 137) puts it, ‘These [Indian] surrogates are doing the physical work, agreed. And they’re being compensated for that. They know that there is no pain without gain’ (Rudge, 2013). References to physical work and pain notwithstanding, the neoliberal narrative effaces the embodied experience of the surrogate mother. The risks posed by pregnancy and childbirth (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 149-50), and how she feels about pregnancy, labour and childbirth are dismissed—‘no pain without gain’—if they are considered at all (Cuthbert and Fronek, 2014, p. 62).

In tracing what she calls the ‘transformation’ of surrogacy in Australia over a twenty-five year period, Millbank (2012, pp. 125-6) notes consistent distinctions made in parliamentary debates in the late 2000s between altruistic surrogacy, which is characterised as ‘good’, ‘noble’ and ‘wholesome’, and commercial surrogacy, which is exploitative and inconsistent with Australian values (see also Stuhmcke, 2015, pp. 75-6). Millbank (2012, p. 110) maintains that this ‘dichotomisation’ is not as stark in media reports for the same period, which demonstrate ‘a surprisingly nuanced approach to payment’. She characterises this as ‘new ... in Australian public discourses on surrogacy’ (Millbank, 2012, p. 111), concluding that parliamentary debates and media reports were ‘utterly divided’ on the issue of payment (Millbank, 2012, p. 125).

My own analysis of Australian news media reporting prior to the ‘Baby Gammy’ case suggests that while ‘new’ discourses in support of paid surrogacy have gained traction in the Australian media since 2011, these narratives continue to be contested. When Australian actress Nicole Kidman thanked her ‘gestational carrier’ in a statement following the birth of her daughter to a surrogate mother in the USA in January 2011, she sparked a storm of criticism in

mainstream and social media⁹ for using what one editorial described as ‘impersonal and dehumanising language’ (‘Giving birth to a debate’, 2011; for further examples, see Higgins, 2011; Tankard Reist, 2011; Warne-Smith, 2011; for an alternative view, see O’Brien, 2011). Indeed, the most vocal advocates of paid surrogacy in Australia remain careful in their choice of public language, distinguishing between ‘commercial’ surrogacy, with its implications of commodification and profit-making; and ‘compensated’ surrogacy (O’Byrne & Gerber, 2015, p. 6), which rewards ‘a social service’ (Szego, 2014) and the ‘sacrifice, love and care which surrogates provide’ (Everingham, 2015). Comments made on national television by Australian Medical Association (WA) President Doctor Michael Gannon typify this position:

What we don’t want to see is human reproduction being a commodity. This shouldn’t be about profit. This should be about looking after people who are making a wonderful gift. (‘There are calls for Western Australia fertility laws to be overhauled to allow surrogacy mothers to be paid’, 2014, min. 01:09)

Notwithstanding observations by Riggs and Due (2013; 2014) about the changing nature of media reporting on commercial surrogacy in Australia, the ‘Baby Gammy’ case resulted in a resurgence of public debate about the ethics of the practice. This debate continued in submissions to the *Inquiry into surrogacy*, leading me to suggest that, in Australia, neoliberal narratives may have a toehold, but they fall short of sure footing.

2.2 Abolitionist position

Charis Thompson (2002, p. 60) notes that radical feminist scholars have been at the forefront of critical analysis of ART, raising moral questions about ‘the commodification of reproduction facilitated by reproductive technologies, including surrogacy’. Radical feminist analysis sheds critical light on how perceptions of parenting, specifically mothering, are shaped by ART and its accompanying rhetoric: for example, how the rhetorical shift from ‘surrogate mother’ to ‘gestational carrier’ serves to distance the surrogate mother from the

⁹ For an example of the social media storm generated by Kidman’s use of the term ‘gestational surrogate’ in the week following the announcement on 18 Jan 2011, see: <https://twitter.com/search?q=gestational%20%2B%20carrier%20%2B%20kidman%20since%3A2011-01-18%20until%3A2011-01-25&src=typd>

child, excise gestational labour from the definition of motherhood, and devalue the carework of parenting (Ekman, 2013; Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013; Riggs & Due, 2010), privileging biological kinship—genetic ties—over social parenting or ‘child nurture as the fundamental role of a parent’ (Grossberg, 2005, p. 115).

Historically, the abolitionist position on surrogacy has been dominated in the academic sphere by radical feminist scholars, who shared that space in the public sphere, somewhat uncomfortably, with religious conservatives (Scott, 2009, pp. 142-4). More recently, adoption studies scholars have added their voices to calls for the abolition of surrogacy, seeing the growth in transnational commercial surrogacy as part of a continuum, with adoption, of a demand-driven ‘market in babies’, enabled by inequalities in wealth and power (see for example, Cuthbert & Fronek, 2014; Quartly, Swain & Cuthbert, 2013). This engagement at the scholarly level is reflected by the involvement of relinquishing mothers’ and adoptees’ groups in public debate in Australia. For these groups, surrogacy replicates the abuses perpetrated in the era of forced adoptions, producing lifelong trauma for surrogate mothers—referred to as the ‘birthmother’ or ‘relinquishing mother’—and babies born through surrogacy (see for example, Association of Relinquishing Mothers (Victoria) 2016; Lynch, 2016; VANISH, 2016).

The impassioned and affective language of abolitionist discourse contrasts sharply with the upbeat tone of neoliberal narratives. Added to concerns raised by feminists since the 1980s about the commodification of reproduction and of life itself (Corea, 1985; Rothman, 1988) are criticisms by legal scholars that commercial surrogacy violates human rights and human dignity (Tobin, 2014, pp. 326-44). Commercial surrogacy is cast by abolitionists as corrupt (Klein, 2014), a form of ‘reproductive prostitution’ (Corea, 1985, p. 227; see also Ekman, 2013, p. 141), equated with child trafficking (Ekman, 2013, p. 147), servitude (Slavery Links, 2016), and the sale of children (Allan, 2015, pp. 116-17; Tobin, 2014, p. 341).

If the physical, emotional and psychic pain of the surrogate mother is absent in the neoliberal narrative, it is front and centre in abolitionist accounts of surrogacy. Abolitionists refute the notion that the absence of a genetic link between the surrogate mother and baby equates to diminished connection,

arguing that a woman irrevocably bonds—physically, psychologically and emotionally—with the child she carries (Agnafors, 2014; Smerdon, 2008, pp. 55-6). Health risks faced by surrogate mothers (and egg donors) through ART procedures are also emphasised (Allan, 2015, p. 127; FINRRAGE, 2016; Pascoe, 2016; Smerdon, 2008, pp. 20-21, 54). For abolitionists, people have a ‘desire’ not a ‘right’ to be parents (Bishop & Loff, 2014; Cuthbert & Fronek, 2014; Frame, 2010). When the pain of intended parents—recast as ‘commissioning persons’ (Allan, 2015, p.113, n. 1)—in surrogacy arrangements is acknowledged at all, it is subordinated to the risks posed by surrogacy to both or either the surrogate mother and the child (Allan, 2015, p. 134; Tobin, 2015).

Agency, valorised in neoliberal narratives, is erased in abolitionist ones: the surrogate mother is a victim, duped by patriarchal capitalism and even her own family, ‘socialised into caring’ (Association of Relinquishing Mothers (Victoria), 2016, p. 2). The voices of women who regret having acted as surrogates are privileged (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2016, p. 2; Ekman, 2013, p. 184). Women who express satisfaction as surrogates are dismissed as victims of false consciousness, and the ways they describe their own relationship to the babies they gestate are criticised as ‘dissociation’ (Ekman, 2013, pp. 171-3; FINRRAGE, 2016, p. 2).

Relationships characterised as ‘win-win’ in neoliberal discourse are redefined by abolitionists as exploitative. Scholars draw attention to structural inequalities that impact on women’s bargaining power and capacity to give informed consent (Allan, 2015, p. 126). Usha Smerdon (2008, p. 54), for example, questions whether Indian woman can freely choose to become surrogates when ‘their “choices” can be so dire’, while for Jyotsna Gupta (2006, p. 32), it ‘is debatable whether [Indian] women are choosing freely to become surrogates, or that their will is socially and economically constructed’. While Sonia Allan (2015, p. 124) acknowledges that ‘blanket statements [about commercial surrogacy] are not possible’, she suggests economic, racial and cultural disparities between ‘commissioning persons’ and women who act as commercial surrogates necessarily result, ‘intentionally or unintentionally’, in exploitative relationships (Allan, 2015, p. 125). Smerdon (2008, p. 53) explicitly links transnational

commercial surrogacy in India with racism and neo-colonialism, viewing surrogacy and egg donation 'as the newest forms of reproductive abuse in India'.

In applying Western moral frameworks to surrogacy in non-Western settings, some abolitionists can be guilty of what Chandra Mohanty (1984; 2003) calls the 'discursive colonization of Third World women's lives', ignoring 'the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world' (Mohanty, 1984, p. 334) and assuming shared (Eurocentric) feminist priorities. Amrita Pande (2009, p. 144) argues that Eurocentric portrayals likening surrogacy to prostitution and baby selling 'cannot incorporate the reality of a developing-country setting—where commercial surrogacy has become a survival strategy and a temporary occupation for some poor rural women'. By universalising women's experience of surrogacy, abolitionists disregard the more nuanced narratives revealed in ethnographic studies, such as Pande's, which privilege surrogate mothers' own 'moral language' (Bailey, 2011, p. 723; see also Pande, 2009, pp. 144-5; Thompson, 2002, pp 62-3). The nuanced motivations expressed by Thai women for becoming a surrogate, for example, which in addition to financial incentives include compassion for the childless and the opportunity to 'make merit' (Hibino and Shimazono, 2013; Nilsson, 2015; Whittaker, 2014a), cannot be accommodated in abolitionist discourse. Abolitionists' casting of Asian surrogates as 'victims' and 'reproductive slaves' (Klein, 2011) reduces them to caricatures, exemplifying the monolithic construction of the 'third-world woman' so acutely criticised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, p. 296).

Further, abolitionists reject the harm reduction argument that because '[c]hildren will continue to be born as a result of [commercial] surrogacy arrangements to Australian couples regardless of whether or not Australian legislation prohibits it', the preferable course of action is to regulate in order to minimise harms (Harland & Limon, 2015, p. 166). For abolitionists, regulation amounts to acquiescence (Allan, 2015, p. 130) or 'capitulation' (Donorkinderen, 2016, p. 5), and is deleterious to public morality (Tobin, 2014, p. 351). The risk that a ban on commercial surrogacy would create a black market is downplayed (Smerdon, 2008, pp. 81-3), or rejected as insufficient grounds for legalisation (Allan, 2015, p. 142).

2.3 Harm reduction positions

The harm reduction position or ‘middle ground’ (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014, p. 134) is characterised by pragmatism. Harm reductionists see an outright global ban on surrogacy as implausible and seek to ‘eliminate exploitation and malpractice within commercial surrogacy’ and ‘maintain a steady focus on social and economic justice’ (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 417; see also Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014; Pande, 2009; 2010; Riggs & Due, 2010).

Harm reductionists are more or less united in their support for ‘reasonable regulation’ (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014, p. 132) and ‘minimum standards of care’ (Thorn, Wischmann & Blyth, 2012) that ‘protect the interests of patients, donors, surrogates and future children’ (Storrow, 2011, p. 544). Harm reductionists advocate for ART industry oversight; transparency and accountability of information, including clinical success rates and financial transactions; development of culturally relevant informed consent guidelines and processes; long-term duty of care to surrogate mothers; and regulation that supports the best interests of the child and upholds child rights, including access to information on donors and surrogates (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014; Thorn, Wischmann & Blyth, 2012; Whittaker, 2011; see also Spar & Harrington, 2009).

Unlike abolitionists for whom commercial surrogacy in and of itself violates international human rights laws, for harm reductionists, human rights law provides a framework for ethical surrogacy regulation (Gerber & O’Byrne, 2015, p. 99; pp. 111-12); and regulation, rather than prohibition, offers the best way to protect human rights (Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, 2016, pp. 2, 15-20).

While recognising that commercial surrogacy is potentially exploitative, and that women’s choices may be constrained, harm reductionists respect that commercial surrogacy ‘may also reflect an appealing employment alternative to other labour options’ available to women in developing countries (Harrison, 2014, p. 146); and that in a carefully regulated industry, women can ‘find agency in using the resources they have as survival strategies’ (Harrison, 2014, p. 155).

As noted above, some harm reductionists question the ‘sharp distinction’ between ‘altruistic’ and ‘commercial’ surrogacy (Jackson et al, 2017, p. 28;

Millbank, 2012, p. 110). Tammy Johnson (2015, p. 47) suggests both commercial and altruistic surrogacy have the scope to be harmful, and calls for both to be regulated 'in order to minimise the risk of harm occurring'. Other harm reduction advocates argue that introducing 'compensated' surrogacy in Australia is necessary in order to reduce the harm associated with commercial surrogacy practices in less regulated overseas settings (Bryant, 2015; Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, 2016; Everingham, 2015).

While harm reductionists can be less unequivocal than their neoliberal and abolitionist counterparts—even co-authors of a scholarly paper can admit to disagreement (Bromfield & Rotabi, 2014, p. 134)—harm reduction narratives tend to be dispassionate in tone, as if to suggest that reason, science and law are sufficient to bring order to chaos. Typifying this tone, Paula Gerber and Katie O'Byrne (2015, p. 111) suggest:

We must move away from the highly emotive language and dialogue that dominates discussion regarding surrogacy, and instead develop evidence-based policies and laws that are informed by and comply with international human rights norms, particularly the CRC [Convention on the Rights of the Child].

The assumption here is that a move away from highly emotive language is both possible and desirable. Yet to ignore the 'highly emotive' nature of surrogacy is to leave the 'elemental' urge to reproduce (Beeson, 2014) out of account. Harm reduction thus does not address 'the anxiety, hope, and pain' (Whittaker & Speier, 2010, p. 370) that not only intended parents but also surrogate mothers bring to the process.

Moreover, the integrity of the harm reduction position relies on assumptions about the efficacy of regulation, and on the privileging of reason and judgment over other factors that motivate human behaviour. However, recent empirical research on people who travel overseas for reproductive treatment finds that they do 'not conform to regulators' assumptions about patient behaviour' (Jackson et al, 2017, p. 43). Notably, instead of discouraging risk-taking behaviour, relevant laws are treated by intended parents as 'abstract technicalities' to be negotiated on a 'well-trodden path' to parenthood (Jackson

et al, 2017, pp. 26-7)¹⁰. Intended parents are attracted to commercial surrogacy for a range of sometimes contradictory reasons, which include: lower costs (Deomampo, 2013a, pp. 85-6; Jackson et al, 2017, p. 24); a greater sense of control over treatment (Jackson et al, 2017, p. 43); the perception of a more secure parental claim, particularly in low-resource settings (Harrison, 2014, p. 148); desire for connection (Jackson et al, 2017, p. 39); and the appeal of distance—geographic and/or racial—afforded by overseas surrogacy (Deomampo, 2013a, p. 93; Harrison, 2014; Riggs, 2015). Furthermore, rather than formal or professional sources, intended parents rely overwhelmingly on the internet, specifically social media, to inform their decision-making, placing particular value on anecdote and testimonials (Deomampo, 2013a, p. 85; Jackson et al, 2017, pp. 37-40).

When the ‘Baby Gammy’ case broke in the Australian and international media on 1 August 2014, it exposed the limited, at times contradictory assumptions at work in all three of the prominent, ultimately ideological positions within the public discourse on transnational commercial surrogacy. I provide examples in the following section of how the ‘Baby Gammy’ story destabilised these dominant narratives, before noting how aspects of the case were subsequently mobilised, selectively, to prop up those same positions.

3. ‘Baby Gammy’

It is fair to say that ‘Baby Gammy’ changed the face of overseas commercial surrogacy in Australia. When the story broke on 1 August 2014, it created a ‘media frenzy’ that put transnational commercial surrogacy into the public spotlight (Beeson, 2014): searches on media databases Factiva and Informit show 73 articles mentioning ‘Gammy’ appeared in major Australian newspapers in the month of August 2014 alone, with 75 items mentioning ‘Gammy’ airing on Australian television during the same period. Speaking at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas in Sydney on 30 August, Swedish journalist and activist Kasja

¹⁰ Jackson et al (2017, p. 26) suggest as a result of the contradiction in countries like Australia, which have ‘extra-territorial criminal prohibitions against commercial surrogacy’ but ‘in practice often facilitate these prohibited arrangements through citizenship and parentage provisions’, reproductive travellers experience the law as ambiguous, ‘both there and not-there’.

Ekis Ekman told the audience that ‘the baby Gammy case will be to Australia what the Baby M case was to the US in the ‘eighties’¹¹ (Sydney Opera House Talks & Ideas, 2014, min. 2:17), that is, ‘a case that forced the tide of opinion against surrogacy’ (Storrow, 2015, p. 196). Mark Beeson (2014, para. 1) suggests the case shone ‘a revealing light’ on international relations, global inequities, and ‘also ... our values and priorities’, while International Human Rights lawyer Anna Gallagher described Baby Gammy as having ‘done us all a favour’ by raising questions about commercial surrogacy practices at a crucial time and forcing public conversation on the issues (Whitmont & Michelmore, 2014, para. 69).

Baby Gammy’s story is inseparable from that of his Thai surrogate mother, then twenty-one-year-old mother of two Pattaramon (Goy) Chanbua, who was contracted in 2012 to act as gestational carrier for Australian intended parents David and Wendy Farnell. The implantation of what Pattaramon referred to as ‘a glass tube baby’ resulted in a pregnancy of twins, a boy and a girl (Murdoch, 2014c). When antenatal tests revealed that the boy had Down Syndrome, the Farnells allegedly requested that Pattaramon abort the foetus, which she refused to do on religious grounds (Murdoch, 2014c), abortion being considered a sin under Thailand’s dominant Theravada Buddhist religion (Whittaker, 2004).¹² The Farnells subsequently took the healthy girl twin back to Australia, leaving Pattaramon to raise the boy, whom she nicknamed Grammy—not ‘Gammy’ as was widely reported.¹³ The story, first aired in Thailand (Whitmont & Michelmore, 2014, paras. 56-63), made international headlines when Pattaramon, whose two other children were then aged six and three

¹¹ See n. 7.

¹² As Andrea Whittaker discusses in *Abortion, Sin and the State in Thailand* (2004), although illegal in all but exceptional circumstances, an estimated 200,000–300,000 abortions take place annually in Thailand. While conservative Buddhists hold that ‘the individual karmic life-force’ begins at the moment of conception making any abortion sinful, moderates suggest the degree of sinfulness depends on the intent behind it and the effort involved, implying that earlier-stage abortions incur a lesser karmic burden (Whittaker, 2004, p. 21). Consequently, as Whittaker (2004, p. 21) explains, ‘most [Thai] women will choose to abort at an earlier stage in pregnancy rather than later and many will attempt to overcome the karmic retribution of abortion through merit-making’. A complicating factor in Pattaramon’s case was that the birth defect was not revealed until late in the pregnancy (Hawley, 2014a; Murdoch, 2014c).

¹³ Pattaramon later clarified that she’d name him ‘after the Gramophone record company for all the noise he made’ (Emmons, 2015, p. 33). For clarity, I use the name ‘Gammy’ where it was originally reported.

(Murdoch, 2014f), went public about her family's financial struggle to meet Grammy's health and welfare needs (Murdoch, 2014c).

From her first appearances in the Australian media, Pattaramon laid bare the embodied and affective elements of commercial surrogacy. In an interview with ABC television news, she wept as she said:

[translation] "I feel sorry for him [the boy]. I don't know what to do. I chose to have him, not to hurt him. I love him. He was in my tummy for nine months, it's like my child.

"I treat him like my other children, never think you are not my child and I don't care for you, never." ('Thai surrogate mother of a baby with Down syndrome abandoned by Australian parents says she cannot afford baby Gammy's medical treatment', 2014, para. 11-12)

In thirty seconds of footage, Pattaramon turned the distinction in neoliberal discourse between 'real' mother and 'gestational carrier' on its head. 'I chose to have him, not to hurt him,' she says, distinguishing herself from the Australian intended, and genetic¹⁴, parents whom she alleged not only abandoned Grammy, but wanted to 'hurt' (i.e. terminate) him. Nor is there any denying the cost to Pattaramon and her family in choosing to keep him, a decision at odds with neoliberal depictions of 'Third World women' actively choosing surrogacy as a pathway out of poverty.

Much of the public response immediately following the exposé focused, understandably, on the vulnerability of the surrogate mother and allegedly abandoned child, resulting in an 'outpouring of sympathy and charity' ('Plight of a Down syndrome baby born to a surrogate mother and left behind in Thailand has prompted an outpouring of sympathy and charity', 2014). Pattaramon was praised as a 'saint' and 'absolute hero' (AFP, 2014), and within days, a 'Hope for Gammy' fundraising campaign had raised A\$200,000 in public donations for the child's care (Murdoch, 2014a). The intended parents were almost universally reviled for the dual abomination of having abandoned a disabled child, and separating twins ('Fears of surrogacy ban after Australian couple deserts Thai

¹⁴ Media reports later revealed that the twins were conceived using donor eggs (Murdoch, 2014f; AAP, 2016)

surrogate mother of baby with Down syndrome', 2014; Murdoch & Howden, 2014; Tuohy, 2014).

On first reading, the case seemed to accord entirely with abolitionists' analysis of commercial surrogacy as a 'heartless, exploitative, capitalist enterprise' (Klein, 2014, p. 45), the rejection of a disabled child attributed to 'the "explosive mix" of consumerism combined with a "throwaway culture"' (Mckenna, 2014). The story was used to highlight the 'significant international human rights issues raised by commercial surrogacy', specifically the '[e]xploitation and commodification of women and children' (Allan, 2014, p. 20):

Chanbua entered into the arrangement because her family was desperate and in debt. The taking of only the healthy child reflects a "market" in which babies are the products and only the "best" will do. Women in such circumstances are required to undergo an abortion, or face being left with a disabled child they may not be able to care for. The situation also reeks of discrimination against, and devaluing of, people with disabilities (Allan, 2014, p. 20)

However, details that emerged in the wake of the exposé merit a more nuanced reading of agency and choice, exposing gaps in all three narratives that dominate discourse on commercial surrogacy.

For the intended parents, there was no 'redemptive narrative of agency overcoming vulnerability' (Riggs & Due, 2014, p. 872). The Farnells failed to conform to the mainstream media's sentimental stereotype of the worthy, white middle-class couple desperate for a child (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 136-7): he was in his fifties, with three adult children from a first marriage (Murdoch, et al, 2014, p. 2); she was from China, prompting one website to impute she was a 'mail-order bride' (Mamamia News, 2014). While public opinion was weighted heavily against them from the outset, some initially sided with the Farnells, believing Pattaramon's breach of contract—her refusal to terminate the pregnancy at their request—left them 'vindicated'¹⁵. However, all vestiges of sympathy vanished with revelations that David Farnell had prior convictions for

¹⁵ See comments number 10, 11, 18 and 19 in response to ABC News online story, 'Fears of surrogacy ban after Australian couple deserts Thai surrogate mother of baby with Down syndrome', 2 August 2014, viewed 16 March 2016 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-02/outrage-as-australian-parents-desert-surrogate-mother/5643074#comments>

child sex offences (Murdoch et al, 2014, p. 2). Whatever the facts, in each version of their own story—and there were several (Miller, 2014; Murdoch & Miller, 2014; Topping & Foster, 2014)—the Farnells portrayed their experience of commercial surrogacy as ‘confusing’ (Hawley, 2014b), ‘stressing’ and ‘impersonal’ (Howes & Dalley, 2014) traumatising, ‘devastating’, and even terrifying (Miller, 2014).

In addition to the ‘language barrier’ (Hawley, 2014b), and legal issues (Miller, 2014), which the Farnells identified as sources of their confusion and stress, the case shed light on a labyrinthine industry, which involved, in addition to IVF clinics, agents and ‘sub-agents’, including businesses based outside of Thailand (Thailand Surrogacy, 2012a). The Farnells’ claim that they didn’t know who their surrogate was (Hawley, 2014b), while questionable, was plausible, given reports that agents were known to prevent surrogates and intended parents from having direct contact. As Anna Gallagher observed,

Brokers and middle-men often have a vested interest to keep the intending parents well away from the surrogate ... [as t]hey may become aware, for example, that the huge amounts of money they’re paying: only a very small amount is trickling down to the surrogate. (Whitmont & Michelmore, 2014, para. 143)

Such a context calls into question neoliberal narratives that portray the surrogate mothers as the primary beneficiaries of these ‘excellent business arrangements’.

While valourising her as the loving mother of a disabled boy, mainstream media coverage focused on Pattaramon’s vulnerability. Although the family live in an industrial area south of Bangkok, Pattaramon was described as coming from an ‘impoverished village’ (Murdoch, 2014c; Murdoch, 2014e); and her young age was frequently mentioned (Alford & Chitprasertsuk, 2014; Hawley, 2014c; Miller, 2014; Murdoch, 2014c). Peter Baines, head of the charity Hands Across the Water managing donations for Grammy’s care, was reported as saying,

“We know that with her family history—she’s 21, she’s just married a third husband and she had her first child at 13—it would be irresponsible for us to give funds to Koi [Pattaramon]...

“There’s been so many twists and turns to this story ... but we’re looking after the interests of Gammy and that’s our responsibility.” (Alford, 2014, p. 4).

The implication that Pattaramon was not already ‘looking after the interests of Gammy’ is breathtaking. Likewise, the notion that ‘[s]cores of Australians ... offered to adopt him’ (Murdoch, 2014e). Undoubtedly, as I discuss in Chapter 3, stereotypes about Thai women and perceptions of Thailand as a dangerous ‘adventure zone’ (Dann, 2008, p. 206)—‘a Wild West of unclear regulations, legal loopholes, and sporadic government crackdowns’ (Shire, 2014, para. 1)—fed into public perceptions of Grammy’s vulnerability.

A different reading sees Pattaramon consistently positioning herself as having exercised agency. While her moral language reflects her Buddhist beliefs in karma and fate, she made it clear that it was her choice not to terminate the pregnancy, albeit for fear of ‘sin’ (Murdoch, 2014c)¹⁶. Her decision to go public on her need for financial assistance to support the child ultimately secured the family a new home, an ongoing stipend for Grammy’s care (Murdoch, 2014d) and Australian citizenship for the boy (Hawley, 2015; Murdoch, 2015)—outcomes at odds with abolitionists’ casting of surrogate mothers as exploited ‘victims’.

Pattaramon’s fortitude is all the more remarkable, given expectations associated with *kreng-jai* in Thai society—literally ‘awe heart’ in English—which Kitiyadisai (2005, p. 20) defines as a ‘quality’,

an attitude of having consideration for others and being thoughtful in maintaining a smooth social atmosphere. So, *kreng-jai* facilitates avoiding unpleasantness and interpersonal confrontation ... the manifestation of *kreng-jai* can range from complying with others’ requests to the avoidance of asserting one’s opinion or needs in order to maintain a cooperative relationship.

Kreng-jai has an expressly hierarchical element, governing ‘the way that people of various ranks communicate, behave and react with one another’ (Moore, 2006, p. 183). As young, female and working class, Pattaramon would rank ‘lower’ than the older, wealthier, paying clients from Australia and therefore be expected to defer to them. Though it seems contradictory, however, her ‘Thai-ness’ may well

¹⁶ The Farnells denied requesting that Pattaramon terminate the pregnancy (Howes & Dalley, 2014), an assertion supported by Justice Thackray in his court case ruling (*Farnell & Chanbua [2016] FCWA 17*, para. 14).

have been her buffer: what was a 'language barrier' for the Farnells gave Pattaramon an advantage.

The 'war of words' that ensued in the mainstream media between Pattaramon and the Farnells was distinctive because, whereas non-English speaking surrogate mothers in developing country settings are 'routinely spoken for by intended parents, medical professionals and reporters' (Harrison, 2014, p. 150, emphasis in original), Pattaramon spoke for herself. Although appearing at press conferences alongside clinicians and representatives from Hands Across the Water, she routinely answered journalists' questions, and was quoted extensively in the media. While adamant that Grammy was her baby and the Farnells 'not the real parents', Pattaramon's comments were initially conciliatory, saying she forgave the Farnells: 'That is the best thing I can do, forgive ... it is best for everybody' (Murdoch, 2014e). But when the Farnells refuted her version of events, she refused to be cowed (Murdoch, 2014f). Disputing claims that the couple showed any interest in the boy, Pattaramon told reporters:

"If they think what they say is true, I want to meet them. Bring a lie detector. The agent can come too. They lie every time in the media. It's like a war of mouths but I say the same thing every time ...

"I just want to be with my child but if the pressure is too much, probably I will explode." (Alford & Chitprasertsuk, 2014, p. 3)

When the agent, Kamonthip Musikawong, spoke to the media, her account confirmed Pattaramon's choices as instrumental to the outcome of the agreement. Kamonthip claimed that Pattharamon proposed to keep the baby boy in exchange for an additional payment on top of her surrogacy fee (Halpin, Yongcharoenchai & Thongnoi, 2014), a version Pattharamon herself later supported (Whitmont & Michelmore, 2014). Kamonthip also claimed that the Farnells ran out of money after paying Pattharamon only half the agreed sum of A\$5,000, and that when they said they would take Gammy instead of paying the balance, Pattharamon waived the outstanding amount in order to keep the baby (Halpin, Yongcharoenchai & Thongnoi, 2014; Whitmont & Michelmore, 2014), a version of events which dovetails with the Farnells' account on *60 Minutes* (Howes & Dalley, 2014). That Pattaramon prevailed in these negotiations

muddies the stereotype of the surrogate mother in a developing country with reduced bargaining power, and sheds light on the significance of language, as well as culture, in negotiating the range of relationships involved in the practice of commercial surrogacy.

Pattaramon's case does not fit neatly into the narrative of regret, which abolitionists suggest is 'typical' of women who reconsider their decision to act as a surrogate (Ekman, 2013, pp. 184-6). Pattaramon attributed the outcome of her surrogacy arrangement to 'good karma' (Murdoch, 2014c) and 'fate' (Murdoch et al, 2014), and consistently demonstrated the strength of her affection for the boy (Hawley, 2014c; Whitmont & Michemore, 2014, para. 100). Furthermore, despite claims that she would discourage others from becoming surrogates (Murdoch, 2014d), Pattaramon had 'again advertised her services as a surrogate' after the birth of the twins (*Farnell & Chanbua [2016] FCWA 17*, para. 80); and at the time her story came to the attention of the media, she was actively involved in recruiting Thai women to become surrogates and egg donors (Alford, 2014; Alford & Phoisaat, 2014; Whitmont & Michemore, 2014).

While not questioning the sincerity of her maternal love for the boy, it is tempting to speculate whether part of Grammy's allure for Pattaramon is also linked to Thailand's relationship to the Western Other, or '*farang*'. Kitiarsa (2010, p. 73) argues that '*farang-ness*' has become part of 'contemporary forms of Thainess'. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridization as a cultural force', Kitiarsa (2010, p. 73) suggests that Thailand's middle class—or more broadly, its 'ruled classes' (Jackson, 2008, p. 149)—have, since the mid-twentieth century, embraced *farang* influences with intensity and increasing intimacy. He notes in particular the contemporary infatuation for mixed race Amerasian or Eurasian children—known as *luk-khreung* (literally 'half-child')—as 'representatives of a modern form of Thainess' (Kitiarsa, 2010, p. 72). In this context, Pattaramon, by being mother to a *farang* baby, may be seen as positioning herself as a modern Thai. At the very least, the case raises questions about whether transnational commercial surrogacy appeals to Thai women based on a desire for 'physical and cultural intimacy' with the Western Other (Kitiarsa, 2010, p. 71). It may seem to undermine my own argument about Grammy being Pattaramon's claim to modernity to also note that she reportedly

changed her name and kept the child ‘on the advice of a monk, who promised that she would become rich and her bad luck would be dispelled’ (Halpin, Yongcharoenchai & Thongnoi, 2014; see also *Farnell & Chanbua [2016] FCWA 17*, para. 15). My point is, however, is that the allure of the modern and adherence to tradition can easily co-exist in the rich mix of cultural choices available to people in the present-day digital age.

I am not the only person for whom the ‘Baby Gammy’ case raises more questions than answers. In November 2015, a trial took place in the Family Court of Western Australia in response to competing applications by the Farnells and Pattaramon for custody of Grammy’s twin sister, Pipah. In his judgement, which awarded custody to the Farnells, Justice Thackray cited an analogy used by the Farnells’ lawyer, Michael Nicolls QC, who said, ‘this case resembles a play that was watched by different people who left the performance at different times and later told others about it’ (*Farnell & Chanbua [2016] FCWA 17*, para. 56). The analogy accords with my own conclusion that the ‘Baby Gammy’ case vividly demonstrates the existential messiness of transnational commercial surrogacy. This messiness is linked, in part, to surrogacy as a form of intimate labour, which, as Laura Harrison (2012, p. 147) notes, entails ‘embodied intimacy, the “messiness” of birth, [and] the class and often racial “Otherness” of the surrogate’. It is also a feature of what Nicole Bromfield and Karen Rotabi (2014, p. 134) describe as ‘a largely unregulated industry which is raging away in low resource countries, where poor women face exploitation daily’. The high emotional stakes inherent in such arrangements for all parties, and the unpredictability of outcomes where human beings are involved, further contribute to the turmoil. The potential rewards may be great, but the risks are high (Millbank, 2012, p. 111; Shire, 2014). Such risks may be denied (Arieff, 2012, p. 3), but as the Baby Gammy case vividly demonstrates, all parties do so at their own peril.

Despite the destabilising impact of the ‘Baby Gammy’ case on the assumptions underpinning dominant narratives in the commercial surrogacy debate, representatives in each camp were quick to mobilise those aspects of the case that served their own discursive (and ideological) requirements to shore up their positions. Advocates of paid surrogacy in Australia used the case to

highlight the dangers of engaging in commercial surrogacy in unregulated overseas settings (Browne & Back, 2014; Everingham, 2015). Abolitionists used it to demonstrate how commercial surrogacy commodified women and children and violated their human rights (Allan, 2014, 2015; Ekman, 2014). Harm reductionists used it to argue for enhanced regulation (Gerber & O’Byrne, 2015). Ultimately, the debate in Australia about transnational commercial surrogacy continues much as it did prior to 1 August 2014.

Thus, I turn to fiction to unsettle the dominant narratives and engage readers in the messiness of transnational commercial surrogacy. In the following chapter, in order to provide a context for the creative component of this thesis, the novel *Mother of Pearl*, and using a framework suggested by reproductive justice advocates Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz (2013) and Alison Bailey (2011), I review existing works of surrogacy fiction in terms of the degree to which they can be said to ‘critically intervene in contemporary rhetorical practices’ (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 146), as I aspire to do in *Mother of Pearl*. I then consider what can be achieved through fiction, discussing the significance of narrative empathy in illuminating complexities and enabling readers to move around the polarising debates outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 2: Surrogacy and fiction

I wanted to make sure in this book that the story was personal, not political. I wanted people to read it and form intimate, novelistic attachments to the characters and if I did it right it won't feel didactic, and you'll care about everybody. (Rushdie, 2005, para. 21)

1. Rhetoric and reproductive justice

As my research into transnational commercial surrogacy progressed, I became increasingly troubled by the complex ethical and political issues it raised. I was also struck by the way that each of the three narratives that dominate academic and public discourse on transnational commercial surrogacy seemed to be underpinned by a hierarchy of grief—calibrated differently in the different narratives—that required one person's (or one group's) pain to be privileged over another. The question of how to engage with the affective elements of transnational commercial surrogacy, while also opening up the narratives to encourage reflection and conversation on the ethics and politics of the practice, provided the impetus for my creative work, the novel *Mother of Pearl*.

Conducting the research for *Mother of Pearl* (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3) strengthened my conviction that no single ideological position as manifest in the discourses that dominate academic and public debate could accommodate the nuances of surrogacy's complex narratives. I concur with Linda Kirkman, Australia's first IVF-assisted 'gestational mother' (her preferred term) that surrogacy is of itself neither good nor bad, but context that makes it so (Kirkman, 2010, p. 20). As I endeavoured to understand the multiple contexts in which transnational commercial surrogacy is enabled and operationalised—or indeed, prohibited—a reproductive justice approach began to make increasing sense as a framework for my creative engagement with the topic.

Reproductive justice emerged as an analytical framework out of the efforts of women of colour in the USA to articulate how the reproductive lives of women in the global South, as well as women of colour in the global North¹⁷, are

¹⁷ I use the terms 'global North' and 'global South' as what should be 'the most neutral term[s] available to denominate the relationship between the dominant and the

affected by race, class and gender inequalities, both historical and contemporary (Bailey, 2011, p. 726-7). Integrating reproductive rights with social justice (ACRJ, 2005, p. 5), the framework considers women's access to services ('reproductive health'), the policy and legal environment ('reproductive rights'), and broader social justice context ('reproductive justice') as 'overlapping lenses for identifying, addressing, and organizing against reproductive oppression' (Bailey, 2011, p. 727, and see ACRJ, 2005). Reproductive justice moves beyond individualism to the broader cultural and societal contexts in which 'choice' is negotiated or constrained (ACJR, 2005, pp. 4-5), in the process raising questions about rights, responsibilities and relationships to each other.

Alison Bailey (2011) uses the reproductive justice methodology to analyse surrogacy in India, exposing the 'deep injustices' underpinning the practice as a starting point for conversation on social justice more broadly. Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz (2013), in turn, uses a reproductive justice perspective to disrupt rhetorical practices in the global North that 'frame and justify' transnational commercial surrogacy, as 'one piece of a much broader project committed to women's reproductive health and dignity' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 146). Fixmer-Oraiz exhorts feminists in the global North to resist 'choice and altruism as two clear and present discourses that mask reproductive injustice' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 150), arguing that while the rhetoric of choice obscures the structural conditions that constrain women's decision-making and the stratification of reproduction (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 147-9), as noted in the previous chapter, the language of altruism obfuscates disparities in wealth and privilege, and the risks of exploitation, by equating payment for surrogacy with 'humanitarian aid' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 149). She argues in addition that the reification of 'biogenetics and the patriarchal nuclear family' in contemporary commercial surrogacy discourse must be challenged, alongside the 'rearticulation of motherhood that privileges whiteness and wealth' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 150). Gestational labour must be recognised as part of what defines motherhood and

subaltern regions of the world' (Schwarz, 2015, p. 11). However, I recognise that since the terms were coined in the early 1980s, the geographic divisions have been 'overdetermined by emerging social inequalities—not just ethnic, but class and gender—that render the South a site of internal contradictions and conflicts, much the same as in the North' (Dirlik, 2007, p. 15).

kinship, and 'additional relations of significance' beyond the confines of the patriarchal nuclear family acknowledged, if the potential of surrogacy to reinvent or queer notions of family is to be realised (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 151-2). Finally, Fixmer-Oraiz (2013, p. 152) argues for urgent harm reduction initiatives, linked to 'more robust visions of reproductive justice and solidarity that include rhetorical forms of redress'.

With its focus on how the intersections of gender, class, race, ability, age and immigration status impact on reproductive health, rights and justice (ACRJ, 2005, p. 5), reproductive justice is ideally suited to an analysis of the 'supply' side of transnational commercial surrogacy, as the work of Bailey and Fixmer-Oraiz demonstrates. But it can also shed light on the demand side, offering an alternative to rhetoric on infertility that favours sentiment over analysis (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 136). Reproductive justice raises questions about discriminatory practices that limit parenting opportunities on the basis of class, race (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 136-7), sexual orientation (Riggs, 2015; Riggs, Due & Power, 2015), ability, and so on. It also queries why the lucrative IVF industry, which fails the majority of patients (Harris et al, 2016, pp. 35-6; Leigh, 2016, p. 127), and has been investigated for a range of unethical practices (Dingle, 2016), still maintains 'excellent records of profitability' (McCredie, 2016, para. 13).

While Bailey and Fixmer-Oraiz focus critical attention on scholarly research and the media, I contend that, as narrative fiction is 'an essentially rhetorical art' (Lodge, 1992, p. x), the novel may also 'critically intervene in contemporary rhetorical practice' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 146) to illuminate the complexity of the field and unsettle easy assumptions about choice, family and justice. Indeed, literary activists see it as the responsibility of the fiction writer to engage in contemporary political issues and raise awareness of social justice (Benaron, 2012; Rushdie, 1991, pp. 87-101; Senior, 2013; Shafak, 2010; Shamsie, 2012). As Indigenous Australian legal academic and novelist Larissa Behrendt evocatively says, 'sometimes it's through the whisper of a story that you can influence people more than through the louder, shouting style of activism' (Marfording, 2015, p. 117). The challenge is to avoid 'overtly didactic fiction', which tends to leave readers cold (Keen, 2007, p. 18). For politics to work in literature, it must be transformed through narrative in the service of art (Senior,

2013). Speaking about his debut novel *Ruins* (2016), Rajith Savanadasa notes that when his writing was being driven by ideas—by points that he felt he had to make—his characters ended up being unrealistic. ‘I had to give up the idea of being a bit didactic,’ he says, ‘and just follow the characters and see what comes out’ (Kanowski, 2017, min. 51.31). I faced a similar challenge writing *Mother of Pearl*, to allow the ideas to belong to and emerge from the characters—as Savanadasa says, ‘the ideas are part of the characters’ (Kanowski, 2017, min. 52.45)—rather than using characters to merely service the ideas. Thus, while the three challenges set out by Fixmer-Oraiz—to disrupt the rhetoric about choice and altruism, to expand notions of family and kind, and to draw attention to reproductive justice—underpin my novel, like Salman Rushdie in the epigraph to this chapter, I have aimed to write story that is personal, driven by characters with whom readers can connect.

Several contemporary authors have written about surrogacy in order to contribute to public conversation about the practice. Kishwar Desai reports that her novel *Origins of Love* (2012) arose from her desire to see ‘surrogacy talked about more’ (East, 2012, para. 9), and professes to write her ‘social thrillers’ in order to bring about social change (East, 2012). Indeed, *Origins of Love*, a bestseller, is credited with triggering ‘heated debate’ about surrogacy in India¹⁸ (Dhillon, 2012, p. 13), suggesting the ‘power [of fiction] to change and provoke’ (East, 2013, p. 45). Significantly, Desai maintains that, ‘True change never comes unless you can personalise these [surrogacy] stories, unless you can live with these characters and understand what they’re going through’ (East, 2012, para. 7). In other words, the writer, who is also a literary activist, has a mission to bring about social change by changing how readers think and feel (Attridge, 2015, pp. 38-9). The mechanism for bringing about these changes in readers is narrative empathy, particularly as it relates to character: to ‘live with’ characters, ‘to understand what they’re going through’.

¹⁸ The public debate, coupled with scandals including the death of an Indian surrogate (Dhillon, 2012, p. 13) and the abandonment of a twin by his Australian parents (Hawley, 2014c) ultimately resulted in the Indian government banning commercial surrogacy for foreigners in October 2015 (Rabinowitz, 2016). However, Desai herself does not support the ‘very harsh law’, saying that it ‘will just drive the practice underground’ (Dhillon, 2015, p. 15).

In the following sections, I provide context for my novel *Mother of Pearl* by exploring its points of synergy and difference with existing surrogacy fiction. Following Fixmer-Oraiz's (2013, p. 146) challenge to 'rethink rhetorics toward reproductive justice', I analyse how questions of choice and altruism, family and kin, and reproductive justice are explored in existing surrogacy fiction, proposing that all three are essential considerations in shedding light on this complex terrain. I then discuss narrative empathy as fiction's unique contribution to this objective.

2. Fiction and surrogacy

The practice of surrogacy takes different forms—altruistic, commercial, traditional, gestational—and occurs in different contexts—within families or outsourced, domestic or transnational, voluntary or involuntary—all of which have their corollaries in fiction. While my focus is on novels that deal explicitly with surrogacy that is transnational and commercial, I also refer to works that reflect critically on the highly stratified system of supply and demand that underpins surrogacy markets, and consider broader questions of family, genetics and relationships. Major works reviewed are dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) by Margaret Atwood and *When We Have Wings* (2011) by Claire Corbett; crime novels *The Night Ferry* (2007) by Michael Robotham, and *Origins of Love* (2012) by Kishwar Desai; and two recent realist popular fiction novels, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015) by Meera Syal and *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016) by Amulya Malladi.

2.1 Choice and altruism in surrogacy fiction

Fixmer-Oraiz (2013, p. 147) argues that the rhetoric of choice obscures both the structural constraints on women's decision-making, and the power differentials that make transnational commercial surrogacy possible. In this light, it is interesting to note that in the highly stratified societies of dystopian fiction, characterised by privation, oppression, totalitarianism and 'organized injustice' (Gottlieb, 2007, p. 27), surrogacy is often posited as the normative method of reproduction. In the society of Lois Lowry's young adult novel, *The Giver* (1993), for example, where free choice has been eliminated and all roles assigned by a

central authority, gestation and giving birth—but not child raising—are assigned to surrogates known as ‘Birthmothers’, a job ‘lacking in prestige’ (Lowry, 1994, p. 53). Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, considered a canonical work in this genre, is so strongly associated with surrogacy and women’s reproductive rights that, as Atwood (2012, p. 20) herself observes, it ‘has become a sort of tag for those writing about shifts towards policies aimed at controlling women, and especially women’s bodies and reproductive functions’ (for example, see Busby & Vun, 2010; Storrow, 2005).

The release of a new television series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 2017, coinciding with the rising influence of the religious right in US politics under President Donald Trump, has led to a resurgence of interest in Atwood’s novel (Atwood, 2017; Mead, 2017); and at least one commentator has drawn a parallel between the fictional Handmaids’ circumstances, and the situation for ‘real-life women in surrogacy hostels’ (Glosswitch [pseud.], 2017).¹⁹ In Atwood’s totalitarian theocracy Gilead, in the former USA, a disempowered, captive underclass of ‘handmaids’ has been created ‘for breeding purposes’ (Atwood, 1987, p. 146), to service the reproductive needs of elite male rulers and their infertile wives. Reproductive technologies are outlawed as ‘irreligious’ (Atwood, 1987, p. 317), and attempts to impregnate the surrogate are ritualised in a ceremony based on a passage from Genesis (Atwood, 1987, p. 104-6). Surrogacy offers disenfranchised women a means of survival, an alternative to banishment to the ‘Colonies’ and slow death from radiation sickness (Atwood, 1987, pp. 20, 321). As the Handmaid who narrates the story, known by the patronymic Offred, says, ‘There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose’ (Atwood, 1987, p. 105). The sentiment is poignantly echoed in the words of real-

¹⁹ *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been criticised on the basis that what appears dystopian to white women—captivity, being forced to breed against their will, having their children taken from them, and being punished if they attempt to escape—‘was the reality for black women in America for hundreds of years’ under slavery (Williams, 2017, para. 4; see also Bastián, 2017). However, viewers from Romania also see their experiences of oppressive reproductive policies in the 1980s under Ceaușescu reflected in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Marina Sofia [pseud.], 2017). In fact, Atwood acknowledges both slavery in the USA and the situation in countries ‘behind the Iron curtain’ as sources of inspiration for the novel (Atwood, 2017, para. 4; Mead, 2017, p. 40).

world Indian surrogate, Salma: 'This work is not ethical—it's just something we *have* to do to survive' (Pande, 2009, p. 160; emphasis in original).

By linking surrogacy to social inequality, Claire Corbett similarly problematises choice and agency in *When We Have Wings* (2011), a 'genre ambiguous' (Golding, 2014) novel with literary, sci-fi, dystopia and crime fiction elements. In Corbett's futuristic society, the haves and have nots are divided into fliers and non-fliers: those with means have their bodies altered to enable them to fly, 'class divisions ... entrenched into flesh and bone, cell and gene' (Corbett, 2011, p. 37). Fliers reside in the purposely remodelled city of Flierville (Corbett, 2011, p. 60), while those 'too poor or too old or too disabled for Flight' squat in satellite cities or live in rural and regional areas known as 'RaRA-land' (Corbett, 2011, p. 38). Surrogacy is the price that Peri Almond, a brave but vulnerable seventeen-year-old from RaRA-land, pays for her wings and residency permit for the elite city zone (Corbett, 2011, p. 138).

Questions about choice and agency in commercial surrogacy arrangements are also critiqued in Megan McCafferty's satirical dystopian duology *Bumped* (2011) and *Thumped* (2012). Set in a future USA, here the surrogates are teenage girls, pressured by a powerful industry into 'commercial prepping' for infertile adults (2012, pp. 39-40). Neo-liberalism is taken to its caustic extreme: would-be 'Surrogettes' can try on a 'Preggerz FunBump' at a store called 'Babiez R U' (McCafferty, 2011, p. 25), while snacking on 'Folato Chips ... *now with 250 percent more folic acid!*' (McCafferty, 2011, p. 47; emphasis in original). With 'petri-prepping' not a 'viable option' for the infertile (McCafferty, 2011, p. 37), the use of assisted reproductive technology is eschewed in favour of the more teen-friendly 'bumping' (sexual intercourse). Contracts are brokered by agents, with the most 'reproaesthetical' girls and boys able to command top prices for their gametes and services (McCafferty, 2011, pp. 39-40, 85), which has real world parallels in the premium placed on fair-skinned egg donors and surrogates (Bailey, 2011, 719-20)²⁰.

²⁰ Given the skin colour of a gestational surrogate has no bearing on the genetic make up of the foetus, 'worries about skin color are most likely code for deeper worries about the surrogate's moral character' (Bailey, 2011, p. 720). An IVF doctor in *Origins of Love* makes the wry observation that: 'Most foreigners preferred fair women—it made them feel less like old colonial exploiters' (Desai, 2012, p. 24)

These dystopian fictions focus critical attention on the highly stratified system of supply and demand which underpins surrogacy markets—inequalities that I also explore in my fiction. However, most do not engage with assisted reproductive technologies, and thus sidestep the substantial economic, physical, psychological and emotional impacts of these technologies. Corbett's *When We Have Wings* is the exception: Zeke, the private investigator who narrates alternating chapters of the novel, links the burgeoning of treatments to enhance looks and abilities to the first IVF baby (Corbett, 2011, p. 37). For Zeke, such technologies are morally compromising, even corrupt, but also irresistible: Zeke does not stop at accessing them for the benefit of his son.

In *Mother of Pearl*, I characterise assisted reproductive technologies as disempowering, both for Meg, who has spent seven unsuccessful years on IVF, and for Mukda, the surrogate mother. The prohibitive cost of Thailand's highly sophisticated ART industry (Whittaker, 2014b, p. 16; 2015, pp. 5-6) makes it unfamiliar to someone like Mukda, her vulnerability exacerbated by gender and class relationships in Thai society, which render a woman from a low socio-economic background incapable of questioning the authority of a male doctor (Whittaker, 2014b, p. 13). Mukda cannot even bring herself to ask how many embryos the doctor is implanting in her, let alone exercise choice by setting limits on the number (pp. 237, 284²¹). Filtering the experience of ART through Mukda's consciousness thereby allows me to demonstrate how her decision-making is compromised, while also defamiliarising the medical procedures, exposing their often hidden physical and emotional impacts (Tsigdinos, 2014).

The social, economic and cultural constraints on poorer women's decision-making in the context of the commercial surrogacy industry in India are explored in Kishwar Desai's *Origins of Love* (2012), Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015), and Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016). Desai and Syal use multiple narrative points of view to expose a range of perspectives on surrogacy, including those of the surrogate mothers, while Malladi's novel is narrated in alternating chapters by US-born intended mother Priya and Indian surrogate mother Asha. Each of these authors demonstrates

²¹ All references to page numbers in the novel correspond to page numbers in this thesis.

how a woman's 'choice' to become a surrogate is attenuated by structural conditions. In *Origins of Love*, for example, while surrogacy is lauded by clinicians as a business opportunity with multimillion dollar potential (Desai, 2012, pp. 265, 358), for village women, surrogacy is depicted not as a 'pathway out of poverty', but as a form of exploitation that easily crosses over into abuse. In one example, Sonia, a Dalit, explores surrogacy as a means of escaping her violent pimp, Rohit, but her plans are hijacked when Rohit brokers a deal for her to bear an heir for his employer. Far from being 'life-changing', for Sonia, surrogacy proves to be another trap (Desai, 2012, p. 145-6).

The intended mother in *The House of Hidden Mothers*, UK-born Shyama, mouths neo-liberal rhetoric about choice, telling herself that surrogacy is 'a business transaction, fundamentally' (Syal, 2015, p. 97), an extension of supply and demand logic that accounted for the outsourcing of labour in a globalised market, a 'win-win situation' (Syal, 2015, p. 98). But the rhetoric rings hollow as Shyama questions the ethics of returning as a 'fertility tourist' to the land of her parents' birth (Syal, 2015, p. 118). Meanwhile, the reader is privy to how Indian villager Mala is pressured into surrogacy by her unloving husband, Ram, who sees her reproductive organs 'as valuable treasures for hire' (Syal, 2015, p. 109), a scenario that aligns with the findings in Pande's (2009; 2010) ethnographic studies of Indian surrogates. When Shyama, on a visit to India, witnesses Ram beating Mala, her decision to bring Mala to London for her confinement seems motivated by guilt as much as her determination to protect Mala and the unborn baby from Ram's violence. Unlike the surrogates in Desai's novel, however, surrogacy *does* provide a pathway out of poverty for Mala as, over the course of the novel, 'she goes from being powerless to immensely powerful, without meaning to' (Alibhai-Brown, 2015, para. 7). Describing Mala as 'an intelligent woman trapped by circumstance' (Rentzenbrink, 2015, p. 21), Syal depicts her transformation as result of opportunity, specifically financial independence and 'the best of care' (Syal, 2015, p. 313).

Like Shyama, American-born, Priya, the intended mother in Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers*, tells herself that she is doing good by paying Indian villager Asha to be her surrogate, 'helping a woman who could end up on the streets' (Malladi, 2016, p. 45). Like Mala, Asha is depicted as being pressured into

surrogacy by her husband and his family (Malladi, 2016, p. 25). But while the prospect makes Mala feel 'dizzy with power' (Syal, 2015, p. 111), Asha resents that being the one to earn the money doesn't give her more decision-making power (Malladi, 2016, p. 27). Asha's anger is refreshing, although her inner voice is unconvincing, at times indistinguishable from that of Priya. For example, when Asha wonders 'if there had ever really been a choice for her [about surrogacy] ... Could she have been selfish and said, "No, this is my body, I decide?"' (Malladi, 2016, p. 21), this jars as the imposition of a Western feminist model of bodily ownership. By contrast, as Dasgupta and Dasgupta (2010, p. 132) explain, traditionally women's reproductive bodies in India are 'tied to cultural ideas about familial interdependence'. More problematically, Malladi portrays the exchange between Priya and Asha as a 'win-win', giving the novel an ending as awkward as it is naïve:

Their names [Priya and Asha] meant "hope", and they had given hope to each other, and this was what brought them together, closed that gap between them, eliminated the social and class differences, made them sisters, mothers—made them equals. (Malladi, 2016, p. 301)

Such a vision risks romanticising surrogacy 'as a bridge between overdeveloped and developing nations, [and] as the source of economic and social liberation for Indian women and families' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 148).

In *Mother of Pearl*, I also address how surrogate mother Mukda's decision-making is constrained by economic, social and cultural factors, some of which are qualitatively different from those experienced by women in India. For example, the majority of Indian surrogates are married, and must therefore negotiate the relationships with husbands, as well as in-laws, when engaging in surrogacy (Pande, 2009, pp. 150, 159-60; Deomampo, 2013b, pp. 167, 177-8). However, prior to the mid-2015 ban, surrogacy agencies in Thailand preferred, if not required surrogate mothers to be unmarried, whether single, divorced, widowed or in de facto relationships (Nilsson, 2015, pp. 11, 29). While the rationale may have been to simplify arrangements for intended parents by avoiding a husband's claim to parental rights (Nilsson, 2015, pp. 11)²², the requirement may

²² Under Thai law, parental rights are granted to the woman who gives birth and her legal husband, regardless of either party's genetic relationship to the child (Whittaker,

also account for the scant mention in the (albeit limited) literature of Thai women being pressured into surrogacy by their husbands. A notable exception is found in the transcript of the court proceedings concerning custody of Grammy's twin sister, which notes that Pattaramon's de facto partner expressly consented to her entering into the surrogacy arrangement with the Farnells in order to pay off debts they had 'built together' (*Farnell & Chanbua [2016], FCWA 17, para. 87*).

A further distinction between surrogacy in India and Thailand resides in the differing morality associated with the practice. Notwithstanding surrogate mothers' own affirmation of their dignity and morality, commercial surrogacy in India is highly stigmatised, erroneously equated with sex work, and considered to violate traditional notions of motherhood through commercialisation (Pande, 2009). Hence, Asha, the surrogate in *A House For Happy Mothers*, agonises that being a surrogate might 'somehow corrupt her motherhood' (Malladi, 2016, p. 21), and is fearful of being 'ruined' if her 'dirty secret' of paid pregnancy got out (Malladi, 2016, p. 22). By contrast, in Thailand, as noted in the previous chapter, surrogacy is seen as a means of making and earning merit. Indeed, the Thai term for 'surrogate', แม่จ้มนบุญ (*mae oom boon*), means 'mother carrying the merit', which, as Andrea Whittaker (2014a, p. 112) notes, 'carries overwhelmingly positive meanings, positioning surrogacy as a selfless, meritorious act creating bonds of obligation and goodwill.' As I discuss in Chapter 3, surrogacy as a meritorious act is an important detail in terms of locating the narrative of *Mother of Pearl* in a Thai context; and I give Mukda both spiritual and financial motivations for entering into surrogacy.

The surrogacy fiction reviewed in this section can be said for the most part to 'resist the seduction of "choice"', as Fixmer-Oraiz (2013, p. 147) puts it, instead describing in nuanced ways the contexts in which women in the global South are compelled to engage in surrogacy. The ways in which surrogacy operates in the highly stratified societies of dystopian fiction echo the highly stratified world of transnational commercial surrogacy depicted in the social

2014a, p. 107). Furthermore, 'the father of a child, who is not married to the birth mother at the time of birth has no parental rights, even if he is recorded in the birth certificate and/or can prove that he is the biological father with DNA testing' (Nilsson, 2015, p. 11). Thus, in the absence of a parental claim by a father, intended parents need only the surrogate mother to relinquish her parenting rights to them.

realist novels of Kishwar Desai, Meera Syal and Amulya Malladi. In the following section, I explore family and kin in surrogacy fiction, analysing the degree to which works challenge and queer, or alternatively reify, traditional notions of family based on genetics and patriliney.

2.2 Family and kin in surrogacy fiction

Fixmer-Oraiz (2013, p. 150-2) suggests that the potential of assisted reproduction, including surrogacy, to reinvent and queer conventional notions of family is all too often lost in a reinforcement of the patriarchal nuclear family and the 'privileging of biogenetics' as the basis for familial relationships. A reproductive justice approach to surrogacy, by contrast, recognises the centrality of gestational labour in the definition of motherhood, and also the possibilities for expanding and queering understandings of family and kin (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, pp. 151-2).

There are tropes in surrogacy fiction, which while they attest to the centrality of gestational labour in the definition of motherhood, also paradoxically privilege genetic ties and the patriarchal nuclear family (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 150). One trope is that of the surrogate mother who changes her mind, which drives the plot in Kay Langdale's *Her Giant Octopus Moment* (2012), for example, set in the UK. Joanie Simpson, by her own admission, 'muddled, inconsiderate, selfish' (Langdale, 2012, p. 302), agrees to gestate a baby for a childless couple, but feigns miscarriage ten weeks into the pregnancy and absconds in order to keep the child, a girl called Scout, who is ten years old when the story opens. Ultimately, Joanie cedes custody to Scout's biological father and his wife, the inevitability of which is signposted in the book's title: Joanie's 'Giant Octopus moment' when she 'discovered the element of self-sacrifice she'd always resisted in motherhood' (Langdale, 2012, p. 305).

By contrast, in *Origins of Love* (2012), Kishwar Desai deploys the trope of the surrogate mother who changes her mind not to reify the patriarchal nuclear family, but as a lens through which to view 'tensions and injustices in women's reproductive lives' (Bailey, 2011, p. 727). While the (fictional) clinic required women to have had at least one child to be eligible to work as surrogates, in a minor subplot in Desai's novel, it is revealed that surrogate mother Reena's child

in actual fact ... had not survived illness and poor nutrition. She had died before her fifth birthday. No one in the family had been perturbed, since deaths of baby girls were a routine occurrence. (Desai, 2012, p. 283)

Reena subsequently attempts, unsuccessfully, to flee from the clinic with the 'fair and blue-eyed' baby boy whom she has carried for an Australian couple, claiming, 'I would rather have this one than not have one at all' (Desai, 2012, pp. 287-8). Heavy-handed prose notwithstanding, Desai uses the anecdote to shed light both on the fragility of girls' lives in rural India, and the centrality of motherhood to notions of women's worth (Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2010, pp. 133-5).

The case of baby Grammy, discussed in Chapter 1, demonstrates that a Thai surrogate may, like the characters in these novels, change her mind and sue for custody, regardless of her genetic relationship to the child. Indeed, in 2015, another Thai surrogate mother, Patidta Kusolsang, unsuccessfully sued for custody of the baby she had carried, known as 'Nong Carmen', allegedly after discovering that Carmen's intended parents were a same-sex couple (Holmes, 2016; 'Surrogate mum reveals pain', 2016). However, while an attempted abduction or legal custody battle adds drama to a fictional narrative, in reality, such cases are rare ('Help Wanted', 2016, paras. 9-10). In my own writing, I was drawn to explore the more subtle and nuanced affective experiences of contested parenthood that underpin the majority of surrogacy arrangements.

A further trope in surrogacy fiction that reinforces biogenetics is that of the gestational carrier who turns out to be the baby's genetic mother. This trope provides a key plot twist in Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers*. When forty-eight-year-old Shyama hires Mala to carry a baby for her and her partner, Toby, the embryo is created using a donor egg and Toby's sperm. In an ethically questionable move by the New Delhi IVF clinic, the egg turns out to have come from Mala. Shyama's vision of 'an oh-so-modern, blended, rainbow-hued, outsourced, chucked together temporary family' (Syal, 2015, p. 311) gives way to the reassertion of the patriarchal nuclear family, as ultimately Mala and Toby end up together, raising their biological child. The implausibility of this ending prompted one reviewer to question whether Syal intended the novel to be 'a cautionary tale about inter-racial surrogacy and late parenthood' (Daftuar, 2015,

para 11). Certainly, Shyama seems resigned, seeing the outcome as ‘the coming together of something inevitable’ (Syal, 2015, p. 400).

As in *Her Giant Octopus Moment*, Corbett’s novel *When We Have Wings*, opens with a surrogate mother on the run, or in this case, on the wing: Peri, who grew up among the rural poor, has earned her wings in exchange for gestating Hugo, the child of wealthy fliers. However, as far as the reader knows, Peri is ‘only’ Hugo’s nanny when the story opens and she vows, ‘I’m not even his mother and I’ll fight for him harder than they [his parents] will’ (Corbett, 2011, p. 7). The strength of Peri’s attachment to Hugo becomes clearer when she is revealed to have given birth to him (Corbett, 2011, pp. 138-9), but it is only much later in the narrative that Peri, and the reader, find out that she is also his genetic mother, having fallen pregnant during an affair with Hugo’s father before embryo transfer could take place (Corbett, 2011, pp. 282-3). In this sequencing of events, Corbett undermines the reification of biogenetics: it is enough for Peri to have carried and cared for Hugo for her to do everything to protect him; and, in contrast with the resolution in *The House of Hidden Mothers*, there is no attempt at the end of the narrative to restore baby Hugo to a nuclear family unit. Knowing she is Hugo’s genetic parent does not have a neutral impact on Peri, but this is less about the quality of their relationship than the authority that she can assume as his mother (Corbett, 2011, p. 328). Peri describes herself as ‘realigning her thoughts [about the future] but the way she looked after Hugo would not change’ (Corbett, 2011, p. 329).

In my own creative work, I have eschewed the trope of the gestational carrier who turns out to be the genetic mother in order to expose ways that transnational commercial surrogacy complicates traditional notions of motherhood, parenting and family. Meg expresses her anxiety about being mother to a child genetically unrelated to her (pp. 200-1), and tries to assuage her fears about surrogacy by conceptualising their arrangement as a business transaction (pp. 213, 261). But as the birth approaches, Meg can no longer sustain the illusion that the surrogate, Mukda—nicknamed Mod—is not the baby’s mother:

Who was she kidding? For all the careful talk of intending parents and gestational carriers, Mod was the only mother the baby had known for nearly

nine months. If the word surrogate meant substitute, then it was Meg who was the surrogate mother, set to take the place of Mod, not the other was around. (p. 352)

My aim in *Mother of Pearl* is to demonstrate what Fixmer-Oraiz (2013, p. 150) calls ‘the relative unfixity of motherhood, family’, which is ‘undoubtedly at stake within the narrative of gestational surrogacy’, while recognising the significance of gestational labour to motherhood (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 151).

Robotham’s *The Night Ferry* (2007) subverts traditional notions of family particularly effectively. Samira Khan, a young Afghan asylum seeker, is given the choice between prostitution or surrogacy to repay her debt to the human traffickers who brought her to Europe (Robotham, 2007, p. 200). A virgin and devout Muslim, Samira chooses surrogacy and, in what is described as ‘a form of medical rape’ (Robotham, 2007, p. 260), she is implanted with two embryos belonging to a UK couple. At the end of the novel, Samira has been awarded custody of the twins she has borne (UK legislation recognising the birth mother as the natural mother), and the three of them are living with protagonist Detective Constable Alisha Barba and her partner Dave. Unable to have children themselves, Alisha and Dave thereby given the opportunity to co-parent. The twins are genetically unrelated to any of the people caring for them: DNA tests reveal they are the offspring of Alisha’s friend, Cate (since deceased) and an unknown sperm donor. Alisha’s former boss, Detective Inspector Ruiz, is ‘like a grandfather to the twins’ (Robotham, 2007, pp. 404-7), with Alisha’s Sikh mother providing an additional ‘relation of significance’, to use Fixmer-Oraiz’s term.

On one level, the ‘blended, rainbow-hued, outsourced, chucked together temporary family’ imagined by Shyama in *The House of Hidden Mothers* comes to fruition in *The Night Ferry*. But the arrangement relies on key parties to the surrogacy agreement being taken out of the equation. In keeping with the requirements of the crime fiction genre—‘There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse, the better’ (Van Dine, 1976, p. 190)—Robotham has the intended parents die in a hit and run accident early in the story. The intended parents are also killed off in Desai’s social thriller *Origins of Love*, while in Corbett’s *When We Have Wings*, the intended mother simply disappears. In another example from the crime genre, Sarah Dunant’s *Birth*

Marks (1992), it is the pregnant surrogate mother who dies. Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter 3, the conventions of the crime fiction genre presented several obstacles for me when it came to writing a novel about surrogacy, despite being an established author in that genre (Savage, 2006; 2010; 2013), and despite how readily the topic of transnational commercial surrogacy lends itself to crime fiction narratives. Rather than simplify the outcome of commercial surrogacy arrangements by killing off one or more parties to the arrangement, at the end of *Mother of Pearl*, I intended for all parties to be left standing, aware of their interconnectedness, grappling with a new concept of family, and tentatively fathoming their responsibilities into an implied future.

2.3 Drawing attention to reproductive justice in surrogacy fiction

Reproductive justice, as noted above, provides a framework that ‘renders social and economic injustices visible and thus vulnerable to intervention’ (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 127). In addition to disrupting the authorising rhetoric of choice and altruism surrounding surrogacy, and deconstructing notions of family that underpin surrogacy arrangements, fiction writers also purposefully draw attention to women’s health and reproductive justice issues. Most of the authors reviewed in this chapter, for example, have created characters whose professions enable, if not require them to reflect on social justice, or justice more broadly. By making such characters averse to surrogacy, the authors enable their characters’ reflections to be all the more critical.

Creating characters who are driven by the pursuit of justice is relatively straightforward for crime writers, whether a private investigator like Dunant’s Hannah Wolfe, a police officer like Robotham’s Detective Constable Alisha Barba, or an amateur sleuth like Desai’s social worker Simran Singh. Each of these respective protagonists meets the definition of a feminist detective, their cynicism offset by a strong sense of morality fuelled by ‘a keen sense of outrage at female oppression’ (Klein, 1993, p. 59), and each is deeply sceptical about surrogacy. Desai’s protagonist, Simran, for example, finds ‘the whole business’ of assisted reproductive technologies ‘self-indulgent and repellent’ (Desai, 2012, p. 108) and likens surrogacy to ‘a sort of slave trade’ (Desai, 2012, p. 110). But she is a pragmatist, accepting a role as an unofficial ethics adviser at the fertility

hospital run by her friends (Desai, 2012, p. 108), all the while seeking opportunities to undermine the business by facilitating adoptions (Desai, 2012, p. 466). In *Birth Marks*, Wolfe likens a commercial surrogacy arrangement involving a cash-strapped English ballet student, a wealthy, ageing French war hero and his much younger wife to a ‘grimy little tale’ (Dunant, 1992, p. 225): ‘The old king and the barren young queen; a fairytale filled with the magic of gynaecological science and the goodwill of a graceful peasant girl willing to sacrifice her body in return for riches’ (Dunant, 1992, p. 147). Robotham (2012, p. 345) echoes the analogy, with illegal surrogacy described as a ‘Goebbels-like fairy tale about forced pregnancies and stolen babies’. The association of surrogacy with grim fairytales has its parallel in the nonfiction references to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This reliance on fictional metaphors may be understood as a response to the dizzying speed of developments in assisted reproductive technology, which ‘routinely outpace attempts to address their ethical and moral implications’ (Harrison, 2014, p. 146): Atwood (2017, para. 11) herself notes that the title of *The Handmaid’s Tale* was partly ‘in reference to fairy tales ... The story told by the central character partakes ... of the unbelievable, the fantastic’.

In *The House of Hidden Mothers*, the surrogacy sceptic is Tara, intended mother Shyama’s nineteen-year-old daughter, whose perspective forms one of the novel’s multiple narrative points of view. A Media Studies student, Tara is angry and self-righteous, decrying surrogacy as ‘immoral’ (Syal, 2015, p. 99) and referring to surrogate mother Mala as ‘Rent-a-Womb’ (Syal, 2015, p. 241), a term used by real-world media outlets to describe India’s surrogacy industry (Rabinowitz, 2016, p. 68). But Tara gradually warms to Mala, and in a passage of dialogue that might be overly expository in a lesser writer’s hands, she reflects on ‘the bigger picture ... of patriarchy and exploitation’ and ‘the whole legacy of colonialism and the infrastructure of the caste system’ in accounting for the differences between them (Syal, 2015, pp. 321-2). Tara is also vulnerable: propelled by an experience of sexual assault, she travels from London to Delhi on an assignment with a women’s non-government organisation (NGO) ‘to purify herself ... balance the abusive act she had endured by fighting abuse elsewhere’ (Syal, 2015, p. 329). Syal uses Tara’s involvement in the women’s group as a vantage point from which to reflect on sexual violence in India—‘every day six

women were assaulted in the capital' (Syal, 2015, p. 339)—including the real life 2012 brutal gang rape and fatal assault on a Dehli bus of a young woman known in the media as Nirbhaya, 'the fearless one' (Syal, 2015, p. 408, and see pp. 402-5, 408-11).

In *Mother of Pearl*, my character Anna also has a NGO background in international development, giving her grounds to reflect on global disparities in reproductive health, and priorities in health care funding more broadly. As the novel opens, Anna has returned to Melbourne after more than a decade in Southeast Asia. When Meg proposes surrogacy in Thailand, Anna protests that she's spent her 'whole career' working against such exploitation (p. 175). For Anna, surrogacy is 'like sex work: both lousy choices, both subject to demand that went largely unchallenged' (p. 178). However, she ends up assisting Meg and Nate with their surrogacy arrangements out of loyalty and to protect them from 'anything dodgy or illegal' (p. 187). Anna's ability to speak Thai fluently enables her to covertly monitor the ethics of the IVF practice, later giving her insights into the circumstances of Thai surrogate mothers' lives.

Mukda/Mod also reflects on the differences for Thai women between having their own baby, and having a baby for *farangs* ('foreigners'). The following example is taken from a scene in which Mod and another surrogate, Nok, visit their housemate, Thip, who has just given birth to a baby for a Japanese couple:

While Thip ate, Mod and Nok oohed and aahed over the platters of fruit, boxes of sweets and showy bouquets. Between mouthfuls, Thip told them she was free to stay at the hospital four nights, longer if she liked, boasting that she had a bathroom all to herself. Mod couldn't help contrasting the situation with Pui's birth in Sisaket, where she'd shared a ward with five other women and gone home the day after giving birth to save on hospital fees. (p. 275)

If I have succeeded in creating a living, breathing character in Mod, I hope readers might be prompted to wonder why Mod's access to resources should vary in this way, and by extension, to question the justice of treating some babies as if they are more valuable than others (Bailey, 2011, pp. 735-6).

Ultimately, balancing ideas or issues with character is an inexact science, and different readers may tolerate different balances. Syal admits that *The House*

of Hidden Mothers is replete with ‘issues’, including ‘surrogacy, arranged marriage, domestic abuse, poverty, corruption, childlessness, family values and conflicts’ (Elkin, 2015, para 1). For some reviewers, the ambitious scope succeeds, and ‘the issues, numerous as they are, never dominate the narrative’ (Elkin, 2015, para 6; see also Grant, 2016, p. 22). Others suggest that the narrative, while engaging, feels overcrowded, and the story weighed down by the issues (Alibhai-Brown, 2015; Beckerman, 2015; ‘Fiction reviews’, 2016).

Opinion is similarly divided on the way that Desai, a former journalist, weaves information and commentary on social justice issues in India through her narratives. In *Origins of Love*, when Customs and Excise officers hold a press conference to announce the seizure of human embryos couriered from the UK to India, for example, Sub Inspector Diwan muses that, ‘in a disillusioned country where over a million babies were born to die every year, the news story was barely noticed’ (Desai, 2012, p. 94). As previously noted, there is mention of the routine deaths of baby girls in the surrogate Reena’s back-story (Desai, 2012, p. 283), while British intended mother Kate, concerned for the future of surrogate Sheela, reflects that, ‘half a million women died in childbirth in India’ (Desai, 2012, p. 399). To my mind, by keeping these reflections brief and personalised, Desai manages to ‘render social and economic injustices visible’ without getting in the way of the story.²³

This overview of surrogacy fiction demonstrates the value of the novel as a means of critical intervention in contemporary rhetoric, with the capacity to contribute to public conversation on the reproductive and social justice issues raised by transnational commercial surrogacy. But equally significant to my thesis is fiction’s unique capacity to engender empathy in readers—to make them capable ‘of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant other and to have emotion related to that participation’ (Nussbaum, 1995, p. xvi). In the final section of this chapter, I make a case for the value of fiction in illuminating multiple pathways through surrogacy’s divided terrain.

²³ Although one reviewer criticises Desai’s style as editorialising and ‘opinion-mongering’ (Mars-Jones, 2013), it is worth noting that her debut, *Witness the Night* (2010), on the ‘very serious subject [of] female foeticide and infanticide’, was awarded the prestigious Costa Prize for best first novel (Skidelsky, 2012).

3. The work of fiction

Writers from diverse backgrounds and genres talk about writing fiction in order to make sense of the world (see for example, Benaron, 2012, para. 3; Robotham, 2013, p. 235; Umaisha, 2007). But I find myself writing not to make sense of the world, so much as to make peace with paradox. As Bob Shacochis suggests,

the potency of fiction and poetry derives not from the difference between a lie and the truth (which is the business of journalism, of information, to distinguish one from the other) nor from the friction between illusion and reality (which is the realm of the purely metaphysical disciplines) but rather from the divine cosmic dissonance that rings through the millennium from the clash of profound truths, one slamming against the other. (Fassler, 2013, para. 31)

Fiction provides a means of opening up the closed narratives around transnational commercial surrogacy outlined in Chapter 1, to move around, if not beyond the polarising positions, to expose the ‘cosmic dissonance’ that reverberates throughout the discourse. In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen (2007, p. xiv) suggests that novels offer a ‘protective fictionality’, a safe space from which to explore empathy. While the real-world need that confronts readers in scholarly or journalistic writing may generate scepticism, suspicion or defensiveness (Keen, 2007, pp. 4, 28), paradoxically, readers:

may respond with greater empathy to an unreal situation and characters because of the protective fictionality, but ... still internalize the experience of empathy in a way that promises later real-world responsiveness to others’ needs (Keen, 2007, pp. xiii-xiv)

A recent review of scholarly research on the effects of reading supports Keen’s theory (Koopman & Hakemulder 2015, p. 88). In encouraging open-mindedness in readers, fiction offers the freedom to move beyond stereotypes, to unsettle comfortable assumptions, ‘to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart’, as Rushdie (1989, p. 11) puts it.

The power of fiction to foster empathy by enabling readers to imagine themselves in the shoes, or indeed the bare feet, of others has been theorized since Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Koopman, 2016, p. 82). Recent empirical research suggests that reading fiction enhances empathic understanding, improving not only readers’ ability ‘to identify and understand others’ subjective states’ (Kidd &

Castano, 2013, p. 377), but also their capacity to appreciate ‘multiple possible explanations for others’ behavior and the limits of one’s insight into others’ minds’ (Kidd, Ongis & Castano, 2016, p. 45). The precise features of fiction that account for these effects remain subject to speculation and experimentation (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015; Kidd, Ongis & Castano, 2016, p. 45), as does the role played by personal experiences, traits and temperaments that readers brings to the text (Keen, 2007; 2011; Koopman, 2016). Debate continues as to whether empathetic engagement results from reading specifically literary fiction, or can be attributed to reading fiction *per se* (Kidd & Castano, 2017; Panero et al, 2017). Nonetheless, the basic premise—that reading fiction fosters empathy—is broadly endorsed by readers, writers, and scholars across a wide range of disciplines (see for example, Keen, 2007; 2011; Kidd & Castano, 2013; 2016; Koopman, 2016; Nussbaum, 1995; Rushdie, 2012). As Susan Sontag (2003, p. 6 of 8) puts it, ‘Literature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours.’

It is not necessary to adhere to a white, hegemonic notion of universalism in order to embrace the idea that connections can be made through literature. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that our shared humanity lies in diversity, and writes of ‘connection not *through* identity but *despite* difference’, citing as an example our ability ‘to respond to art that is not ours’ (Appiah, 2006, p. 135, emphasis in original). This makes sense of Gabriel García Márquez’s affinity for the writing of J M Coetzee and Salman Rushdie (Rushdie, 2012, p. 143), as well as of my own experience of literature: having my perception of so-called ‘slum dwellers’ turned on its head by reading Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995), and experiencing powerful insights into the impact of racism through Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992). Feminist sociologist Chandra Mohanty (2003, p. 503), in “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited’, while critical of the ‘false universalizing’ of Eurocentric humanism, reaffirms her ‘belief in the local as specifying and illuminating the universal’ and on commonality over difference. She writes:

In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the

connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully.' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 505).

These ideas are echoed in what Rushdie (2012, p. 627) writes about the specific value of literature:

All writers and readers knew that human beings had broad identities, not narrow ones, and it was the breadth of human nature that allowed readers to find common ground and points of identification with [a vast array of fictional characters] ... Readers and writers could take that knowledge of broad-based identity out into the world beyond the pages of books, and use the knowledge to find common ground with their fellow human beings.

That writers *and* readers can engage imaginatively and empathically across boundaries of identity speaks to fiction's power to foster these connections.

Character identification, as Rushdie suggests, is fiction's conduit for making connections, 'the most commonly nominated feature of narrative fiction to be associated with empathy' (Keen, 2007, p. 93). Keen (2007, p. 121) locates this 'ubiquitous form of empathy' in the conscious intent of authors to create empathetic characters and make empathy an explicit theme of their work. Indeed, several authors reviewed in this chapter are candid about creating characters to whom they hope readers will feel emotionally attached. For Robotham (2013, p. 234), great writing 'is 80 per cent about character', while Syal says:

When I read a book or see a play, I don't want to be preached [at]. I want to feel the emotional connections between the characters and to follow them on a journey. So long as people [readers] invest in the characters, I've done my job.' (Rentzenbrink, 2015, p. 20-1).

Syal's desire for 'emotional connections' with characters aligns with Keen's (2007, p. 99) findings that most readers 'value empathy as one of the desired experiences brought about by reading', and will 'seek out novels that will allow imaginative identification with characters and immersion in vividly rendered fictional worlds so that they can feel with fiction.'

The notion of 'feeling with fiction' resonates through narratologist Rita Felski's work. However, she finds the term 'character identification' wanting, suggesting it conflates 'formal *alignment* with a character' and 'experiential

allegiance with a character' (Felski, 2008, p. 34). While literary techniques such as 'focalization, point of view, or narrative structure', can encourage readers to align themselves with characters (Felski, 2008, p. 34), certain narrative features can result in readers 'recognizing aspects of ourselves in the description of others', whether familiar or strange (Felski, 2008, pp. 38-40). She suggests recognition of the self in the text takes different forms. In what she terms '*self-intensification*' is the 'shock of the familiar', 'triggered by a skilful rendition of the densely packed minutiae of daily life', through which readers experience 'commonality and shared history' (Felski, 2008, p. 39, emphasis in original). By comparison, '*self-extension*', is about 'coming to see aspects of oneself in what seems distant or strange' (Felski, 2008, p. 39, emphasis in original). Felski's observations dovetail with those of Derek Attridge, who maintains that 'literature as art' comprises 'works that open the reader to new horizons, or ... bring the 'other' into the reader's habitual frameworks of consciousness and affective life, and effect some degree of change in the reader' (Attridge, 2015, p. 17). As the first work of fiction to deal with transnational commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand, and to explore the nuances of surrogacy specific to the Thai context, my novel *Mother of Pearl* seeks to open the reader to 'new horizons', by building empathy for a range of diverse characters, while also raising questions of reproductive justice.

Significantly, I have chosen to narrate the story from three points of view: that of Mukda/Mod, the Thai surrogate mother; Meg, the Australian intended mother; and Anna, Meg's sister, who has spent over a decade as an aid worker in Southeast Asia. This polyphonic structure recognises the impossibility of containing surrogacy's complex and contradictory narratives within a single point of view or position. I have endeavoured to create characters whose voices are not aligned to the ideological positions outlined in Chapter 1, but whose ideas shift and change over the course of the story. Moreover, I have aspired to breathe life into these characters, so that readers may experience either or both the 'self-intensification' and 'self-extension' identified by Felski and, in the process, unsettle their own assumptions about who is right and wrong, and who has agency, in transnational commercial surrogacy arrangements.

The inclusion of Mukda's perspective is expressly intended to bring her—the Thai 'other'—into the 'habitual frameworks of consciousness and affective life' of non-Thai readers. However, as a non-Thai/white Australian writer, choosing to voice a Thai character raises ethical issues of its own. In the following chapter, I provide further background to my creative work in terms of Australian writing about Asia. I then discuss both the process, and the ethical implications, of representing a different cultural identity when writing fiction, situating this discussion in the context of recent debates about cultural appropriation.

Chapter 3: Writing fiction about surrogacy in Thailand

Good writers ... treat their own experience of the world as provisional. They do not presume. They respect people, not by leaving them alone in the inviolability of their cultural authenticity, but by becoming involved with them. They research. They engage in reciprocal relationships. (Hari Kunzru, in Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 3)

1. Writing across boundaries of identity

In his 1984 essay, 'Outside the Whale', Rushdie (1991, p. 100) advocated for literature to engage in the 'continual quarrel', calling for 'books that draw new and better maps of reality'. I started writing stories set in Thailand some twenty years ago with this sense of quarrel, writing in reaction to, and as a refutation of, stereotypes and clichés that dominated Western writing on Asia, particularly Thailand. Recent debates about cultural appropriation, however, in Australia and globally, have prompted me to reflect on the ethical implications of representing a different cultural identity when writing fiction.

I preface the following discussion by noting that I use 'Asia' as shorthand, suggesting that 'it should always be read as if written between quotation marks' (Broinowski, 1996, p. xii). I recognise that this 'vague geographic term' comprises 'more than a dozen different countries all with different languages, dialects, customs and politics' and becomes racialised when used in Australia to describe the 'other' (Castro, 1996, para. 2), as it does in much of the fiction discussed below. I also recognise that distinctions between 'Asia' and 'Australia' are increasingly problematic in a hybridised world (Sobocinska, 2014, pp. 11-12), while acknowledging the significance of 'multiple identities' for Asian-Australians (Pung, 2008, p. 4).

In this chapter, I outline the Orientalist constructs that besiege Asia in Australian fiction, and the stereotypes surrounding Thailand, particularly Thai women, before discussing the evolution of my own fiction within this context. I then consider the vexed question of cultural appropriation in fiction, as an important issue in my creative work. I explore the recent iteration of arguments surrounding cultural appropriation sparked by US writer Lionel Shriver's

opening address at the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival (hereafter, 'Shriver's speech'). Between the polarities of belief in the inviolability of poetic licence, which I refer to as the 'authorial autonomy' argument, and belief in the inviolability of cultural authenticity—the 'Own Voices' argument—I discuss 'authorial responsibility' as a way forward for writing fiction in the current climate. I analyse how my practice in writing *Mother of Pearl* compares with the elements of an ethical and responsible creative practice, as they have emerged in response to the cultural appropriation debate. I also explore the degree to which Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2009, pp. 69-85) concept of the respectful transcultural conversation at the heart of cosmopolitanism provides a framework for an ethical creative practice.

As much of the debate about cultural appropriation has taken place online, I draw on websites, blog posts and social media in addition to scholarly work. As Aboriginal Australian author and academic Ambelin Kwaymullina (2015b) notes, for marginalised groups, who have a significant stake in the debate, the 'blogosphere' provides space for their voices to be heard outside the formal, 'privileged' channels of mainstream media and academia. Furthermore, the emergent concept of 'sensitivity reading', discussed in this chapter, has yet to feature substantially in scholarly material.

1.1 Asia in Australian fiction

In *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, Broinowski (1996, p. 172) traces white Australia's at times 'scornful', at times 'reverential' relationship with Asia. Rather than see Australia as part of the Asia-Pacific region, for almost two centuries, settler Australians defined themselves as a distant outpost of Europe, 'accepting Europe's Orientalist constructs [of the region] as substitutes for knowledge' (Broinowski, 2006, p. 25)—'Orientalist' here reflecting Edward Said's term for discourse used by the West to denigrate and exoticise the East in order to dominate and exert authority over it (Said, 1978, p. 3). While Robin Gerster notes that it is problematic to transpose Said's analysis to the Australian context, given Australia's own peripheral status with respect to Europe, he concedes that, in perceiving themselves as subjects of a British outpost, 'Colonial Australian writers subscribed to prevailing imperial ideologies in representing

Asia as not only essentially and irretrievably 'different', but as backward and barbarous and in dire need of Britain's benign civilising influence' (Gerster, 2009, p. 304).

Several Orientalist constructs that conditioned white settler Australians' responses to the Asia-Pacific region endure as stereotypes even in contemporary fiction, the most persistent 'based on Otherness and sex' (Broinowski, 1996, p. 232). A prominent construct is the fantasy of Asia as 'Illicit Space'—a term coined by Rana Kabbani (see Broinowski, 1996, p. 50)—where the normal rules of behaviour with respect to sex and violence do not apply (Broinowski, 1996, p. 119), inducing conflicting reactions of 'allure and repugnance, assumed superiority and guilt' (Broinowski, 1996, p. 50). Connected to this is Asia as 'Adventure Zone' (Broinowski, 1996, p. 50), an exotic backdrop for what Gerster (2009, p. 320) refers to as 'white male questing and self-fulfilment'. Another enduring construct is the 'Far East Fallacy', defined as 'the image of Asia as an undifferentiated, remote place, full of inscrutable Asiatics' (Broinowski, 1996, p. 205). Combined with the paternalistic ethos of colonialism, these Orientalist constructs resulted in a heavily gendered division, reflected in literature, between white Australia as 'heavy, sometimes coarse, logical, intellectual, aggressively *masculine*' (Broinowski, 1996, p. 6), and the Asian other as 'female, submissive, emotional, immoral, alluring, repulsive, exploitable and treacherous' (Broinowski, 1996, p. 10). Particularly vulnerable to stereotyping, Asian women are 'constructed as superfeminine, submissive, mysterious, desirable and docile', while Asian men are rendered alternatively invisible (Manderson, 1997, p. 125-6) or demonised (Pissard, 2010 pp. 44-60).

Australia's relationship with Asia began to change from the 1960s, with the Vietnam War, the progressive dismantling of the White Australia policy, changing trade relations, and greater contact between Australia and Asia through tourism, migration, education, trade and the media (Gerster, 2009, pp. 314-7; Sobocinska, 2014). Between 1965 and 1985, white Australian writers of fiction set in Asia 'reassessed and mostly rejected the images of the past' (Broinowski, 1996, p. 194), and attempted to reconfigure, through social realism or satire, Asian-Australian relations (Pissard, 2009, p. 16). This fertile literary period saw Australian writers explore Asian culture and philosophies, together with

Aboriginal philosophies, as pathways to a new national identity no longer dependent on Britain or Europe (Tiffin, 1984, pp. 469-70). As Helen Tiffin declared in a 1984 article, Asia was no longer an exotic backdrop but ‘a territory of the Australian psyche’ (Tiffin, 1984, p. 468), the ‘significant other’ against which Australia sought to define itself (Gelder & Salzman, 1989, p. 26). Gerster (2009, p. 320) agrees with Tiffin’s analysis, but is critical of its implications, suggesting that, in becoming ‘the convenient vehicle for a redefinition of national identity ... [o]nce again Asia is taken as a space upon which the Western sensibility is imposed’. Noting the general shallowness of Australian engagement with the region, Gerster (2009, p. 312) suggests that the myth of Asia as ‘a place of testing and titillation for the visiting white male’ still endures in Australian writing.

As I discuss below, I started writing fiction set in Thailand largely as a rejoinder to Western male writing about Thailand, particularly about Thai women. Interestingly, several scholars find a qualitative difference between Australian fiction written by women and that which is written by men, suggesting that women writers are more inclined ‘to empathise with the Asian Other ... [and to] seek to balance contending impressions, rather than to take sides’ (Broinowski, 1996, p. 232; see also Gelder & Salzman, 1989, pp. 35-6). Similarly, Isaraporn Pissard (2009, p. 238) suggests that Australian authors who ‘occupy marginalised space’—she includes gay men as well as women—may be able ‘to represent the other in a less hegemonic way’ and demonstrate ‘a greater sensitivity towards difference’. Broinowski (1996, p. 203) credits women writers, notably Blanche d’Alpuget in *Monkeys in the Dark* (1980) and *Turtle Beach* (1981), and Barbara Hanrahan in *Flawless Jade* (1989), with ‘breaking new ground’ in Australian literature by taking readers into the homes—and minds—of their Asian characters, without the need for Australian characters to be present. Gelder and Salzman (1989, p. 41) waver between commending d’Alpuget’s ability to slip into another character’s viewpoint and give ‘Otherness’ a voice, and questioning ‘if it is right to speak on behalf of other cultures in this way’, suggesting that current debates about cultural appropriation, which I explore later in this chapter, are part of a conversation that has been going on for decades. Moreover, JV D’Cruz and William Steele (2003, p. 206) are highly critical

of *Turtle Beach*, arguing that d'Alpuget engages in historical distortions and 'reinforces a thoroughly colonialist metaphorical system based on an abundance of stereotypical inaccuracies' (see also, D'Cruz & Steele, 2003, pp. 199-258). Among more recent novels by Australian women set in Asia and featuring indigenous characters, Pissard (2009, p. 22) identifies Lynette Chataway's *Noble Sindhu Horses* (2005) as an example of 'a sympathetic portrayal of Thai villagers and a vehement critique of the unequal power relations between East and West', although she is critical of Chataway's treatment of Buddhism and suggests that her central Thai protagonist 'is largely made to think and speak Western thoughts' (Pissard, 2009, p. 129). These critics caution that the aspiration to produce positive, post-colonial texts by writing strong and central Asian characters is undermined for as long as 'the West' remains 'the yardstick' against which the Asian other is measured (D'Cruz & Steele, 2003, pp. 203).

The persistent Orientalist constructs in white Australian literature about Asia in general are writ large in Western fiction about Thailand. In her comprehensive critique, *Imagining Siam*, Caron Eastgate Dann traces Western depictions of Siam, as the country was known until 1939 (Jackson, 2008, p. 167, n. 1), now Thailand, from its early association with *The Arabian Nights* as part of 'an undifferentiated Orient' (Dann, 2008, p. 121)—Broinowski's 'Far East Fallacy'—to its enduring reputation as 'Illicit Space' and 'Adventure Zone': exotic, erotic, dangerous and promising excitement (Dann, 2008, p. 206). Dann's findings are consistent with those of Pornsawan Tripasai, who argues (after Mohanty, 1984) that the enduring 'myths' of Thailand as exotic and primitive, erotic and mystical, are a means by which the West discursively colonises the country (Tripasai, 2003, p. 20). In the following section, I trace the evolution of my own work as a non-Asian Australian writing about Thailand.

1.2 Significance of Thailand in my creative process

I first visited Thailand in 1985 en route home from a year in Europe, prior to the tourism boom spearheaded by the Thai government's '1987 Visit Thailand Year' campaign (Hamilton, 1997, p. 148). In retrospect, my first experience of the country was somewhat rarefied. While enjoying Bangkok's popular tourist sights—the Royal Palace, the temples, a long-tail boat ride through the *klongs*—

unlike most tourists (Dann, 2008, p. 192; Iyer, 2003, p. 56), I interacted predominantly with Thai people outside of the tourism industry, staying with long-term resident Italian expatriates, meeting their Thai friends—mostly women—and visiting a young Thai nurse trainee whose education was sponsored by my grandfather through an Australian NGO. While I had learned to speak French fluently and could pass myself off as French by the time I left Europe, I was confronted by the fact that in Thailand such a ruse would never be possible, no matter how fluently I might learn to speak Thai. I was intrigued by the challenge, then as now, of how to get by in a place where blending in was not an option.

I travelled again to Thailand in 1990. My journal from this period indicates a preoccupation with the heat, reflections on the impact of tourism, and my appreciation of Thailand's beguiling combination of natural beauty, cultural richness and creature comforts—'all the exoticism of the East served up amidst all the conveniences of the West', as Pico Iyer (1989, p. 312) put it. When an academic interest in women and HIV/AIDS brought me back to Southeast Asia in 1992, Bangkok was my first port of call. However, in an example of 'being subjected to the production of truth through power' (Foucault, 1980, p. 3)—in this case, the power of Western media and scholarship, its attention drawn by the global AIDS crisis to the 'problem' of Thailand's commercial sex industry (Bishop & Robinson, 1998, pp. 43-59; Hamilton, 1997, pp. 147-8)—before I'd even arrived, my perceptions of Thailand had changed significantly. In my mind, the country had become what Hamilton (1997, p. 145) calls 'libidinalized', reinscribed as a sex tourism centre and vector of HIV transmission (Bishop & Robinson, 1998, p. 43-4). I had absorbed as 'accepted knowledge' Bangkok's reputation as a global brothel (Dann, 2008, p. 150; Tripasai, 2003, p. 8), and this time around, its red-light district of Patpong was among my first stops.

While based in Laos and later Vietnam between 1992 and 1996, I travelled frequently to Thailand, before moving to Bangkok in 1997. Living in a Thai neighbourhood for eighteen months and spending time with Thai people unconnected to my work in HIV prevention helped reorient my view of the city. Nevertheless, when it came to writing my first novel set in Thailand, *Behind the Night Bazaar* (2006), I walked a well-trodden path in Western fiction by using

the sex industry as a setting, albeit in Chiang Mai rather than Bangkok (Dann, 2008, p. 168). Thailand's sex industry is over-represented in Western fiction (Dann, 2008, p. 150), so much so that Iyer, himself no stranger to writing about the bar scene (Iyer, 1989), quipped that 'you can be forgiven for not realizing that ... [Thailand's] a rural country, with a complex history, daylight hours and a taste for shyness' (Iyer, 2003, p. 56). However, while Dann (2008, p. 161) suggests that in 'virtually every piece of writing about Thailand's sex industry, whether 'literary' or not, lasciviousness and voyeurism combine to titillate the reader', she singles out *Behind the Night Bazaar* as one example that 'presents the sex industry without voyeurism or lasciviousness but uses it to drive a plot that condemns the underlying corruption of both Thailand and the West' (Dann, 2008, p. 214)²⁴.

I was inspired to write *Behind the Night Bazaar* largely as a corrective to the stereotypes and clichés about Thailand and Thai people, especially women, which dominated English-language material in Bangkok's bookshops in the late-1990s and early-2000s. Particularly grating were locally published novels written by Western men about doomed relationships between expatriate men—or *farang*—and Thai bar girls (Hamilton, 1997, p. 150-5; Dann, 2008, pp. 150, 155-6)²⁵. I was also troubled by novels like Alex Garland's *The Beach* (1996), in which Thailand functions as a generic, exotic setting (Tripasai, 2003, pp. 30-1; Dann, 2008, pp. 191-2)—the 'Far East Fallacy' again—and the tawdry sensationalism of memoirs by Westerners who'd spent time in Thai prisons for drug-related offences²⁶ (Dann, 2008, p. 163; Marshall, 2009, p. 43)—'Illicit Space' meets 'Adventure Zone' with disastrous consequences. Writing in the crime genre, I felt that *Behind the Night Bazaar* needed the sort of 'seedy underbelly'

²⁴ *Behind the Night Bazaar* is set in 1996, when the Australian government introduced extraterritorial legislation to allow prosecution of child sex offenders under Australian law for crimes committed overseas. The legislation, while well-intended, raised troubling questions for me about sovereignty, as did my interactions with Australians who operated charities that 'rescued' underage sex workers from brothels. In the novel, I wanted to unsettle this modern-day equivalent of taking up 'the white man's burden'.

²⁵ Examples include Colin Piprell's *Bangkok Knights* (2001, Asia Books, Bangkok), David Young's *Thailand Joy: A novel* (c2002, Editions Duang Kamo, Bangkok), and JF Gump's *Even Thai Girls Cry* (2003, Bangkok Books, Bangkok).

²⁶ The Thai prison memoir is typified by Australian Warren Fellows's *The Damage Done* (1997, Asia Books, Bangkok)

setting that could be provided by Chiang Mai's Loh Kroh district (Savage, 2006, p. 140; Dann, 2008, p. 168). However, I intended for my novel to avoid the usual stereotypes associated with the 'masculinist imaginary' when applied to such settings (Hamilton, 1997, p. 154), particularly the depiction of Thai women as beautiful, subservient and/or exciting (Hamilton, 1997, p. 153; Bishop & Robinson, 1998, p. 167), stereotypes summed up by Tripasai (2003, p. 47) as 'the temptress Eve, the nurturing native, and the [grotesque] *femme fatale*'.

Furthermore, in the subgenre of the doomed Thai-*farang* romance novel, the majority of Thai female characters

are depicted as speaking only "bar-girl" English, which means that they are unable to converse with foreigners except in a most limited, stilted, and stereotypical fashion. This matters profoundly, because, unable to speak, they cannot reveal their true selves (Hamilton, 1997, p. 154).

D'Cruz and Steele (2003, p. 260) argue that Anglo-Australian authors in particular are prone to 'use ostensibly aberrant speech as a tool to belittle and disempower foreigners'. Certainly, rendering Thai women's speech in broken English infantilises them and deprives them of 'linguistic power' (Pissard, 2009, p. 185). At the same time, this not-speaking produces a strange double-bind for the male characters in these narratives, on the one hand adding to the woman's 'allure and mystery', on the other, confounding the man's attempts to 'save' her because he 'never knows what is going on' (Hamilton, 1997, p. 154-5). Setting aside the question of whether a Thai character can reveal her 'true self' in a voice imagined by an Australian writer, I was determined that the Thai characters in my novels, especially the Thai women, spoke, and spoke eloquently. Consequently, I created in private investigator Jayne Keeney an Australian protagonist who speaks Thai fluently, and chose to narrate parts of the story from the point of view of different Thai characters, enabling them to speak and think in their own language (albeit narrated in English). Part of my challenge is to reflect the syntax and phonology of Thai language, while avoiding, as much as possible, the use of non-standard English in ways that risk being reductive, or worse, ridiculing non-English/non-native English speakers (D'Cruz & Steele, 2003, pp. 214-21).

Writing about Australian crime fiction set in Thailand, Pissa-ard (2009, p. 19) suggests that ‘certain Orientalist images are frequently revisited and enthusiasm for contact with Asia sometimes obscures unequal power relations between East and West’.²⁷ She implies that the crime genre appeals to writers because it offers consolation to a Western ‘threatened self’ and an opportunity to reassert power (Pissa-ard, 2003, p. 177), perhaps in the belief that crime narratives require neat resolutions (Franks, 2014). However, the crime fiction genre is broad enough to accommodate the ‘inherent ambiguities and contradictions’ of modern life (Pepper, 2000, pp. 13-14); and in subgenres such as hard-boiled crime fiction—with which my work is associated (Blundell, 2013)—the social order is revealed as corrupt and unworthy of restoration (Newton, 2009, p. 38), and neat resolutions are eschewed (Willet, 1996, p. 8). Thus, genre was no impediment to my desire to explore the ambivalence in Australia’s relationship with Asia in *Behind the Night Bazaar* and the two novels that followed (Savage, 2010; 2013)—an ambivalence derived from the colonial attitudes of the past, alongside the appeal of, and inherent challenges in, Australian-Asian engagement in an era of globalisation (Pissa-ard, 2009, pp. 178). As reviewers have noted, my crime novels offer no neat restoration of the moral order: justice is partially served at best, and the endings leave open ‘questions of equity and exploitation’ (England, 2010, p. 28). Of *The Half-Child*, one reviewer writes:

Savage creates a complex, unsettling portrait of life in Thailand, revealing the many differences in attitudes and expectations from those familiar to Westerners. She brings Jayne, and us, face to face with the reality that we may not have the right to impose our morality on people of a different culture and mind-set ... (Oliver, 2010, p. 32)

Although *The Half-Child* utilises Pattaya’s sex industry as a setting, my third novel, *The Dying Beach*, intentionally avoids any reference to Thailand’s sex

²⁷ The most recent crime novel analysed by Pissa-ard is Peter Yeldham’s *Two Sides of a Triangle* (1996, Pan, Sydney); others are Blanche d’Alpuget’s *White Eye* (1993, Viking, Ringwood, Australia), Tom Beauford’s *Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?* (1989, Penguin, Ringwood, Australia), and R.F. Brissenden’s *Poor Boy* (1987, Allen & Unwin, Sydney).

industry altogether, with the plot focusing on environmental degradation caused by tourism, corruption, and global consumption.

Writing crime fiction is something of a double-edged sword. Given its popularity (Franks, 2014), the genre presents an opportunity for the communication of ideas to a potentially large audience. But crime writers must cater to readers' expectations of the genre, at least to some degree. In the author's note that opens his thriller *Bangkok 8*, UK author John Burdett begs forgiveness for his selective depiction of the Thai capital as sleazy and corrupt, on the basis that a 'novelist is an opportunist', and his novel 'is entertainment within a very Western genre, and nothing more' (Burdett, 2003, p. 9).²⁸ Burdett effectively admits that the Bangkok of his novel is not Bangkok as it is, but Bangkok as Western crime readers expect it to be (Dann, 2008, p. 166). However, for my part, by choosing to write about surrogacy in the form of realist literary fiction, rather than crime fiction, I am released from certain reader expectations—of seediness, sleaziness, corruption—with respect to the Thai setting.

Is it possible for Orientalism and stereotyping to be avoided or redressed in writing by non-Asian Australians about Asia? Broinowski (1996, p. 226) writes that in the 1990s in Australia,

a silent, undocumented debate was taking place about readers of fiction: whether they were now more 'Asia-literate' and would not tolerate clichés, or whether they still got a thrill out of books about Asia, the exotic Other. If Orientalism vanished, would the appetite for it survive? Would some other Adventure Zone be constructed to feed the need? Or would the Far East Fallacy persist in the face of the facts, simply because there was a market for it?

I suggest that these questions are as relevant today as they were twenty years ago. Broinowski (1996, p. xii) admitted to being surprised by 'how powerful images are and, once received, how resistant to change'. Tripasai (2003, p. 103) maintains that the 'Thailand constructed as the great global 'illicit space' shows no signs of disappearing from the cultural radar'; and Dann (2009, p. 213) concludes that Western writing about Thailand still trades largely in 'erotic,

²⁸ In fact, crime fiction is also popular in Thailand, with Thai crime writers just as inclined as their Western counterparts to 'subscribe to cultural stereotypes and reveal fear and mistrust of the other' (Pissa-ard, 2003, p. 309).

exotic' stereotypes. I note, too, that in catering to Western expectations, Burdett enjoyed six-figure sales of his first two novels in twenty countries ('Bangkok crime writers brought to book', 2007). A more optimistic outlook is provided by Pissard (2009, p. 305), who argues that the works of Australian poet Noel Rowe, academic and novelist Peter A Jackson, and short story writer Anna Mandoki, together with Thai authors Rattawut Lapcharoensap (2005) and Pira Sudham (1988; 1994), both of whom write in English, demonstrate that it is possible to 'overcome [the] cultural divide' and negotiate differences to produce 'new and hopeful possibilities'.

A push towards greater 'Asia literacy' among writers and publishers is suggested by the increasing publication of, and awards for, fiction by Asian Australian writers²⁹ (Broinowski, 2011; Wilson & Lokugé, 2016), as well as the trend toward use of 'sensitivity readers', which I explore later in this chapter. Whether these trends also correspond to an appetite among a broad range of readers, and thus a market in Australia for books about Asia that depart from the Orientalist clichés is a topic for further research.

The burgeoning of Asian Australian writing, coupled with globalisation and the rise of social media, have contributed not only to cultural hybridisation (Broinowski, 1996, p. 232; Wilson & Lokugé, 2016, p. 527), but also a new accountability when it comes to writing across boundaries of identity. Depending on one's point of view, the current literary climate might be described as 'attuned to the complexities of representation' (Waldman, 2017, para. 4), or as straining beneath the weight of identity politics (Tolentino, 2016, para. 3). To date, my fiction has not been subject to criticism on grounds of misrepresentation or cultural appropriation. Nor has my decision to narrate parts of my stories from the view of Thai characters been questioned. Alternating narrative points of view between non-Asian Australian and Thai characters (among others) gives me a means to explore cross cultural encounters from multiple perspectives, the Australians being the *farang* 'other' to the Thais, as the Thais are 'other' to the Australians. It also provides a means of making whiteness visible to the reader,

²⁹ I use the term 'Asian Australian writers' as shorthand, recognising that the term obscures a range of diverse national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Huang and Ommundsen, 2016, p. 533).

rather than treating it as the default. These challenges continue to preoccupy me; and the choices I make in *Mother of Pearl* with respect to setting and narrative point of view are consistent with my previous novels.

In the following section, I outline key positions in the debate about cultural appropriation, before considering the ethical issues raised for my creative process.

2. Cultural appropriation redux

Several high-profile incidents fuelled public debate over cultural appropriation during the course of my research. These include Lionel Shriver's opening address at the Brisbane Writers Festival, 'Fiction and Identity Politics' (Shriver, 2016), and the reaction it generated from writers in Australia and globally; protests in response to New York's Whitney Museum Biennial over *Open Casket*, a painting by a white artist depicting the body of fourteen-year-old, African-American lynching victim, Emmett Till (Young, 2017; Friedersdorf, 2017); and publication of a highly inappropriate editorial, 'Winning the Cultural Appropriation Prize', in an issue of The Writer's Union of Canada's *Write* magazine devoted to Indigenous writing (Lederman & Medley, 2017; Nourbese Philip, 2017). While drawing on responses to these multiple incidents, I concentrate on the impact of Shriver's speech, which, taking place in Brisbane and embroiling local writers, had particular significance in Australia.

In her address of 8 September 2016, Shriver posited that identity politics and cultural appropriation 'challenge our right to write fiction at all' (Shriver, 2016, para. 3), and contended that a 'climate of super-sensitivity' was stifling creativity and freedom of speech (Shriver, 2016, para. 17). Arguing that fiction is appropriative by nature, and that the fiction writer's job is 'to push beyond the boundaries of ... personal experience' (Shriver, 2016, para. 30), she maintained that writers are entitled to write whatever stories they can make their own, provided they write them well: 'fiction helps to fell the exasperating barriers between us, and for a short while allows us to behold the astonishing reality of other people,' she said. 'The last thing we fiction writers need is restrictions on what belongs to us' (Shriver, 2016, paras. 59-60).

The Guardian subsequently published a rejoinder by Sudanese-born Australian Yassmin Abdel-Magied, decrying Shriver for arrogance, condescension and an attitude that ‘drips of racial supremacy’ (Abdel-Magied, 2016, para. 27). Abdel-Magied (2016, para. 13) suggested that what might have been a ‘fascinating philosophical argument’ about how fiction writers can write about experiences they have not had became ‘a *celebration of the unfettered exploitation of the experiences of others, under the guise of fiction*’ (Abdel-Magied, 2016, para. 18, emphasis in original). In making light of identity politics, Shriver denied both historical oppressions like colonialism, and the reality that ‘marginalised groups, even today, do not get the luxury of defining their own place in a norm that is profoundly white, straight and, often, patriarchal’ (Abdel-Magied, 2016, para. 25). Marginalised people should be supported to tell their own stories, Abdel-Magied (2016, paras. 21-2) argued, rather than have their experiences filtered through the ‘skewed and biased lens’ of writers whose race, education and wealth gives them advantages on the unlevel playing field that is the publishing industry. The article attracted more than 1,500 comments on *The Guardian* site,³⁰ and when Shriver’s speech was published five days later, it attracted even more—over 2,100 comments at last count.³¹

Arguments about ‘cultural appropriation’ raised in response to Shriver’s speech can be traced to the practice of ‘writing back’, starting in the mid- to late-twentieth century, in which postcolonial writers sought not only to redress damaging Eurocentric stereotypes in literature, but to interrogate the philosophical underpinnings of colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2013, p. 32; see also Said, 1994, p. 243). However, author Kamila Shamsie suggests that ‘[w]hat started as a thoughtful post-colonial critique of certain types of imperial texts somehow became a peculiar orthodoxy that essentially denies the possibility of imaginative engagement with anyone outside your little circle’ (Forna, 2015, para. 17). Certainly, the response to, or ‘furore’ over (Rajkhowa,

³⁰ Viewed 7 March 2017, see https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/10/as-lionel-shriver-made-light-of-identity-i-had-no-choice-but-to-walk-out-on-her?CMP=soc_567#comments

³¹ Viewed 18 May 2017, see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad#comments>

2016) Shriver's speech demonstrates that the cultural appropriation debate, fuelled by social media (Mason, 2017, para. 4; Waldman, 2017, para. 4), has moved from the academic to the public sphere, becoming enmeshed along the way in arguments about power, privilege, equity in the publishing industry, the nature of fiction, and even the capacity of human beings to understand one another.

Amid the commentary, three camps of opinion can be discerned, which I refer to as the 'authorial autonomy', 'Own Voices', and 'authorial responsibility' positions. Unlike the narratives that dominate academic and public discourse on surrogacy outlined in Chapter 1, these positions are not mutually exclusive³²; and while they do not align neatly with political affiliations, proponents of authorial autonomy tend to be associated with the conservative right, the authorial responsibility camp with the progressive left, and own voices with social justice activism (Friedersdorf, 2017). As I discuss below, while respecting the political aims of the Own Voices camp, my own creative work affirms authorial responsibility as an ethical starting-point for imaginative acts of boundary-crossing.

2.1 Authorial autonomy

Shriver espouses a traditional notion of authorial autonomy, a freedom that William Faulkner avowed gave the artist license to 'rob his mother' for the sake of his art: 'the "Ode on a Grecian Urn",' he quipped, 'is worth any number of old ladies' (Faulkner, 1956). For those who believe in authorial autonomy, 'cultural appropriation' is a misnomer, anathematic to the imaginative and creative freedom at the heart of art. That an author has the right to write whatever they like is seen by adherents as 'plain common sense' (Craven, 2016, p. 18) and a

³² Malaysian-Australian poet, rapper and novelist Omar Musa, for example, encourages white writers to 'read, support and promote the work of writers of colour before attempting to encroach on that space themselves', but admits that to discourage writers from moving outside the boundaries of their own experience 'comes into direct conflict with what he sees as the purpose of fiction: to empathise with and understand other people's lives' (Convery, 2016, para. 15). Kamila Shamsie (2012, para. 58) suggests that arguments about 'cultural appropriation are political and 'can easily be trumped by another political argument about the importance of engagement' (Kunzru et al, 2017, paras. 4-7)

'truism' (Rajkhowa, 2016, para. 6). Those who would impose on writers to refrain from cultural appropriation are cast as censorious and totalitarian (Aston, 2016; Foreman, 2017; Nordland, 2016), 'absurd' and 'anti-literature' (Wood, 2016, p. 111).

Authorial autonomy advocates argue further that as fiction deals with the realm of the made up, charges of cultural appropriation are misplaced. For New Zealand author Lloyd Jones, whose novel *Mister Pip* is narrated from the point of view of a fourteen-year-old Bougainvillean girl, a character 'only exists on the page. And her existence, whether you believe it or not, depends on my ability to be persuasive' (Wood, 2016, p. 111). Jones insists that those who conflate a writer's ability to imagine the other with cultural appropriation misunderstand the nature of fiction:

The point is that identity lives on the page... It's not trying to draw down from life. The playground is on the page, in language. It makes things exist or it doesn't, and that's where it works. (Wood, 2016, p. 112)

British author Philip Hensher concurs: 'The only thing worth saying about the issue of cultural appropriation is that it has nothing to do with identity, and everything about quality' (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 33). Like Shriver (2016, para. 28), these authors effectively argue that readers are justified in being offended by bad writing—caricature, stereotyping, tokenism, fetishism—but not by the author's imaginative act of boundary crossing *per se*.

An underpinning assumption of the authorial autonomy argument is that fiction occupies a rarefied space outside the historical and political context in which it is produced—as if 'antiseptically quarantined from its worldly affiliations', as Said (1994, p. xiv) puts it. Ethicist Claudia Mills (2000, p. 195) notes that, historically, fiction writers were not subjected to ethical standards of practice, because their work was considered either 'too trivial because ... it traffics in the imaginary', or 'too exalted ... the writers of fiction are given "poetic license" to break ordinary moral rules in the service of artistic creation'. Said's point (1994, p. 31) that writers once wrote about the colonial other with no thought to being read, let alone critiqued by those whom they wrote about, is also pertinent. In Australia, as Wiradjuri writer and academic Janine Leane (2016, p. 43) observes, the 'powerful legacy of settler representations is now

being challenged by Aboriginal storytellers and scholars'. The growth in Asian Australian writing mentioned earlier has opened up a 'third space'—to use Homi Bhabha's (1994, p. 4) term—of cultural hybridity, intervening in contemporary debates about representation by

questioning the ideology of Australian multiculturalism, the core/periphery hierarchy, the perpetuation of Orientalist attitudes and stereotypes, and white Australian claims to belong as seen in its myths of cultural authenticity and authority. (Wilson & Lokugé, 2016, p. 527)

These developments demonstrate that fiction cannot be isolated from politics and ethics; and further, as Said (1994) and others have noted, that the writer's imagination is not neutral territory (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 58; Loffreda & Rankine, 2015). 'Poetic license' is now understood as 'privilege'.

2.2 Own Voices

The strongest challenge to the traditional notion of authorial autonomy and appeals to—occasionally, demands of—authorial responsibility come from the Own Voices camp. With its origins in a hashtag on the social networking service Twitter³³, Own Voices is a term that is applied across fiction to signify, as Kwaymullina (2016a, para. 4) defines it, 'stories told by marginalised peoples about our own experiences rather than stories told by outsiders'. The term 'diversity' is sometimes used in lieu of 'marginalised', and may be defined as 'including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual], Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities' (We Need Diverse Books, n.d.). It is the crossing of ethnic or racial boundaries, specifically by white writers into non-white territory, that appears most controversial in terms of generating debate.

It is important to acknowledge the pain and anger that underscore the Own Voices position, particularly where Indigenous writers are concerned; and to recognise how the violence of colonialism and attempted genocide might echo

³³ #OwnVoices was coined by YA author Corinne Duyvis to refer to children's literature 'about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group', viewed 18 May 2017, <https://twitter.com/corinneduyvis/status/640584099208503296>

in the experience of being erased, assimilated, misrepresented, denied access to and stolen from in literature. As Kwaymullina (2016c, para. 4) states,

Indigenous peoples and other marginalised peoples have long had our humanity denied, and that denial continues to be the basis of discrimination against us. To suggest that writers have a right to put themselves in our place is often not to respect our humanity but to further deny it—especially when this is done by those who have inherited the benefits of our marginalisation.

With an analysis firmly rooted in historical and contemporary power relations, *Own Voices* advocates equate cultural appropriation with theft (Leane, 2017, p. 43), and reject notions of authorial autonomy and imaginative freedom.

Australian author Peter Polites, for example, drawing on the work of cultural theorist bell hooks, writes that:

... there is no such thing as the neutrality of imagination. Imagination is framed by what we know and the structures of power that govern us ... [I]magination and privilege are interchangeable. The idea that white writers use imagination to somehow entitle them to write about the Other does not have any roots in the realities of the Other. (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 58)

Similarly, artist Hannah Black, objecting to ‘the appropriation of Black culture by non-Black artists’, maintains that ‘white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights’ (Muñoz-Alonso, 2017, para. 11)³⁴.

For *Own Voices* advocates, the question is not ‘Can writers tell another’s stories?’ but ‘*Should* writers tell another’s stories?’ (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 54). Many Indigenous Australians are actively opposed to having their stories told by non-Indigenous fiction writers (Heiss, 2002; Leane, 2016), particularly when writing from a first person or ‘deep third’ point of view (Kwaymullina, 2015a, 2016b); while for Polites, the privileges enjoyed by white writers makes ‘penning the Others’ stories ... untenable’ (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 58). It is this apparent readiness to proscribe limits on creativity that sees such advocates accused of censorship, and portrayed as ‘cultural appropriation police’ (Foreman, 2016, p. 33). Yet Polites freely acknowledges that whether writers can

³⁴ Black made this statement in an open letter to the curators of the Whitney Biennial, calling for Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till, *Open Casket*, to be removed and destroyed (Young, 2017).

or can't tell another's story, 'they do it anyway' (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 54), while Kwaymullina (2015b) offers a strong and respectful case in support of her position that stops short of actually telling writers what to do. My philosophical misgivings about the Own Voices argument, which I outline below, do not preclude me from respecting the ethical and political points raised by these advocates. Moreover, as a reader, I fully support their calls for greater equity in publishing (Elliot, 2014; Kwaymullina, 2015b, 2016c; see also Convery, 2016), to foster what Leane (2016, p. 45) refers to as 'conversation-through-literature'. Indeed, I believe that an ethical writing practice, based on Appiah's notion of the respectful transcultural conversation at the heart of cosmopolitanism (2006), can deliver the outcomes desired by the Own Voices camp, while avoiding some of the philosophical pitfalls of their position.

My main difficulty with the Own Voices' contention 'that it is not simply difficult to understand another (or even the Other) but that it is essentially impossible' (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 57) is that it leads to a kind of racial or biological essentialism. Said (1994, p. 31) draws attention to the dangers of this kind of thinking in *Culture and Imperialism*:

The difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarizations that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagoguery more than they enable knowledge.

While observing that all cultures tend to stereotype those who are 'foreign' to them, Said maintains that cross-cultural understanding is possible, not least of all because cultures are not separate and distinct, but 'hybrid ... entangled' (Said, 1993, p. 317), made up of 'massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences' (Said, 1993, p. 32). Similarly, Young and Haley (2009, p. 285-6) reject the premise that '[i]nsiders have privileged epistemic access to their culture' that outsiders do not, an underpinning premise of the Own Voices position, because such essentialism overlooks the porous and dynamic nature of culture. '[D]ifferences that exist *within* communities' are elided (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 59, emphasis in original). Moreover, as Stephanie Convery notes, racial essentialism 'is always reactionary' (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 57), not to mention easily turned against its proponents (Foreman, 2016, p. 33).

Own Voices advocates' proposition that any and all attempts to imaginatively understand each other across boundaries of identity are untenable refutes the notion of what UK author Chris Cleave calls the 'shared emotional truth' at the heart of 'an honest book' (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 17), and denies fiction's unique capacity to engender empathy, as discussed in Chapter 2. This is by no means to deny the demeaning stereotypes that exist in fiction written across the cultural divide, nor readers' justification in objecting to such misrepresentation. But to treat all attempts to empathically imagine one's way into other subjectivities as harmful robs literature of its power (Young & Haley, 2009, pp. 286-7). As Nesrine Malik (2016, para. 9) notes,

The most valuable literature not only teaches us what we do not know about others (and ourselves), but also reminds us that common human traits—love, fear, loss, family—bind us together both vertically throughout history but also horizontally across race, gender, disability and sexual orientation.

Indeed, British writer Hari Kunzru describes the attempt 'to think one's way into other subjectivities, other experiences' as 'an act of ethical urgency' (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 2).

Moreover, to demand that 'lived experience' is 'the superior and most veracious form of truth' risks ghettoisation: Malik (2016, para. 8) points out that only those with power and privilege do not feel the need to resort to identity in order to 'shore up' their authority. For similar reasons, I find the provocation posed by Own Voices ally³⁵ Australian writer Justine Larbalestier (2016, para. 31) troubling: 'Who is better qualified to tell their stories: you [white writer] or them [people of colour or Indigenous writers]?' Setting aside the difficulty of ascribing ownership to stories (Convery & Polites, 2013, p. 59), I question what kind of writer believes themselves best qualified to tell *any* story. I suspect only those with what Shriver (2016, para. 23) calls 'gall', who never feel the need to question their power and privilege, and whose sense of entitlement protects them from doubt (Malik, 2016, paras. 3-4).

³⁵ The term 'ally' or 'allyship' is applied to members of the majority, dominant or privileged group who support oppressed or minority groups. Numerous online resources provide guidelines on how to be an ally; see for example: Lamonte, A 2016, *Guide to Allyship*, viewed 30 May 2017, <http://www.guidetoallyship.com/>

To my mind, the pertinent question is not, ‘Who is better qualified to tell their stories?’ but rather, ‘What is at stake if I write this story?’—particularly if I write it in ways that members of the community I’m writing about have identified as potentially harmful. By making these questions of ethics rather than points of dogma, the onus is placed on the author to make an informed decision and to take responsibility for their actions. As US author Paul Beatty said at the Sydney Writers Festival in May 2017, ‘You’ve got a right [to say what you want] ... but you’ve got to think about are you willing to hurt that person. And if you are, then that’s your choice’ (Harmon, 2017, para. 32).

In the following section, I analyse how my own creative practice aligns with the elements of an ethical practice, which have emerged in response to the cultural appropriation debate (Gandolfo, 2016, para. 13). Linked to the relatively new concept of authorial responsibility (Rajkhowa, 2016, paras. 3-4), these elements comprise clarification of narrative intent, meticulous research, community consultation and openness to criticism. I consider the degree to which Appiah’s concept of the respectful transcultural conversation at the heart of cosmopolitanism can incorporate these elements to provide a framework for an ethical creative writing practice.

3. Authorial responsibility: Towards an ethical writing practice

3.1 Narrative intent

The first step in an ethical creative writing practice is to clarify narrative intent: to examine the impulse, desire or motive for writing from the perspective of another (Lo, 2014, para. 21; Gandolfo, 2016, para. 12; Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 43; Teoh, 2016, pp. 6-7). Loffreda and Rankine (2015, p. 17) suggest that instead of asking, ‘Can I write from another’s point of view?’ writers start with the ‘first-principle’ question, ‘Why and what for?’

My decision to write stories set in Thailand and to tell them from the perspective of Thai characters is by no means capricious, but grounded in years of experience and research. It is no accident that my interest in writing about transnational commercial surrogacy was sparked by an article that specifically mentioned Thailand (Corderoy, 2013). Thailand is a place where I have lived, where I have relationships, and, as I discuss below, where I have some ability to

speak the language. While none of this necessarily ‘qualifies’ me to write about Thailand, and certainly not to write about Thailand without getting things wrong—Appiah (2006, p. 8) points out that it’s not only the ignorant who are prejudiced—it explains why the country and its people feature so strongly in my fiction. Like Charlotte Wood (2009, p. 66), I might wonder if my concerns about ethics expose me as an amateur; but as a matter of principle, I cannot envisage writing about places and people with whom I have no rapport. In his memoir, *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie recalls advice that he was given as a student by his history professor: ‘You must never write history until you can hear the people speak.’

Rushdie writes that

it came to feel like a valuable guiding principle for fiction as well. If you didn’t have a sense of how people spoke, you didn’t know them well enough, and so you couldn’t—you *shouldn’t*—tell their story. (2012, p. 40; emphasis in original)

Rushdie’s guiding principle echoes the advice of Indigenous advocates in the Own Voice camp: that writing about Indigenous people, if it is done at all, should come from a place of respect, knowledge, understanding and friendship (Huggins, 1994), stemming from ‘social and cultural immersion’, both with Aboriginal people, and with Indigenous texts (Leane, 2016, p. 43). I believe that these are sound principles to apply to writing about any community outside of one’s own.

For *Mother of Pearl*, it was vital to include the perspective of Mukda, the Thai surrogate mother—to portray her as an individual whose life, body and emotions are impacted by the experience—in order to unsettle the narratives that dominate the surrogacy debate. Mukda embodies what is at stake in transnational surrogacy arrangements. To refer to her only through the eyes of the Anglo-Australian characters rather than allow the reader to get inside Mukda’s head would be to ‘other’ her, to keep her at a distance. This would effectively mirror what intended parents generally do by hiring a surrogate mother overseas in the first place (Riggs, 2015; Whittaker & Speier, 2010; Keyes, 2016): ‘geographic distance and racial difference’ enable them to ‘other’ the surrogate mother, separate her from the baby she carries (Harrison, 2014, p. 151) and disregard the intimacy of the labour she performs (Whittaker, 2014a).

Surrogacy brokers' websites³⁶ (New Life Thailand, 2011; Thailand Surrogacy, 2012b) reinforce this distancing, reducing Thai women to their body parts, reproductive functions and 'mere laboratory material' (Whittaker, 2014a, p. 109). Alternatively, Thai bodies are erased altogether, sidelined by images of white heterosexual and homosexual couples with white babies on websites (Bangkok IVF Thailand, 2011; Wee Care Partners USA, 2012), and rendered invisible in surrogacy narratives in the mainstream media (see for example Baker, 2012; Crouch, 2014). To write the Thai surrogate mother out of my fictional narrative would be, to paraphrase Shamsie (2012, para. 46), to treat her as 'enigmatic, inscrutable, unknowable', effectively reinforcing the stereotype of the inscrutable Asiatic—Broinowski's 'Far East Fallacy'—a stereotype that is profoundly implicated in enabling women in Asian countries to be exploited as surrogates in the first place (Rabinowitz, 2016, p. 80; and see Deomampo, 2013a, pp. 92-3).

A further objective in narrating *Mother of Pearl* from Mukda's perspective is to redress the stereotypes about Thai women discussed earlier in this chapter. Depictions of Thailand as 'a sort of global brothel' (Seabrook, 1996, p. 1), for example, may fuel assumptions about the availability of Thai women's bodies for the intimate labour of surrogacy. As Whittaker (2014a, p. 106) notes, the 'advent of a surrogacy trade in Thailand continues a history of industries founded upon the bodies of women', which include manufacturing, domestic service and tourism in addition to the sex industry. While Australian intended parents might not acknowledge links between Thailand's sex industry and its surrogacy trade,³⁷ it is easy to imagine how stereotypes of Thai women, forged in the context of the sex industry, might influence their decisions to engage in surrogacy in that

³⁶ Most websites promoting surrogacy in Thailand were shut down in the weeks following both the Baby Gammy and Mitsutoki Shigeta cases, the latter involving a Japanese businessman who fathered 16 children through surrogacy in Thailand (Intathep & Wangkiat, 2014); limited access to the websites is available through the internet archive, Wayback Machine.

³⁷ The exception is blogger Amani (Meg) (2013) who, commenting on citizenship requests for Australian children born in Thailand and India, writes, 'I suspect the higher rate for Thailand is due to the proximity of Thailand to Australia, and Thailand being a more popular tourist destination for Australians than India. I think there would be a higher number of Australian men travelling to Thailand and having a bit on the side, or marrying a local Thai woman, than would be going to India for the same'.

country. These include seemingly contradictory notions of Thai women as 'tender' and caring, yet 'hard as a rock' (Seabrook, 1996, p. 3, p. 29), 'submissive yet manipulative' (Jolly & Manderson, 1997, p. 17). Arguably, these contradictions combine to make the stereotypical Thai woman the ideal gestational surrogate in the minds of the intended parents: tenderly caring for the baby during pregnancy, but unsentimental when it comes to relinquishing the child—a duality captured in the images used by surrogacy agents on their websites (see for example, Thailand Fertility, 2013).

Ethnographer Daisy Deomampo suggests that in the Indian context, stereotypes 'helped doctors and parents conceal the power imbalance that made foreign surrogacy possible'; and further, that transnational commercial surrogacy 'thrived in India in part because it relied on the fact that surrogate mothers and intended parents rarely, if ever, met face-to-face' (Rabinowitz, 2016, p. 80; and see Deomampo, 2013a, pp. 92-3). By contrast, when asked what reforms she would make to surrogacy, Indian surrogate mother Sonali (not her real name) told academic and writer Abby Rabinowitz that she would institute monthly visits with intended parents. 'We will feel that they are our clients and they have care for their baby ... And that they see us' (Rabinowitz, 2016, p. 81).

Fiction provides the opportunity to personalise the story, to go beyond stereotypes and bring the Thai surrogate mother face-to-face with the reader. In doing so, I recall Attridge's (2015, p. 17) challenge to 'bring the 'other' into the reader's ... consciousness and affective life.' If I succeed, the reader may be moved to question stereotypes about Thai women, and also the values that underpin transnational commercial surrogacy arrangements and the responsibilities that flow from these arrangements. To wonder, as Offred the Handmaid does, about 'who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it' (Atwood, 1987, p. 145).

3.2 Research

Writers are urged to do their research 'properly' when writing the 'other' (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 43), to be diligent (Larbarlestier, 2016, para. 12) and meticulous (Yang, 2014, p. 12). But as Malinda Lo (2014, para. 22) notes, research is required to write '*any* fiction ... truthfully and well'. Indeed, in order

to create authentic characters and vivid settings in *Mother of Pearl*, in addition to Thailand and Thai culture, my areas of research included infertility, assisted reproductive technologies and surrogacy, as well as jewellery making, botany, and poetry. Having no personal experience of either IVF or surrogacy, I read memoirs (Arieff, 2012; Garner, 2016; Leigh, 2016) and blogs by affected women (see for example, InLimbo 2013; Journey Girl, 2009; TABI, 2007) in order to understand both the practicalities and the emotions involved, and to go beyond the stereotypes associated with infertility (Sandelowski and de Lacey, 2002). For the purposes of this following discussion, however, I focus on examples of my research related to Thailand, and specifically to surrogacy in Thailand.

My research for *Mother of Pearl* builds on previous research into Thailand and Thai culture, which has been part of my creative writing practice since I first started writing stories set in that country nearly twenty years ago; and prior to this, on research that I undertook in the 1990s in order to be, if not a model resident expatriate in Thailand, at least a polite one attuned to cultural sensitivities. In addition to building on my general knowledge of Thailand—its politics, history, culture—my research for *Mother of Pearl* looked specifically at the experience of surrogacy in the country, in terms of both traditional and contemporary practices.

As noted in the previous chapter, the Thai term for surrogate, แม่ผู้บุญ (mae oom boon) means ‘mother carrying the merit’, a term that locates surrogacy ‘within positive Buddhist ethical practices’ (Whittaker, 2014a, p. 112). In addition to being raised alongside financial motives in the academic literature (Hibino & Shimazono, 2013; Nilsson, 2015; Whittaker, 2014a), the motivation to make merit is also mentioned by Thai surrogate mothers in media interviews (Abboud, 2013; Chientong, 2010; Fuller, 2014). In Thai Buddhism, merit-making refers both to good deeds such as alms giving, and also to ideas of karmic restitution, ‘counterbalancing demerits’ of sin and bad deeds in order to improve one’s fate in this life or the next (Hibino & Shimazono, 2013, p. 64). Significantly, interviewees in two Thai studies explicitly mentioned being motivated to become surrogates in order to earn merit to compensate for an earlier abortion (Hibino & Shimazono, 2013, p. 65; Nilsson, 2015, pp. 37-8), considered by

Buddhists to be a sinful act.³⁸

Merit-making is, furthermore, highly gendered in Thailand. Both sexes are expected to make merit to honour a lifelong debt of gratitude to their parents, a feature of what is known as the *boon khoon* relationship (Nilsson, 2015, p. 39; Whittaker, 2014a, p. 112). But while sons can repay this debt by becoming monks, daughters do not have this option (Keyes, 1984). Earning money takes on added significance for Thai women, as daughters show gratitude to their parents by buying them goods, paying their debts, and generally providing for their wellbeing (Hibino & Shimazono, 2013, p. 169; Nilsson, 2015, p. 39; Whittaker, 2014a, p. 112). Notably, in Thai culture, love and money are seen not as antagonistic, but as mutually reinforcing (Hamilton, 1997, p. 146-7). The significance of *tham boon* and *boon khoon* notwithstanding, it is important to reiterate that financial motives take precedence in Thai women's accounts of their reasons for becoming surrogates, including 'pressing financial needs [that] arise from divorce, underpayment, and other reasons' (Hibino & Shimazono, 2013, p. 68; see also Cohen, 2015, p. 119; Nilsson, 2015, p. 35).

In *Mother of Pearl*, the Thai surrogate character, Mukda/Mod, has both financial and spiritual motives for becoming a surrogate. She is a divorcee, whose gambler ex-husband has left her destitute, after having forced her to terminate a pregnancy early in their marriage. Falling pregnant a second time gives Mukda the strength to leave him, but she suffers the stigma of being a divorcee in Thailand, carries the karmic burden of an abortion, and struggles to provide financially for her young son and extended family, including her widowed mother. A conversation with her neighbour, known by the honorific 'Aunty' Chompu, depicts the interplay of motives as Mukda/Mod contemplates becoming a surrogate; in addition, in an example of how surrogacy traditionally operated within Thailand (Whittaker, 2015, p. 6), Aunty Chompu, whose husband left her because she couldn't have children, is raising one of her sister's sons as her own:

Mod blinked, flashes of yellow and black like a wasp in her peripheral vision. 'But wouldn't it be shameful to be pregnant and not married?'

³⁸ See n. 12.

‘Being a surrogate mother isn’t shameful, *naawng*. You’re helping people who can’t have a baby. What my sister did for me...’ Aunty Chompu pressed her palms together and touched them to her forehead.

‘An act of great merit,’ Mod agreed. ‘But to have a baby for money?’

‘Why not? If you carry someone else’s baby for nine months, why shouldn’t you be paid for your trouble ... Pushing a food cart around isn’t going to get you ahead in life.’

‘I’m not sure, Aunty,’ Mod said, though she heard wisdom in the older woman’s words...

But could she really carry someone else’s baby? It was such an odd idea. Yet the moment it entered her mind, the fortune teller’s words had come back to her.

‘Your good luck will be earned, not won. You will see the opportunity when it comes.’

Was being a surrogate mother that opportunity, her chance to earn both money and merit? (pp. 181-2).

By introducing these nuances from my research into the narrative of the novel, I aim to show how local moral values, not only related to merit making, but to expectations of Thai women as nurturing mothers and dutiful daughters (Nilsson, 2015, pp. 34-42), impact on Mukda’s decision to become a surrogate, while also bringing to light the financial hardship underpinning her decision. Mukda’s difficult financial situation is explained in the context of a political dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear (‘Phra Wihan’ in Thai) temple, which has seen the border between the two countries closed to tourists since 2008. These details, grounded in research, help to make the Thai cultural, social and political context an integral part of the story, rather than the kind of exotic, undifferentiated backdrop to the action criticised in Western writing by Broinowski (1996, p. 50) and Dann (2008, pp. 191-3), and cleverly satirised by Lapcharoensap (2004, pp. 1-23) in his short story, ‘Farangs’.

Reading fiction by Thai authors such as Lapcharoensap and Sudham (1988; 1994), together with blogs by Thai bloggers Panrit ‘Gor’ Daoruang³⁹ and

³⁹ *Life of a Thai Teenager* was one of several blogs authored by Panrit (formerly Nattawud) ‘Gor’ Daoruang, which are now suspended; limited access is available through the internet archive Wayback Machine; for example, see

Kaewmala⁴⁰, provided insights into different Thai views of Thai life, society, politics and relationships. Indeed, reading insiders' texts, as well as watching their films, listening to podcasts, and following them on social media are recommended, notably by Own Voices advocates, as part of meaningful research (Huggins, 1994; Leane, 2016; Kwaymullina, 2016b; Larbalestier, 2016)—the 'conversation-through-literature' referred to above. However, notwithstanding the growth in Asian Australian writing mentioned earlier, I can identify only two Thai-Australian authors whose work is currently being published in Australia: children's author Oliver Phommavanh and poet Adam Aitken. Meanwhile, the availability of Thai fiction in English or in translation does not appear to have improved since Broinowski (1996, p. 182) noted a '[r]eluctance to market Australian books ... directly in Asia and Asian ones in Australia, and to promote translation' in the 1990s (see also Broinowski, 2011). With the exception of Lapcharoensap, whose work is published in the USA (where he lives) and the UK, to read Thai authors generally requires purchasing books from Thai publishers, rendering the 'conversation-through-literature' with Thailand in Australia a long-distance one.

Leane's conversation-through-literature echoes Appiah's (2006, p. 85) notion of the respectful '[c]onversations across boundaries of identity' at the heart of cosmopolitanism. Appiah (2006, p. 85) uses 'conversation' not only to denote actual dialogue, 'but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others', likening it to 'the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel'. He maintains that conversations do not require universals, as it is enough that people in the conversation find something in common and 'get used to one another' (Appiah, 2006, p. 85). Appiah (2006, p. 97) suggests that 'cosmopolitan curiosity' means '[w]e can learn from one another; or we can simply be intrigued by alternative ways of thinking, feeling and acting.' Bhabha (2009, p. xiii) similarly identified curiosity as a pathway to empathy, as it 'shifts the balance of discourse from the language of enmity to the language of

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130326190138/http://thailandlife.com/my-baby-daughter/index.php>

⁴⁰ Kaewmala (a pseudonym) blogs at *Thai Woman Talks – Language, Society, Politics & Love*, viewed 5 June 2017, <https://thaiwomantalks.com/>

proximity.’ While Appiah notes an explicit relationship between cross-boundary conversation and the imaginative engagement fostered by *reading* novels, it is not a stretch to extend the metaphor to *writing* novels. Appiah’s description of ‘the problem of cross-cultural communication’ could apply equally to the author’s challenge in creating convincing characters outside of our own cultures:

The problem of cross-cultural communication can seem immensely difficult in theory, when we are trying to imagine making sense of a stranger in the abstract. But the great lesson of anthropology is that when the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree; but, if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end. (Appiah, 2006, pp. 98-9)

To write ‘a stranger in the abstract’ only results in tokenism or stereotyping. The writer’s task is to make the character ‘real and present’, not necessarily likeable (Wanner, 2016, p. 79), but someone to whom a reader can relate as a human being. This leads to a second objective of ethical research: the pursuit of details.

A columnist writing in *The New Yorker* in 1989 refers to details as ‘the stuff of fiction’, adding

details ... are connective. They hook your interest in a way that ideas never can. If you let in the details of some aspect of life, you almost have to allow that aspect to be what it really is rather than what you want or need it to be. (‘Talk of the Town’, 1989, p. 23)

Details are fundamental to personalising a story, to creating complex and nuanced characters that resist stereotyping and cliché and come alive on the page. To this end, I have borrowed small details from the lives of Thai women I encountered in my research for my novel. A surrogate mother whom Mukda meets in Bangkok refers to a doctor putting ‘two glass tube babies’ inside her (p. 217), the same expression used by baby Gammy’s surrogate mother, Goy, to refer to the embryos implanted in her through IVF (Murdoch, 2014c). In *Mother of Pearl*, a counsellor tells Mukda, ‘Think of yourself as an oven’ (p. 197), a reference to a comment made by a Thai surrogate that, ‘I am just an oven... The child inside is not mine nor related to me in any way’ (Chiengtong, 2010). However, in my account, the image does not sit well with Mukda; she prefers ‘to think of her womb as a hammock where a baby could wait, comfortable and safe,

until he was ready to rise' (p. 197), making the metaphor more true to a rural Thai woman's experience.

In addition to text-based research, I visited Thailand in December 2015, expressly for the purposes of gathering details for my novel. Field research has proven particularly beneficial in my experience when it comes to the evocation of place, providing insights into sights, sounds, smells, tastes and texture that can give a setting what Australian novelist and literary critic James Bradley calls, 'the imaginative thickness it needs' (Wood, 2016, p. 54). Examples of details gleaned for the novel include: the flayed frogs, legs still kicking, in metal dishes at the morning market in Sisaket (p. 171); the blast of cold air at the entrances to Bangkok's plazas (p. 195); and the smell of brine and barbeque at Baeng Saen Beach (p. 382). I also noted features in the landscape that enabled me to deploy the technique of showing, rather than telling: showing the significance of Buddhism, for example, by referring to a sign on Bangkok's Skytrain asking passengers to *Please offer this seat to monks* (p. 223); and demonstrating the enduring and literal nature of animist beliefs by describing UHT boxes of flavoured milk crowding a shrine at a maternity hospital (p. 361).

Physically moving through the settings that I imagined my characters to inhabit also helped bring them to life. This may be, as Eudora Welty (1998, p. 787) observed, because 'place has a good deal to do with making the characters real, that is, themselves and keeping them so'. Certainly, I felt closer to my Thai character, Mukda, in Thailand, particularly when I visited 'her' hometown of Sisaket in rural Isaan, a location I'd chosen on the strength of Janet Brown's (2008, pp. 104-5) account in her memoir, *Tone Deaf in Bangkok*. I mixed observation with speculation in my field notes, following the example of David Almond (2001, p. 175), who in 'Exploring Home', 'mingled factual details of the place with invented, imaginary details'. Rather than simply jot down observations about the wooden house in Sisaket where I'd decided Mukda and her family would live, I imagined her slipping out the door and using her rubber sandals to cushion her knees as she waited on the concrete porch for the monks to come past with their alms bowls (p. 155). I imagined, too, how Mukda might feel after travelling all day by train from Sisaket to arrive in Bangkok and walk down the *soi* ('side street') where I'd chosen to locate the surrogates'

accommodation. I speculated that while she might find the high fences and ornate gates intimidating, she would perhaps be comforted by the familiar accents of the security guards, the birdsong, the old bench swing and shoe rack in the courtyard of the surrogates' house (p. 215). These prosaic details were important, too, in depicting Bangkok as a city that is home to more than nine million Thai people (United Nations Thailand, 2017), rather than as the exoticised and eroticised adventure zone of the tourism industry (Dann, 2008, pp. 26-9). At the same time, I sought to convey the charm and ambiance of Mukda's home town as a rejoinder to a 2005 Lonely Planet guidebook's dismissal of Sisaket as 'perennially humdrum' (Cummings et al, 2005, p. 516).

A significant area of ongoing research for me is Thai language. While by no means a fluent Thai speaker, I am conversant in Lao, which is almost identical to the language spoken in Thailand's northeast region of Isaan (where Mukda comes from), and I have a working knowledge of Central Thai, the official national language. Understanding the grammar and syntax of Thai language, as well as Thai idioms, similes and metaphors, enables me to further animate my Thai characters while also attenuating, though never removing, the risk of imposing Western thought and speech on Asian characters. To this end, I draw heavily on two studies of Thai language as it relates to emotions and relationships (Kaewmala, 2009; Moore, 2006), as well as online resources (thai-language.com, n.d.) for vocabulary and idiom.

I employ code switching when writing dialogue and interior monologue, interspersing transliterated Thai words or phrases with English, as a means of both grounding the Thai characters, and reminding the reader that the conversation or thought is taking place in Thai. I may translate the words, or allow the meaning to be implied by the context. The following extract from *Mother of Pearl*, of a conversation among a group of surrogate mothers in Bangkok, provides an example of both; the extract opens in the middle of a discussion about the 'vanishing' of a twin during pregnancy (which can happen naturally or through medical intervention):

'I think maybe a *phi krasue* took it,' Dao said.

Mod shivered at the mention of the ghost, a beautiful, floating female head that trailed entrails in her wake and preyed on pregnant women. The idea

of the *phi krasue*'s long, thin tongue probing her body like the doctor's instruments made her feel dizzy. She stopped walking and put her hands on her knees.

'Sa baai dee baaw, naawng?'

Nok looked at her with concern.

'I'm fine,' Mod said. *'My stomach's rolling a little, that's all.'* (pp. 284-5)

The last line of this extract reflects an additional technique I use to reflect the nuances of the Thai language, which is a literal translation into English, i.e. the Thai word for 'queasy', *muaan thaawng* (มวนท้อง), is 'rolling belly/stomach'. On occasion, I also translate Thai idioms literally, allowing the non-Thai speaker to devise the English equivalent: for example, when Mukda receives a positive pregnancy test result, one of her housemates tells her, 'don't draw your bow before you see the squirrel' (p. 250). While I recognise that using Thai language phrases and translations may create distance between my Thai characters and some non-Thai readers, other readers may appreciate the 'imaginative transactions' that they are encouraged to make with the text as a result of these techniques and derive pleasure from this interplay (Takolander, 2014, p. 43; see also Kidd and Castano, 2013, p. 377).

This overview of my research for *Mother of Pearl* demonstrates how Appiah's notion of the respectful conversation across boundaries of identity can be applied in an ethical creative writing practice in a metaphorical sense, both in terms of the 'conversation' I have as writer with my research, and in the dialogic relationship I seek to encourage between the text and the reader (Barthes, 1992, pp. 4-5). But there is also scope for literal conversations between the author/text and 'people who are part of the culture you are writing about' (Yang, 2014, p. 12). While I consider such conversations to be an intrinsic part of research, the consultation process is increasingly becoming formalised as 'sensitivity reading' and treated as an additional step in an ethical writing process (Ro, 2017, paras. 4-5). In the following section, I outline my own consultation process and discuss how it compares to 'sensitivity reading'.

3.3 Consultation and sensitivity reading

As writing fiction is unavoidably appropriative (Young & Haley, 2009, p. 288), there is a degree to which every encounter, every consultation that takes place in the course of writing a novel is potential fodder for a story. As Margaret Drabble (2004, p. x) admitted, 'Whatever we write is, knowingly or unknowingly, a borrowing. Nothing comes from nowhere'. Elsewhere (Savage, 2016a) I have explored important issues that arise when a writer 'steals' from the lives of those around us for our fiction, agreeing with Mills (2000) that the ethical course of action is to consult for permission. In this section, I consider consultation not as part of data gathering, but as an element of revision, seeking opinion and feedback from readers specifically across boundaries of identity.

Advocates of authorial responsibility encourage writers to consult members of the community or culture they are writing about as part of an ethical writing process (Stone, 2017, p. 6; Teoh, 2016, p. 7; Yang, 2014, p. 12). 'Make sure someone from the "other" community reads your work before it gets read by someone with publishing power', counsels British author Nikesh Shukla (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 43). Such consultation may be seen as a form of what Appiah (2006, p. 144), writing about cosmopolitanism, cites as '*fallibilism*—the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence'. Indeed, authors like Maggie Gee explicitly link consultation—'a willingness to show our character to their models and hear the critical comments they make'—to 'humility about what we know' (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 40; see also Malik, 2016, para. 2; Ro, 2017, para. 21). The ethical writer recognises their risk of getting things wrong and seeks advice to minimise harmful mistakes.

While in the past I have consulted Thai friends informally for feedback on aspects of my novels, for *Mother of Pearl*, I adopted a more formal approach. In the course of working on the manuscript, I met Anchana Muangnil, a Thai-born Australian resident, with an avid interest in the portrayal of Thai women in fiction written by Western writers. Anchana, who was born in Isaan and worked as a translator for foreign journalists in Thailand, had read and admired my second novel *The Half-Child*; and when she offered to read my new manuscript, I took up the offer with enthusiasm. After she read the work, we met face-to-face to discuss her feedback. Apart from correcting some of my Thai expressions and

transliterations, her main criticism was that I was ‘too soft’ on my Thai characters. In one example, there was a scene early in the novel where Mukda gives a piece of grilled chicken to a *dek wat*, a boy from a poor family who accompanies monks as they collect alms. I had written that the boy resisted eating the chicken and added it to the stash of alms for the monks, which was what he *should* do; Anchana suggested I re-write the scene to have him devour the chicken on the spot, which is what he *would* do (p. 155). She encouraged me to make more of Isaan women’s bawdy sense of humour, too, and to allow certain characters to be ‘callous’ and disrespectful when speaking Thai in the presence of *farangs* whom they assume cannot understand them. She also suggested that I make more of the impact of materialism on the Thai surrogate mothers’ decision-making, a point echoed by a Thai NGO worker during my field visit to Bangkok. In short, Anchana encouraged me to be less ‘reverential’, to use Broinowski’s term, in my treatment of the Thai characters in my novel.

Anchana was one of four readers who provided feedback on the second draft of my manuscript, the others being established authors. Shortly after this feedback process, I became aware of ‘sensitivity reading’, a type of consultation that is more formal again, and increasingly recommended for, if not expected of authors writing across boundaries of identity. Informal consultation has undoubtedly been part of many writers’ creative practice, and specialist readers have been used to vet books for younger readers on a casual basis for some time, particularly in the USA (Mason, 2017, para. 3). However, the hiring of ‘sensitivity readers’ by writers and publishers is a recent phenomenon (Ha, 2017, para. 30; Ro, 2017, paras. 4-5), so much so that there is scant scholarly writing on the topic, although I strongly expect this will change.

Definitions vary in terms of what sensitivity readers do, or should do. The US-based Writing in the Margins website, which hosts a sensitivity reader database, defines a sensitivity reader as someone who ‘reviews a manuscript for internalized bias and negatively charged language’ (Writing in the Margins, n.d. para. 2); and founder, author Justina Ireland, describes the database as the ‘last line of defense before it gets to readers’ (Mason, 2017, para. 12). Sensitivity readers have been also described as ‘members of a minority group tasked specifically with examining manuscripts for hurtful, inaccurate, or inappropriate

depictions of that group' (Waldman, 2017, para. 2). Freelance sensitivity reader Jennifer Baker describes her role as 'cleaning it [writing] up for racist, homophobic, transphobic, able-ist, Islamophobic material' (Ha, 2017, para. 31). However, author and sensitivity reader Nic Stone suggests sensitivity reading is about authenticity, not political correctness: 'the goals of sensitivity reading actually align with those of good art—to create a layered and truthful portrait, whether or not it ruffles some sensibilities' (Waldman, 2017, para. 10). Unsurprisingly, in the public commentary on the topic, consulting a sensitivity reader in the interests of accuracy and authenticity as part of a writer's research and editing process is less controversial than the idea of a sensitivity reader as gate-keeper, charged with censoring fiction for potentially offensive material (Mason, 2017, paras. 6-7; Neary, 2017, paras. 7-9, 16-17; Shriver, 2017; Waldman, 2017, paras. 7-9).

Ireland reportedly established her fee-for-service sensitivity reader database to meet demand among writers for people of various backgrounds to read and provide feedback on their manuscripts (Mason, 2017, para. 8), though some writers question the ethics, or the wisdom, of writing about a culture where the author does not know anyone well enough to identify sensitivity readers for themselves (Larbalestier, 2016). At the time of writing, an Australian sensitivity reader directory is in development (Vann, 2017), and in the current environment, demand for sensitivity readers is only likely to increase (Waldman, 2017, para. 4).

My experience of what I would, in retrospect, call 'sensitivity reading' was positive, and I believe that the feedback from the sensitivity reader improved my manuscript, an experience I have in common with other authors (Mason, 2017, para. 15; Ro, 2017, paras. 6-8; Waldman, 2017, paras. 6, 15). However, I recognise that sensitivity reading is not a 'fix' or 'stamp of approval', which provides a special defence against criticism of the finished work (Ha, 2017, para. 13). Author and editor Sangu Mandanna helpfully describes sensitivity readers as 'a resource, not a shield' (Ro, 2017, para. 15); and the Writing in the Margins website (n.d. para. 2) emphasises that sensitivity readers will help avoid mistakes but are no guarantee against them. As responsibility for the work and

its reception ultimately remains with the author, a further step in an ethical writing process, then, is to remain open to criticism.

3.4 Openness to criticism

Openness to criticism as the corollary of creative freedom is highlighted by proponents of authorial responsibility (see, for example, Aminatta Forna, Naomi Alderman, Maggie Gee in Kunzru et al, 2016). As Australian author Omar Musa puts it, ‘There will be people who will tell you that maybe you didn’t quite get this right, and you just have to cop that flack’ (Convery, 2016, para. 17). Like British author Naomi Alderman (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 30), I am grateful when readers offer feedback on my writing, however critical. However, as Loffreda and Rankine (2015, p. 19) note in their introduction to *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, ‘white writers can get explosively angry when asked to recognize that their racial imaginings might not be perfect ... and in particular when confronted with that fact by a person of color questioning something they wrote’. In addition to the points noted above, a criticism levelled at Shriver was the idea that she has the ‘right’ to write whatever she likes without being accountable to the people she writes about—to retain her right to offend, while objecting when those she offends want the right of reply (Abdel-Magied, 2016, para. 18; Convery, 2016, para. 25; Malik, 2016, para 4). US author Junot Díaz (2016) noted the ‘contradiction’ that ‘Shriver’s right to appropriate should not be questioned, but our right to question that appropriation should be condemned’. As Loffreda and Rankine (2015, p. 15) observe,

This language of rights is as extraordinary as it is popular, and it is striking to see how many white writers in particular conceive of race and the creative imagination as the question of whether they feel they are permitted to write a character, or a voice, or a persona, “of color.” This is a decoy whose lusciousness is evident in the frequency with which it is chased. The decoy itself points to the whiteness of whiteness—that to write race would be to write “color,” to write an other.

Shriver mobilised this ‘luscious decoy’ by citing, as valuable examples of boundary-crossing fiction, work by exclusively white writers, such as Graham

Greene and Donald Trumbo (Shriver, 2016, paras. 11-13). Had she highlighted Pakistani-British novelist Kamila Shamsie's depiction of a Japanese character in *Burnt Shadows*, or Malaysian author Tash Aw's channelling of an octogenarian British expatriate in *The Harmony Silk Factory*, or Sri Lankan-Australian writer Channa Wickremesekera's 'chameleon-like absorption of the consciousness of the quirky Afghan boy' in his novella *Asylum* (Lokugé, 2016, p. 565), the discussion and subsequent debate may have played out very differently. Instead, Shriver's tactics only encouraged marginalised groups to close ranks (Tolentino, 2016, para. 7; Wanner, 2016, p. 78), allowing her to reinforce her own position (Hopper, 2016).

Kunzru (2016, para. 2) suggests artists should 'go forth boldly' but 'tread with humility', humility being a word that surfaces regularly in discussions of authorial responsibility. There is what Kunzru refers to as 'humility in the face of otherness', the admission of what the writer does not know (Kunzru et al, 2016, paras. 2-3), which is part of the writing process. There is also the humility of fallibility, of accepting as inevitable some level of failure (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 30), as part of the work's reception. It strikes me that there is a further space for humility, too, in recognising that, as Alderman puts it, 'No one has a right to be read' (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 32). Many readers, whether from marginalised groups or not, choose to read only Own Voices work, that is, 'books about minority groups written by members of that group' (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 31), and thus the conversation that I aspire to have between my work and readers, particularly Asian Australian readers, simply may not happen. Herein, I recognise limits to Appiah's notion of the respectful conversation across boundaries of difference: for dialogue to take place, both parties must *want* to be part of the conversation. I might try to open a conversation with my work, but I cannot force it to happen.

Moreover, to be humble requires acceptance that in the current climate, the very act of writing as a privileged white writer from the point of view of a Thai character may be enough to offend, regardless of the quality of the writing; and further, that such offense may not necessarily result in debate or dialogue. Discussing the *Open Casket* incident, Jonathan Blanks suggests that those who protest about cultural appropriation may do so not to persuade the unconvinced,

so much as to acknowledge a ‘cultural trespass’ (Friedersdorf, 2017, para. 59); and further, that a complainant may have no interest in engaging in debate, particularly if they are an activist. Activists, Blanks writes, ‘understand that politics is not about unanimity and disruption without consensus can still bring about social change’ (Friedersdorf, 2017, para. 63). In this, Blanks echoes points made by Rushdie in his 1990 lecture-essay, ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’: namely, that what matters in a free society is the ability to argue, ‘not the resolution of that argument’ (Rushdie, 2012, p. 210; see also Rushdie, 1991, pp. 415-29).

Thus, the responsible writer must remain open to criticism of her work, but also to criticism of the creative choices that precede the work. In addition, she must remain open to criticism without resolution and, most humbling of all, to the prospect of not being read.

4. Ethics and art

Unlike social scientists who require ethics committee approval to broach human subjects, writers are not accountable to external oversight of our creative practice. Publishing contracts require us to warrant that our work is original, and that it does not contain defamatory, libellous or potentially injurious material (Hansen, 2007, paras. 1-2). But when it comes to other potential harms posed by our work, ‘fiction’s capacity to cause pain’ (Wood, 2009, p. 72), it is left to individual writers to set our own ethical standards.

In this chapter, I have outlined the ethical framework that I have applied in writing my creative work, *Mother of Pearl*, focusing on issues of narrative intent, research, consultation and feedback. I am aware that the work may be criticised, whether or not it is read. I do not concur with those who imply that an ethical process can only produce ‘anodyne drivel’ (Shriver, 2016, para. 3). By contrast, I believe my work is enhanced by the application of an ethical framework, giving me the confidence to take more risks and making my prose less timid.

‘Moral flaws *are* artistic flaws’, says Claudia Mills (2000, p. 201, emphasis in original). For Mills, fiction that causes pain because it is ‘unfair’, ‘unkind’, ‘exaggerated’—in short, untruthful—undermines a work’s artistic merit (Mills, 2000, p. 201). Young and Haley (2009, p. 275-8) make a similar point when they

distinguish between 'non-distorting' instances of cultural appropriation, and harmful practices such as misrepresentation and stereotyping. '[T]he novel doesn't much like stereotypes,' Shamsie (2012, para. 44) notes. 'They come across as bad writing.' Further to the relationship between an ethical creative writing practice and artistic merit, Shamsie suggests that work that stems from a sense of 'arrogance or entitlement' is unlikely to succeed (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 4), because writers who

start with an attitude that fails to understand that there are very powerful reasons for people to dispute your right to tell a story ... [have] already failed to understand the place and people who you purport to want to write about (Kunzru et al, 2016, para. 5)

In cross-cultural fiction, humility, respectfulness and an understanding of reciprocity are especially important qualities for the writer to possess, when her object is to 'open the universe a little more' (Saul Bellow, cited by Rushdie, 1991, p. 21). These qualities do not quarantine a creative work from criticism, but they surely make for better starting-points, providing a pathway for writers and readers to empathically imagine themselves into other subjectivities.

Conclusion

The environment in which transnational commercial surrogacy takes place is constantly shifting. During the three and a half years in which I have undertaken my research, surrogacy industries in India and Thailand, and a smaller-scale operation in Mexico's Tabasco state have been closed to foreigners and same-sex couples (Jackson et al, 2017, p. 24). Surrogacy markets have opened and closed in Nepal and Cambodia (Gerber, 2016), although they are rumoured to be re-opening in Cambodia under new legislation (Ros, 2017). Indian IVF professionals have established clinics in the Ukraine and Kenya (International Medical Travel Journal, 2016), with Indian women seeking work as surrogates allegedly following in their wake ('Help wanted; Surrogacy', 2017, p. 61). Thai agents and clinicians are now operating in Laos (Lefevre, 2017; Wilson, 2017), among them medical practitioners involved in Thailand's surrogacy scandals (Page, 2017).

Most troubling is the changing shape of surrogacy businesses: in response to national bans, 'a new, unregulated cross-border industry' has emerged, which 'exists outside any national jurisdiction and puts women, children and parents at greater risk than before' (Wilson, 2017). There are reports of 'multinational multimillion dollar commercial players operating across nine or 10 jurisdictions flying women, eggs, surrogates, doctors and patients in an out of which jurisdiction is most porous for their commercial enterprise' (Millbank, 2016, cited by Christensen et al, 2016, p. 27):

It is now not uncommon for a couple in one country to pay a surrogate in a second, via an agency in a third, for a child that will be born in a fourth, all in an effort to comply with the letter of the law in the various jurisdictions. (Wilson, 2017)

As a case in point, although Thailand has banned foreigners from hiring Thai women as surrogates, Thai law is not considered to be violated if a Thai agency based in Laos employs women from that country—or the Philippines or Georgia—and brings them to Bangkok for the delivery (Lefevre, 2017; Wilson, 2017).

It would seem that the Thai surrogacy law was designed, as one military appointed member of parliament put it, 'to stop "Thai women's wombs from

becoming the world's wombs" (Murdoch, 2015b), but not to stop Thai businesses from profiting from surrogacy. As supply keeps rising to meet demand in a globalised market, those who profit appear least vulnerable to prohibition. There is, as US sociologist Arlie Hochschild suggests, a 'sad inevitability' to the global surrogacy business (Zadjow, 2014, p. 46).

In light of recent developments, the recommendations of the parliamentary *Inquiry into surrogacy*, discussed in Chapter 1, appear lacklustre at best. In its April 2016 report, *Surrogacy Matters*, the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs ('the Committee') asserted 'first and foremost' that 'the practice of commercial surrogacy remain illegal in Australia' (Christensen et al, 2016, p. v). However, there is a 'mixed message' in its recommendations in relation to Australians who engage in commercial surrogacy overseas (Jackson et al, 2017, p. 37). Assuming that there is 'no reasonable prospect of a worldwide ban on commercial surrogacy in the near future', the Committee claimed to adopt a harm minimisation approach (Christensen et al, 2016, p. 31), and recommended establishing an interdepartmental taskforce 'to report in 12 months':

While not condoning Australians' use of offshore surrogacy, the aim of the taskforce should be to ensure that where the regulatory, economic or social conditions in a particular jurisdiction give rise to an increased risk of exploitation or rights violations, Australians entering into or facilitating surrogacy arrangements in that jurisdiction are made aware of those risks, and are subject to a more stringent investigative process to ensure that the rights of the birth mother and the child have not been infringed (Christensen et al, 2016, p. 33).

Such a recommendation seems insufficient in light of the Committee's findings: that extra-territorial legislation has not deterred intended parents from engaging in commercial surrogacy overseas; that there is an apparent reluctance on the part of the judiciary to enforce the laws; and that there is 'no desire' on the part of the pertinent government agencies 'to manage ... Australian families who enter into offshore commercial surrogacy arrangements, even when they do so in high-risk jurisdictions' (Christensen et al, 2016, pp. 31-2).

Moreover, the recommendation assumes intended parents lack information on risks, and that awareness-raising through formal channels will

'fix' the problem of exploitation. However, these assumptions are not borne out in practice. As noted in Chapter 1, not only do intended parents experience the law as equivocal (Jackson et al, 2017, pp. 26, 33-7), they may actually be attracted to commercial surrogacy in low-resource, high-risk settings, for a range of reasons, some of which seem counterintuitive.

As it is, at the time of writing, neither the establishment of a taskforce, nor the Committee's recommendation for a national law reform process in Australia, have been implemented. Surrogacy advocates have accused the government of taking a 'blind-eye' approach (Jackson et al, 2017, pp. 45-6), criticising surrogacy arrangements in other countries, while failing to address domestic arrangements that fuel reproductive travel from Australia (Barker, 2016, paras. 49-50). Certainly, the Australian government shows no commitment to a reproductive justice approach. Rather than direct resources to address the social and economic injustices that facilitate globalised commercial surrogacy, since 2014-15, it has made significant cuts to the overseas aid budget (*Country Report Australia December 2016*, 2016, p. 4), halving aid funding specific to family planning and reproductive health programs in the three years since July 2013 (Barlow, 2017). While Chief Judge John Pascoe has been appointed to represent Australia on the Experts' Group on Parentage and Surrogacy at the Permanent Bureau of the Hague Conference on Private International Law, and the inquiry Committee has suggested that the work of the Hague provides 'one of the best long-term prospects for meaningful regulation of international surrogacy', the Committee has also noted that international law reform is 'not rapid' (Christensen et al, 2016, p. 34).

Despite the stated commitment to harm minimisation, and the affirmation of a robust domestic regulatory system (Christensen et al, 2016, pp. 7-17), in the short to medium term at least, the Australian government seems to have opted to maintain the status quo by placing the onus on individuals to make ethical choices with respect to overseas surrogacy arrangements. At its simplest, short of avoiding commercial surrogacy altogether, the ethical choice for individuals would be to avoid jurisdictions in which surrogate mothers are at high risk of exploitation, and/or arrangements are characterised by significant power inequalities. However, while in no way endorsing unethical choices, I submit that

for those in the grip of ‘desperation to have a child’ (Harrison, 2014, p. 146), especially those trying to access procedures ‘illegal or unavailable to them at home’ (Jackson et al, 2017, p. 24), expecting them to ‘just say no’ is naïve at best.

In this exegesis, I have supported the assertion of feminist scholars that public rhetoric matters ‘profoundly to the crafting of public policies, attitudes, and belief that continue to shape the cultural terrain in which commercial surrogacy is authorized and practiced’ (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2013, p. 146; see also Bailey, 2011; Harrison, 2014). Building on research focused on Western engagement with the surrogacy industry in India, I have argued that the ‘othering’ and stereotyping of Asian women, specifically Thai women, contributes to an enabling environment for the provision of transnational commercial surrogacy that relies specifically ‘upon people of color and low socioeconomic status to meet the reproductive demands of the dominant classes’ (Harrison, 2014, p. 146). While noting Australian author Peter Carey’s comment that ‘if you want to change the world, you don’t become a novelist’ (Allington, 2015, p. 146), and cognizant that Suzanne Keen (2007, pp. 140-1) could identify only three novels that have had significant real-world impacts in terms of improving social justice,⁴¹ I concur with Stephanie Convery (2012, p. 78), that the ‘status quo is never challenged without an act of imagination taking place.’

Mother of Pearl aspires to stimulate such acts of imagination. As the first work of fiction to focus on transnational commercial surrogacy between Australia and Thailand, and to explore nuances of surrogacy specific to the Thai context, the novel specifically seeks to bring readers face-to-face with the Thai surrogate mother, Mukda. But this entails creative choices that raise ethical issues of their own. Taking account of recent debates about cultural appropriation, in this exegesis, I have outlined a framework for an ethical creative practice, based on the writing of *Mother of Pearl*. Beginning with clarification of narrative intent, I have demonstrated the application of meticulous research and community consultation in the development of my creative work. The final stage in this ethical creative practice is to humbly put

⁴¹ These novels are *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) by Charles Dickens, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) by Alice Walker (Keen, 2007, pp. 140-1).

forward the work to be read.

Thus, in the second part of this thesis, I present the creative component, the novel *Mother of Pearl*, as an alternative to the closed discourses outlined in Chapter 1. In place of a singular authoritative voice, the novel offers a polyphonic narrative that creatively addresses what is hidden or erased in public and academic discourse. By providing a 'protective fictionality', to use Keen's term, and characters, both familiar and strange, with whom readers may feel empathy, *Mother of Pearl* aspires to unsettle readers' assumptions about reproductive justice and shed light on multiple pathways through surrogacy's complex and divided terrain.

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Cases

Farnell & Chanbua [2016] FCWA 17

Mother of Pearl

Angela Savage

Book 1

Preconception

Buddhist Era 2541 / Common Era 1998

Blinking lights danced on the puddles like fireflies. Mod trod carefully to avoid the mud. Her mother was right. She should've worn her rubber slippers. But the candy pink sandals with plastic daisies on the straps were the first new shoes she'd had in three years and she couldn't resist showing them off.

All of Sisaket town seemed headed to the temple. Older women in their *phaa sinh* skirts carried silver bowls of offerings for the monks. Little children stomped in shoes that squeaked. Boys checked their reflections in the side mirrors of their motorbikes. Over the whir of their idling engines, Mod heard carousel music, excited shrieks, bells, gongs and whistles.

'Hurry up, *euuay* Mod.'

On the road ahead, Chai hopped from one foot to the other, their father standing patiently by his son's side. Mod quickened her step and felt herself slip. A hand grasped her elbow before she could fall, the grip strong enough to hurt.

'Steady there, cutey.'

She glanced up into the grinning face of a man she didn't recognise.

'Thank you—' she began, before she spied her mother walking towards them. Mod shook her elbow free and stuck out her chin. 'It's not polite to touch a lady you don't know,' she said, loud enough for *mae* to hear.

The man backed away, but his grin stayed in place. 'My apologies, *naawng*.' He pressed his hands together and bowed. 'The name's Rungrot, by the way. Now that we've met, maybe you'll dance with me later.'

Mod blushed with pleasure at the idea.

'Flirting already, *luuk*?' *Mae* shook her head, though she was smiling.

'Come on. That hot-hearted little brother of yours will explode if we don't get to the fair soon.'

Mod steadied herself on her mother's arm as she tiptoed across the portable runway matting laid over the mud at the temple entrance. The stone *naga* serpents that guarded the gate were obscured by bunches of inflatable toys carried on sticks by their vendors. Food carts and trinket sellers jostled for space alongside stalls where you could lasso prizes of tinned food and whiskey with bamboo hoops, or shoot targets for toys. To one side of the courtyard was the

heaven swing, its spokes lit up with tubes of pink and gold, its eight gondolas dangling like bird cages. A makeshift stage promised live music and *mor lam* singing.

‘I want to play fishing!’

Chai had spotted the inflatable pool, where children squatted at the edge and tried to scoop goldfish into jugs of water, armed only with rice-paper nets. Most walked away empty handed, nets disintegrating before they could catch anything. The skilful took their prizes home in plastic bags. Mod had loved playing, too, when she was Chai’s age. To seven-year-olds, it seemed like a great game. At sixteen, she recognised it as a lesson, a reminder of the impermanence of the material world.

‘I’ll look after him,’ Mod’s father said to her mother, nodding towards the pool. ‘Let’s meet in the food court.’

Mae led Mod and her sister Ying down a strip lined with food vendors, past pyramids of bamboo skewers loaded with sausages and fish-balls, bowls of bright green bean-paste worms swimming in coconut milk, trays of deep-fried grasshoppers and *maeng da* beetles—delicacies they’d missed during the drought years. Mod’s stomach cried out for a snack, but her mother kept walking until the stalls were behind them. As they approached the *wihan*, Mod could hear the chanting of the monks. But rather than lead them inside to make an offering, her mother stopped and gestured to a fortune teller’s tent leaning against the shrine hall wall.

‘Come, *luuk*.’ She pressed two ten *baht* coins into Mod’s hand. ‘This *maaw duu* has a good reputation. Listen carefully to what he says. Come and find us afterwards.’ She opened the tent flap and nudged Mod inside.

A grey-haired man was sitting cross-legged on a plastic mat, an open briefcase beside him brimming with charts, amulets and pictures of the royal family. Mod bowed in a respectful *wai*, slipped off her sandals, and settled on a corner of the mat, tucking her feet behind her. The man put on a pair of glasses and picked up a pencil.

‘What is your good name, *naawng*?’

‘Mukda,’ Mod said. ‘Mukda Boonpranee, Sir.’

‘And you were born?’

'Twenty-ninth day of the eight month, 2525.'

'Year of the Water Dog.' He wrote in his notebook. 'Born on a Sunday.

Lucky colour red, for the sun god *Phra Arthit*.'

Mod nodded. This much she knew already.

'Time of birth?'

'Eleven minutes to eight in the evening, Sir.'

'Place?'

'Here in Sisaket.'

The *maaw duu* put down his notebook to consult an almanac. Mod glimpsed a page covered in circles and lines, numbers in a grid. He fished a deck of cards from his briefcase, instructed her to draw three, and placed them in a line on the mat between them. He stared at them for a moment, before adding more lines and numbers to her chart. Mod shifted her weight from one hip to the other. She could smell rice whisky on the old man's breath. From the tent walls, the animals of the horoscope eyed her with disapproval.

'Not so lucky in love,' the *maaw duu* said.

'*Khaaw thoht kha?*'

'But you will have good luck with money.'

Mod tugged at the cuff of her blouse. 'Tell me more about my good luck with money, *maaw*. Will I marry a rich man? Will I win the lottery?'

The spirit doctor checked his notes and shook his head. 'Your good luck will be earned, not won. You will see the opportunity when it comes, *naawng*.'

'What opportunity? How will I know when I see it?'

'You will know just as Sita recognised Hanuman as an emissary when he showed her Rama's ring.'

It was from the Ramakien story. Rama gave Hanuman his ring so that his wife Sita, imprisoned by the demon Ravana, would know the Monkey God could be trusted. But how did the story relate to Mod's fate?

As the trill of the *khene* started up outside, thoughts of money and luck flew from her mind. All she could think about was the chance to dance with Rungrot.

Mod gave the *maaw duu* another *wai*, put her coins into the suitcase and rushed back out into the throng of the temple fair.

Later she would blame her haste to get away for the loss of the plastic daisy from one of her shoes.

1

Anna pulled a yellowing paperback from the shelf and glanced at the inscription inside. 'A. Greenaway, Fatima College, Year 12D'. Twenty-two years since she'd finished high school, long enough to know she'd never read *The Grapes of Wrath* again. She fanned the pages before adding it to the box destined for the op shop.

'You're so contrary,' Meg said when she dropped by that morning. 'You're supposed to throw things out *before* you go away.'

Anna shrugged. 'It's easier to let go of stuff when you've lived without it for so long.'

Meg heaved a hardback from one of the boxes. '*Inspirational Women*. Didn't you win this as a prize?'

'History.'

'Don't you want to keep it? For sentimental reasons?'

Anna shrugged. 'You have it if you want.'

Meg made a point of setting the book aside, but Anna found it after she'd left and put it back in the op shop box.

Pluck, fan, discard. Out went the children's classics she'd saved for children who never materialised, the crime novels that no longer held any mystery. Pluck, fan, discard, a rhythm interrupted only when the pages released the ephemera—scraps of paper, tram tickets, the odd postcard—she'd used as bookmarks. A bound photocopy of *The Quiet American*, bought on the street in Hanoi, yielded a thousand Vietnamese *dong*, a note no longer in circulation. On one side, the ubiquitous portrait of Ho Chi Minh. On the other, elephants hauled lumber from what was left of the Vietnamese jungle. Anna slipped it back between the pages and returned the book to the shelf.

Pluck, fan, discard. She jettisoned old editions of *The AIDS Manual* and Macquarie Dictionary, and extricated Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood and Ray Bradbury from among the bodice rippers left by previous tenants.

A dedication inside *Fahrenheit 451* gave her pause. 'One of my favourite books for one of my favourite people.' From Alex. They'd gone out briefly in her

second year at university. Alex told her he aspired to fit everything he owned in the boot of his car—a grand gesture in those pre-digital days. Anna had taken it personally, his way of saying he wasn't going to stick around. Perhaps Meg was right about her being contrary. At twenty, she'd wanted commitment. At forty, she wanted to be unencumbered. The less she had, the easier to leave it all behind.

Her iPod was playing Gillian Welch's *Time (The Revelator)*. Once she'd hooked it up to the speakers, all her CDs went into boxes, too. Old travel guides followed. One modest volume had covered Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia when she first started travelling. Each country had since earned its own guide, each new edition growing fatter as ever more territory succumbed to the reaches of tourism.

Pluck, fan, discard. A photo tumbled from an outdated *Lonely Planet Thailand*. Anna picked it up and read the inscription. *Meg and Nate, Bangkok, Dec. 1998*. Hard to believe it was ten years ago next month. She tossed the guidebook into the box and sat down with her back against the shelf. Gillian Welch sang of a fortune lady as Anna gazed at the image.

Bangkok had been Meg and Nate's final stopover on their round-the-world honeymoon tour. Anna had taken a few days' leave and flown from Vientiane to meet them. It was Meg's first time in Asia. Anna had been living in the region for five years, and had three days to show her sister why.

Her whirlwind tour included the popular sights—the temples, Grand Palace, markets—plus a canal ride, a drag show, an Elvis impersonators' cabaret and, at Nate's request, a *muay thai* kickboxing match. Anna took them to her favourite restaurants, drank with them in her favourite bars, and introduced them to the city's most reliable dealer in pirated videos.

On their last day, Anna had led them into the undercover car-park of the Bangkok Hilton.

'What are we doing here?' Meg's voice was tight, her skin slick with sweat, despite the mild December weather.

'You'll see in a minute.'

A side door opened on to a garden, wedged between the rear of the hotel and the Saen Sap Canal. Gem flower hedges lining the path gave way to what

looked like picket fences, but were actually shafts of wood and concrete shaped like penises. At the end of the path, a black stone lingam, wrapped in coloured scarves, towered over a spirit house.

‘What is this place?’

‘The Chao Mae Tuptim shrine,’ Anna said.

‘What’s with all the dicks?’ Nate said.

Meg pointed to a stone phallus. ‘That one’s wearing a garland of flowers.’

‘There’s even some with legs.’

‘Supposed to be extra lucky.’ Anna swept out her arm. ‘Welcome to Bangkok’s most famous fertility shrine.’

Meg brushed a stray hair behind her ear and smiled. ‘Is it that obvious?’

‘After living together for five years, I’m guessing you didn’t get married for the towel sets and toasters.’

‘You think it’s old-fashioned.’

Anna shook her head. ‘I think it’s sweet. And I love the idea of being an aunt. All fun and no responsibility.’

Meg pulled a face, but Anna could see she was touched.

‘Now, this is a very powerful shrine and you don’t want to offend the Lady Tuptim by not leaving her a gift. On the off-chance neither of you brought along a phallic offering, I took the liberty of buying one earlier.’ Anna reached into her handbag and produced an oversized penis, carved in dark wood, bought from a souvenir shop on Sukumvit Road. ‘This about your size, Nate?’

She’d taken the photo seconds later, Meg with her face screwed up, holding the phallus at arm’s length, Nate blushing and laughing. In the background, the black lingam seemed to beckon like a finger.

Anna took out her mobile phone and scrolled through her photos until she found one of Meg and Nate, taken at their nephew Jack’s second birthday the previous week. She compared it to the Bangkok photo. The faces on the phone were more lined. Nate’s ginger hair was speckled with grey, and both were heavier than they had been. Was it Anna’s imagination, or did the arc of their smiles appear clipped at the corners, as though the past ten years had worn away their joy at the edges?

Ten years on, and still the Lady Tuptim had not seen fit to bestow her favour on them.

Anna stood up, set the photo aside, and resumed her cull.

Meg threw a cotton cardigan over her t-shirt as she left the house, but soon took it off, the November morning hotter than anticipated. At this time of year, even the built up spaces of inner suburban Melbourne seemed to pulsate with life. Baby spiders abseiled through the air, silk threads flashing silver in the sunlight. Birds nested. Butterflies broke free of their cocoons. Bees swarmed to flowers and wasps to garbage bins.

It was no accident that Anna's flat was only a few blocks from where Meg and Nate lived in Thornbury. Anna joked when she bought it that she was inspired by rural Lao communities, where men married into their wives' families and sisters, when they moved out, built homes close to one another. At the time she made it sound like they'd enjoy the perfect mix of private and communal living, resources shared and children cared for by an extended family. But the flat had been let to tenants for most of the ten years since. Maybe if they'd had children, Meg might have convinced Anna to come home sooner. But that didn't bear thinking about.

The sugar gum that dominated the small park opposite Meg and Nate's place was home to a family of magpies, the fiercely protective parents and their incessantly hungry bird-child. This late in spring, all three were the same size, the baby distinguishable by its greyish feathers and ravenous squawking. Meg stopped to watch the parents take turns to scavenge for food and guard the infant.

She loved magpies for their loyalty, their swagger, their euphonic warbling unique to each family unit. But there was a time when Meg couldn't bear the sight of them, the parents with their new baby, year in, year out. Back when there was no space in her life for anything other than longing for her own child.

She felt for her pendant, an inverted triangle of beaten silver, set with an elongated freshwater pearl that bulged in the middle. Although Meg had trained years earlier as a jeweller, she probably wouldn't have forged a career as an artist, had her other great dream come to fruition. But after several years of failing to fall pregnant naturally, followed by seven fruitless years of IVF, she

desperately needed to do something else. Something within her control, that gave her a shot at satisfaction. *Something that doesn't involve my uterus*, she'd thought at the time, though it hadn't quite turned out that way.

In the catalogue for her current exhibition, the author described Meg's pairing of odd-shaped freshwater pearls with discs of beaten silver as an example of *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic that honours the beauty in imperfect, worn, transient and incomplete things. Meg knew a little about Japanese aesthetics, and the author wasn't far off the mark. Meg used freshwater pearls—human creations, considered the least valuable pearl variety—because they were knurly and imperfect like she imagined her eggs to be. Like the embryos made with those eggs, which started to divide then stopped. Impermanent, incomplete things. She set the pearls in misshapen disks of silver that symbolised her dysfunctional uterus, her ovaries, sometimes her heart or brain.

The jewellery was Meg's attempt to reinscribe her failings as things of beauty. The pendant she wore was the first piece she'd made, and served both as medal and amulet: to commemorate her grief, and to protect her from being engulfed by it. She held it as she passed the magpie family, still toying with it when she reached her sister's place ten minutes later.

Anna's doorbell failed to ring. Meg knocked loudly, poised to phone when her sister appeared, wearing a grubby apron. Her skin was pale and there was a glob of something in her hair.

'Oh thank god.' Anna kissed Meg on the cheek. 'I thought my lunch guests had come early.'

'You're having people over.' Meg tweaked what turned out to be cooked egg from Anna's auburn fringe. 'I should've called first.'

'That's OK. I could do with a hand, to be honest.'

'What do you need me to do?'

Anna led her through the dining area, where a neat table was set for three, a vase of striking pink peonies at its centre. The kitchen by contrast was chaos, surfaces strewn with food, sink crammed with dirty dishes.

'I was aiming for pumpkin frittata, but I burnt the edges. I tried cutting off the burnt bits, but...' Anna gestured at what looked disturbingly like a platter of vomit.

'You can't serve that,' Meg said.

'So it looks as bad as I thought. Shit. I need something vegetarian. Got any bright ideas?'

Anna put her hands on her head, making her upper arms wobble. She'd worn the same style of sleeveless blouse with a Chinese collar for years now, tailor-made for her in Bangkok. Meg thought it was time for a change, but her sister seemed too fragile to handle any hint of criticism.

Meg opened the sparsely stocked pantry. 'You have pasta shells. That's a start. What about pesto sauce? Cherry tomatoes? Capsicum?'

'I have pesto.' Anna's eyes lit up. 'A jar of roast capsicum. No cherry tomatoes. Will romas do?'

'Sure.' Meg helped herself to an apron and unhooked a large saucepan from above the sink.

'I've got basil, too, growing in a pot.'

'Gardening already?'

'Welcome home present from David,' Anna said.

'Our brother, the urban green warrior.'

'The fridge magnet's also from him.'

She gestured at a photo, set in perspex, that Meg recognised: David, Sandy, three-year old Matilda and two-year-old Jack.

'He sent me one, too.'

Anna put her hands on her hips. 'I don't think he means to lord his superior fertility over us.'

Her solidarity made Meg smile. 'Mum says it's Sandy's doing.'

'She would.' Anna rolled her eyes. 'So, what's my new lunch menu?'

'Pasta salad.'

'Meggie-Lou, you're a lifesaver. I'll wash up. I always made a better dish pig than head chef.'

Meg laughed. Only fourteen months age difference and yet oceans between them. Anna's red hair and freckles came from their mother, but her eyes

were her own, striking starbursts of gold on blue. Meg was a grey-eyed blonde, whose flawless skin Anna attributed to a single Chinese ancestor she'd uncovered on a branch of the family tree stretching back to the goldfields—a connection that made Meg wonder if Anna's fascination with Asia was in her blood.

She put the water on to boil. 'So who's coming for lunch?'

'An old friend of mine, Stephen, and his partner Willem. You're welcome to stay only—'

'Only what?'

'They're bringing their newborn daughter.'

Newborn was one of those words that could still rattle Meg when she didn't see it coming. She turned so Anna didn't see her blush. 'How did they manage that? It's almost impossible to adopt a newborn.'

'She's not adopted. She's theirs. Apparently they used a surrogate mother in Thailand. I don't know the details.' She hesitated. 'Sorry, Meg. I wasn't expecting you.'

'I'm fine.' Meg's discomfort had quickly given way to curiosity. 'You don't happen to have any olives?'

'In the fridge.' Anna gestured with a sudsy rubber glove. 'There's semi-dried tomatoes, too.'

'Lunch is starting to look good. I think I will stay, assuming that was a genuine invitation.'

'Of course. If you're sure you're up for it.'

Meg opened the fridge door, biting back the urge to point out that Anna's concern for her wellbeing was a case of too little, too late. She could have used her support a few years earlier when all her old friends from school were having babies. When every female on the admin team at work was taking maternity leave. When their younger brother and his wife announced they were expecting. If Anna had been around, she would've been the first person Meg turned to. But she hadn't been around. She'd been off saving the world.

Meg closed the fridge, the flare of anger subsiding as she took in the dark circles under Anna's eyes, the sheen of sweat on her forehead. Not for the first time, Meg wondered what had brought her sister home.

Mod woke just before six with the crowing of the first rooster. Fittingly for a child nicknamed Sleepy, her twenty-month-old son Pui didn't stir. Mod brushed aside his soft, black locks and sniff-kissed his cheek, his skin cool against her lips. She tucked the quilt around him to fill the space where her body had been.

A familiar mix of love and worry flooded her heart as she gazed at her son's face. In such moments, she reminded herself of what the fortune teller had said. That opportunity would come to her and she would earn good money. Or was it earn good luck? Ten years on, Mod regretted her impatience. She should've asked the *maaw duu* to explain how luck could be earned. Clearly not by gambling. Marriage to a gambler had only brought her bad luck. But if hard work was enough, she should be rich by now. What else could she do to earn good luck? Did she need to make more merit?

Ying stirred in her sleep as Mod shuffled past on her way to the washroom at the back of the house. She glanced briefly at her reflection in the blemished mirror above the basin. She was not pretty, her eyes too small, her nose too flat. Rungrot used to call her his *ung aang*, his chubby frog. Before she came to know better, she'd mistaken it for affection.

She squatted over the toilet to empty her bladder, before removing her pyjamas and sluicing herself with water from the large plastic barrel she'd filled the night before. The cold bath combined with the cool season chill made her break out in goose-bumps and she dressed quickly in a t-shirt, sarong, pullover and socks.

In the kitchen, Mod drained the glutinous rice and decanted it into a bamboo steamer. Taking a tray of marinating chicken pieces from the fridge in one hand and the rice in the other, she made her way outside. Her mother already had the water boiling. Mod carefully lowered the rice steamer into the aluminium pot, letting the gas burner warm her hands. *Mae* had the brazier going, too. She fanned the coals as Mod sat down and placed the tray of *gai yang* on the ground between them. They worked in companionable silence, inserting the chicken pieces into split sticks of bamboo and placing them on the brazier, turning and basting them so the marinade caramelised.

The combined smell of turmeric, coriander and lemongrass filled the air, making Mod's stomach rumble. At some point *mae* handed her a bowl of *khao tom*, seasoned the way she liked it with fried garlic and preserved cabbage. Mod ate the rice soup slowly, pausing between mouthfuls to transfer the cooked chicken pieces from the brazier to the cooler bucket. She put the best pieces to one side for the monks and placed a new batch on the grill.

As Mod finished eating, Ying appeared wearing an old jacket of their father's over her pyjamas. She pushed back the sleeves and checked the rice, giving the basket a shake, before taking Mod's place by the brazier.

Mod put the chicken for almsgiving into separate plastic bags and tiptoed back through the house. She took off her socks, eased open the bi-fold wooden doors and slipped outside, using her rubber sandals to cushion her knees while she knelt in wait on the footpath.

As the monks filed past, Mod bowed her head and dropped her offerings into each alms bowl, thankful for the chance to make merit. She pressed her hands together and held them to her forehead as the senior-most monk paused briefly to bless her. She kept her eyes downcast until the orange robes and bare feet of the monks gave way to the spindly legs and rubber flip-flops of a *dek wat*, a temple child. Mod looked up at the small boy, his once white school shirt grey from years of washing. A cloth bag, the same shade as the monks' robes, hung limp across his scrawny chest, ready to carry any surplus donations once the monks' bowls were full. Mod knew the boy was unlikely to eat unless there were leftovers. She gestured for him to wait and dashed back inside for another piece of *gai yang*, which she slipped into his bag.

The boy gave her a *wai*, turned his back so the monks couldn't see, and wolfed down the chicken on the spot. Mod shivered as she watched him run off, thinking of her own boy asleep in the room behind her.

She hoped the fortune teller was right.

'Sorry we're late.' Stephen kissed Anna's cheek. She caught a whiff of something sour beneath his expensive aftershave.

Willem followed, brandishing a baby capsule. 'The little darling insisted on a feed before we could leave.'

'No worries.' She stepped aside to let them in, wondering if they'd dressed to match in checked shirts, jeans and loafers, or were too distracted by the demands of parenthood to notice.

'This is my sister Meg,' she said, leading them into the dining room. 'Stephen, Willem and...'

'Isabella,' the two men said in unison.

Willem peeled back a muslin canopy to reveal a baby, bald, fair and, to Anna's relief, sound asleep.

'She's beautiful,' Meg said.

'We think so.' Willem replaced the cloth. 'We're totally biased, of course.'

'Why don't you put her in the lounge room?' Anna said. 'It's quiet in there and we'll hear if she wakes up. Meg, can you give me a hand?'

'Let me.' Stephen moved like a praying mantis, long-limbed and angular, towering over Anna as he followed her into the kitchen.

'So how are you?' she asked, fossicking through a drawer for serving spoons.

'Exhausted. But happy.'

'Wine?'

'Please. Will's designated driver.'

She raised her glass to his. 'Here's something I never thought I'd say to you, my friend. Congratulations on becoming a father.'

They sipped the wine.

'How does it feel?'

Stephen ran his hand over his close-cropped hair, a velvet more grey than Anna remembered. 'I'd say it's a dream come true, except that as a gay man, fatherhood wasn't really a dream I let myself have.'

A memory buffeted Anna, like a sudden drop in altitude. 'You mentioned it once, years ago. That you wanted to have children.'

'Did I?'

'You were probably too drunk to remember.' She grasped the wine bottle by the neck and nodded at the bowl of pasta. 'Can you carry that?'

'Sure. Hey, this looks good. Since when did you become a domestic goddess?'

'I had help. My sister.'

'That's more like the Anna I know. You always did pour a mean glass of wine, though.'

'You sound like an old codger in a nursing home, reliving the good old days.'

""To be able to look back on one's life with satisfaction is to live twice".'

'Who's that?'

'Khalil Gibran.'

'If you start on the one about your children being living arrows, I'll throw up.'

'Sentimental as ever, I see. For the record, I like the idea of children as living arrows.'

Anna rolled her eyes. 'I think I liked it better when your idea of picking up a baby was cruising Thai boys on the dance floor.'

'God, that seems like a lifetime ago.'

Anna caught his eye. 'Do you miss it?'

Stephen shrugged. 'Not as much as I thought I would.' Her scepticism must have showed because he added, 'A bit.'

Willem was mid-sentence as they took their seats at the dining table.

'...and we used an egg donor from South Africa with fair hair and blue eyes. We figured our kid would have enough hurdles to get over in having two dads, and it would be easier if she looked like us.'

Meg looked confused. 'But Anna said your baby was born in Thailand.'

'She was,' Willem said. 'The surrogate was Thai. But she's not the real mother. There's no biological relationship between her and Isabella.'

Anna thought sharing a blood supply for nine months qualified as a biological relationship, but she kept it to herself.

‘It all sounds very *Brave New World*,’ she said lightly. ‘Shall I serve?’

‘We know which one of us is the biological father,’ Willem continued, answering a question no one had asked. ‘We had to do DNA tests in Bangkok to get Isabella’s passport. But we’re not saying because, well, to us it doesn’t matter. We’re both the real dads.’

‘Of course you are,’ Anna said, heaping pasta salad on to Willem’s plate. ‘Meg?’

Her sister blinked.

‘Salad?’

Meg nodded, fiddling with the pendant at her neck.

‘We were so naïve at first. We thought we could mix our sperm together and leave fertilisation in the lap of the gods, so to speak,’ Willem said, helping himself to bread. ‘But we found out if you put sperm from two different men in a Petri dish, they fight between themselves and ignore the egg altogether.’

Anna raised her eyebrows at her sister. ‘What does that say about men’s nature, hey?’

Meg’s smile was vague. Anna wondered if she regretted her decision to stay.

‘So we took turns. One cycle we used my sperm, the next time we used Stephen’s.’

‘Too much information, sweetheart,’ Stephen said, to Anna’s relief. The last thing Meg needed was a blow by blow account of the birth story.

‘Sorry. But you know what I’m like when I get talking about our gorgeous girl.’

‘I’m really happy it’s worked out for you guys.’ Anna raised her glass. ‘Here’s to Isabelle.’

‘Isabella.’ Willem corrected her.

She nodded, swigged her wine and seized the chance to change the topic. She asked Stephen about work opportunities. Willem helped himself to more salad. Meg surprised Anna by accepting a second glass of wine. There was a pause in the conversation.

‘What made you decide to do surrogacy in Thailand?’

Meg’s question came out of the blue. Anna frowned, but the men were unfazed.

‘It wasn’t our first choice, was it Stephen?’

‘I don’t see how surrogacy would be anyone’s first choice.’

‘We would’ve adopted if it’d been an option. But you know what the adoption laws are like. A few people we know had gone down the surrogacy path in India, but it never felt quite right to us. Then we found out they were doing it in Thailand.’

‘Will and I were concerned about Indian women being coerced into surrogacy by their husbands or middlemen.’ Stephen looked at Anna. ‘Knowing what I do about Thailand and especially Thai women, we figured it was a better option.’

‘There’s poverty in Thailand, too,’ Anna said.

‘Yes, but even so, Thai women are hardly pushovers. Besides, to be a surrogate, they have to be single, divorced or widowed.’

‘Stephen and I met in Bangkok,’ Anna explained to Meg. ‘He was with the UNICEF regional office and I was working on a UNICEF project in Laos. Do you remember?’

Stephen grinned. ‘How could I forget. UNICEF in Laos was going through a year’s supply of ORS almost every month—’

‘ORS?’

‘Oral rehydration salts. A cheap way to prevent infant deaths from diarrhoea.’

‘Except in this case.’

‘Your sister figured out that the men in the villages were using the ORS to treat their hangovers.’

Anna raised her glass. ‘Information, I might add, that has come in handy over the years.’

‘But that’s terrible,’ Meg said.

‘At least once we knew what was going on, we could do something about it.’

‘Figuring out what was going on. That could’ve been my job description,’ Anna said.

‘Stephen moved to Nepal from Bangkok, which is where *we* met,’ Willem said. ‘We’d been together six years, and we always wanted a family. And now here we are.’

Anna kicked herself. It always made Willem defensive when she and Stephen talked about the past. Now that he had the ultimate trump card, of course he was going to play it.

‘Bravo,’ she said with the rosiest smile she could muster. She picked up the empty salad bowl. ‘Meg, would you clear the table while I make coffee?’

‘So are you thinking of going down the surrogacy path yourself?’ Willem asked as Meg stacked the plates.

Anna, en route to the kitchen, froze in her tracks.

‘Oh, no, no, no,’ she heard Meg say. ‘I mean, I’m happy it’s worked out for you guys, but I don’t think I could—’

She was left hanging as an ear-piercing wail sent both men running from the room.

Nate was home ten minutes when Meg wandered in, patches of red blooming from beneath the neckline of her t-shirt. He looked at his watch.

‘I’ve been at Anna’s.’ She kissed his cheek and teetered to the sink. ‘Lunch.’

‘It’s nearly six-thirty. Long lunch.’

Meg drained a glass of water. ‘Anna had friends over. They were late getting there, and then their newborn woke up in the middle of it all. I don’t think we finished eating until after four.’

‘Right.’ Nate took a beer from the fridge, wondering if there was any connection between Meg’s proximity to a baby and the drinking. Though she still had her bad days, she’d been good for the better part of a year. Was a time she couldn’t have said the word newborn without stumbling over it.

He uncapped the beer. ‘You okay?’

‘I’m great. How was your day?’

‘Fine, same.’ He took a swig from the bottle.

‘Still want to be a lion tamer?’

It was a long running joke between them, based on a Monty Python sketch. A man goes for job advice and the assessor tells him, based on his dullness and lack of personality, he should become an accountant. The man says he really wants to be a lion tamer. Nate had been an accountant all his adult life. From time to time he made noises about changing jobs, but neither of them expected he would. Then again, neither of them expected Meg to walk away from her job at the courier company after nearly twenty years to become a full-time jewellery maker.

Nate approached the sink and wrapped his arms around Meg’s waist. ‘If I did become a lion tamer, would you run off and join the circus with me?’

Meg undid the top buttons on his business shirt, exposed his greying chest hair to her fingers. She leaned close to his ear. ‘Just so long as I could be something glamorous like a tightrope walker or a bareback rider.’

Nate’s body responded to the charge of her breath on his skin. ‘Bareback riding.’ He kissed her neck. ‘Now there’s an idea.’

He left his beer on the edge of the sink and led her to the bedroom.

#

As they lay in bed in the prolonged dusk of daylight saving time, Nate felt a surge of gratitude. At last he and Meg seemed to have moved on from the grim years when sex lost almost all its pleasure in their drive to procreate.

Their doctor had made it sound great at first. 'Don't get too hung up on precise timing,' she'd said. 'The key to getting pregnant is to have sex frequently.'

'And by frequently you mean?'

'Two to three times a week.'

Nate had nudged Meg, winked, made her laugh.

But the laughter ceased when another year went by with no pregnancy.

There followed what Nate thought of as the dark time. The IVF Years.

They handed their hopes of becoming parents to clinicians, abandoning intimacy in the process. Nate resented having to wank into plastic cups, more so when told to minimise sex between 'deposits' in order to maximise the quality of his sperm. Still, his discomfort was nothing compared with what Meg went through, with the mood altering drugs and invasive medical procedures required for her eggs to be 'harvested'.

Fertilisation took place in glass. 'Embryo transfer' replaced conception. Possible signs of pregnancy became 'symptoms'. Twice Meg was hospitalised with abdominal pain and bloating, which in a cruel twist, was the closest she ever came to looking pregnant. They became inured to pleasure, immune to success. For nearly a year they stopped having sex altogether.

After six years of crushing disappointment, Nate was ready to call an end to IVF. He wanted a child, but not at the expense of Meg's health or their marriage. He knew he had to tread gently or risk having Meg spend the rest of her life blaming him for not having children. In the end, he'd recruited Anna to play hard cop, allowing him to come out of it looking conciliatory by comparison. He still felt guilty for having imposed on Anna, but at the time, he was desperate.

Nate shuddered at the memory. Meg raised her head from his chest.

'What's wrong, darling?'

He brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead. She was going greyer. 'Nothing, sweetheart. Nothing at all.'

'Are you sure?'

He cupped her face in his hands. 'I've just made love with a beautiful woman. What more could a man want?'

It was a rhetorical question but Nate could see Meg's mind ticking over.

'There's something I want to ask you about.'

'What's that?' Nate kept his tone neutral, though the uneasiness he'd felt when Meg mentioned a newborn resurfaced.

'How do you feel about trying surrogacy to have a baby?'

Nate's heart sank. Hadn't they finally made peace with not having children? 'Sweetheart, I thought we'd already ruled that out.'

'We ruled out surrogacy in India. But what about Thailand?'

'What about Thailand?'

'That's where Anna's friends went to have their baby. They said the process was pretty straightforward and—'

'Straightforward?' Nate propped himself up. 'What could be straightforward about going to a foreign country and paying some poor woman to have a baby for you?'

'It's not—' Meg sat up beside him, bedsheet ruched around her waist. 'You've seen what Thailand's like. It's not like India where everyone's poor.'

'So Thai women are having babies for foreigners out of the kindness of their hearts?'

'Well, no, of course they get paid. I mean, they should get paid, don't you think?'

Nate shook his head. 'I don't know what to think.'

'Thailand's close to Australia. The medical facilities are world class. The baby only needs a DNA match with the father to get Australian citizenship—'

'You found out all this over lunch?'

She ignored the interjection. 'Anna's friends said that Thai surrogates even get a say about the couple they want to work with.'

'And how does Anna feel about all this? I wouldn't have thought she'd be in favour of anything that smacks of Third World exploitation, as she might call it.'

'She isn't. I mean, they were her friends, so I assume she's okay about it.'

Nate sighed. 'Meg, sweetheart, I'm not sure I have the energy to go through this again.'

'But we haven't been through this. It's something we haven't tried.'

Nate heard the waver in her voice.

'I feel like we've finally got our lives back on track,' he said.

She leaned her head against his chest. 'You don't have to make up your mind now. Just promise you'll think about it?'

He put his arms around her. They'd been here before, back when Meg wanted them to start IVF.

Nate kissed the top of her head. 'I promise.'

Meg couldn't sleep, her mind racing with the new world of possibilities that Stephen, Willem and their daughter had opened up. Careful not to wake Nate, she eased herself out of bed and padded to her studio at the end of the house. She closed the door behind her and started up her laptop computer, not bothering to switch on the lamp. The bamboo blind on the window above her desk sent stripes of shadow and moonlight across her body.

She typed "surrogacy + Thailand" into the internet search engine and scanned the list that appeared. References to surrogacy in India, links to websites of IVF clinics in Thailand. Blogs, too, some of which Meg recognised. Once she'd found comfort in reading other women's accounts of IVF, knowing she wasn't alone in what she was going through. Shy by nature, Meg could open up online in a way that she couldn't in public. She'd never been a blogger herself, but she'd followed many women who wrote about their struggles with infertility and IVF in Australia and overseas. Occasionally she left comments using the alias "ThingWithFeathers".

She still had the Emily Dickinson poem, transcribed in her mother's hand, pinned to her noticeboard. Her mother, Helen, understood the nature of disappointment. How easily you could succumb to its toxic bitterness, how vital it was to resist. That was why Meg eventually stopped following the infertility blogs. The jealousy that consumed her whenever a blogger achieved their long sought-after pregnancy wasn't constructive. Nor was wallowing in self-pity along with other chronic infertiles. Meg tried to follow Helen's lead and focus on what she had, not on what she lacked, though she didn't always succeed.

She clicked on a link to an IVF clinic in Bangkok. The homepage brought up a photo of a moon-faced Thai doctor and an eye-catching pull quote: "Gestational Surrogacy and Egg Donation are more affordable than you might think and could make your dream come true. Don't give up hope."

Don't give up hope. How many times had Meg told herself that? Her mind returned the Dickinson poem. Had the thing with feathers flown from her reach? Or was it still there, perched in her soul, as Dickinson would have it? Meg

remembered the fluttering in her stomach as she'd nursed Isabella on her lap after lunch. Was that hope, stretching its wings?

She scanned the website. The doctor's name was Boribun. He had a Masters degree from an Australian university. By the light of the laptop screen, she jotted down some questions. She made a note to ask Anna for Stephen and Willem's contact details.

Meg needed to pick Anna's brain, too. Her sister had lived in Thailand for years. She spoke the language. She'd be able to clarify things—like what they meant by, “surrogacy is not illegal but also not controlled”. With Anna's help, Meg could establish what was possible and explain the options to Nate.

She turned off the computer and allowed her eyes to readjust to the semi-darkness. Her heartbeat seemed to grow louder as she imagined a little bird nesting in her chest, the striped light from the window falling across their trembling bodies.

Anna woke in a sweat. She peeled the sheet from her body and used it to fan herself. Another power outage. Glancing up, she frowned at the empty space where the ceiling fan should be. It took another groggy moment to remember where she was.

She'd dreamed of Cambodia, the last place she'd worked before returning to Melbourne. She'd been hired by a young visionary, Ponleak, to advise on how his organisation might work with Cambodia's estimated 30,000 drug users. Cambodia was one of Asia's poorest countries, and drug users among the poorest of the poor. Street kids, sex workers, migrant labourers, the unemployed—they used drugs to keep themselves awake or knock themselves out. As part of her feasibility study, Anna had visited a rehabilitation centre in the country's far northwest, run by police and the Orwellian-sounding MOSAVY, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation. The centre's budget barely covered two small meals a day, let alone medications for drug withdrawal. The chance of anyone being rehabilitated was remote, which Anna pointed out in her report. Ponleak's boss, a member of the ruling Cambodian People's Party, objected to her implied criticism of the government. But it was Anna's role to tell the boss what Ponleak could not, to open the door a crack, so that when the time was right, he and all the other bright young things could push through. As a *barang* consultant, Anna accepted that she was useful but expendable. Still, she'd never quite achieved the necessary degree of detachment to walk away unscathed. She couldn't forget the emaciated, ulcerated bodies she'd glimpsed through doorways at that remote rehabilitation camp. In nightmares she heard the agonised screams of people wanting to die.

On nights like this—*mornings*, she corrected herself, reading 2.47 on the bedside clock—she'd lie awake, wondering if there was anything she might have said or done to make a difference.

The ornamental pear tree outside the bedroom window cast a long shadow across her bed. Anna got up and made her way to the kitchen. By the stove light, she poured the last of the wine from lunch into a glass and took it into the lounge room. Switching on a lamp, she contemplated the uppermost

bookshelf she'd avoided during her recent cull. Her diaries. She put down her glass, hooked out the first—from 1993—and opened a page at random.

“When it comes to AIDS, everyone looks for someone else to blame. The Thais blame Western sex tourists and African drug traffickers. The Laos blame the Thais. The Vietnamese blame the Thais and Cambodians, and the Cambodians blame the Vietnamese. My job is to convince them AIDS is everybody's business.”

She swapped the 1993 diary for one from 1996.

“I met an amazing young woman today, Pheung (nickname = ‘bee’), who volunteers to help people with HIV break the news to their families. Vipada told me Pheung was a virgin when she got married and contracted HIV from her husband, who slept with sex workers. A familiar story, although I should've told Vipada off for gossiping. She should know that how someone gets infected doesn't matter.”

Anna remembered Pheung. She had a photo of her somewhere. The young Thai woman wasn't much to look at, but she left a big impression. Fear of AIDS was huge back then, and it took courage to go public about having HIV. Anna hoped Pheung was still alive—that she'd got on to the treatments in time.

Another diary entry, written in Kuala Lumpur, reminded her of the many who did not. “Beautiful memorial celebration for Jet last night. Highlight was the finale when his main rival in the local drag scene sang ‘I Am What I Am’ from *La Cage aux Folles*. I'm really going to miss him.” Anna remembered how nervous she'd felt, walking into her first workshop run by people living with HIV. Jet had been the one to shuffle over and make room for her.

On the cover of her 1998 diary was a bumper sticker in Lao: “AIDS does not discriminate—people do.” Anna couldn't bring herself to look inside.

She returned the journals to the shelf and swallowed some wine. For twenty years, she'd been so sure of herself, despite the contradictions that were plain to see in her own diaries. It had taken a major United Nations review, released earlier in the year, to force her to acknowledge that she got it wrong. That AIDS might not be everybody's business. That AIDS did, in fact, discriminate.

Anna picked up a framed photo taken in Vietnam, circa 1999. A group of grinning young people in matching t-shirts, whom she'd helped train as peer educators. Smart kids from good families. Ambitious. Keen to volunteer for the chance to work with foreigners and practise their English. She'd trained nice kids like these in countries across the region. What were the chances any of them would ever set foot in a brothel, shooting gallery or beat, where they faced a real risk of HIV infection?

'*Mais pourquoi pas?*' Christophe had said, when she put the question to him. 'It's not possible to say what any of them might do.'

They were sitting on the terrace at his place, geckoes gorging on the insects that swarmed to the overhead light.

'But it is. That's the point. The report says that while I was off training kids who might theoretically be at risk, the kids most definitely at risk were missing out.'

Christophe responded with what Anna thought of as a uniquely French gesture, a snort combined with a shrug.

'Don't be so hard on yourself, *chérie*. When you first started this work, you had enough trouble convincing your colleagues to take AIDS seriously. Imagine if you told them this was a disease of prostitutes, gays and drug users. In this case, do you think any country in the region would have a national AIDS program now?'

He'd kissed her palm, and she felt the tension in her body start to slip away. But then he dropped her hand, patted it and said, '*Alors, arrête ton cinéma.*'

His words were like a slap. She'd never given him cause to think she was melodramatic. Couldn't he see how thrown she was, how badly shaken?

Christophe went to replenish their drinks, leaving Anna staring out over the dark garden. Had she felt stronger, she might have confronted him. Instead, she'd withdrawn like a whelk plucked from a rock.

The nightmares had started around that time, fuelled by questions she couldn't bring herself to ask in the light of day. What good, if any, had she done? What difference had she made? Was any of it worth what she'd given up?

Anna returned the frame to the shelf. Next to it, a black-and-white photo of herself and Meg, taken not long after their parents separated and they'd

moved with their mother from Ballarat to the inner Melbourne suburb of Oakleigh. Anna had just turned eleven. Meg was nine-and-a-half. In an effort no doubt designed to make life look more cheerful than it was, Helen had posed them holding hydrangeas, plucked from a bush in the background. While Anna looked ready to stab someone with hers, Meg held her puffy blooms to her chest like a bride, hiding her teeth behind a brave smile.

Meg was the constant in Anna's life. Most of her friends in Australia had given up on her, jaded by years of neglect. Long estranged from her father, Anna had grown distant from her mother, the time between visits too long, the gaps in their lives too great to bridge. Five years earlier, she'd risked a rift with Meg, too, by leaving her in the grief-stricken thick of failed IVF treatments to return to Southeast Asia. The sad irony was that she'd done it for Meg's sake. Anna would do anything for her sister.

She sighed, knowing she'd never get back to sleep by dwelling on everything that was wrong with her life. Sipping her wine, Anna scanned the bookshelf, fishing out a collection of travel stories by Pico Iyer. She took the book with her wine to the couch, and started reading. The timing of her first visit to Southeast Asia had coincided with Iyer's, his account of the region's obsession with Rambo reminding Anna of the gaudy, hand-painted billboards of Sylvester Stallone that decorated Bangkok's cinemas in the mid-1980s. But it was in his rumination on home where she experienced the frisson of recognition.

"Home is, finally, not the physical place," Iyer wrote, "but the role and the self we choose to occupy."

Mod sought out her usual vendors at the Morning Market. Khun Tum for snake beans, tomatoes and cabbage, Khun Sutti for chillies and garlic, Khun Phet for green papaya and limes. The best limes had come from an elderly Khmer woman, but she'd disappeared since the border with Cambodia had closed, her patch taken over by a man selling rattanware from his motorbike.

The fishmonger, Khun Chantana, was skinning frogs and talking with the vendor in the neighbouring stall as Mod approached.

'...the Yellow Shirts are occupying the international airport in Bangkok. They've shut the whole place down.'

Once Mod would've found the women gossiping about love affairs and scandals. But since the Thaksin era, all talk was of politics. The former prime minister loved Isaan people. It was because of Thaksin that Mod could afford to take Pui to the hospital when he got sick. Thaksin gave them affordable health care, cheap fuel, debt relief and, most of all, respect. The Yellow Shirts in Bangkok hated him for it.

'I saw on TV. Still trying to get rid of our prime ministers.' The neighbour shook her head.

'Next they'll be saying we can't be trusted to vote.' Chantana threw a flayed frog, legs still kicking, into a dish at her feet.

'Have you heard those rumours, too, *euuay*?'

'I was making a joke.' Chantana looked up at Mod and put down her knife. 'The usual, *naawng*?'

Mod nodded. Chantana scooped a handful of purple paddy crabs into a plastic bag.

'One *phaaw meung* at the airport was on TV saying he would use Hun Sen's blood to wash his feet.' The neighbour raised her eyebrows at Mod. 'That's all we need, eh?'

'Or,' Mod nodded. Hurling insults at the Cambodian prime minister could only make a bad situation worse. She sometimes wondered if Isaan people like her were better off accepting their fate, keeping their faces to the dirt and their backs to the sky.

Back home, Mod steered the vending cart from the front room to the footpath. She'd bought the *rot kaen* second-hand. It squeaked a little and the painted palm tree on the front needed a touch up, but it was her means to earn a living. Releasing the side, Mod opened up the cart and placed the fresh ingredients and pickled crab in the small glass display cabinet at the front. She removed her supplies of dried shrimp, sugar and sweet chilli sauce from storage and added them to the countertop. Weighing down the banana leaves with her mortar and pestle, she laid out her knives, spoons and chopping block. Finally, she brought out the home-made *bpaa daaek*, its pungent smell escaping from beneath the lid of the jar.

Ying appeared with the cooler buckets of cooked chicken and sticky rice. Their brother, Chai, followed with a dish of hot coals. Mod kept watch as he transferred the coals to the metal grill on the end of her cart where she would reheat the chicken.

'Do you need any more plastic bags?' their mother called from inside.

Mod did a quick stock-take. Small clear pouches for chilli sauce. Larger ones for the chicken, papaya salad and sticky rice. Elastic bands to seal them. Black plastic carry bags.

'Have already, *mae*.'

She put on her apron, took the cart by the handles and wheeled it out into the street. Cars and motorbikes veered around her as she trudged toward her regular spot. A military truck approached, most likely headed for the border. Mod supposed the villages closest to the crossing point for Phra Wiharn were doing well from the influx of soldiers. But for those like her stuck in Sisaket town, the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the temple was a disaster with no end in sight. A motorised cart would give her the freedom to follow the market, closer to where the soldiers were encamped, perhaps, or west to the ruins at Wat Sa Kamphaeng Yai—not that this could compare with Phra Wiharn as a tourist attraction. But a motorised cart was a pipe dream. Mod was lucky to get by, let alone save anything. She sighed again. The day had hardly begun, and already she felt exhausted.

She paused at the side of the road as the military vehicle thundered by. It turned out to be the first in a three-truck convoy, and by the time they'd passed,

Mod was engulfed in a cloud of dirt. She fished a dust mask from her apron pocket, but it was a case of fencing the yard when the ox had already escaped. Grit coated her face, her eyes watered and she tasted dust. It would be hours before she had the chance to wash.

Mod's vision grew blurry as the trucks faded from view. This wasn't how she imagined her life would be. She tried not to dwell on what might have happened if she had stayed in her job as a cashier, kept up her English lessons, hadn't fallen for Rungrot.

Her mother always said there was no point crying over what you could not change.

But tears washed dust from the eyes.

Meg made her second impromptu appearance at Anna's flat in as many days. Remembering her previous visit, she gave the door a forceful knock. Anna appeared, dark circles like bruises under her eyes.

She kissed Meg's cheek and smiled. 'I was just making coffee. Want some?'

Meg followed Anna into the kitchen. There was no sign of the mess of the day before, only an empty wine glass on the sink.

'Are you okay? You look tired.'

'Think I'm still jetlagged.'

Meg thought a month was more than enough time to be over jetlag, but she let it slide.

Anna took a shiny coffee pot from the shelf above the stove. 'I bought a percolator with a gift voucher I got for my fortieth,' she said, almost apologetically.

'I still remember the coffee we had on the street in Bangkok,' Meg said. 'So thick it stuck to my teeth. The woman strained it through what looked like a windsock.'

Anna smiled. 'You're talking about *kafae thong*. I was tempted to bring back some of those calico bags. But things like that never taste as good out of context.'

Meg spotted a small rattle in a bowl on the kitchen bench where Anna kept her keys. She picked it, rang its muffled bell.

'Isabella's?'

Anna sighed. 'They were bound to leave something behind, given the amount of stuff they had.'

'They seem to be doing well, though,' Meg said. 'I mean, Stephen and Willem seem very happy.'

'They seemed exhausted to me.'

'I guess a new baby will do that.'

Anna rubbed her temples. 'Sorry, Meg. I'm a bit cranky. Not enough sleep. Need coffee.'

On cue, a burbling sound emanated from the percolator. Meg restored the rattle to the bowl and opened the fridge. 'You don't have any milk.'

'There's a can of condensed stuff on the top shelf.'

'Thai-style.' Meg brought the tin to the bench. 'What was all that about things not tasting the same out of context?'

'Some habits die hard.' Anna poured a finger of the sweet, sticky milk into each mug and added the coffee. 'Cheers.'

Meg took a sip. 'Speaking of Thailand, I'm hoping you can help me find out more about doing surrogacy there.'

Anna paused with her coffee halfway to her mouth. 'You're not serious?'

'At this stage, I just want to find out more about what's involved.'

The colour seemed to drain from Anna's face. 'What's involved is exploitation. Rich Westerners ripping off poor Asian women. God, Meg, I've spent my whole career working against that.'

'But what about Isabella? You don't seem to have a problem with Stephen and Willem doing it.'

'It's different for them. They don't have the same choices as you and Nate.'

'Like what?'

'Like adoption.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake.' Meg set her mug down with enough force to splash coffee on the bench. 'Why does everyone think adoption is an answer? Do you have any idea how difficult it is to adopt a baby in this country? The amount of paperwork involved? The scrutiny? The time? More people than ever want to adopt, but there are hardly any babies available. You can go through the whole process only to be told at the final hurdle that the country you've applied to has decided to close its files to overseas applicants.'

'Oh God.' Anna placed her hand on Meg's arm. 'Did that happen to you?'

'It happened to friends of ours.' Meg shook Anna off and reached for the dishcloth. 'They were heartbroken, as you can imagine.'

She swiped at the spilt coffee. 'I'm thirty-nine next week, Anna. Nate's already forty. By law, there can't be more than forty years age difference between the parents and the child they adopt. Even if we started the process

now, chances are we wouldn't qualify for a baby or even a toddler. And I've seen what people go through when they adopt an older child.'

Meg rinsed the dishcloth and draped it over sink. She felt Anna's hand on her arm.

'I'll have one for you, if it's what you really want.'

For a heartbeat, Meg entertained the fantasy. 'Oh, Anna.'

'I mean it.' Anna was smiling. 'I should've thought of it before. It's the perfect solution.'

Meg smiled back, shaking her head.

'Don't shake your head. I'm serious.'

'I know you are, and it's a lovely offer.' Meg patted her sister's hand. 'But Anna, your age, plus the fact you don't have children means no clinic in Australia would accept you as a surrogate.'

'Oh?' Two bright red spots appeared on Anna's cheeks.

They both sipped their coffee.

'So you see why—' Meg began, but Anna interrupted her.

'We don't need to go through a clinic. We could use the turkey baster method. It's worked for several lesbians I know.'

Meg blinked back tears of frustration. This was not a conversation she wanted to have. She grasped her skirt in tight fists and took a deep breath.

'I know you mean well. But I've been dealing with infertility for ten years and I know what I'm talking about. Trust me, Anna, even if you actually wanted to have a baby yourself, chances are you'd have a tough time trying to get pregnant, with or without IVF.'

Anna opened her mouth to protest, but Meg held up her hand. 'Much as it pains me to admit it, my best chance is to use donor eggs from a young woman and have the baby carried by a surrogate. If you don't want to help me, that's fine. I respect that. But please give me contact details for Stephen and Willem so I can follow up with them.'

Meg rinsed her cup and upended it on the sink.

'I need a little time to think it over,' Anna said. 'I didn't know... I mean, I thought you'd given up on the idea of having a baby.'

Meg's lower lip quivered with suppressed anger. 'I've never given up, Anna. All I've done is tame the grief. I've never, ever given up hope.'

Anna felt as if an intruder had broken into her home and rifled through her things. She had to get out of the apartment. She put on sunglasses and a hat and hooked her keys from the bowl, avoiding Isabella's rattle as though its touch might burn.

The end of the street backed onto the All Nations Park, a slice of Australian bushland that five years earlier was a municipal tip. Since it opened, Melbourne had been in the throes of its worst drought on record, yet the park thrived. A place of optimism at odds with Anna's mood, but she craved space to breathe.

The conversation with Meg snapped at her heels as she marched along the path. In a barbeque area by the entrance, a young, shirtless man was strumming a guitar. He stopped when he saw Anna, lifted a wine bottle from the picnic table in front of him and held it out.

'Drink, sister?'

Scowling, she headed away from him, following the path through a grove of ironbark. Her footfall disturbed nesting currawongs, forcing her to duck as they swooped to defend their young.

Anna would never openly criticise the choices Stephen and Willem had made in order to become parents. She was guilty of a double standard in that regard, cutting them slack because they were gay. But the truth was, she didn't approve of commercial surrogacy. Regardless of whether the surrogates came from India or Thailand, such women were invariably poorer than the people who paid them to have their babies.

She didn't buy Stephen's argument that surrogacy gave women the opportunity to get out of poverty. Such a trade wouldn't exist if women weren't poor in the first place. To Anna's mind, surrogacy was like sex work: both lousy choices, both subject to demand that went largely unchallenged.

As she approached the park's small lake, a series of signs warned against swimming, diving and allowing dogs into the water. The drought had reduced the lake to a muddy bog, but a family of swamphens had made a home in its reeds. Anna paused on a small bridge to watch as the smart-looking birds in their blue

feathered vests and red caps performed impossible balancing acts on top of the sharp reeds. Beneath the bridge, an abandoned bicycle poked out of the stagnant water, rear lights flashing red. Was it some kind of sign? A scene from *On The Beach* came to mind, where a man risks nuclear fallout to trace a mysterious radio signal, only to find the transmission key being tapped by a Coca-Cola bottle, caught on a blind fluttering in the breeze. Did anyone even believe in signs anymore?

Anna kept walking. She'd acted on impulse, offering herself to Meg as a surrogate. Probably not such a good idea, though it hurt being told she was too old. It wasn't that long ago that she'd been pregnant, not that Meg would ever know about that.

Could she stomach the idea of helping her sister to access surrogacy in Thailand?

She rounded a bend lined with spindly pines and came across a playground. Children crawled on a climbing frame like spiders on a web. Toddlers flung fistfuls of tanbark at each other. Parents, mostly mothers, stood around with babies slung across their chests despite the heat, chatting, sipping from water bottles, adjusting sunhats. This was what Meg wanted, to be part of this contented tribe. She didn't want to be among the infertiles where—how did she put it?—she had to tame the grief. How could Anna not help her?

She made her way to the park's dog off-leash area. Although free of small children, she found no respite there. In amongst the scrub was a sculpture of three terracotta figures. According to a plaque, it was designed to celebrate cultural diversity. But to Anna, the trio looked hostile, as though she was standing in their way.

Anna knew Thailand. She spoke the language. She could navigate both the terrain and the culture. The country was going through a tumultuous time, making people desperate. She didn't see how she could leave Meg and Nate to deal with all that on their own.

Her exposed skin was starting to burn and sweat trickled down her back. She hastened along the path to complete her circuit, arriving back at the barbeque area where the young man had been playing guitar.

But the man had gone, leaving an empty wine bottle on the table.

From her vantage point near the bus station, Mod witnessed the steady flow of tourists dwindle to a trickle. Once a prime location, it now served as a daily reminder of her poor luck. Opportunities to practise her English had all but disappeared, words and sounds falling away like feathers from a chicken. Without access to the Phra Wiharn temple, there was little to attract tourists to Sisaket. If she ever did see a *farang* in the street, she guessed he was married to a local girl.

Aunty Chompu said some of the farangs were journalists. 'One of them was asking around at the market if the border dispute was bad for business.'

'It's terrible,' Mod said.

'I'm not sure the working girls down near the army camps would agree with you.' Aunty Chompu laughed, making her ample belly shake.

The older woman's bawdy humour made Mod giggle. She could relax in Aunty Chompu's company, perhaps because they were both divorcees.

'Sorry business isn't so good for you, *naawng*,' Aunty Chompu patted her hand. 'How's your little one doing?'

'He's talking a lot, not that you can tell right now.' Mod nodded at Pui, who sat mesmerised by the novelty of Aunty Chompu's large screen TV. 'And your son?'

Aunty Chompu couldn't have children, grounds her husband had used for their divorce. But a sister had taken pity on her and gave Chompu one of her own sons to raise.

'He's studying hard for his eleventh grade exams. He talks already about wanting to *buat phra* once he finishes high school.'

Mod smiled. It was a blessing they shared as the mothers of sons, the chance to earn merit when their boys became monks.

'Speaking of monks, I saw the husband of my old school friend Lamai with shaved head and eyebrows,' Mod said. 'Did he go to the temple recently?'

'Now there's a story.' Aunty Chompu blinked. 'Is your little one okay?'

Pui was drooping in front of the TV. Mod arranged cushions for him to lie down, and resumed her seat on the rattan couch. Aunty Chompu topped up their tea from the thermos.

'They split up,' Aunty Chompu said. 'But I don't believe it's for real. I think the husband made himself scarce so Lamai could get a job as a *mae oom boon*. Apparently, you can make a small fortune.'

Mod frowned. She thought of carrying a baby for someone who couldn't have their own, like Chompu's sister did, as an act of kindness. A way to earn merit.

'Aunty, I don't understand. How can you make money by being a *mae oom boon*?'

'Foreigners will pay you to carry a baby for them. Rich Thai people, too.'

'Are you saying Lamai is carrying a farang baby for money?'

'That's right. The doctors took a farang egg and farang sperm and made a baby in a glass dish. Then they planted the baby inside Lamai's belly.' She demonstrated by spearing a chunk of pineapple with a toothpick. 'There's no action south of the navel, if you know what I mean.'

Mod was too preoccupied to laugh at the joke. 'Then why did Lamai and her husband split up?'

'To be a surrogate mother you're supposed to be single and you must have children already. My guess is, they got separated so Lamai could get her single status letter. She moved to Bangkok for the last months of the pregnancy. Her boys stayed here with her mother. Once she delivers the baby, my bet is she'll be back with her husband and sons, bringing a heap of cash with her.'

Mod blinked, flashes of yellow and black like a wasp in her peripheral vision. 'But wouldn't it be shameful to be pregnant and not married?'

'Being a surrogate mother isn't shameful, *naawng*. You're helping people who can't have a baby. What my sister did for me...' Aunty Chompu pressed her palms together and touched them to her forehead.

'An act of great merit,' Mod agreed. 'But to have a baby for money?'

'Why not? If you carry someone else's baby for nine months, why shouldn't you be paid for your trouble. Better than that other way poor girls around here make their money.'

Mod was reminded of a conversation she'd tried hard to forget: the moment she saw Rungrot's true face and knew their marriage was over.

'You're young and healthy, little sister, with a small boy to raise. You should think about doing it, too. Pushing a food cart around isn't going to get you ahead in life.'

'I'm not sure, Aunty,' Mod said, though she heard wisdom in the older woman's words.

'Listen, Lamai will be home after the baby is delivered. I'll invite you both over so you can talk with her. *Jai pben glaang*, okay?'

Mod nodded. She supposed there was no harm in keeping an open mind.

Cracking sounds came from Aunty Chompu's knees as she rose from her seat. Mod sprang up.

'Is there something I can do for you, Aunty?'

'Sadly, no. Just imagine if you could rent a bladder. Now that's something I'd pay for.'

She emitted another belly wobbling laugh and disappeared in the direction of the bathroom.

Mod checked on Pui, the light from the television playing on his face. Muting the volume, she pressed her lips to the spot where his glossy black hair met the nape of his neck.

Abandoned by Rungrot, with almost no money, Mod could have spent her pregnancy in a state of high anxiety. But she'd kept her mind calm to protect her baby. Apart from a few weeks of nausea, pregnancy was comfortable. And when at last she held her newborn son, Mod felt her heart overflow with happiness.

Of course she felt sad for anyone who couldn't experience this joy for themselves. But could she really carry someone else's baby? It was such an odd idea. Yet the moment it entered her mind, the fortune teller's words had come back to her.

'Your good luck will be earned, not won. You will see the opportunity when it comes.'

Was being a surrogate mother that opportunity, her chance to earn both money and merit?

Meg was gouging a silver disk when the graver slipped and pierced her fingertip. She put down her work and pressed a tissue to the cut, cross with herself for having lifted the lid on the grief she'd worked so hard to contain. She didn't want to be one of those childless women who goes through life in a miasma of misery. Like her mother, Meg wanted to focus on the good. Loving husband. Family. Friends. Artistic vocation. But when she told Anna she'd tamed her grief, it wasn't entirely true. Meg's grief was a wild animal in a cage. Contained, but still wild.

Perhaps it was a mistake to open the door again to the possibility of a child. Once a woman in her circumstances would've been classified as barren with no room for ambiguity. But infertility was something else, a diagnosis, subject to an ever expanding array of medical interventions. Even the word *infertility* carried with it the hope, false or otherwise, of fertility. More than once Meg had thought it would be easier to know that there was no hope, that she would never have children. But no doctor or nurse, not a single professional she dealt with, ever suggested she give up.

Through the window above her workspace, Meg's once lush garden was dying in the drought. The lawn was straw, the ferns like brown bones. She thought of the conversation with Anna, and her sister's impulsive offer to carry a baby for her. Though Anna had never expressed any interest in having children, Meg had more than one avowedly child-free friend suddenly change her tune after accidentally falling pregnant in her forties. Assuming Anna could even get pregnant, Meg couldn't trust that she wouldn't do the same. It was hard enough that her younger brother had children. Meg couldn't bare it if Anna had a baby, too.

Several years earlier, their mother actually suggested that Meg ask Anna to have a baby for her.

'I've read about it, and Anna would need to be artificially inseminated with Nate's sperm'—Helen blushed when she used words like *sperm*—'but the baby would still have both your genes because Anna's your sister after all.'

'But what about Anna, Mum? She'd have to come home to Melbourne. She could hardly be pregnant over there. And even if everything went smoothly,

she'd be looking at giving up a year or more of her life for my sake. I don't think I could ask her to do that.'

'You'd do it for her,' Helen said.

'Yes, but she wouldn't ask it of me.'

After another three unsuccessful rounds of IVF, however, Meg had second thoughts. She wondered, perhaps, if a year might not be too much to ask of Anna after all. She raised the idea with her doctor.

'When the surrogate uses her own egg, that's when things are most likely to go pear-shaped,' Doctor Lau said. 'Most clinics in Victoria won't go near TS.'

TS. Traditional Surrogacy. Just one in the agglomeration of acronyms that formed the code of the infertile. Assisted reproductive technology, aka ART, had introduced Meg to IUI (intrauterine insemination), IVF (in vitro fertilisation), ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection) and ET (embryo transfer), each resulting in a BFN, that most loathed of all acronyms. Big Fat Negative.

Meg had become a lay expert on infertility. If the clinicians weren't prepared to support TS, Anna would have to undergo frozen embryo transfer—FET—which was a lot more complicated. She'd be put through invasive tests, onerous preparation routines, and hormone treatments to facilitate implantation, with all the attendant health risks. The process, if it worked, would take longer than a year, more like two, and in the end, Anna wouldn't even have a baby of her own to show for it. Meg couldn't ask Anna to put herself through that.

Eventually, she had to admit what no one would tell her. She was barren. She would never have a child. Door closed. End of story.

Yet here she was contemplating surrogacy in Thailand.

Meg turned her gaze from the parched garden and checked her finger. The bleeding had stopped. She picked up her graver. The piece she was working on could be taken for an exotic flower or sea creature. But in her mind it was a frayed womb. An *hystera*, as it was called in Greek.

She sighed. The thing with wings would not be subdued. She desperately wanted Anna's help.

Anna knocked at Meg and Nate's front door. They were due at Helen's the following afternoon for Christmas lunch and Anna didn't want the surrogacy question left hanging. Not in the maternal home, with its mantelpiece of framed baby photos, and David's two little ones running amok. She took a deep breath as she heard the approaching footfalls.

Nate was wearing khaki shorts and an old blue t-shirt that set off his eyes. He was barefoot and unshaven, ginger stubble on his chin. It suited him. He'd aged well.

'G'day Anna.'

He held the door open for her, his kiss scratching her cheek.

'Meg home?'

'She just popped out. Shouldn't be long. Coffee?'

'That'd be great.'

She followed Nate into the kitchen where he set about manipulating an elaborate coffee machine.

'So how're you going? Latte okay?'

'Since when did you become a barista?'

'It was my fortieth birthday present. Great, isn't it.'

Anna thought it over the top, but nodded politely. 'Sorry I missed it, by the way.'

'You'll be around for Meg's. That's what matters.'

Anna raised her eyebrows. Meg's fortieth birthday was another year away. No telling where she'd be by then.

Nate tamped coffee into the group, levered it into position over two cups, and pressed a button that made the machine growl.

'You didn't answer my question.' He raised his voice above the noise. 'I asked how you're going.'

'Oh, you know...'

He fixed her with his grey-blue eyes. 'No I don't. That's why I'm asking.'

She shrugged. 'I'm a bit all over the place, to be honest. I'm not sure coming back was the right decision.'

‘Are you worried about work?’

‘No, it’s not that. It’s just...’

Nate turned back to the machine and shut off the water. She’d been on the verge of mentioning Christophe, but was discouraged by the abrupt silence.

‘I feel like I left Australia before I could put down roots. Then I was in Southeast Asia for all those years, but I didn’t put down roots there either. I feel like a tumbleweed or something.’

‘We don’t have tumbleweeds in Australia.’

‘Precisely.’

‘We do have orchids, though. Orchid seeds are dispersed on the wind, and they can put down shoots pretty much wherever they land.’

‘Orchids are common in Asia.’

‘They’re found all over the world, even in the Arctic circle. Some things can settle anywhere.’

‘Pico Iyer says that about people.’

‘Who’s that?’ He turned back to the machine to froth milk in a stainless steel jug.

‘Travel writer.’

Anna wanted to ask how he knew so much about orchids. But as the hiss of the steam subsided, she heard the jangle of keys in the front door.

Meg greeted her with a nervous smile.

‘Coffee, sweetheart?’ Nate asked, handing Anna hers.

‘Yes, please.’ Meg put her shopping bag on the ground without taking her eyes off Anna. ‘Shall we go into the lounge room?’

Anna followed, waiting until the coffee machine rumbled to life before speaking.

‘I’ve thought about it, Meg, and I *am* going to help you with the surrogacy in Thailand.’

‘Oh, Anna.’ Meg’s eyes lit up but Anna raised her hand.

‘I have a couple of conditions. If you decide to head down this path and end up going to Thailand, I want to come with you. I’ll be your guide, your interpreter, whatever you want.’

‘That would be amazing—’

'But I need to know you'll take my advice seriously. You may know a lot more about infertility than I do, but I know a lot more about Thailand.'

'Of course.'

'There's often a huge gap between how things appear and how they really are.'

'I trust you, Anna.'

'If I get wind of anything dodgy or illegal, I'll pull the plug, understand?'

Meg winced. A poor choice of metaphor, perhaps, but Anna pushed on.

'But I'll do whatever I can to help you.'

In the kitchen, the sound of the coffee machine gave way to the whoosh of steam in milk.

'Thank you—'

Anna pulled Meg into a hug.

Lamai's surrogacy had become Aunty Chompu's favourite conversation topic. Mod learned that the last few weeks of her pregnancy, Lamai had experienced heartburn and swollen ankles, 'but nothing serious.' At thirty-eight weeks, she'd delivered by C-section what Aunty Chompu described as 'a big, fat, four-kilo farang baby.'

'*Look kreung*,' she corrected herself. 'The father is farang, the mother Thai.'

Mod thought of the movie stars and models who were *look kreung*, half-and-half. 'The baby must be very beautiful.'

In the last week of December, Mod found Lamai herself lying on the rattan couch where Aunty Chompu usually sat, one of her sons propped in front of the TV. Lamai was plumper than Mod remembered, her belly still swollen from the pregnancy. Mod sat Pui down next to the other boy, who barely blinked. Lamai made no move to make space for her and, as Aunty Chompu had the only other chair, Mod sat on a mat at the women's feet.

'It's good to see you,' she said to her old school friend. '*Sabaidee baw?*'

'I'm fine.' Lamai patted her lower abdomen. 'You can't believe how much those parents love me. See this.' She hooked her thumb through the thick gold chain around her neck. 'It weighs nearly three *baht*. A gift to thank me for looking after their baby.'

Aunty Chompu murmured her approval. 'Mod's too shy to ask, but she wants to know all about it, don't you, *naawng*.'

'Are you thinking of working as a surrogate mother, too, Mod?'

She shrugged and sipped the bitter tea Aunty Chompu had set before her.

'You have a whole lot of injections at the beginning, which is a pain.' Lamai pulled a face. 'And there are a lot of appointments at the clinic. But it's all so clean, so *tansamai*. And you get pampered, you really do.'

'Lamai was telling me she stayed in a nice house in Bangkok,' Aunty Chompu said.

'Didn't you miss your family?'

Lamai shrugged. 'I didn't go until I started to show. My husband brought the boys to visit a couple of times but it was easier for him to stay away, seeing as how we couldn't, you know...'

'No spooning?' Aunty Chompu offered.

Mod stifled a giggle. Lamai blushed.

'I had to sign a piece of paper to say I wouldn't...you know...until after the birth. I wasn't allowed to do anything that might hurt the baby.'

Mod thought Lamai was lucky to have such a sympathetic husband. Rungrot would never have agreed to such conditions.

'They're not as strong as natural babies, you know,' Lamai said, helping herself to a piece of chicken.

'But what did your sons think when you didn't come home with a baby?'

'Oh, we didn't tell them. They're too young to understand. I told them I had gas in my stomach and had to stay in Bangkok until the doctors got it all out.' She nodded toward the child in front of the television. 'Nien was so cute about it. He told me, "*Mae*, I miss you. Make those doctors take the gas out faster".'

Her giggle turned into a grimace as her hand moved again to her abdomen. '*Ooy*, I keep forgetting I shouldn't laugh.'

Mod glanced at the boy. She guessed he was around three years old. Had his mother's pregnancy really escaped his notice?

'It couldn't be easy,' she said.

Lamai pursed her lips. 'It's strange at first, carrying someone else's baby. But you get used to it.'

'What about giving it up?'

Lamai's smile faltered ever so slightly.

'*Dai yang, siii yaang*, right?' Aunty Chompu suggested.

That was true, Mod thought. Whenever you gain, you lose. In her case, gain husband, lose money. Gain child, lose husband. For Lamai, gain money, lose a baby.

'That's right, Aunty.' Lamai perked up. 'It was never my baby. I always remind myself of that. She looked nothing like me. Such lovely white skin, and me so black.'

'You're not black,' Mod said politely, though in truth, Lamai's skin was quite dark. Hard to imagine her giving birth to a fair-skinned baby.

'Who knows?' Lamai dunked a wad of sticky rice into the spicy sauce. 'Now that I've had one girl, maybe next time I'll have a little sister for my boys. With the money I made, I could build a house big enough for six children.'

'Good for you,' Aunty Chompu patted Lamai on the knee. 'Now, eat up, girl. You need to get your strength back.' She turned to Mod. 'So what do you think, *naawng*? Now you've heard Lamai's story, don't you think you could do it, too?'

Mod's mind swarmed with thoughts like a cave full of bats. She looked at the floor. 'I'm not sure, Aunty. I need to think about it.'

'Well, don't spend too long thinking. Such opportunities don't come along every day.' Aunty Chompu topped up Lamai's glass. 'More tea for you, Mod?'

'Thank you, Aunty, but no. My mother needs me at home.'

It wasn't entirely true. Her mother was visiting the temple. But Mod suddenly needed fresh air. She scooped up her son and, although he was capable of walking, she carried him all the way home, her heart beating hard against his.

Lucinda Williams was playing on the iPod, her melancholic voice transporting Anna back to Laos in the early 1990s, when she used to cycle around Vientiane listening to the American country singer on a Walkman nestled in her bike basket. Then as now, Lucinda put words and music to feelings that Anna kept hidden.

Setting her coffee on the desk, she turned on her computer. In the weeks since agreeing to help Meg and Nate explore surrogacy in Thailand, Anna had exchanged emails with several IVF clinics that catered to foreigners. All were headed by doctors who, judging from the online testimonials, enjoyed a cult-like following. Anna wasn't surprised—many Thai organisations she'd worked with pivoted around charismatic individuals—but she was anxious to choose the right man. And they were all men. She ruled out several clinics on instinct, such as the 'Ideal Woman Institute', which made her think of *The Stepford Wives*, leaving her with a shortlist of four.

In response to her inquiries, two clinics referred Anna to English-speaking counsellors on staff, the others to third party agents. Both the counsellors and agents were responsible for matching the 'intended parents' or IPs—she was still getting her head around the acronyms—with a woman who would act as their surrogate mother. Once a pregnancy was established, they would liaise between the IPs and the IVF clinic and report on progress. Extras included egg donor matching and legal assistance. Wary of intermediaries in principle, Anna decided to rule out the clinics that used third party agents.

She sipped her coffee and checked for new messages. There was an email from Tom, a lawyer whom Anna had a fling with years earlier, before he met his Thai wife. They'd stayed friends, and she'd asked for his help to get a handle on the legal situation.

"Surrogacy is not my area of expertise, and you shouldn't take the following as legal advice," his message read. "But the bottom line is anything goes.

"It's a completely unregulated area. Medical Council guidelines require ART providers to be approved by the Royal Thai College of Obstetricians and

Gynaecologists. The guidelines also state, and I quote, “(A) No compensation in return to the gamete donor in a manner that may be understood as a trade; (B) No compensation in return to the woman who gets pregnant instead of the couple in a manner that may be understood as hiring to get pregnant; (C) The woman who gets pregnant for the couple shall be a relative by blood of either party of the couple.” But the guidelines don’t carry the weight of law, and you don’t need me to tell you how open each statement is to interpretation. Is it “hiring to get pregnant”, for example, if a couple responds to a woman offering to be their surrogate?”

It seemed like splitting hairs to Anna, but Tom would know what he was talking about.

“It seems that in the absence of legal obstacles, and in light of demand, the Thais have simply added surrogacy to the mix of IVF services they offer to medical tourists. The clinics are encouraging the agents because they can’t manage demand directly to the degree desired by foreign intending parents.”

Reading between the lines, Anna guessed the doctors didn’t want to be hounded by farang IPs demanding daily updates on their baby’s progress.

“A market burgeoning in the grey zone between legality and illegality,” Tom’s email concluded. “A case of TIT, wouldn’t you say?”

Anna smiled. “A case of TIT”, short for “This is Thailand”, was how an infamous expatriate barfly used to sign off his weekly column in *The Bangkok Post*. An in-joke to remind Anna of how long she and Tom had been friends.

Lucinda Williams was singing about her big red sun blues as Anna checked the remaining emails. The surrogacy counsellors had replied to her request for information, falling over themselves to help fulfil her ‘dreams of motherhood’.

“We believe everyone deserves the right to be a parent,” enthused one correspondent.

“Even paedophiles and serial killers?” Anna typed, before deleting it.

“Our philosophy is heart, patience and morality,” wrote another.

‘Yeah, right,’ Anna muttered aloud.

She took another sip of coffee, poised to delete the message, when she caught sight of the letter on her desk. Pale blue paper in a matching envelope.

Only her mother's generation still used stationery like that. Helen's blue note had arrived following Meg's announcement at Christmas lunch that she and Nate were going to try, with Anna's help, to have a baby through surrogacy in Thailand. Helen wasn't one to communicate directly with her eldest daughter. They'd been close once, and Anna had thought it would make her mother proud if she achieved what Helen had not. Tertiary education. Financial independence. Travel. Career. Instead, it seemed to drive them apart. Meg was the daughter Helen gravitated to, Anna the one whom she felt more comfortable addressing in writing.

"I can't tell you how happy it makes me to know you are helping your sister to have a baby in Thailand," Helen had written. "You were away for the worst of it when Meg was going through the IVF. But I saw how much they both suffered. Every month was like a funeral in that house."

Anna tried not to read this as an admonition.

"She puts on a brave face, but your sister has never stopped wanting to be a mum. She's never given up hope."

Meg and Helen were united on that point.

"Years ago I suggested to Meg that she ask you to carry a baby for her. But she wouldn't consider it. Your work was too important, she told me. Meg was so proud of you."

That had stopped Anna in her tracks.

"And now, because of that work, you're in a position to help your sister to finally realise her dream."

And the clincher: "I hope with all my heart that the surrogacy business works out for Meg and Nate. But even if it doesn't, I know it will mean the world to them that you tried. As it does to me, my darling."

Anna couldn't remember the last time Helen had called her darling.

She slipped the letter back into its blue envelope and returned to the email. Heart, patience and morality. That wasn't so bad. If she judged every option by her own cynical standards, none of the surrogacy agencies would make the cut. But this wasn't about her. It was about Meg.

She hit reply and started typing. "I'd like to know more about your service. How is the surrogate selected?"

In the end it was fever that sent Mod back to Lamai. Both *Mae* and Pui succumbed and, as her sister Ying needed to care for them, Mod was left to do the work of three women on her own. Their brother Chai, clearly of the opinion that the daily grind of shopping, cleaning and cooking was beneath him, proved more of a hindrance than help, which was no doubt his intention. The scant savings Mod had managed to set aside were eaten up paying for saline drips and medicine, thanks only to Thaksin's health care scheme that she didn't end up in debt. By the time her mother and Pui pulled through, Mod was gaunt, exhausted and broke. A shattered bucket that could hold no water.

Aunty Chompu arranged another meeting at her house, and this time Mod took notes. Lamai drew her a map showing how to get to the condominium where the IVF clinic was located. When Mod admitted she didn't have the fare to Bangkok, Lamai offered to advance her the money and Aunty Chompu gave her contact details for a relative she could stay with while she applied to be a surrogate. Lamai told Mod to anticipate a battery of medical tests, and coached her on how to answer questions during the interview. She advised Mod to put on some weight saying, 'Nobody will entrust their baby to someone the shape of a chopstick.'

Mod spent the eight-hour bus ride to Bangkok fighting nausea, smearing her nostrils with Tiger Balm until they tingled. She found her way to Aunty Chompu's cousin's apartment, where she was given a fried egg over rice and a sleeping mat. The following morning, she took a bath, washed her hair and dressed in her best clothes.

Lamai's map led her to a plaza on Ploenchit Road, next to the Erawan Shrine. It wasn't quite nine in the morning, but the low fence around the shrine already wore a thick mantle of marigolds, the four faces of Than Tao Mahaprom obscured by a fragrant cloud of incense. On nearby tables, teak elephants nudged offerings of green coconuts, bananas and whisky. Mod wished she could afford to release a clutch of sparrows from the little bamboo cages sold at the entrance. Freeing temple birds was her favourite way of making merit—she never believed the rumours they were trained to fly back in readiness for the next devotee.

Instead, she exchanged a five baht coin for three sticks of incense, and added them to the smoking trays that surrounded the sacred statue.

A blast of cold air at the entrance to the plaza made Mod hug her jacket tightly around her. When she finally found the correct floor, she was confronted by a glass wall covered in pictures of farang babies. She couldn't see a door and was anxious not to smudge the glass by feeling for it. Someone must have noticed her, as there was an electric buzz, followed by a click, and the wall slid open.

The receptionist wore an ice-blue jacket and a smile to match. Beyond the reception desk, women in blue uniforms sat with couples at small tables, or at computers talking into headsets. Mod was ushered into an office. The woman behind the desk wore a skirt suit in the same pale blue, hair teased high to emphasise her status. She introduced herself as Khun Pimsuda, acknowledged Mod's *wai* with a smile and gestured for her to take a seat. Mod sat with her spine straight, not touching the back of the chair, her handbag on her lap. The bag was shabby, its seams frayed, the plastic coating peeling from the handles. Mod felt ashamed.

Pimsuda asked for her ID card.

'Khun Mukda Boonpranee,' she read aloud.

'Mod.'

'Very well, Mod. Born in Buddhist Era 2525. So you're twenty-six years old.'

It wasn't a question, but Mod nodded nervously.

'You have one son.'

Mod nodded again.

'You're a native of Sisaket, I see. Many of our surrogates come from Isaan, so you'll be among friends. I'll just take a copy of this.'

She placed Mod's ID inside the printer on her desk, an electric growl followed by a flash of light.

'Your friend put in a good word for you,' Pimsuda said, handing back the card. 'It's how most surrogates come to us, you know, through word of mouth.'

That explained Lamai's willingness to lend Mod the travelling money. She would have earned a commission on the referral.

'I'm not sure how much she told you, but to establish whether you would be suitable, I have to ask you some questions. After that, I'll send you to the clinic to test your blood. It's routine. You have to pass all the tests to become a surrogate mother.'

Pimsuda shuffled the computer mouse on her desk, making the monitor light up on her heavily powdered face. 'Now let me see...'

Mod sipped her water, so cold it put her teeth on edge. On a shelf behind Khun Pimsuda's desk, a waving cat beckoned.

'Here it is.' Pimsuda gave her another business-like smile. 'Shall we begin the questionnaire?'

Over the following hour, Mod answered questions about her health, education, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, divorce, personal habits and mental state. Though some of the questions made her blush, overall, she found the interview exciting. She'd never imagined anyone taking such interest in the details of her life. Not even her mother asked so many questions.

'So far, so good,' Pimsuda said, typing as she spoke. 'You meet all the criteria. You're the right age. You have a child already. You're no longer married. Your general health is good. But tell me...' She clasped her hands together on the table in front of her. 'What motivates you to become a surrogate?'

Lamai had forewarned Mod about this question. 'Don't tell them it's only for the money. It's okay to say the money will be useful—to help your mother, send your son to a good school, whatever. But say it's about helping others.'

Well, it is, Mod had wanted to say.

'I have my son already,' she told Pimsuda. 'I feel sad for couples who can't have their own baby. I want to help them. *Tham boon dai.*'

'Yes, many of our girls see surrogacy as a good way to make merit. We don't call you *mae oom boon* for nothing.'

Mod hadn't thought of it that way, but Pimsuda made a good point. *Mae oom boon*—the mother carrying the merit.

'And you'll be able to give up the baby easily afterwards?'

It wasn't a question Lamai had prepared her for. Mod hesitated and Pimsuda frowned.

'It won't be your baby, you understand. Even if the intended parents decide to use an egg donor from Thailand, we don't let them use your eggs. So the baby won't be related to you in any way.'

'Yes, I understand. It won't be my baby. I'll just carry it for a while, then hand it over to the parents. But I'll take good care of it.'

'*Kha, kha,*' Pimsuda nodded, smiling again. 'Think of yourself as an oven. The parents provide the ingredients. The doctor is like the baker who puts the dough inside. Your body does the cooking. And when the cake is done, the doctor takes it out and gives it to the parents.'

Mod nodded, though thinking of the baby as a cake conjured images of the parents trying to eat it, like the frog swallowing the moon at the lunar eclipse. She preferred to think of her womb as a hammock where a baby could wait, comfortable and safe, until he was ready to rise.

A sheet of paper slid out of the printer. 'This form authorises your medical tests at the clinic. They'll take blood, and you'll need to provide a urine sample, so finish your water, there's a good girl. The doctor will also check your cervical culture. Any questions?'

Mod was too shy to ask what it meant to check her cervical culture. She shook her head.

'I'll contact you once we have the test results, in a week or so. Assuming everything is clear, when would you be ready to start?'

Mod thought of Pui's second birthday just before the traditional New Year celebration. 'After Songkran?'

'That's still a couple of months away. But I suppose that's all right. They'll want to test your blood again.'

Mod nodded and took another sip of water.

'Do you have any other questions, *naawng?*'

'Will I need to stay in Bangkok for the pregnancy?'

'Up to you. It can be easier that way to get to your appointments. We provide free accommodation and take care of all your expenses.'

'But my family. They will struggle without me.'

'Let me put your mind at rest,' Pimsuda said. 'We pay in instalments. You get the first payment when you sign an agreement with the parents, the second

following a positive pregnancy test, another payment at the end of the first trimester, another at the end of the second trimester, and so on. You'll be able to look after your family.'

You'll be able to look after your family. Mod repeated those words in her mind like a silent mantra. This surrogacy business would not be easy. But that promise would get her through.

You'll be able to look after your family.

Meg wrapped a handful of ice in a wet facecloth and placed it on the back of her neck. The heat was stifling and unrelenting. The forecast maximum had dipped below thirty degrees only twice in twelve days. The week before, they'd had three days in a row over forty, including a record-breaking forty-five point one. She switched on the kitchen radio.

'—and Premier John Brumby warned that we could be looking at the worst day for bushfire conditions in the history of the state. "It's just as bad a day as you can imagine and on top of that the state is just tinder-dry. People need to exercise real common sense." Currently in Melbourne it's thirty-five degrees.'

'Thirty-five degrees?' Meg wailed at the radio. 'It's only ten o'clock in the morning.'

She turned it off in disgust and moved the improvised icepack to her chest. Where the hell was Nate? It was nearly an hour since he'd gone out to buy a newspaper. She tried calling him, only to hear his phone ring from under a magazine on the kitchen bench. She opened the front door to look for him. Bad idea. A fierce north-westerly wind was blowing, hot and dry as bleached bones in the desert.

Meg retreated inside. All the curtains and blinds were drawn, but the hot wind penetrated between the floorboards. She made her way to the bedroom, the darkest and coolest room in the house. Switching the pedestal fan to top speed, she lay down on the bed and covered her eyes with the damp cloth. She was a fish, gasping for air in a dying creek bed.

She was still lying there when she heard Nate's key in the door.

'Meg?'

'In here,' she moaned.

She heard the clatter of keys, the thud of papers hit the dining room table, footsteps as Nate drew closer.

'Oh, my poor darling. You really don't like heat, do you?' The mattress dipped as he sat beside her.

She lifted her head and raised her blindfold. 'What took you so long?'

'I stopped off at the travel agent. They've got a great deal on flights to Bangkok. I'm starting to get excited.'

Meg flopped back onto the pillow and groaned. 'What possessed me to think I could go to Bangkok to have a baby?'

Nate patted her hand. 'Remember, Anna said that in all the time she was away, it never got as hot over there as it does in Melbourne.'

Meg choked back a sob. The hand-patting stopped.

'This isn't about the heat, is it.'

'I think we should try with our own embryo.' Meg's words spilled from her. 'I don't want to use donor eggs. I want it to be our baby.'

Nate removed the facecloth from her eyes. 'It will be our baby, sweetheart.'

'No, it will be your baby with a stranger. "A young Thai woman, often a university student".' She parroted the typical online profile. 'I think we should try the surrogate with my eggs.'

Nate sighed. 'Meg, darling, we've been through all that. It didn't work. It doesn't work for us. Surely it doesn't matter how the baby gets made. What matters is that we have one.'

'But what if I can't love it?'

Her words hung in the air. Outside, the front gate slammed in the wind.

Nate wiped her stray tears with the damp cloth. 'You know, it's never been about genes for me. I'd have been just as happy to adopt if we'd gotten in early enough. I know it's easy for me to say since it's my sperm we're using. But believe me, sweetheart, I'd happily trade places if I thought it would give us a better shot at becoming parents. Hell, we'll even use a sperm donor if that's what you want.'

'That's not what I want,' Meg sniffed.

'We've got to be realistic, sweetheart. We've tried making embryos. It's never worked. Why would we put ourselves through the stress, and waste time and money going down a path that's only ever led to disappointment?'

Meg knew Nate was right. Their best strategy was to use donor eggs. The IVF websites made no bones about it. The younger the egg, the higher the chance of success—"up to ten times higher than with traditional IVF".

But the websites said nothing about the chances of loving a child born from a donor egg. Meg wanted to know those odds.

'I'm scared, my love. The baby might look like you but it won't look like me. What if I don't bond with it?'

Nate gestured at a framed photo on the wall of their niece and nephew. 'No one would ever pick Sandy out of a lineup as Matilda's mother.'

Meg smiled. 'Tilda's the image of my brother, poor thing.'

'Exactly. But anyone who sees Sandy and Tilda together knows they're mother and daughter because of the love between them. And you have so much love to give, my darling.'

Meg cupped Nate's face in her hands and pulled him into a kiss. She peeled off his t-shirt, then hers and pressed her body against him. The heat took her breath away. But she would not be daunted.

She had to believe she could do this.

Anna bought a ticket to the movie with the longest running time, willing to endure an overblown blockbuster to escape the record-breaking heat. Re-emerging from the cinema just after four o'clock, she found the sun shrouded in a haze that smelled like smoke and no sign whatsoever of the forecast cool change. She ducked into the bar next door for more air-conditioning and a cold beer. A TV on the wall was showing images of an inferno so excessive, at first she mistook it for another action movie. It wasn't until the person in front of her moved that she saw the news logo at the foot of the screen.

Victoria's parched landscape was in flames. Bushfires raged across the state, inundating homes, fields and forests. The news showed fire spiralling in deadly molten eddies, and there were reports of red-hot embers raining down from the sky. Trees exploded. Buildings disintegrated. It looked like Hell.

The pub was quiet, the crowd transfixed by the unfolding disaster. A map of Victoria appeared on the screen. Red dots indicating individual fires spread like stains as different firefronts began to merge. Around the room, people gasped and steadied themselves on the arms of strangers.

By the time Anna dragged herself away, the outside temperature had dropped more than fifteen degrees and a cool wind was blowing from the southeast. But there was no comfort in it. The news said the change would make the fires worse.

Within days, the media took to calling it Black Saturday, as the full extent of the devastation unfolded. An estimated two hundred people dead, more than two thousand homes destroyed. Towns razed. Rural communities decimated. Nearly half a million hectares burnt out.

Anna volunteered at the Red Cross, having worked with them in Asia, and was put on the phones. At first, she was buoyed by how the community rallied to support the victims and survivors. In less than a week, people had donated fifty million dollars for bushfire relief, inundating the Red Cross and other charities with offers of goods and services.

But the rallying calls soon turned inward, as though this experience of grief and loss set Australians apart from everyone else. Flags appeared on

charred poles and blackened trees. At a ceremony to mark a national day of mourning, the Prime Minister spoke of the Country Fire Authority volunteers' "courage, compassion and steely resilience" as though these were exclusively Australian qualities.

Anna did not doubt for one moment the strength of the loss and grief, nor the courage of the CFA volunteers. But she regretted the lost opportunity to acknowledge how those experiences of loss and grief, courage and compassion, connected rather than separated human beings from one another. After all, it was less than a year since tens of thousands of people were killed by Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the earthquakes in China. Surely the Burmese and the Chinese understood grief and loss? Surely the Chinese rescue workers who died on the job shared with the CFA volunteers the qualities of courage, compassion and steely resilience? Anna kept these thoughts to herself, of course, aware she'd make no friends by raising such questions.

A few weeks after Black Saturday, with some fires still burning across the state, she opened a bottle of wine and started going through the photos on her computer. She had an idea that sorting them into albums might help her make sense of her experiences, to build a bridge across the chasm that separated her life in Asia from her life in Australia.

She started at random with a batch taken in Laos to illustrate the outcomes of a rural women's development project she was employed to evaluate. Most of the project's target villages were within a day's drive of a major town, but you wouldn't know it looking at the photos. No electricity. No running water. Roads impassable in the wet season except on foot. The most common killers of women and children in these communities were diseases so banal, they wouldn't even register as threats in a country like Australia. Dysentery, sepsis, acute respiratory infections. Most could be prevented with cheap, low-tech solutions like pit latrines, ceramic water filters and smokeless stoves. The project had done great work in this regard—Anna smiled at a photo of a 'model villager' and her two children inside their bamboo house, proudly showing off their clay stove—but it was on such a small scale. She couldn't help thinking what a difference it would make if the collective sympathy and generosity generated by Black Saturday could be directed towards those villagers.

Dousing these seditious thoughts with wine, Anna scrolled on through her portraits of the village women. Their lives were harsh, though their formal, unsmiling poses belied their warmth and hospitality. She paused at a shot of a woman no older than her, hair pulled back into a high ponytail, her expression tentative. She wore what Anna suspected was her best blouse, white, trimmed with lace, the one kept for holy days and village meetings. Anna couldn't remember her name, but she remembered asking how many children she had—a common conversation starter—and the woman's answer.

'Eight. Five dead, three living.'

Memories combined with the wine to make her feel maudlin. When her phone buzzed with a call from Meg, she was grateful for the distraction.

'I've got exciting news. We've chosen a Thai egg donor. Her name is Noy and she's twenty-four years old.'

Anna had made several brief forays into the bizarre world of online egg donor catalogues. Pages of donor profiles listing height, weight, hair and eye colour. Echoes of the women who sat in the glass fronted massage parlours known as 'fishbowls' in Thailand, numbered badges clipped to their bikini strings.

'Noy's a nickname,' she said. 'It means small.'

'Well, she looks beautiful in her photo. Not that looks matter, of course. What's important to us is that Noy's got a successful track record as an egg donor. At least one person's already had a baby using Noy's eggs.'

'Does that mean your child will have half-brothers and sisters somewhere?'

Meg hesitated. 'It doesn't really work like that. Most egg donors prefer to remain anonymous.'

The woman who'd lost five children stared down from the computer screen. Anna turned her face away.

'Is it the egg donors or the parents who prefer it that way?'

There was a sharp intake of breath. 'Look, Anna, this wasn't an easy decision. Don't make it any harder. I called to let you know what's happening and to thank you for the help you've given us so far. The clinic you recommended seems to have a great reputation among Australian IPs.'

'IPs?'

'Intended Parents.'

'Of course.'

'Nate and I are getting ready to book flights to Bangkok, and seeing as how the clinic has staff who speak English, if you want to pull out at this point, that's fine by us.'

Anna was suddenly bereft. 'Don't you want my help anymore?'

'Of course we do. But we're not going to drag you to Bangkok against your will.'

'As if I ever need to be dragged to Bangkok. I said I'll be there for you, Meg, and I will. How about I book us a place to stay? I've seen the hotels that the clinic recommends and I can find somewhere nearby for a fraction of those prices.'

'That would be great, Anna.'

'And I'm sorry for being such a bitch. I've had a few glasses of wine tonight and I'm feeling terrible about all the stuff that's going on. You know.'

'The bushfires? God, it's awful, isn't it. Those poor people have lost everything.'

Yes, Anna thought, as she hung up the phone. Those poor people have lost everything. Why is it that those who are poor to begin with don't seem to make it on to the radar?

She shook her head. That kind of thinking didn't help. She topped up her glass, opened her internet browser and typed in the name of her favourite hotel in Bangkok.

Mod told her family she was awaiting the results of a job interview. She told herself this was more or less true, and she wasn't violating the fourth Buddhist precept not to tell lies. When Pimsuda phoned ten days later to say she'd passed all her tests, Mod waited until her brother and sister had gone to bed, before telling her mother the whole story.

'I can make money, *mae*, enough to take care of the family until the tourists start coming back.'

Mae fingered the *hoi muk fai* she wore on a string around her neck. When Mod was small, her mother would dampen the mouth of the shell with spit or water to make the colours inside come to life. Mod used to think *mae* had magical powers to conjure rainbows like that.

'There's nothing wrong with being a surrogate,' *Mae* said after a long pause. 'It's a noble thing, to help others to have a baby. But you're no longer married, child. People will gossip.'

'They said I can stay in Bangkok,' Mod said. 'I thought once I start to show, me and Pui could—'

Mae patted her hand. 'I'll look after the boy.'

'But—'

'The city's no place for him. It's better this way.'

Mod blinked back tears, knowing what her mother said was true.

The two of them came up with a story: they'd say she'd taken a job as a maid in Bangkok to tide them over until the situation on the border improved. Local girls went to the city for work all the time. Mod would ask Aunty Chompu and Lamai to corroborate the story, too.

She secured her mother's promise to get Ying to help her with the food vending cart. She wished it wasn't necessary, but there was no guarantee the surrogacy would succeed and they needed the income. The experience might even motivate Ying to study harder so she didn't end up pushing a *rot kaen* forever. Perhaps even Chai would step up. Mod was sorry her brother had been so young when their father died. *Phaaw* would have told Chai that it was poverty and not 'women's work' that posed the greater threat to his dignity. But trying to

explain these things to Ying and Chai was like watering a tree stump. They had to learn these lessons for themselves.

Mod dreaded the separation from Pui. But in order to make a better life for them together in the future, for now, she had to leave him behind.

As Aunty Chompu would say, *Dai yang, siia yaang.*

Book 2

Gestation

Anna watched the moving map on her video screen, her stomach fluttering as the small, white aeroplane inched closer to their destination. Bangkok in English, *Krung Thep* in Thai. She touched her sister's arm.

'Did you know the Thai capital holds the world record for the longest place name?'

Meg slipped off her headphones. 'What did you say?'

'The world's longest place name,' Anna said. 'In Thai, it gets shortened to Krung Thep, which means City of Angels. But there are all these other parts to it. Great city. Happy city. Home of the gods incarnate. Something about nine gems. Too long to remember.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Bangkok. It has a completely different name in Thai. Bangkok is a diminutive. I think it means village by the wild plum tree.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Remember how I said things are often not what they seem in Thailand.' She pointed to the moving map. 'Even our destination is different, depending on what language you read it in.'

With a vague murmur, Meg restored her headphones and closed her eyes, leaning on Nate, asleep against the window. Anna's eyes wandered from her sister's face to the screen and back again. She remembered another phrase in the long name of the city. *Amon Rattanakosin*. Residence of the Emerald Buddha, Thailand's most sacred statue. Anna would take Meg and Nate to the temple where it was housed in the grounds of the Grand Palace, show them its costumes made of gold, which the King changed three times a year, according to the season.

Anna knew that for her sister, spending time in Bangkok was nothing more than the means to an end. But when she overheard Meg describe the trip to their mother as 'a necessary evil', Anna became determined to change Meg's mind. To make her see Bangkok with the same wonder as she did.

Distance to destination was 220 kilometres in Thai, 137 miles in English. Anna had learned to speak Thai as a way of distinguishing herself from the

farang kee nok, grotty ‘birdshit foreigners’, who came to Thailand in their millions as tourists. The plane was full of them in their flip-flops and singlet tops, still angling for beers after the fasten seatbelts sign had been switched on.

When she’d first visited Bangkok more than twenty years earlier, Anna had been a *farang khee nok* herself. Staying in cheap hostels with shared bathrooms, she’d done well to wash her hair, let alone her clothes. She’d kissed her boyfriend in public, worn sleeveless tops to temples, probably exposed the soles of her feet, too. At every turn, she’d violated local standards of tidiness and decorum, the principle of *riab roi* so cherished by Thai people. Not that Anna was aware at the time of causing offence. Like the tour operators in Julian Barnes’s *England, England*, Thai people did not insult the ignorance of their visitors, even when that ignorance extended to reducing their City of Angels to a village of plum trees.

Retrospective embarrassment couldn’t tarnish Anna’s memories of her first time in Bangkok. What she’d conceived as a stopover to break up the long haul flight to Melbourne after two months in Europe ended up being the highlight of her trip. After the cold, dark solemnity of European churches with their tortured god and martyred saints, Bangkok’s temples seemed playful, golden stupas and glass mosaics sparkling in the sunlight, Buddha statues smiling as if privy to some great cosmic joke. The city’s train line divided what appeared to be a vast, laid-back village in the west from a hustling, modern metropolis in the east, while the serpentine Chao Phraya River and its myriad *khlongs* invited unexpected comparisons with Venice.

Anna was besotted to be in a place so wholly different from everything she’d ever known. In her diary, she described feeling stripped back, as if, like a snake, she’d shed her old skin. “I’ve never felt so fully alive,” her nineteen-year-old self gushed.

No matter how many times she’d been back since, Bangkok still had that effect on her. The butterflies in her stomach soared as the plane came in to land, and neither the frigidity of the new airport nor the sluggish queues at immigration could still them. When Anna stepped into the city’s humid embrace and inhaled its distinctive perfume of overripe fruit, diesel and dust, it felt like coming home.

She looked to Meg and Nate to share her excitement. But Meg seemed to wilt like a delicate flower in the heat, while Nate looked ill at ease, a fish out of water. Or as it was put more bluntly in Thai, *pla dai nam deun*, the fish that dies in shallow water.

Anna had them wait with the luggage inside the air-conditioned terminal while she ordered a taxi. When the car was assigned, she bundled them into the back and showed the driver the address of their hotel. He turned on the ignition, blasting them with cold air. Anna angled the vents towards Meg and Nate in the backseat.

‘All good?’ she asked, as they turned on to the expressway.

‘Anna.’ Meg’s voice rose up in panic behind her. ‘There aren’t any seatbelts.’

Whatever Anna said made the driver laugh and slap his palm on the steering wheel. Meg felt the colour rise in her cheeks. The driver added something and gestured at the knickknacks dangling from the rear-view mirror.

‘No seatbelts.’ Anna said over her shoulder. ‘But our driver says we’ve got strong spiritual protection. See that?’ She pointed to what looked like a leaf, finger-painted in gold on the ceiling. ‘That means the taxi’s been blessed by a monk.’

Meg saw red. ‘Do you have any idea how dangerous this is, Anna? We can’t transport a baby in a car that doesn’t have seatbelts.’

‘Darling—’ Nate began, but Meg cut him off.

‘She doesn’t get it. She doesn’t understand the risks.’

The silence that followed was broken by the driver. Anna replied with *mai pen rai*, which even Meg knew meant ‘never mind’. But Meg did mind. She wanted Anna to mind, too.

‘Tell you what.’ Anna twisted around to face them. ‘In future, whenever we need a taxi, I’ll ask for one with seatbelts, okay?’

‘You can do that?’

‘I can try.’

Meg mumbled thanks, drained by her outburst.

The drama of the months leading up to their departure had taken its toll. First, Nate’s boss had refused to give him leave before the end of April. As a result, they’d missed out on their first choice of egg donor, Noy, by a week. The young woman was apologetic, explaining she had to schedule the procedure for the April break so it wouldn’t interfere with her studies. Meg had no choice but to wish her well and move on. It was unusual for intending parents to develop a relationship with their Thai egg donor, but at Anna’s urging, and given Noy’s command of English, Meg had chatted with her by email. She figured the more she knew about the young woman, the better it would be for her child in the future. It seemed more ethical than simply treating egg donation as a business transaction.

When the arrangement fell through, Meg couldn't help feeling cheated. Identifying an alternative donor proved relatively straightforward, but Meg couldn't muster the enthusiasm to invest in another relationship that might come to nothing. She reminded herself that the donor wasn't giving away her eggs—not at two and a half thousand dollars per retrieval—and accepted that, despite whatever gloss you put on it, egg donation was ultimately a business transaction. No point trying to turn it into something else.

She'd come to terms with this first setback when their plans were dealt a second blow. Less than a month out from their departure date, violent protests erupted on the streets of Bangkok, spilling over into other parts of the country. Media coverage in Australia was thin on the ground, but Meg read all about it online. When the Thai government declared a State of Emergency, she actually considered calling the whole thing off.

Ironically, it was Anna who'd talked Meg around. Though she hadn't mentioned it at the time for fear of worrying the family, Anna admitted to being in Bangkok during the thick of political protests in the past.

'The demonstrations are in a completely different part of Bangkok from our hotel and the clinic.' she'd said, opening a new window on Meg's laptop. 'Look, I'll show you on the map.'

Meg only glanced at the screen. 'The Australian government is telling people not to travel to Thailand because of the high threat of terrorist attack and political instability.'

Anna opened up the travelling warnings page in another window. 'That's impressive, Meg. You almost had it word perfect. But they're not saying don't travel to Thailand. They're saying use common sense, avoid the demonstrations.'

'But what if they shut down the airport like they did last year?'

'There is always that risk.' Anna typed something into the search engine, waving her hand with a flourish as an image appeared on the screen of a gold sandy beach dotted with umbrellas and, beyond it, an aqua sea dotted with islands.

'Tah-dah! Behold the island of Phuket,' Anna said. 'The perfect place to take your mind off terrorist attacks and political instability. We've got a bit of time to kill. Why don't we go there? No protests, and it has an international

airport. Worst comes to worst and Bangkok airport gets shut down again, we can fly home directly from Phuket.’

Meg looked at her sister. ‘You’ve thought of this before.’

‘I always plan an escape route.’

Reading up on Phuket’s tourist attractions provided Meg with a welcome distraction. She and Nate would have the dreaded two-week wait—‘2WW’ in IVF-speak—between the embryo transfer and pregnancy test. And she figured they’d be better off spending that time luxuriating on a beach, than being stuck in Bangkok, even without the added disincentive of political turmoil.

As their departure date approached, however, Meg’s anxieties resurfaced. Not even the lifting of the State of Emergency made her feel better. She clung to Nate, resenting Anna, as though it was her fault they were in Thailand in the first place.

Meg could barely stand to hear Anna chatting away to the taxi driver. It wasn’t that she was jealous of her language skills, or annoyed when she showed them off. What made Meg mad was that Anna could be so *relaxed*, so utterly oblivious to her pain.

She gazed through the taxi window at the dense jungle of skyscrapers rising above a viper’s nest of expressways and motorways. The elevated route from the airport made it seem as though they were orbiting the city, an effect enhanced by the night sky and the glow of lights through what Meg supposed was a haze of pollution.

Could this strange and savage city possibly deliver on her dreams?

Meg wished they could just keep circling. But the taxi veered off the expressway and spiralled down the exit ramp to street level.

Mod watched Pui's tear-stained face and outstretched hands fade from view. It was a mistake to bring him to the station. He'd wanted to ride the train, of course, and wept as though his heart might break when Mod boarded without him.

She sat back against the wooden seat and gazed out the window. Herons scattered from the parched rice fields, leaving the scant spoils to the bronze-winged coucals that were less easily spooked. The heat combined with the motion of the train made Mod sleepy. She closed her eyes, praying that she was doing the right thing.

The sun had set by the time the train pulled into Hualamphong Station. Mod was hungry, having eaten only a small bag of fried crickets and a packet of sticky rice since breakfast. But she feared being out after curfew and headed straight to the MRT. The chill of the underground came as a shock after the hot, dusty journey from Sisaket, making her hair stand on end.

She'd been assigned to a house in a soi off Sukumvit Road, an affluent part of the city unfamiliar to her. When she turned into the side-street and came face-to-face with a man in a navy blue uniform guarding the golden gates of a luxurious apartment building, Mod half-expected him to shoo her away. But the guard merely smiled and nodded. As she ventured further along the soi, the apartment towers gave way to free-standing houses, barely visible behind high fences and tall trees.

A porch light shone at the address she'd been given. Through the gate Mod saw banana palms and potted plants. To one side of the door was an old bench swing, to the other, a shoe rack. Drawing comfort from these familiar trappings, she pressed the bell beside the gate.

A woman in a billowing smock appeared in the doorway, slipped on a pair of sandals and shuffled across the courtyard.

'*Sawatdee ka*, you must be Mukda.'

She opened the gate and they exchanged a *wai*.

'I'm Nok.'

'Call me Mod.'

'Khun Pimsuda said to expect you today.'

Under the porch light, Mod took in Nok's sweet face and round belly.

'*Gin khaao la baaw?*'

Hearing her language in a strange place was enough to make Mod's eyes grow moist.

'No, I haven't eaten yet,' she replied. 'Are you from Isaan, sister?'

Nok nodded. 'Kalasin. You?'

'Sisaket.'

'Come in and meet the others. I'll get you something to eat.'

The front door opened on to a large room with a tiled floor, where three women lounged in front of a television.

'Everyone, this is Mod,' Nok said, before disappearing into what Mod guessed was the kitchen.

Two women in pregnancy smocks stayed on their respective couches, while a third, in jeans and a T-shirt, bounced up to her.

'*Sawatdee ka*, Mod. I'm Yupa. Everyone calls me Ice. This is Thip.' She indicated one of the pregnant women, a mole like a tear on the outer corner of her right eye. 'She's from Chonburi.'

Thip pressed her hands together, resting them on her pregnant belly.

'And this is Oy.'

Oy propped herself up and gave Mod a *wai*, flashing a smile that showed off her prominent eyeteeth.

'*Khon Isaan?*' Mod asked.

'Yes, from Nong Khai. I heard you say you're from Sisaket.'

Ice pulled a face. '*Aiee*, Thip and I are outnumbered, three to two. I'm from Bangkok.'

'We're all from Bangkok,' Oy said pointedly.

'What do you mean?'

'The parents don't like it when their *mae oom boon* comes from the countryside.'

'That's because Bangkok girls are smarter.' Ice laughed and ducked her head.

'Who wants a country bumpkin having their baby?' Nok reappeared with a tray. 'The dirt might rub off.'

'Stop teasing or you'll scare Mod away.' Thip patted the couch beside her. 'Come, sit down. You look more tired than me.'

Thip's kindness made Mod's eyes well up again. She took a seat gratefully. Nok handed her a plate of grilled chicken and sticky rice and put a bowl of dipping sauce and a glass of water on the table in front of her. The ceiling fan overhead generated a gentle breeze.

'Excuse me for asking, *euuay*, but how far along are you?'

'No need to apologise.' Thip rubbed her belly. 'There are few secrets in this house. I'll be thirty weeks tomorrow. The baby is Japanese. A boy.'

'And your own children?'

'Two girls and a boy, with my mother in Chonburi. The money I make from the surrogacy will build us new house, with a shop downstairs and room out front for tables and chairs. I'll go back at the end of week after my check up.'

'So you don't stay here?'

'I come and go. Oy stays. It's up to you.'

'I'll probably stay, too.' Nok took a seat on the couch beside Oy and placed a plate of longan fruits on the table. 'Only eight weeks gone, and already I've got a belly like a watermelon. The mother is Thai, the husband from New Zealand. I've got a boy and a girl of my own. My parents take care of them.'

Oy helped herself to a longan. 'I'm sixteen weeks along. The mother is Australian. She had the doctor put two glass tube babies inside me, but only one has grown. Lucky, I think, because she has no husband, and she's old already. More than forty. One baby will be enough work for her.'

Oy slipped the longan from its skin and ate it. Her wrists, though thin, looked tough, as though made of wire.

'How many children do you have?' Mod asked her.

'Two girls, one boy. One girl died already. Fever.' She glanced at her belly. 'This one's a girl, too.'

Mod dipped a wad of sticky rice into the chilli sauce.

'Have you had much to do with farangs?' Nok asked.

Mod shook her head.

'I should warn you, they're not always polite.'

'You can say that again.' Oy raised her eyebrows. 'They touch your belly without even asking.'

'And they cry in public, even when they're happy,' Nok said. 'It can be exhausting.'

Oy reached for another longan and held it up between two fingers. 'Hey, this is what I am. *Lam yai*. Brown on the outside, white on the inside.'

Their collective laughter was like chirping sparrows.

'I'm getting ready for the doctor to inject a baby inside me.' Ice patted Mod's arm. 'We might get pregnant at the same time.'

Mod managed a weak smile. She had a thousand questions but no energy to ask them.

'Just look at her,' Thip said. 'She can barely keep her eyes open. You need a bath and some sleep, *naawng*.'

Mod let herself be shown to a plain but clean bedroom. She had just enough energy to sluice off the dust of the journey before collapsing into bed. The mattress was more comfortable than what she was used to at home and she fell into a deep sleep, stirring only to feel for Pui, before remembering he wasn't there.

Anna woke to what looked like stars, but proved to be sunlight streaming through moth holes in the curtains. To save Meg and Nate on accommodation, she'd booked them into the Federal Hotel, a friendly place, if past its prime, within easy distance of the IVF clinic. Anna shimmied into her bathers, wrapped herself in a sarong, fished her keycard from the wall slot and headed outside.

The pool attendant was asleep with his head on the counter beside a soft stack of towels. Anna helped herself without disturbing him, spread her towel on a sunlounge, and slipped into the tepid water. The pool was shaped to accommodate the frangipani trees in the courtyard that surrounded it. Anna could smell their rich scent as she floated on her back with her eyes closed, and through the water, she could feel the pulse of the city, the buzz of electricity, the hum of traffic, the beating of ten million hearts.

A wave of water flooded her nose, making her splutter. Righting herself, she saw a couple had entered the pool, a farang with a tattooed eagle sagging across his chest, and a younger Thai woman, breasts like tennis balls in the twin triangles of her white bikini top. He sat on the steps, watching, while she bounced in the shallows. Anna tried to avoid making assumptions about local women and farang men, but there was no way a respectable Thai woman would be seen dead in a bikini in public. Neither of them acknowledged Anna, but that was nothing new. Being forty, female and farang effectively made her invisible in Bangkok.

Meg and Nate still hadn't surfaced by the time she'd showered and dressed. Though loath to leave them to fend for themselves, the pull of the city was irresistible. Anna had resurrected a couple of old mobile phones before leaving Australia and bought SIM cards at the airport so she and Meg could keep in touch. She slipped a note under the door asking Meg to call when she woke, promising not to be more than ten minutes away.

With a nod to the hotel guard, Anna headed out to survey the damage.

Alors, what do you mean, survey the damage?

She heard Christophe's voice in her head, French accent and all, as she stepped over a skinny dog dozing in the driveway.

Why assume change is bad, chérie?

Because it usually is. This whole area's becoming gentrified. It used to have so much more character.

It used to have more rats, too.

Even in her imagination, she let him have the last word.

She wandered into the soi, taking in the mix of familiar and new. The sixties era house opposite the Federal was still standing, its veranda posts at obtuse angles like arms trying to hold back the high-rise looming all around it. She recognised the German and Australian bars, the Indian tailors and dosa restaurants. The wine bar was new; likewise, the Lebanese restaurant. Anna was happy to see the street's one remaining teak house on stilts still survived, albeit as a guest house. Anna wondered if the food vendors who gathered out front were drawn subliminally to this tiny vestige of traditional village life in the shifting landscape of the city.

Among the vendor carts she found a drink seller serving fresh coffee, brewed and strained through a calico bag. Anna ordered it with sweet milk on ice to go.

The vendor raised her eyebrows. *'Khoon phuut phaa saa thai geng.'*

Anna shook her head. *'Phuut dai nguu nguu, bplaa bplaa.'*

It never failed to raise a laugh, denying she spoke Thai well by using a colloquialism—'speak snake-snake, fish-fish'—that only proved the contrary. Within minutes she was being introduced by the drink seller, Nee, to neighbouring vendors, Gift and Mint. Clearly, the Thai fashion for English words as nicknames was alive and well.

'Where are you from?'

'How long have you lived in Thailand?'

'What is your job?'

'How many children do you have?'

Though she'd been asked the same questions countless times, Anna never tired of answering. Being interrogated beat being ignored, and when she spoke, she was seen.

She chatted with the women as she sipped her coffee through a straw. All three were from villages in Thailand's poorest region, Isaan, in the northeast. When Anna slipped into their language—it was virtually identical to Lao, which

she'd learned by living in Vientiane for several years—they whooped with delight. But there was sadness in their smiles when they talked about moving to Bangkok for work, leaving children behind.

'Khid hod ban,' Nee said. Gift and Mint nodded. All three were homesick.

The smells coming from Gift's food cart made Anna's stomach rumble. To slake her hunger, she bought a bag of pomelo segments from Mint and ate as she walked, relishing the delicious clash of sweet fruit and spicy dipping salt. She passed a couple of garden restaurants and a strip of 'boutique' hotels, which she knew from past experience meant the rooms were stylish but windowless. She saw with relief that Cheap Charlie's was still in the same spot it had occupied since the 1980s, though the bar was closed like a covered wagon at this time of day. She made a mental note to take Meg and Nate there.

At the corner where the soi met Sukhumvit Road, *tuk-tuks* and motorcycle taxis hovered like fish at the mouth of a stream. Drivers sat around playing draughts with bottle tops, draught boards carved into the bench seats where they sat in wait for fares. Anna shook her head in response to their chorus of 'Taxi, madam?' and paused to take in the scene.

The six lanes of Sukhumvit Road were lined with highrise and bisected by the elevated tracks of the Skytrain. Bangkok's mass transit system was rich fodder for her verbal sparring matches with Christophe about the pros and cons of development. Christophe could see no disadvantages to the Skytrain, not when journeys that once took hours through Bangkok's toxic, gridlocked traffic were reduced to minutes in air-conditioned comfort. Anna argued that the system was elitist, inaccessible to all but the able-bodied, who had the means to live within a short walk or motorcycle taxi ride of a station. Christophe said she'd spent too much time in communist countries.

Of course, Anna didn't hesitate to use the Skytrain, especially after having lived through the construction of the damn thing. Back then, the city had looked like the set of a disaster movie, filled with troubling portents like severed flyovers and pedestrian staircases that lead nowhere. The same journeys that in those days found her lurching through traffic on the back of a motorbike, heart in her throat and eyes stinging with pollution, were now a matter of hushed minutes in a chilled carriage. Anna didn't miss the fear and frustration, but she

did miss the intimacy, proximity to the sights, smells and sounds that brought Bangkok to life.

If she tried explaining it to Christophe, he'd probably accuse her of more *cinéma*.

The phone ringing in her handbag brought her thoughts back to the present.

'Hi Meg.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm just down the road. How are you? Did you sleep well?'

'Not at all. Our room smells of insecticide. It's given Nate terrible hay-fever.'

'I'll talk to the cleaner about not spraying the room. Do you need me to pick up some antihistamines?'

'That'd be great.'

'I'll be back in ten minutes. Will you and Nate be ready to go out? I'm starving.'

'We don't really feel up to much. We thought we'd just eat at the hotel and hang out by the pool.'

'Eat at the hotel? No way. I'm taking you out.'

'But—'

'I'm going to the pharmacy now. See you soon.'

Anna hung up before she could protest. Thailand was giving Meg another shot at fulfilling her dream of motherhood, an experiment with the potential to bring a half-Thai child into their lives. It was time for Meg to move among the people in the place that made it possible.

Meg struggled to keep up, forced to walk single file behind Anna and Nate on account of the food carts and motorbikes blocking the footpath. Not to mention the people. Tourists. Indian men in turbans. And Thais, of course. Girls in short skirts playing with their hair. Women in pink uniforms beckoning from massage parlours. Other women in aprons and hairnets agitating giant woks over open flames. Men on building sites in long-sleeved tops and balaclavas. Meg didn't know how they did it. The heat was oppressive. She could feel sweat trickling down her spine. Didn't Thai people ever sweat?

A mangy dog, pink skin showing through dirty fur, lurched across her path. Meg swerved to avoid it, yelping as her bare arm brushed against one of the thick, black wires that dangled from the telegraph poles like snakes. Several bystanders giggled.

Nate turned around. 'You okay, sweetheart?'

He put his arm around her but Meg shook him off. 'Too hot.'

'Not far now,' Anna piped up. 'The station's just around the corner.'

Her cheery tone set Meg's teeth on edge. Anna seemed oblivious to the heat, the dogs, the holes in the footpath, prattling on about bars and spirit houses—even the flowers decorating the traffic islands. The more she went on, the more irate Meg became.

When they finally boarded the Skytrain, she could have cried with relief. In the cool, clean, quiet of the carriage, Bangkok seemed another world away. If not for the advertisements in Thai and a sign asking commuters to *Please offer this seat to monks*, she could have been anywhere.

Anna continued her running commentary, reminiscing about her first visit to Bangkok. But Meg was only half-listening, distracted by a small child on the lap of a woman opposite, staring at her with eyes like onyx. Meg smiled. The boy buried his face against his mother's chest. Meg turned to the window, swallowing a lump in her throat.

From the Skytrain, Anna led them across an elevated walkway into an air-conditioned shopping plaza. A narrow escalator ferried them to an upmarket food court. Not Anna's usual style.

'I thought you might like this place.' She swept her hand across the extensive dining area. 'You can get all kinds of food, and it has fish-tanks. Tropical fish,' she added. 'For watching, not eating.'

She found them space at a bench surrounding a two metre tank, where lemon-coloured fish circled an artificial log. Yellow Tang, according to a sign on the glass. There was an orange starfish on the tank floor, too, though Meg couldn't tell if it was real.

Nate minded the seats while the sisters inspected the food outlets. Anna angled for Meg to try some of the more exotic offerings—curries, spicy salads, red roasted duck—but Meg wasn't in the mood to be adventurous. She ordered a *pad thai* for Nate and fried rice for herself, ferrying the food to the table on a plastic tray. Anna joined them, bearing three bottles of water and a plate of unrecognisable vegetables.

'What's that?'

'*Yam thuaa phuu*,' Anna said. 'Winged bean salad. Want to try some?'

Meg shook her head and ate her rice, the fish looking down on her with pursed yellow lips.

Anna left a morsel of salad on her plate and pushed it aside. 'How do you feel about visiting Jim Thompson's House after lunch?'

Nate raised his eyebrows. 'Jim Thompson? The American crime writer?'

'Sorry, no.' Anna chuckled. 'I'm talking about Jim Thompson, the American businessman who helped take Thai silk to the world. You didn't get to visit his house on your last trip and it's beautiful.'

'I don't really feel up to sight-seeing,' Meg said.

'It's only a short walk from here.'

Nate placed his hand protectively on Meg's lower back. 'It's all right for an Asia-hand like you, Anna. But it's going to take me and Meg time to acclimatise.'

'Well, let's go to the aquarium. It's in the basement. Not cheap, but it's air-conditioned. And it's pretty amazing. They've got a walk-through shark-tank and—'

'I'm tired,' Meg said bluntly. 'I want to go back to the hotel.'

'Already?'

'I'll get a taxi back. You two can go to the aquarium without me.'

‘But it’ll be fun—’

‘I’ll go back, too—’

They spoke over each other. Anna gestured for Nate to continue.

‘I’ll go back with Meg. I could do with a rest, too.’

‘Up to you,’ Anna shrugged, though Meg could tell she was disappointed.

She wished she could explain to Anna that she needed to concentrate all her energy on the surrogacy. She’d felt the same way when she was doing IVF. It wasn’t rational. There was something almost superstitious about it, as though the intensity of her focus could make a difference to the outcome, and allowing herself to be distracted jeopardised her chances of success.

They barely spoke on the trip back to the hotel. Anna left them at the entrance without saying where she was going. Nate retired to the pool while Meg used the public computer in the foyer to check her email. There was a message from Doctor Boribun at Team Baby to say their egg donor would receive her trigger shot that night, and reminding them of Nate’s appointment the following morning for what was delicately referred to as an “initial retrieval”. Backup in case he couldn’t perform on the day when fertilisation was scheduled. Meg sent a quick message to confirm.

Their room still smelled of insecticide. Meg turned up the air-conditioner, stripped down to her underwear and lay on the bed. Their donor had been on stimulating meds for ten days. Meg remembered the regimen of mixing liquid and powders, uncapping needles, pinching her stomach fat with one hand while stabbing herself with the other, and sending the plunger home. Her own bravery gave her a thrill at first. But as time went by, she felt sordid, a junkie with a habit that was getting her nowhere. She rubbed her stomach below her navel, imagining she could still feel the injection sites.

Likely as not, the egg donor wouldn’t be injecting herself, but attending the clinic for her shots. But what about the side effects? Would the donor experience the depression that had flattened Meg? The headaches? The back pain? The cramping and bloating? In a cruel twist, the closest Meg had ever come to looking pregnant was when her overstimulated ovaries made her belly swell and her body ache with retained fluid. The condition was a response to the

trigger shot and could be life-threatening. What if something terrible like that happened to the egg donor? How could Meg live with herself?

She sat bolt upright, heart racing, skin slick with sweat despite the air-conditioning. Her hands by her sides held the sheet in her fists. She took a deep breath, releasing her grip as she exhaled, breathing slowly until she felt the tightness in her chest begin to ease. Her hand found the pendant at her neck, thumb tracing the warped pearl on its bed of silver.

Doctor Lau, who always took credit when things went smoothly, blamed the stuff up on poor luck. Ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome was rare, she'd said, and riskiest on a first treatment cycle. That thought brought Meg some comfort. Given their donor had a proven track record, she'd have donated eggs before. Surely that lowered the risks?

Meg reminded herself that for the donor, egg retrieval was just part of the job. The physical and emotional demands were not the same as they had been for her. The egg donor wasn't trying to have her own baby.

She continued her deep breathing. She couldn't afford to let her anxiety get the better of her. Nate wouldn't tolerate a return to the 'bad old days', and Anna had made it clear she was participating under protest. Meg didn't want to give either of them an excuse to scuttle the whole thing.

She lay down and drew up the sheet. Her hands found their way to her abdomen, feeling for her ovaries. She imagined herself in the body of the egg donor, follicles quivering as they prepared to release dozens of perfectly formed human eggs, picturing them as flawless pearls.

Sleep when it came was mercifully dreamless.

The IVF clinic occupied the nineteenth floor in the tower of an upmarket shopping centre. Anna, Meg and Nate stepped out of the lift to find giant images of blond-haired babies staring down at them and the words ‘Team Baby: making dreams come true’ emblazoned in English and Thai on an opaque glass wall. A door opened on to a brightly lit space, where couples sat in white leather chairs around coffee tables and in booths that lined the walls. Most were attended by women in smart, powder-blue skirt suits. A Perspex tablet inside the entrance listed the languages spoken as English, Japanese, Chinese, Hebrew and, almost as an afterthought, Thai. To Anna, the place had the look and feel of a business class airport lounge.

The receptionist ushered them to a table, promising a consultant would be with them shortly. Anna saw Meg take Nate’s hand.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Nervous,’ Meg managed a small smile. ‘But excited, too.’

‘This place is amazing,’ Nate said.

‘How does it compare to Australia?’

‘More slick.’ Nate gestured around the room. ‘You don’t see images of babies plastered all over the walls. IVF clinics back home are more...um...’

‘Circumspect?’

‘I was going to say subtle.’

Giant babies at the entrance, photographs on the walls—there was nothing subtle about Team Baby’s advertising. The message was loud and clear: *You want babies? We’ll give you babies.* Anna glanced around the room, registering the hushed voices, tense postures, nervous hands. She wondered how these anxious couples had arrived at a course of action as precarious as paying a Thai woman to have a baby for them. Was lack of subtlety—the overconfidence—part of the appeal? Or was it simply a case of finding the service they wanted at the lowest price?

Anna wondered where the various couples came from. She’d once met a woman in a Bangkok bar who claimed she could distinguish mainland Chinese and those from Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan by the quality of their haircuts

and shoes. Anna tried deploying similar techniques to guess the nationalities of the clients at the neighbouring tables, but quickly gave up. Any one of them could be from Australia.

A woman whose nametag read 'Cherry' arrived with a clipboard and forms for Meg and Nate to fill in. Anna excused herself to use the bathroom, eavesdropping on accents along the way. She detected a couple from the US, another from Singapore or possibly Malaysia. One trio was speaking Chinese. The bathroom featured more baby photos and smelled of talcum powder.

Back in the waiting lounge, a couple had joined Meg and Nate at their table. Anna pulled up an extra chair.

'This is my sister, Anna,' Meg said. 'Anna, this is Ian and Kwan. They're from Sydney, although Kwan's originally from Thailand, aren't you?'

'My parents migrated when I was eight.' Kwan smiled and combed her fingers through her thick hair, pushing it back off her face. Anna put her at around Meg's age, the husband perhaps a decade older, his scurfy complexion attesting to a life outdoors.

'Their surrogate's pregnant with twins,' Meg said, her eyes shining.

'Congratulations.'

'Thanks,' Ian beamed. 'Worked on the first go. I don't think Kwanie knows what she's in for. I've got grown up kids, but this is the first time for her.'

'Oh?'

Anna saw Meg's smile falter.

'We wanted to have a baby together, and when IVF didn't work, we figured why not rent a womb? The surrogate gets to make money and we get to make a baby—or in our case, *babies*. It's a win-win.'

Anna held her tongue.

'So are you happy with Team Baby?' Meg asked.

'Couldn't be happier. The facilities are first-rate and the service is better than you get at home.' Ian patted his wife's thigh. 'They don't call this place the Land of Smiles for nothing.'

Kwan rolled her eyes. 'My husband is such a sweet talker.' She looked at Meg. 'So where are you in your surrogacy journey?'

Anna cringed at the terminology, but Meg took it in her stride.

'We're just starting out. This is our first appointment actually...' Her voice trailed off as Cherry reappeared with a second woman in tow.

'We'd better let you get on with it then.' Ian levered himself up and offered Nate his hand. 'Good luck, mate.'

'Yes, good luck.' Kwan smiled at Meg.

Anna joined Meg and Nate in rising to their feet to greet the two women in matching uniforms.

'This is Miss Pimsuda,' Cherry said. 'She is your counsellor.'

Pimsuda pressed her palms together and raised them to her chin, her coral nail polish perfectly matched to her lipstick.

'*Sawatdee ka*. Welcome to Team Baby. You can call me Pim, Mister Nate, Missus Meg and—'

'Anna.' She returned the *wai*. 'Meg's sister. We exchanged emails.'

'Ah yes. Please.' She gestured at the chairs.

Pimsuda went through the forms with Meg and Nate, confirming the details of what she referred to as their 'package'. Although Anna knew money didn't carry the same taint as it did in Australia—in Thailand, money could express love, if not buy it—the discussion of pricing and packages made her uncomfortable. Meg and Nate had spent several thousand dollars to get the egg donation and surrogate selection processes underway, also forking out for legal advice in Australia and Thailand. Anna suspected they'd re-mortgaged the house to afford it.

'Now, you have an appointment for a deposit, Mister Nate?'

It took Anna a moment to realise they were no longer talking about money but about sperm.

'Before you go, do you want to meet the egg donor?'

Meg looked surprised. 'Is that possible?'

Pimsuda extracted a slim phone from her breast pocket. Anna heard her ask in Thai for a Miss Natnicha. Without quite knowing why, she committed the name to memory.

Within minutes, a young woman joined them. Anna vaguely recognised her from a photograph in the egg donor catalogue. She had porcelain skin and

high cheekbones, her hair held back with a glittery headband. Her smile revealed dimples in both cheeks and braces on her teeth.

‘This is Miss Nu,’ Pimsuda said.

Anna smiled to herself. The nickname ‘Mouse’ seemed appropriate for someone who was participating in this strange medical experiment.

Nu greeted them with a *wai*. Meg responded by throwing her arms around the girl and gushing, ‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’ Nu stiffened. Anna was about to remind her sister to rein in the physical contact, but saw the tears in Meg’s eyes and let it go.

‘I’m sorry.’ Meg laughed as she wiped her eyes. ‘Miss Pim, please tell Nu that I’m sorry for getting carried away. I’m just very happy to meet her.’

Nu acknowledged the translation with a forgiving smile.

They chatted for a few minutes. Pimsuda did the interpreting, Anna having decided not to let on that she spoke Thai for the time being. Nu told them she was twenty-six, lived at home with her parents and her three-year-old daughter, and worked as an accountant. The family’s chief breadwinner, Anna guessed. Nate told Nu that he was an accountant, too, and they agreed that the baby was bound to have a good head for numbers. Anna saw Meg wince.

‘Is your family from Bangkok?’ Anna asked.

‘My ancestors came from China a long time ago. But my parents were born in Bangkok.’

‘You’re very pretty,’ Meg said.

Nu shook her head, the polite response.

‘It’s true. I hope our baby will have your dimples.’

‘But not my nose,’ Nu said. ‘You don’t want a baby with a flat nose like mine. Your baby should have a nice big nose like your husband.’

Nate laughed in response to Pimsuda’s translation.

‘But you have a lovely nose,’ Meg said.

Again, Nu shook her head, though she looked pleased by the compliments.

They posed for Anna to take a photograph, Meg and Nate standing either side of Nu. There was another flurry of hugs and *wais*, before Nu left and Nate was ushered away.

Anna scrolled through the photos while Meg attended to more paperwork. Nuu was a full head shorter than Nate, shorter than Meg, too; and whereas Nate and Meg looked their age, Nuu looked younger than twenty-six. Anna wondered what a stranger would make of the threesome. Husband, wife and mistress? Parents and their grown up, adopted daughter? Western couple visiting the young Thai woman they'd sponsored as a child? Or were images such as this destined to become commonplace, mosaic pieces in the fragmented family portraits of the future?

She zoomed in on their faces. Nate and Nuu were beaming. Meg wore a smile Anna recognised from their childhood. The brave smile she used when she felt like crying. Anna glanced up at her sister and felt a surge of love, tinged with the sting of regret. She should've rearranged them for the photo so that Meg was in the middle, the centre of the hoped-for family, the link between Nate and Nuu.

She returned the camera to her bag, and pulled her chair closer.

White fairy-lights encircled the trunks of the tallest trees in the garden, making them appear to float out of the shadows. More lights flickered from among the shrubs and palms like sprays of baby's breath. The house band was playing Van Morrison's 'Moondance', and the air smelled of lemongrass. Whether it was the setting, the music or the two gin and tonics she drank with dinner, Meg felt herself relax for the first time since arriving in Thailand.

'Same again?' Anna caught their waiter's eye and raised her empty glass.

'I'm not sure.'

'Oh, go on, Meg. Tonic water helps keep away the malaria, you know.'

'Malaria?' She eyed the nearby pond with alarm.

'I'm just teasing. Another beer, Nate?'

'I wouldn't say no. What's this place is called again?'

'Rosabieng. It means dining car in Thai. Did you see the train carriage in the garden when we came in? There's a model railway inside, too.'

Nate stood up. 'I've gotta see that. Anyone else?'

'You go and report back to us, sweetheart.'

Meg smiled as she watched him disappear inside the restaurant building.

'You're lucky to have him, you know,' Anna said.

'I know.'

They sat for a moment without speaking. The band launched into a cover of Ben E King's 'Stand By Me'.

'So is there anyone special in your life, Anna?'

'Why do you ask?'

Meg rolled her eyes. 'Nate's right. You *do* deflect questions about yourself. I ask because I'm your sister and I care about you.'

Anna stirred her gin and tonic with a straw. 'There's a guy in Cambodia. We've been seeing each other for a few years—'

'A few years? Why didn't you tell me?'

'It's complicated. He's French.'

'How romantic! Does that mean you're going to live in France?'

Anna shook her head. 'It's not like that. I came back to Melbourne to get him out of my system.' She paused in her stirring. 'It hasn't worked. *C'est la vie*, I guess.'

Meg reached across the table and took Anna's hand. 'I feel terrible. I've been so caught up in the whole surrogacy thing, I didn't even realise what you've been going through.'

'Don't be hard on yourself. I haven't exactly been forthcoming.' Anna released her hand from Meg's hold. 'Anyway, enough about me. You met the mother of your baby today. How are you feeling?'

Meg's heart sank. 'She's not the mother of my baby, Anna. She's just the egg donor.'

'But she's the baby's biological mother, surely.'

'I'm not sure you understand, Anna. The egg donors prefer to remain anonymous. We only met Nuu because we all happened to be there at the same time. I don't even know her real name.'

'Natnicha,' Anna said. 'I wrote it down for you. For some reason, I thought you'd want to know. For your child's sake—'

'Will you look at that.' Nate's voice cut into their conversation. 'There's an elephant in the driveway.'

Meg turned to look, happy for a distraction, anything to avoid another argument with her sister. To her surprise, there *was* an elephant standing at the entrance to the restaurant. A female, judging by the lack of tusks. A man in a black t-shirt and camouflage pants was leading her on a rope. Meg watched as he fished a piece of sugarcane from a cloth bag on the elephant's back and waved it at the diners.

Meg leapt to her feet. 'Oh, I think we're allowed to feed it. Nate, quick, get the camera.'

'Don't.' Anna caught her by the arm.

'What?'

'Please, don't encourage them. It's illegal to bring elephants into the city for street begging.'

Meg gestured at the small crowd gathering around the elephant. 'But other people are doing it. And I love elephants.'

'If you love them, then don't do it, Meg. The city's toxic for elephants. The hot roads damage their feet. They get injured in traffic accidents. You can see from the way she's swaying and showing the whites of her eyes how distressed she is.'

Meg slumped back into her seat. 'Who made you the bloody expert on everything?'

She knew she sounded childish. But she was sick of being made to feel inadequate all the time.

'Look, feed the elephant or don't feed the elephant. It's up to you. But I'm not going to pretend it's all okay.' Anna tossed her serviette aside and stood up. 'Take some fucking responsibility is all I'm saying.' She placed some baht notes on the table and drained her glass.

'Where are you going?'

'Out. I assume you can find your way back to the hotel.'

Meg saw her scowl at the elephant keeper as he offered her the sugarcane on her way past.

'What's up her arse?' Nate said.

'Man trouble.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah. You know what she's like. Won't actually talk about it, but she's very upset.'

'I'll say.' Nate leaned across the table and took Meg's hand in his. 'And how about you, my love? How are you feeling? What did you think of our egg donor, Miss Nuu?'

Meg couldn't help smiling. 'She seems lovely.'

'Not too mousy?'

She rolled her eyes. 'That's a terrible joke.'

He grinned and sipped his beer. 'Seriously, though. Half our baby's genes are coming from her.'

Half our baby's genes are coming from her. Meg wished she'd found those words to say when Anna was going on about biological mothers.

'You will think of it as our baby, won't you, even though—'

He held up his hand. 'This baby wouldn't exist if it wasn't for you.'

Meg leaned across the table and kissed him in gratitude.

'Just as well our moral watchdog wasn't around to see you do that.' Nate grinned and raised his bottle. 'Here's to a successful egg retrieval.'

Glass clinked like a bell between them. The house band chose that moment to launch into Bon Jovi's 'Born to be my baby', making them both laugh.

Nate tilted his chin toward the space over Meg's shoulder. 'Now, how about you go and feed that elephant.'

She stood, giddy with gin and hope, and looked to where the animal was still standing. The mahout caught her eye and held out a piece of sugarcane like a relay baton. Meg hesitated. Was Anna right about the whites of the elephant's eyes showing?

Shaking her head, she sat back down.

Mod's knees dangled from hard plastic bars, her legs spread, hospital gown scrunched up so they could get at her belly. She lay as still as she could, grateful for the mask that concealed her face. Her bladder was so full, it required all her concentration not to wet herself as the doctor pressed down on her stomach with his dull instrument. Somewhere above Mod's head was a screen that showed the doctor her insides. He'd barely glanced at her face, but he'd been studying her insides for weeks now. Mod couldn't see what was going on, but Pimsuda had told her this was the day that the doctor would put what Oy called a 'glass tube baby' into her womb.

She'd been prepared for weeks. At first, the doctor gave her tablets to eat. Then he added medicine like white bullets, and told her to put one inside herself each day.

'You mean swallow it?' she'd asked, confused.

'No, I mean insert it into your vagina,' the doctor replied stiffly.

To be sure his meaning was clear, the nurse bent down and whispered, '*Fang nai haawy naawng*. Inside your cunt, girl.'

Perhaps she used Isaan market talk to be kind. But Mod was so embarrassed, she almost cried. She had no intention of losing any more face by wetting herself on the examination table.

'Inserting the speculum,' the doctor said to no one in particular.

The slide of cold metal against her skin made her catch her breath.

'Cleaning the cervix.'

It felt like something had crawled up inside her. Mod bit her lip.

'Transfer catheter.'

A woman doctor joined them in the room, carrying what looked like a long, uncooked vermicelli noodle. The two doctors glanced at the screen Mod couldn't see, murmuring in voices she couldn't hear. She closed her eyes and brought an image to mind of Pui at the market. She'd been buying *bplaa krai*, when a catfish leapt from its basin and slithered through the mud over Pui's foot, making him shriek with laughter. He'd shown off the muddy whorls on his toes to his grandmother as proudly as if they were new shoes.

‘Checking catheter is clear.’

Mod’s opened her eyes as the expert, holding the vermicelli noodle upright, withdrew to the adjacent room.

The doctor removed the ultrasound wand from her belly and Mod heard a snap as the metal speculum was released. But her relief was short-lived.

‘One of the embryos was left behind in the catheter.’ The expert had reappeared. ‘We’ll have to go again.’

This was the first Mod had heard of them putting in more than one baby. Did this mean she could end up with twins like Nok? She wasn’t sure her body was strong enough to carry two babies at once. But she wasn’t in a position to ask questions. She closed her eyes as the doctor pummelled her bladder with the ultrasound wand and reinserted the metal clamp. Whatever they did seemed to hurt more this time. She thought again of Pui’s muddy toes, and waited for it to be over.

When at last the pressure ceased and the metal was gone from between her legs, Mod opened her eyes to find only the nurse, Wasana, left in the room. The eyes above her mask were kind as she helped Mod out of the stirrups and rearranged her gown to cover her crotch.

‘I bet you could use a toilet right now, *naawng*,’ she said.

‘Is that okay? I mean, the babies won’t fall out, will they?’

Wasana’s eyes crinkled at the corners as she patted Mod’s hand. ‘No more than a seed planted in the earth can fall out into the sky. Go and use the bathroom, *naawng*. I’ll show you where you can lie down after that.’

Mod peeled off her mask as she sat up, aware of a dull pain in her lower back as her feet found the floor. She moved slowly, despite what the nurse said, conscious of the responsibility she carried.

Wan pheut wang phohn. The saying came to mind as she caught sight of her anxious reflection in the bathroom mirror.

We plant a seed and hope.

Anna met Fon in a café annexed from the menswear section of a department store on Sukumvit Road. Fon's choice, of course. Anna would've been happy to eat in a local food court, but her friend liked the finer things—at least, when she wasn't working in remote villages up country. Fon wore an aqua polo shirt over tailored pants, her hair cut shorter than Anna remembered it. They greeted each other with a wai, followed by a brief hug. A waiter materialised and Anna welcomed Fon's offer to order for them both, grateful not to have to take charge for a change.

'So you've come back to Bangkok already,' Fon said in English. 'I thought you said it was time to go home.'

Had she said that? Anna tended not to use the word *home* to refer to Australia.

'I didn't expect to be back quite this soon. I'm almost too embarrassed to tell you why.'

'Oh?'

'It's my sister, Meg. She and her husband have come to Thailand to hire a surrogate mother to have a baby for them. I tried to talk Meg out of it, but she was determined. And I figured it was better for me to be involved than not. I mean, that way I can keep an eye on things, make sure no one gets exploited.'

'You're worried about your sister being exploited?'

'Oh god no.' Anna felt her face redden. 'I'm worried about the surrogate mother.'

'Why?'

'Well, I figured it's poor women who sign up as surrogates and—' Fon's wry smile stopped her mid-sentence. 'What? The surrogate mothers are vulnerable, aren't they?'

Fon shrugged. 'Probably not as much as cleaners and factory workers. And the salary is better.'

'So you think it's okay for farangs like my sister to pay Thai women to have babies for them?'

‘Why shouldn’t women in my country take advantage of such opportunities? *Reuu dtawng gin naam dtai saawk mai?*’

The expression was one Anna had heard Fon use before, the Thai equivalent of being satisfied with the crumbs from a rich man’s table. Translated literally, it was more visceral. ‘Must they drink only the water that drips from the elbow?’

‘Being a surrogate mother is a way of making merit,’ Fon said. ‘It’s considered a humanitarian act. A lot better than sex work.’

Anna chased the ice-cubes in her water glass with a straw. She’d assumed that as a feminist, Fon would be dead against commercial surrogacy.

‘Neither surrogacy nor sex work seem like great choices to me.’

‘That’s because you’re thinking like a farang.’

Anna sighed. They’d been having variations on the same conversation ever since they met.

‘The Thai surrogate mothers can look after themselves, Anna. You should look after your sister.’

‘I’m trying to, but she doesn’t make it easy. I can hardly get her to leave the hotel.’

‘It must be very frightening for her. Imagine trusting a complete stranger to look after your baby for nine months.’

‘It won’t even be her baby. They’re using a Thai egg donor, too.’

Fon raised her eyebrows. ‘*Weuuy!* Your sister must really want to be a mother to go to so much trouble.’

The irony of Fon sympathising with Meg while she sympathised with the Thai surrogate was not lost on Anna.

‘You know, I read somewhere that surrogacy transfers one woman’s pain to another—the pain of childlessness for the pain of giving up a baby you’ve carried for nine months.’

‘I don’t know about that. I think surrogate mothers in Thailand just focus on the money.’

The shock must have shown on Anna’s face as Fon added, ‘I’m not saying the surrogate mothers have no feelings. Just that they’re practical. Remember, we don’t distinguish between the heart and the mind in Thai like you do in English.’

Anna remembered all right. The Thai word *jai*, meaning ‘heart’, could denote ‘mind’ as well, and myriad expressions containing the word *jai* could refer to emotions, states of mind, or both. It was a concept she still struggled to get her head around. And her heart.

‘Surely it’d be difficult to give up a baby you’ve carried inside you for so long.’

Fon tilted her head. ‘And what would we know about that?’

The arrival of their food saved Anna from having to respond. Being a career woman who’d never married gave Fon a common bond with Anna that she didn’t have with most of her peers, and Anna appreciated the show of solidarity. But she didn’t necessarily agree that you had to go through something yourself in order to empathise with the plight of others.

Fon spooned spaghetti on to their plates, releasing a heady aroma of garlic, anchovies and chillies. Anna dished out the spinach salad and topped up their water glasses. The conversation wandered on to the safer ground of work and gossip about friends they had in common.

But Fon’s words kept playing in the back of Anna’s mind. *Your sister must be frightened. She must really want to be a mother.* When she and Fon parted company, Anna dialled Meg’s number.

‘Meg, I want to apologise for being such a bitch last night—’ she began.

‘Anna, it’s Nate. We’re at the clinic.’

‘What’s happening? Is Meg okay?’

‘You could say that. We’ve just been told they harvested thirty-one eggs from our donor. We’re both in shock. The most we’ve ever had before was...how many was it, darling? Eight?’

Anna’s heard an indistinct murmur, followed by the flurry of the phone changing hands.

‘Thirty-one eggs.’ Meg sounded breathless. ‘And Nuu is absolutely fine.’

‘I’m very happy for you,’ Anna said.

‘If all goes well, and there’s no reason why it shouldn’t, Doctor Boribun says he’ll do the embryo transfer next Monday. That’s when we’ll meet our surrogate.’

'Let me take you and Nate out to celebrate. I want to make up for last night.'

'You don't have to make up for anything, Anna. We'll meet back at the hotel and work it out from there. Nate's still got to provide a fresh sample for the embryologist and—'

'Too much information,' Anna protested, laughing. 'Good luck. I'll see you soon.' She hesitated. 'Oh, and Meg?'

But her sister had already hung up.

'You'll make a beautiful mother,' Anna said into the silence.

Meg sat beneath an electric fan beside the reception desk, sipping water and blotting the sweat from her face. She nearly changed her mind about visiting Jim Thompson's house when Anna's 'short walk' turned out to be another hair-raising trek around piles of garbage, mangy dogs and rickety grates that threatened to send her plunging into the foul-smelling drains below. Mercifully, Jim Thompson's compound was neat and surprisingly quiet, the fan and shade a relief from the sweltering heat. Across the courtyard was the house-cum-museum, made of wood and raised on stilts, its steeply pitched roof shaded by a huge rain tree.

Anna handed her a ticket and a flier. 'Our tour's in fifteen minutes. Do you want to have a look around the garden while we wait?'

Meg hesitated. 'Can we take the fan with us?'

Anna pulled a face. 'Come on. With your green thumb, you'll love this place.'

The temperature dropped several degrees as they entered a shady grove along a brick path. Ferns and fan palms towered above them, while the understory was dense with tropical plants. Meg recognised anthuriums, orchids and heliconias among the flowers. Large ceramic tubs of water, dotted around the garden, contained different types of fish; and there was a pond, too, home to several turtles—Meg spotted their pointed snouts above the waterline—and what sounded like a small army of frogs. Her parched garden back home might as well be on a different planet.

She stopped to examine a flower she'd never seen before: purplish-black with wing-like petals, a cluster of bells at its centre and a fringe of long filaments like spider's legs. It looked to Meg like an exquisite little monster.

'Hey Meg, come and see this.'

Up ahead on the path, Anna was peering into a waist-high hexagonal pot. Two young men in a pale grey safari suits stood nearby, smiling sheepishly.

'Look inside.'

The pot contained a single black fish, the size of a mango.

'Take a close look at the flower buds floating on the water.'

‘Those things that look like chickpeas?’

Anna nodded. ‘They didn’t get there by accident. They’re numbered from one to nine. When the fish chooses one, the boys note down the number.’

As Meg watched, the black fish rose to the surface, wrapped its maw around one of the buds, and promptly spat it out. She made out a two in blue biro on the expelled bud.

‘*Saawng*,’ one of the boys said.

Anna clapped her hands. ‘That’s the third time it’s come up with the number two. Two and three. Today’s lucky lottery numbers, so the boys tell me.’

‘They’re using the fish to choose lottery numbers?’

‘I know, it’s hilarious, isn’t it.’

Meg watched the fish rise back up to the surface, mouth another pod and spit it out again. Number three.

‘I wish Nate could see this.’ She held up her camera. ‘Is it okay to take a picture?’

The boys nodded, though as soon as Meg was done, one of them scooped up the buds and put them in his pocket. Nudging each other, they walked back to their post in a nearby corner of the garden.

‘We got here at just the right time.’

Meg stared at the black fish circling through the water. ‘Do you believe in luck, Anna?’

‘This isn’t about luck. It’s about gambling.’

‘I used to believe everything happened for a reason,’ Meg said. ‘If you were a good person, good things happened to you. If you were bad, you’d be punished. When I couldn’t have a baby, I thought I must’ve done something wrong.’

Anna put a hand on her arm. ‘Oh, Meg.’

‘Better than some of the theories people put forward. Like, our genes weren’t meant to be reproduced—as if Nate and I were animals on the brink of extinction.’

‘Oh darling, how bloody awful.’

'Meanwhile, you'd read stories about children who were neglected, abused, or worse.' She nodded at the fish. 'It took me a while, but I finally figured out I wasn't undeserving, I was just unlucky.'

Anna squeezed her arm. 'In my experience, shit happens, Meggie. It's not fair or unfair. It just is.'

'Shit happens, yes. But good things happen, too. You can't rule out hope.'

Anna touched her fingertips to the water, making the black fish swim to the surface. 'Nietzsche called hope the worst of all evils because it only prolongs our torment.'

'You don't really believe that,' Meg said. She nodded at the grinning Thai guards. 'Those boys don't exactly look tormented.'

'They just hide it well,' Anna said, smiling.

She took Meg's hand, something she hadn't done since they were children. 'Come on, Meggie-Lou. Our tour's about to start.'

#

Jim Thompson's House was exquisite, but it was the lucky fish that played on Meg's mind when, a couple of hours later, she checked her email and found a new message from Doctor Boribun. Five days after fertilisation, they had sixteen A-grade embryos. Sixteen possibilities in Petri dishes. *Sixteen*. Meg re-read the email, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

She copied the message and the attached embryologist's report to a USB stick, wrote down the file names, and asked a receptionist with the unlikely name of Apple for a print out. Apple disappeared into what Meg had started to believe was a room that housed the world's slowest printer. She took a seat in the foyer and settled in to wait.

Once Meg wouldn't have thought of herself as a gambler. But that was before IVF. She and Nate had been married four years when they first consulted Doctor Lau. She was thirty-three, Nate thirty-four, their prospects for success 'practically fifty per cent' for each IVF cycle. After three failed attempts, however, they were advised to have fertility tests. Nate passed his with flying colours. Doctor Lau couldn't detect anything to account for Meg's infertility, but reassured her that she was not alone in having 'idiopathic obstacles'. Meg had looked up the meaning of idiopathic to learn that it was doctor-speak for 'cause

unknown'. She convinced herself that 'cause unknown' meant 'no cause' and that it was only a matter of time before her perseverance would be rewarded.

Over the years, their odds of a live birth dropped to one in three, one in four, less than one in five for each cycle. They had too few embryos after each egg harvest, too few cells the same size in the ones they did have, too much of what Doctor Lau called 'fragmentation'. Each IVF attempt left them increasingly in debt. Even so, Meg kept telling herself they were still in with a good chance. Almost one in five was nearly twenty per cent. That wasn't bad. What she hadn't wanted to admit, and Nate had been at pains to point out, was that less than twenty per cent chance of success meant more than eighty per cent likelihood of failure.

Having a fish choose your lottery numbers? Who was she to cast the first stone.

Get your baby for sure. She'd come across this tagline on the website of an IVF clinic in Bangkok. No clinic in Australia would dare make such a claim. Yet they behaved as if a guarantee were implicit, every negative result treated as a test of perseverance, a stepping-stone to success. Never as a setback, let alone preparation for the grief to come.

And the grief, when it came, hit Meg like a landslide. Despite the years of pain and crushing disappointment, there was no deliverance in giving up IVF. Only a paralysing sadness that came in waves and made it hard for her to breathe.

For months, she moved as if in a stupor. When she wasn't obliged to work, she holed herself up in the house, interacting with no one other than Nate. Sometimes even being with Nate was too much, especially knowing that, if not for her, he might have been a father by now. When she ventured to suggest he leave her while he still had time to find another partner and start a family, he'd burst into tears and told her that their marriage was the only thing that mattered to him.

It was ultimately Nate's love that enabled Meg to resurface. That, and her art. Slowly, she found her way back into the light and, step by step, she learned to navigate the landscape of a life without children.

Somehow, three years later, she'd ended up in Bangkok, with sixteen A-grade embryos. Meg tried not to get ahead of herself, but sixteen A-grade embryos presented possibilities she'd never dreamed of, such as a sibling—

She caught her breath mid-thought, shocked at how easily she could recalibrate her expectations. Perhaps Anna was right about hope prolonging the torment. Meg exhaled slowly. She would not be greedy. All she wanted was one healthy baby, a child with Nate to love.

Apple reappeared with her print outs. Meg scanned the report on her way upstairs, noting Doctor Boribun's recommendation that they opt for a multiple embryo transfer to increase their chances of success.

She paused by the door and took a moment to fan herself with the documents. Multiple births carried risks for both the surrogate mother and babies. Despite the hope-drunk moment brought on by the sixteen blastocysts, Meg didn't want to push her luck.

Anna understood that to qualify as a surrogate in Thailand, a woman needed to have finished having her own babies. But the girl introduced as Meg and Nate's surrogate didn't look old enough to have started. Yupa wore no make up other than lip gloss, her hair pulled back in a high ponytail. An oversized Hello Kitty T-shirt drooped from her bony shoulders. She looked like she should be hanging out with friends at the mall, not preparing to be artificially impregnated. She greeted them with an awkward *wai*, put her hands in her jeans pockets and kept her eyes on the floor.

Meg was clearly surprised by her youthfulness, too, as her first question was about Yupa's age.

'She's twenty-four,' Pimsuda said.

'She looks so young. And she already has children?'

'A son.'

'And how old is he?'

'Two years old.' Again Pimsuda answered on the younger woman's behalf.

What if complications from the surrogacy meant she couldn't have more children in the future? Anna wanted to ask if Yupa was sure one child was enough for her. But she'd vowed to keep her mouth shut unless something was seriously wrong. This part of the process was Meg and Nate's responsibility.

'Would you please tell Yupa that words cannot describe how grateful we are to her,' Meg said.

Pimsuda turned to Yupa and said in Thai, 'The foreigners say thank you for being their surrogate.'

Yupa dipped her head and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

'Tell her we've been trying to have a baby for ten years,' Meg said. 'She is helping to make our dream come true.'

'They've been trying to have a baby for ten years,' Pimsuda said in Thai.

'Tell her we wish her luck and good health and that we will do everything we can to support her.'

'They wish you good luck,' Pimsuda said in Thai. 'I think you should say something back to them.'

Yupa looked anxious. 'I don't know what to say.'

'I can say something for you,' Pimsuda said.

'Yes, thank you, Auntie.'

'Miss Yupa says she hopes it is her fate to make your dreams come true,' Pimsuda said in English.

Anna had to hand it to her. Pimsuda's improvisation skills were impressive, even if her interpreting left a bit to be desired.

Meg smiled, her eyes threatening tears. Having coached her beforehand not to make physical contact with the surrogate, Anna could see her sister was taut with self-restraint. Yupa, by contrast, couldn't keep still.

There was a knock and a man in a suit poked his head in the door.

'Ah, this is Khun Amornthep, the lawyer.'

'Hello, *sawatdee khrap*.' Khun Amornthep greeted them with a *wai* and pointed his pressed hands forward as if to clear a path through the crowd in Pimsuda's office.

Anna touched Meg on the shoulder. 'I'll wait outside.'

She'd gone over the surrogacy contract with Meg and Nate the previous weekend, after her friend Tom had vetted it. The contract seemed very one-sided to Anna: the surrogate had to agree to a list of conditions and assume all risk, whereas all the parents had to do was make payments. The schedule of fees, payable to the clinic, was outlined, though it wasn't clear how much the surrogate received. Anna was surprised to read a clause requiring the surrogate to permit termination of the pregnancy if a chromosomal abnormality was detected, given that abortion was technically illegal in Thailand. As it was, Meg and Nate wanted to delete that clause. But Tom advised against making too many changes, or risk having the Thai lawyer lose face and getting the clinic off-side. He suggested they consider the document as a set of minimum standards to improve on at their discretion.

Anna returned to the white leather chairs in the waiting area, watching as the staff in their pristine uniforms moved like worker ants between the offices, consulting rooms and laboratories. Despite her ongoing misgivings about commercial surrogacy, she took some comfort from the high standards of health

care available to the surrogates. The facilities at Team Baby were at least as good as what you'd find in a hospital in Melbourne. Hi-tech, comfortable, spotless.

An image from Cambodia came into her mind. A squat building at the end of a dirt road, red dust riding up the whitewashed walls. Inside, a room with a kitchen sink, a bare metal gurney against one wall and a stainless steel obstetric examination table by an unglazed window. Someone had strung a bright pink cloth across the bottom of the window for privacy, but the shutters remained open for light due to a power outage. Fly-spotted posters encouraged women to breastfeed their babies and eat a balanced diet of fruit, vegetables, rice and eel, frog, insects—whatever protein they could forage. Anna had visited dozens of rural health stations, some better equipped, some poorer. The memory stayed with her because of the contrast between the bare metal of the examination table and the cheery pink curtain above it.

Meg and Nate reappeared hand in hand, their eyes shining.

'They're doing the embryo transfer now,' Meg said.

'Do you want to hang around to see if it worked?'

'We won't know that for another eight to ten days.'

'Of course, sorry.' Anna smiled sheepishly. 'That's why we're going to Phuket tomorrow. To take your minds off all that.'

Meg raised her eyebrows.

'Worth a shot,' Nate said.

Mod was given a blood test on Tuesday and another on Thursday morning. Later that afternoon, Pimsuda phoned to congratulate her on a positive pregnancy test result. Mod hung up the phone and burst into tears.

‘What’s wrong?’ Nok handed her a tissue. ‘Bad news?’

She dabbed her eyes and shook her head. ‘I’m pregnant.’

‘Oh, that’s good news. Congratulations.’

‘How do you feel?’ Oy said.

‘Relieved. I can send money to my mother.’

‘Yes, yes, we understand. But I mean, how do you feel? Sick, not sick? Tired, not tired?’

Mod took a moment to think about it. The idea that she had someone else’s baby inside her was strange. She felt nervous, but not especially sick or tired.

‘I feel fine.’

Oy pursed her lips. ‘How did you feel when you were pregnant with your boy?’

Mod shuddered. ‘I was losing my stomach all the time for the first few weeks.’

‘Well, take my advice, and don’t draw your bow before you see the squirrel.’

Nok gave Oy a pained look. ‘Why the negative attitude, *naawng?*’

Mod shrugged. ‘Oy’s right. I guess it’s up to fate now.’

‘What’s that about fate?’ Ice said, slipping off her shoes. The smell of *gaaeng khiaao wann* emanated from the plastic bags she placed on the table.

‘Where’ve you been?’ Nok asked.

Ice began unpacking the green curry, rice and vegetables. ‘I’ve been trying to get pregnant, like the rest of you.’

‘But they put in the baby four days ago. Where did you go? Are you okay?’

Ice added small bags of spicy sauce to the spread. ‘Yeah, I went home for a couple of days to see my boy.’

Mod let this information sink in. She knew Nok and Oy were, like her, missing their children. Oy was at a loss to understand why Ice wouldn't choose to stay with her son. But as Nok pointed out, they couldn't know what was in her heart.

'Well, Mod's pregnant,' Nok said. 'That's what we were talking about when you came in. I'll go get bowls for the food.'

Ice turned to Mod. 'Congratulations.'

'Thanks, but Oy already reminded me not to be too confident.'

'I'm telling you, Nok's the only one who's stayed pregnant on her first go,' Oy said. 'It took Thip two times and me three.'

'Three times?' It hadn't occurred to Mod that she might have to go through the process more than once.

'I tested positive like you the first two times. But I never made it to six weeks before this one.'

'And you kept going?'

Oy shrugged.

'But how can you stand being apart from your children for so long?'

'My children are the only reason I'm doing this.'

The steel in Oy's voice was lost on Ice.

'Oh, I hope I get lucky on my first try,' she said, patting her concave belly. 'I met the parents. They're farangs from Australia.'

'Really?' Mod hadn't met the Thai couple who'd hired her.

'Wife did all the taking. Husband just stared at me.'

'Probably eyeing you off as a potential minor wife,' Oy teased. 'Next thing you know, he'll be saying let's skip the glass tubes and make babies the natural way. I bet he's a *book hoom yai*, too.'

Oy's coarse joke made Mod laugh, but Ice wasn't smiling.

'Don't mind us, *naawng*,' she said gently. 'We're just fooling around. It's what country girls like us do. I'm sure the Australian couple have only respect for you.'

Nok reappeared with bowls and spoons. 'Someone needs to wake Thip for dinner. I'm going back for drinking water.'

'I'll do it,' Oy said.

Ice sidled up to Mod as she began decanting the food. 'The farangs gave me an iPod as a present.'

'That's nice. See, they do think well of you.'

'Yeah.' Ice grinned, upending bag of green curry into a serving bowl. 'I got three thousand baht for it at the Tha Chang market.'

For the fourth morning in a row, Anna found Nate alone in the resort restaurant, two fried eggs and a rasher of bacon leering from the plate in front of him. As she sat down, she caught the eye of an elderly waiter, who nodded and disappeared into the kitchen.

‘Meg checking emails again?’

‘Yep.’

Anna glanced at the *Phuket Gazette* on the table. ‘I thought a beach holiday would keep her mind off all that.’

‘You can’t blame her for being anxious, Anna.’

‘But it’s obsessive. She won’t even leave the resort in case she misses an email.’

‘You think that’s obsessive? Compared to what it was like when she was the one trying to get pregnant, this is nothing.’

Anna scowled. ‘Well, it’s boring.’

‘She’s trying to exercise control over a completely out-of-control situation,’ Nate said. ‘That’s why I was reluctant to go down this path. I knew it would stress Meg out.’

‘Then why did you?’

‘Because I couldn’t stand in her way. Not once you’d put the idea of surrogacy in her head.’

Anna sat back and folded her arms. ‘Are you saying it’s my fault?’

‘No, of course not. I didn’t mean—’ He sighed. ‘It’s just, I thought we’d put the whole baby thing to rest. I was wrong. I hadn’t realised how hard it was on Meg to stop trying. She’s been so brave, and I love her so much.’

‘I know you do.’

‘I swear, after that night, I never—’

She held up her hand. ‘Bad times, best forgotten.’

He gave her a grateful smile. ‘I just want for Meg what she wants.’

On the night he’d alluded to, some five years earlier, Nate had been so desperately unhappy about Meg’s obsession with having a baby—not to mention, drunk—that he’d made a pass at Anna. Nothing had happened, of course, though

it had worried Anna to think that her sister risked losing Nate and couldn't see it. Then again, a lot escaped Meg's notice in the myopia of baby lust.

Seeking distraction, Anna picked up the newspaper. 'Look at these headlines. Polish expat hangs himself. Chinese tourist drowns. Woman killed by box jellyfish. You'd think we were in some kind of hell hole.'

'Box jellyfish?'

'Different part of the country.' She looked up as the elderly waiter reappeared. 'Ah, here's my breakfast.'

The man set a steaming bowl of rice congee, topped with minced pork, in front of her. A young woman followed with the condiment canister.

Nate raised his eyebrows. 'I thought it was a choice between American or European breakfast.'

'I asked the waiter for a serve of whatever the staff are eating. I figured it had to be better than that.' Anna wrinkled her nose at the greasy offering on Nate's plate.

'You never cease to impress me, Anna.'

'Flattery will get you nowhere,' she said, though she felt her mood lift.

She paused with her soup spoon over the bowl. 'Come on, Nate. Surely between us we can think of a way to distract Meg. What about the James Bond Island tour—you'd be into that, wouldn't you?'

'Are you kidding? I'd love it. But how could we get Meg to come?'

'What if we threatened to go without her?'

'I don't think she'd care.'

Anna ate a spoonful of congee, the tang of fresh ginger cushioned by the soft, salty rice. 'What if I buy tickets and say they're non-refundable?'

'Might work. Meg shares your mother's aversion to the idea of money going to waste.'

Anna resisted the urge to ask how that squared with years of fruitless investment in IVF. Instead, she said, 'I put it down to our Scottish heritage.'

She added some white pepper to her bowl. 'I'll get tickets for tomorrow or the day after.'

Nate smiled. 'Sounds like a plan.'

He pushed aside his plate and nodded in the direction the kitchen. 'In the meantime, reckon you could order me a bowl of whatever you're having?'

They had to lie flat in the canoes to avoid banging their heads on the low-hanging rock at the mouth of the cave.

‘I’m not sure about this,’ Meg whispered, as they floated from bright sunlight into darkness.

Nate squeezed her shoulder. ‘You’ll be fine, sweetheart.’

Inside the cave, the temperature dropped sharply. They sat up again. There was a rank smell like ham gone bad. Their guide used his head-torch to illuminate the source, a colony of bats among the stalactites. In the darkness up ahead, a jagged slice of light marked another cave mouth.

Nate gasped. ‘My god, Meg, we’re actually in a tunnel.’

Again, they had to lie down to pass through, this time emerging into a sunlit lagoon, open to the sky, but surrounded on all sides by jungle-draped cliffs. Their guide paddled them across jade-coloured water, through a narrow gap in the rock and into a second lagoon, wider than the first. It was so quiet, Nate could hear gasps of delight from the other tourists over the gentle splash of the paddles. When Meg turned to look at him, her face was glowing.

They drew up alongside the canoe Anna was sharing with the only solo traveller in their group, a young man from Singapore.

‘It’s so beautiful,’ Meg said.

Anna, too, was beaming. ‘They call these lagoons *hong* in Thai. It means room. Like we’re in a room inside the island.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ Meg said.

Nate caught Anna’s eye and winked.

An outburst of chatter drew their attention to the cliff face where a troop of monkeys descended towards the water. The guides paddled closer until all seven canoes from their tour boat converged on a craggy outcrop where the monkeys settled, seeming to pose for photos. Nate joined the other tourists in obliging them.

‘Oh, Nate, look.’

Meg pointed to a yellow-eyed mother, a dark-haired baby clinging to her chest. As they watched, the baby swivelled in his mother’s arms to face them.

'He's so cute. Pass me the camera, will you?'

Cute wasn't how Nate would describe the scrawny baby with his wrinkled pink face and big pink balls. But he knew Meg wasn't seeing the monkey. He handed her the camera and leaned back, the inflatable canoe like a floating armchair.

Never could he have imagined feeling so relaxed in the middle of the dreaded two-week wait. In the past, the 2WW had meant ten days of torment, as Meg clung to the idea of being 'Pregnant Until Proven Otherwise', or PUPPO. Of all the absurd IVF acronyms, PUPPO was the one Nate hated most. It made him think of pupa, as though IVF reduced his beautiful Meg to a grub that never metamorphosed. If Anna had witnessed Meg taking multiple home pregnancy tests, if she'd been the one who stood by while Meg checked her underwear every hour for signs of bleeding, Nate suspected she'd be more forgiving about the email obsession.

He glanced now at Anna, chatting with her guide in Thai while her Singaporean co-passenger photographed the monkeys. She caught his eye and gestured at their surrounds.

'It's like *The Lost World*, isn't it.'

'I was thinking *King Kong*.'

'So you found your movie set after all.'

He gave her a wry smile. *The Man With the Golden Gun* had been filmed in Thailand, and the showpiece of the 'James Bond Island Tour' was the secret lair of the titular villain, played by Christopher Lee. The movie was among Nate's favourites in the Bond franchise. But 'James Bond Island' was a disappointment, crammed with camera toting tourists and shops selling tacky souvenirs.

'Everything about the tour apart from James Bond Island itself has been fantastic,' he admitted to Anna.

'Yeah, but would you've been so keen to come if it was called the Pha Nga Bay Tour?'

Nate knew she was right. But if he'd been played, he could only be grateful. Yet another paradox in a country that seemed full of them.

A couple of nights earlier, saying he was going to a bar to watch the footy, he'd taken himself to Bangla Road in Patong, curious to see whether the

infamous 'party zone' lived up to its sleazy reputation. He could've taken the girls with him, but Anna would've turned it into a lecture on the evils of capitalism or sexism, probably both, and Nate just wanted to relax. His sister-in-law was a good person—god knows, he owed her—but sometimes she could be a pain in the arse.

When Nate told his colleagues he was going to Phuket, Bangla Road was all they talked about. The bars. The girls. The shows. 'You'll want to leave the wife at home, mate.' This from Craig in HR who, to Nate's knowledge, had never been married. As it turned out, among Bangla Road's many surprises was the number of wives among the tourists who flocked there. Some were pregnant, others pushed babies in prams. Family groups from all over the world strolled among the girls in bikinis who hustled in front of the bars. Elderly couples posed for photos with ladyboys in their showgirl costumes, while Chinese tourists snapped furtive pictures of themselves with go-go dancers in the background. The place felt more like a fairground than a red-light area. Coloured lights flashed. Music boomed. Among the touts with their laminated menus of live sex acts were hawkers selling hair accessories, umbrella hats and glowsticks. The equivalent strip in Bangkok, which Nate had walked through ten years earlier on one of Anna's awareness-raising tours, was the domain of old, white men. It seemed that since then, the sex industry had become just another one of Thailand's tourist attractions, to tick off alongside elephants and James Bond Island.

Nate wondered how to reconcile the spectacle of scantily clad bargirls calling 'hello handsome' and planting their pert bottoms on the laps of strangers, with Anna's insistence that Meg not get touchy-feely with Yupa or risk offending her modesty. Was he looking at two sides of the same coin? Was it circumstance that distinguished the brazen bar worker from their shy and distant surrogate?

The idea that he and Meg might be giving someone like Yupa an alternative to prostitution made Nate feel like they actually were doing good. In fact, the more time he saw of Thailand, the better he felt about the whole surrogacy arrangement. Their relatively stress-free 2WW suggested that things were different this time around. For the first time in years, Nate dared to hope the outcome might be different, too.

Even Meg managed to relax on the James Bond Island Tour, though sitting next to her on the boat trip back, Nate felt her body growing more tense as they neared Phuket.

He kissed her temple. 'You okay, my love?'

'Yes.' She patted his knee. 'Great day. Worth the trip.'

Nate inclined his head to the opposite side of the deck, where Anna was talking with a couple who looked like they were from India. 'Don't let your sister hear you, or she'll be dragging us out on a different tour every day.'

'It's good to see the beauty of this country,' Meg said, tilting her chin at the island-studded bay. 'It helps.'

Nate hugged her close and stared at the waves churned by the boat in their wake.

Doctor Boribun sat behind at his desk as they took their seats, Anna closest to the door, Meg in the middle, holding Nate's hand. Pimsuda joined them, exchanging a *wai* with the doctor as she sat down.

'Can I get you anything?' she asked. 'Some water, perhaps?'

'We just want to know the results of the pregnancy test,' Meg said.

The doctor's smile made Anna tense. She recognised a *yim haeng*, a 'dry smile', and prepared for bad news.

'I'm sorry to inform you, but the test this morning was negative,' he said.

Meg gasped and turned pale. Anna put her hand on her sister's arm.

'But why?'

'As you know, sometimes it takes more than one cycle to achieve a successful outcome.'

'But it was a grade-A embryo.' Meg was indignant.

'Yes, the embryos are excellent quality. We will try with a frozen one next time.'

'But I don't understand why we need a next time.'

Doctor Boribun clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. 'I know you are disappointed, but don't give up hope. At Team Baby our success rates with frozen embryo transfer are almost identical to fresh embryo transfer and—'

'The problem is the surrogate.' Meg cut him off. 'We need a different one. Someone older and sturdier.'

'*Man phuut arai?*'

Anna was shocked. Meg wasn't handling the news well, but that didn't give the doctor licence to refer to her using a Thai pronoun generally reserved for animals—even if he assumed they couldn't understand him.

She pulled Meg to her feet. 'Would you please excuse us for a moment?'

Anna bustled her sister into the corridor outside the doctor's office, Nate hot on their heels.

'Meggie, I know you're in shock, but you need to think this through. You can't just toss Yupa aside because she didn't get pregnant on the first go. And frankly, I'd have concerns if Team Baby agreed to—'

Meg shook free of her hold. 'We're not in this to be nice to people, Anna. We're in this to have a baby. It's a business, okay? However else you want to dress it up, at the end of the day, we're paying for a product.'

'A product?' The indignation Anna felt on her sister's behalf gave way to anger. 'We're talking about a baby here, Meg, not a bloody product.'

'I meant to say *service*. We're paying for a service. And we want it to work.'

Anna looked to Nate. 'What about you? Do you feel the same way?'

He shrugged. 'Meg's right. The embryos are good. And seeing as how we've come this far...'

Anna clenched her fists and shook her head. 'I can't be a part of this anymore.'

Meg eyed her squarely. 'That's right, Anna, run away. It's what you always do when things get tough. You piss off.'

The vitriol in her voice gave Anna a jolt. She glanced at Nate, who looked away.

'I'm sorry you feel that way, Meg,' she managed. 'I hope you get what you want. And I really hope it's worth it.'

Outside, the air was soggy, the sky a swamp. Anna waved down a motorcycle taxi and directed the driver to wait outside the hotel. She was gone only minutes, her suitcase still packed from the trip to Phuket. On impulse, she settled the bill for Meg and Nate as well as her own. A final accounting.

She had the *motercy* driver deposit her at the Skytrain station. The rain started as she descended at National Stadium, forcing her to duck and weave under girders and awnings as she made her way to the A-One Inn. She'd first stayed there fifteen years earlier, the cheap guesthouse of choice for NGO workers in the region, infamous for its soporific staff and indifferent service. A perfect bolthole.

Her sodden arrival met with blank looks by the guesthouse staff, all of whom looked like they were straight out of high school. She was grudgingly shown to a room with a balcony overlooking the street and an attached bathroom so small, she could've used the toilet, shower and basin all at the same time. Once she'd changed into dry clothes, she checked her handbag. She needed

to find an internet café, transfer funds to her credit card, and book a flight to Phnom Penh.

Her phone beeped with a message as she was about to leave. When Anna had first travelled to Bangkok, fifteen years earlier, she could disappear, free from scrutiny or expectation in the gaps between letters and phone calls home. Nowadays, there was no escaping the constant surveillance of family and friends. Not without making a point of it.

It was from Meg, as she knew it would be. Anna's thumb hovered over the message bank. She wished it was 1993, when Meg's thoughts on their confrontation would've taken at least a week to arrive by mail, giving Anna plenty of time to come up with a considered response. It could only prolong the heat of the moment, this technologically enabled to-ing and fro-ing. Anna didn't need instant feedback. She needed time to reflect.

She opened the message. 'Being assigned new surrogate. Sorry if doesn't meet with your approval. Home tomorrow. Reception says our bill paid. Is this true?'

Anna replied with a single word. 'Yes.'

As she pressed send, the phone beeped with another incoming message.

'You spend your whole life helping strangers. Why sympathy for everyone except me?'

Anna put her head back and groaned. She removed the SIM card from the phone, threw it into her suitcase and unexpectedly burst into tears.

Mod started bleeding a couple of days after her period was due. A 'chemical pregnancy', Nurse Wasana called it. Mod didn't know what that meant, except there would be no more money to send home to her family unless or until she became pregnant.

'Not your fault,' Wasana said as she hooked Mod's legs into the stirrups. 'The client went against our advice. We told her, "Use donor eggs". Her eggs are too old already.'

The doctor appeared to perform the *khut moht luuk*, described by Nurse Wasana as 'cleaning out the womb'. Once again Mod felt the snap of a cold metal clamp between her legs, followed by a sting like an ant bite. She saw the doctor exchange a thin metal rod for what looked like a tiny spoon with a long handle. Though the area between her legs was numb, she could still feel the inside of her womb being scraped away, triggering tears.

The procedure was mercifully short. The doctor spoke into the space between Mod's legs, telling her it was normal to have cramps and light bleeding. After he left, Nurse Wasana helped Mod from the examination table, handed her a tissue and a packet of sanitary napkins and patted her hand.

'I probably shouldn't say anything, but I think Khun Pimsuda plans to match you with a farang couple from Australia. They're using a Thai egg donor. Much better. I'm sure you will be lucky next time, *naawng*.'

Mod wondered if these were the same farangs who'd given up on Ice. But if they were, did it matter? Perhaps it was Mod's fate, not Ice's, to carry their baby.

Besides, Ice hadn't seemed all that upset when Khun Pimsuda had phoned the previous day to say the farangs didn't want to try with her again. She knew there were plenty more clients on the waiting list.

So when she returned to the apartment from the clinic, Mod was surprised to find Ice packing her bags. Thip was back in Chonburi with her family, Oy and Nok nowhere to be seen.

Mod sat down gingerly on the edge of Ice's bed. 'You're not leaving?'

'I never really liked being pregnant,' Ice said, cramming her belongings into a small backpack decorated with a Japanese cartoon cow.

'Then why did you want to become a *mae oom boun*?'

Ice's shrug made her t-shirt rise up above her low-slung jeans, exposing a scar like a bamboo leaf on her abdomen. 'It was my father's idea. He said I'd already brought shame on the family by having one baby. I may as well have another to make some money.'

'What will you do now, little sister?'

'I'm sure my father will think up something.'

The tone of her voice made Mod uncomfortable. She felt sorry for Ice. Had her own father been alive—

'I don't know why he's so hard on me,' Ice added. 'I mean, it's not like I had an abortion or anything.'

Mod stomach sank. 'I'd better go. I have to lie down.'

'Here, take this.' Ice thrust a pink t-shirt at her, a waving Hello Kitty on the front.

'I couldn't—'

'It's too big for me. Take it.'

Once in her room, Mod stuffed the t-shirt into a corner of her cupboard and lay down on the bed.

She had no idea how much time passed while she stared at the ceiling, waiting for the cramps in her stomach to subside. When she got up, night had fallen and Ice was gone.

Meg supposed it felt different this time around because the failure wasn't hers. Normally at this point after a Big Fat Negative, bloated with disappointment and artificial hormones, she'd burst into tears at the slightest provocation. A sappy pop song, lost dog poster, even a health insurance commercial could set her off. She'd be exhausted, but unable to sleep, spending hours online, seeking solace in forums where women with BFNs encouraged each other not to give up.

But surrogacy was different. Of course, she was disappointed. But she felt neither physically wrecked nor wracked with guilt as she had in the past. She and Nate still had fifteen good embryos on ice in Bangkok, ready and waiting to be implanted, and it had taken Team Baby a matter of days to identify a new surrogate.

"Her name is Mod," Pimsuda wrote in an email. "She is 26 years old and has one young son. We propose to you to do the FET in June."

Barely a month until the frozen embryo transfer. If it was Meg doing the IVF, they'd have made her wait longer before trying again.

She replied to Pimsuda's email, opened up a new window and transferred fifteen hundred dollars into Team Baby's account. She scanned her inbox in the hope of a message from Anna.

Nothing.

Meg felt a pang of sadness. She opened up a new message and typed in Anna's email address. But on reaching the subject line, she hesitated, the cursor pulsing like a warning light.

Anna had spent her whole life helping strangers. If anyone suggested that the kind of people she worked with got what they deserved—usually their Uncle Jack, itching for a fight after too many beers—Anna was always first to leap to their defence. Drug users were not junkies but people in precarious circumstances who needed speed to stay awake, or heroin to sleep. Sex workers were women with limited employment opportunities. No one deserved to get HIV. Everyone made mistakes, especially under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

'You'd know all about making mistakes while under the influence, Uncle Jack,' she'd say, wiggling the fingers on her right hand to draw his attention to his own truncated digits, half his index and middle fingers lost decades earlier in an ill-conceived attempt to chop wood while drunk. Jack would concede defeat, mumbling the line from the Bible about the first stone. And Anna, gracious in victory, would get him another beer.

But why did her sister's well of sympathy run dry whenever Meg tried to draw from it? Years earlier, when Meg suffered complications from the IVF treatment, Anna had come home to support her, only to turn around and leave when something came up at work. And now she'd done it again, deserting Meg in Bangkok within minutes of receiving bad news.

Meg was right to stand up to her sister. As Nate said, Anna wasn't the world bloody authority on everything. If she really understood what they'd been through, she wouldn't be so hard on them. She'd see that sometimes you had to make difficult decisions.

Meg moved her cursor to the rubbish bin icon at the bottom of the screen and clicked. The blank window vanished, revealing a new email message in her in-tray. From Pimsuda again.

"Please see attached Mod photo for you."

Meg opened the attachment. Mod wasn't pretty like the previous surrogate. She looked older than twenty-six. Her face was a series of broad planes, her nose flat, her mouth small and unsmiling. Her jaw was clenched as if in anticipation of hard work. Meg supposed it was a good sign.

To have made time to meet a new surrogate would've meant delaying their departure from Bangkok, changing tickets, negotiating additional leave for Nate. Meg figured it wasn't worth the trouble, not to mention the cost, given what happened with the last girl. Even before the BFN result, she'd been disappointed in Yupa. She thought meeting the surrogate would be something special. She'd imagined them locking eyes as those around them talked, finding a bond beyond language, almost sacred. But Yupa had kept her eyes averted the whole time, showing no emotion except when Meg handed her their gift. That had earned them a half-smile and a prayer-like gesture of thanks, though still no eye contact.

The BFN two weeks later made Meg's efforts to connect seem an embarrassing waste of time.

But looking at Mod's photo, Meg wondered if she'd made the right decision. Sure, she was paying the woman for a service. But treating it as a simple business transaction didn't feel right, despite what she'd told Anna in the heat of the moment. No amount of money could ever really compensate someone who carried your baby for you. In retrospect, she should've met the Thai woman to thank her for even contemplating such a generous act, irrespective of the outcome.

Meg saved the photo to a flash drive. Tomorrow she'd find somewhere to get it printed.

The immigration staff at Phnom Penh's Pochentong Airport had been issued with new computers since Anna's last visit, but it made no discernible difference to the chaotic process of securing a visa on arrival. Anna waved her completed application forms, cash and passport at various officials, like a punter at the races hoping to get lucky. Twenty minutes and twenty American dollars later, she emerged through customs with a business visa.

She settled on the first taxi driver who looked old enough to have a licence. While he put her suitcase in the boot, she paused to take in the warm, damp air, the smells of cooking fires, ripe fruit and fermenting fish. Forgetting she was back in a left-hand drive country, she tried to take the driver's seat, both of them laughing at her mistake.

Urban development in the Cambodian capital appeared to have slowed in the ten months she'd been away, the Global Financial Crisis making its presence felt. Anna counted four stalled building projects on the road into town, concrete structures draped in hessian or wrapped in blue plastic like unwanted gifts. An excavation over half a city block, slated on a billboard as the site of a luxury condo, was being steadily reclaimed by moss and vines. Given the land-grabbing and forced evictions that cast a long shadow over Cambodia's construction boom, Anna couldn't help thinking the downturn was a good thing.

The taxi slowed to pass a cattle-cart laden with earthenware pots, giving Anna the chance to admire the children walking home in their white and navy uniforms, the vendors balancing their wares on the ends of bamboo poles, the plucky chickens pecking in the dirt. On a traffic island, frangipani trees shed sweet, white flowers onto the dusty ground.

Even in the throes of economic decline, Phnom Penh was a far cry from the ruined city Anna had first visited in the early 1990s. She recalled derelict French-era villas, potholed roads littered with the bodies of squashed rats, piles of rotting garbage, and streets teeming with beggars, victims of the landmines that at the time were still being laid by the Khmer Rouge around their jungle stronghold. Anna had made the mistake of eating at a café on the footpath one night, and ended up giving away all her cigarettes and loose change to the steady

stream of amputees that filed past. As she'd stood to pay for her meal, two dirty children leapt out of the shadows, dumped the remains of her noodle soup into a plastic bag and disappeared.

The austerity of that period contrasted sharply with the abundance on show as Anna's taxi circled the Russian Market. Dusk was falling as the stallholders packed up. Pyramids of pineapples and dragon fruit were disassembled into the trays of pick-up trucks, alongside bundles of snake beans and flowering chives. Pigs trussed into rattan baskets were loaded onto the back of motorbikes, live poultry tied at the feet and draped over handlebars.

The compound where Christophe lived was a block from the market. A young guard opened the gate, took Anna's suitcase and led her across the courtyard. Christophe was waiting in the doorway. Anna thought his hairline had receded a little since she saw him last, though this did nothing to diminish his good looks. Grey-eyed and square-jawed, he wore a loose orange t-shirt over faded blue jeans. He stooped to kiss her cheeks the customary three times, his lips brushing her ear as he withdrew.

'Entres. What an unexpected pleasure to see you again so soon, chérie.'

'You, too.' She kept her voice light. *'Thanks for putting me up.'*

'Pas de problème. A few days you said, yes?'

Anna nodded, choosing not to ask what he meant by that. *'I could do with a shower.'*

'But of course.' He picked up the suitcase. *'The guest room is made up for you. Rune's gone home, but she left dinner.'*

'Sounds good,' Anna said, happy to delay the inevitable face off with Christophe's possessive housekeeper, Rune.

His house was standard for expatriates in Phnom Penh. Built with servants in mind, the bedrooms were outnumbered by bathrooms. The largest communal space was an undercover, open-air terrace on the second floor, where Christophe was waiting when Anna reemerged after her shower. She wore a blue dress with shoestring straps, white tiles cool beneath her bare feet. Christophe was stretched out on one of three rattan couches that surrounded a low table, ceiling fan whirling overhead. The table was set, food under covered plates, a

bottle of white wine resting in an ice bucket. Christophe opened the wine, handing Anna a glass as she took the couch adjacent to his.

'Comme tu es belle.'

'You are too kind.' For some reason, she found it easier to accept compliments in French than in English. She touched her glass to his. *'Santé.'*

They held eye contact as they took the first sip, a custom Anna had learned from working with Europeans. In Australia, people kept their eyes on their drinks.

'Your email didn't mention what brings you back to Phnom Penh.'

Anna was tempted to debrief about the whole surrogacy saga, but the appeal of forgetting about it for a while won out.

'I was bored in Australia,' she said.

'Alors, and I thought you were missing me too much.'

'Don't flatter yourself.'

Christophe laughed and Anna took a swig from her wine glass, neither of them fooled by her bravado.

Rune had left them fish *amok*, a thick, fragrant curry steamed in individual banana-leaf boats, with arty garnishes of red chilli curls to remind them she'd once cooked for the Cambodian ambassador to France. There were side dishes of taro spring rolls and banana flower salad, steamed rice and dipping sauces. Anna and Christophe ate slowly, relishing the food, their conversation ranging from local gossip and updates on which of Anna's favourite bars were still standing, to the latest in the ongoing trial of the ageing Khmer Rouge officials.

They finished the wine and ferried the leftovers down two flights of stairs to the fridge, before moving seamlessly to one couch. Anna sipped chilled vodka. Christophe was drinking scotch on ice. She tasted it on his lips when she leaned over and kissed him. He put down his glass and returned the kiss, running his fingertips along the side of her neck and slipping the strap of her dress from one shoulder. As he kissed her throat, Anna closed her eyes and tilted her head back.

The kisses stopped. She opened her eyes. Christophe had shuffled along the couch and retrieved his scotch.

'I'm seeing someone,' he said.

'Of course you are.' Anna hooked the strap of her dress back over her shoulder and smoothed her skirt. 'Though that wouldn't normally present an obstacle for *un coureur* like you.'

He shrugged. '*Alors*, but...'

The word *but* jarred like a wrong note on a piano.

'Anyone I know?'

He shook his head. 'She arrived in Phnom Penh a few months ago. But...'

That word again.

'It's serious.' Christophe smiled. 'I want to marry this woman.'

'Ah.'

'You should be proud of me, Anna. You always said I was afraid to commit.'

That he failed to see the irony made her want to howl. Instead, she forced a smile.

'Well, bravo, Christophe. I hope you'll both be very happy.' Anna raised her glass, downed the remaining vodka, and stood up. 'So is your driver free to drop me at the FCC or should I take a taxi?'

'You're going out, *chérie*?'

'Sorry, didn't I mention it? I'm meeting Francesca.'

There was no meeting, of course. Anna had hoped—no, *assumed*—she would spend the night in Christophe's bed. Instead, summoning her last reserves of dignity, she would head out to the Foreign Correspondents Club overlooking the river. The place was always teeming with men keen to tell their stories. She would sit at the bar by a wall so thick with geckoes that it seemed to move, and let the strap of her dress fall from one of her shoulders. When a man offered to buy her a drink, she would accept, appearing nonchalant at first. But her enthusiasm would grow the more he talked about himself, and her rapt attention would work like an aphrodisiac. They'd go back to his place, where he would mistake the strength of her anguish for passion. They'd fuck and she'd try not to think of Christophe, but he'd be on her mind the whole time, writhing there like the geckoes on the wall. She'd fake an orgasm to hurry things along and once the guy fell asleep—she'd struggle later to recall his name—she'd make her escape. She'd get back to Christophe's place just before sunrise, rumped and sluggish, to

be busted by Rune the disapproving housekeeper. Her act of defiance would be lost on Christophe.

And Anna would cry herself to sleep.

Mod returned to Sisaket to spend the Visakha Bucha Day holiday with her son. He seemed happy to see her, sitting on her lap and chatting while they ate, snuggling close to her at night. But when he wasn't eating or sleeping, he would wriggle out of her embrace to go off and play. Where once he'd been content to lie in bed while she held him, he was up within minutes of waking. Her mother assured her it was normal for a boy his age to start becoming more independent. But Mod wasn't convinced. It was as though Pui was moving away, learning not to need her.

She was under strict instruction to return to Bangkok by the first of June, a Monday, in order to start the injections again. Although road travel made her sick, Mod took the overnight bus on the Sunday in order to wring out a few extra hours with Pui. When they were hit by a monsoonal downpour outside of Surin, it seemed to her that the sky was crying the tears she kept inside.

June was supposed to be a quiet month in the surrogate house. Pimsuda had told them to expect a new recruit, another girl from Isaan, but none of the pregnant surrogates was due to give birth. However, a routine scan showed the baby Thip carried had stopped growing, and she was told it would have to be delivered by C-section at thirty-six weeks.

'Think of it as coming into the money sooner,' Oy said, as they helped pack her bag for the hospital.

A tear coursed over the mole below Thip's eye like water over a pebble. 'But what if something's wrong with the baby?'

'There's nothing wrong with the baby,' Oy said, as Mod handed her a tissue. 'You're going to one of the best hospitals in Bangkok. You'll be fine. The baby will be fine.'

'But what if it's not? What if they refuse to take it? I can't afford to care for another baby.'

Oy placed her hands on either side of her own pregnant stomach as if to block the baby's ears from sound of Thip's distress. 'You're worrying for no reason, *naawng*.'

‘As if the parents would refuse to take the baby,’ Oy said, as they waved Thip away in a taxi. ‘What a crazy idea. But then, what else can you expect from a Chonburi girl, eh?’

Despite her attempt at a joke, Mod could tell Oy was upset—Nok, too—as though Thip had tempted fate by putting into words the fear they all shared. When she proposed to stop at the Erawan Shrine to pray for Thip’s good fortune, Oy and Nok promptly scraped together enough baht for her to buy a garland of marigolds to add to her usual incense sticks.

They were all relieved when Nurse Wasana phoned later that afternoon to say that both Thip and the baby were doing well.

‘The Japanese parents won’t arrive until Friday,’ she said. ‘So you can visit Thip in the hospital if you like.’

Oy had no desire to step inside a hospital until it was absolutely necessary, but Nok, like Mod, was curious to see what the place was like. They put on their good clothes and dusted their faces with powder, before catching the Skytrain to Sala Daeng.

The hospital looked more like a five-star hotel, with its lounge chairs, guest tables and glittering chandeliers. There were pictures on the wall that changed while Mod looked at them, and a piano that played music all by itself as though possessed by a ghost. She clung to Nok as they rode the lift to the floor where Thip was staying. The nursery department turned out to be on the same floor, though a large blind covered the viewing window.

‘Let’s take a look at the baby,’ Nok said.

‘Can we do that?’ Mod nodded at the sign by the intercom button instructing them to identify the names of the mother and baby. ‘What do we even say?’

‘We ask for the baby of Sutathip Thanthara. She’s still the mother for now.’

‘Are you a relative?’ a voice asked in response to their inquiry.

‘Cousins.’ Nok said into the intercom. ‘From Chonburi.’

After a few minutes, the blind went up to reveal a baby in a clear plastic tub, round face and double chin above a blue blanket. His eyes were closed in straight lines and tufts of black hair poked out from beneath his woollen cap.

‘He looks very Japanese,’ Nok whispered.

From the nursery they walked along a corridor that smelled of bleach, their footsteps muffled by thick carpet. They found Thip sitting up in bed, wearing a cardigan over her pyjamas, and watching television. She wore a knitted hat, too, keeping warm after giving birth, the way their grandmothers taught them. As Mod and Nok greeted her, she muted the sound and gestured at the flowers and gifts on the shelf either side of the television screen.

‘From the parents.’ Thip said. ‘They love me.’

Mod perched beside Nok on a couch by the bed. ‘How are you feeling, *naawng?*’

‘Not bad. A bit sore. But it was okay. They treat me like I’m special.’

As if on cue, a woman in an apron and paper hat appeared in the doorway with a tray of food. ‘Lunch for you.’

Thip pushed a machine aside to make room on her tray table.

‘What’s that for?’ Nok asked.

‘Breastmilk pumping. The parents are paying me extra to provide milk for the baby while I’m still in the hospital.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘No, but it makes me feel like a cow.’

Thip chuckled and tucked into the food. She seemed cheerful, as though a great weight had been lifted from her, which Mod supposed it had. There was not a trace of the previous day’s panic.

While Thip ate, Mod and Nok oohed and aahed over the platters of fruit, boxes of sweets and showy bouquets. Between mouthfuls, Thip told them she was free to stay at the hospital four nights, longer if she liked, boasting that she had a bathroom all to herself. Mod couldn’t help contrasting Thip’s situation with Pui’s birth in Sisaket, when Mod had shared a ward with five other women and gone home the day after giving birth to save on hospital fees.

‘We saw the baby in the nursery,’ Nok said as Thip pushed aside her plate.

‘What’s he like?’

‘You haven’t seen him?’

She shook her head. ‘Better not to.’

Mod saw a flicker of regret in Thip’s smile. ‘He’s very hairy,’ she said.

Nok caught Mod’s eye. ‘That’s right. Like a baby monkey.’

'Sounds ugly.' Thip said.

'Yes, quite ugly. *Khee reh.*'

Thip laughed, though Mod thought she looked fragile, like a blossom that falls to the ground in the rain.

'I'm sure the parents will love him,' she added.

A nurse appeared in the doorway and glanced at her watch. Thip pressed them to take some fruit and sweets, clearly enjoying the chance to dole out gifts as though she were a rich *khoon ying*, not a mother-of-three and factory worker from the port district.

There were few gifts when Pui was born, only the clothes her mother provided, and the thin, gold chain Mod had bought for her son. She wondered in retrospect if the meagre gift was a mistake. Perhaps she should've borrowed money to buy something better. She made a silent promise that if she succeeded in having a baby for the farangs, she would use some of the money to buy Pui a new gold chain. Something heavier, to bind him to her.

The following day, Mod asked about bringing Pui to stay with her in Bangkok.

'You'll be starting additional medication tomorrow to prepare for the next transfer, *naawng*. That means daily visits to the clinic.'

'My mother could come, too,' Mod said. 'She could look after him when I have my appointments.'

'There won't really be room for your mother and son, as we expect some new girls to arrive any day now.' Pimsuda reached over and patted Mod's hand. 'Let's wait until after you have a confirmed pregnancy. Then we'll see if that idea can come to full flower.'

That night in the surrogate house, Mod curled her body around the empty space in bed where her son should have been and cried herself to sleep.

Meg glanced at her watch again. Midday in Melbourne meant nine a.m. in Bangkok, when Doctor Boribun said the frozen embryo transfer would take place. Meg put down her work and picked up the photo of the surrogate. Mod, also known as Mukda. *Muck-dah*. Not a pretty-sounding name. She wondered what it meant. Anna would probably know.

Meg's gaze wandered to the window, the sky outside winter-white and bare. More than a month and still Anna hadn't made contact. At least, not with Meg. Their mother had word from Cambodia. Anna had a job there, Helen said. Meg wondered if she'd gone back to her Frenchman.

She returned her attention to the photo. 'Good luck today, Mod,' she said to the woman with the serious face. 'I hope the procedure is pain free for you, and results in—'

She hesitated. It felt wrong to wish a baby on a surrogate, knowing she would have to give it up.

'I hope it's fruitful for all of us,' Meg said.

She closed her eyes and thought lovingly of their embryos. They'd looked like planets under magnification, whole worlds of possibility. She had to remind herself that technology distorted everything. A blastocyst was a tiny thing, smaller than a poppy seed. She thought of Mod, the stranger who at this very moment was taking their tiny blastocyst into her body. Meg started to send positive feelings towards the Thai woman, willing that tiny seed to grow.

Her eyes blinked open. She was sitting in a studio in Thornbury, while halfway across the world, a complete stranger was being implanted with the makings of hers and Nate's baby. Meg had thought IVF was an alienating experience, but it had nothing on overseas surrogacy. There was no screen to watch and no one's hand to hold. No shared anticipation. No one to hear her whispered hopes and hush her fears.

Meg thought of Mod, being subjected to invasive procedures on behalf of a couple she'd never met. Meg hoped she had someone—a friend or family member, at least a kindly health professional—to sit beside her and tell her everything would be all right.

Watching the clock all morning meant she had little to show for several hours' work. Her aim was to craft a piece with a successful surrogacy in mind. She would give it the shape of a scallop to represent a cradle, and source a natural pearl for this one. Something lustrous.

She opened the satin lined box where she kept loose pearls, different types in their separate compartments. She picked up a glossy purple Japanese *Keishi* and rolled it between her index finger and thumb. A 'poppy seed pearl' seemed a fitting metaphor for the blastocyst, until she remembered that the *Keishi* was pure nacre, formed from the leftovers when an oyster rejected an implanted nucleus. She dropped it back into its compartment as though it might burn her fingers.

Her gaze fell on a large, perfectly round, white pearl. She held it up to the light. It seemed to glow from within, the surface iridescent. A South Sea cultured pearl. She remembered buying it when she and Nate were in Broome on holiday. One of the most expensive gems in her collection. The antithesis of the misshapen freshwater variety she usually worked with. The perfect pearl for the optimistic piece she had in mind.

She rested the pearl against the framed photo of Mod, and set to work saw-cutting the silver into shape.

Anna moved into the cheapest room in the nicest guesthouse she could afford. It didn't matter that her window looked onto a brick wall, when she had access to a sparkling swimming pool and the lush tropical garden that surrounded it. The garden boasted a stand of towering trees, some supporting staghorn ferns, others fringed with aerial roots. The trees were a legacy of the Khmer Rouge period, perhaps the only beneficiaries, other than the rats, when the genocidal regime forcibly evacuated Phnom Penh in 1975. The trees had thrived in the ensuing period of neglect, continuing to flourish in the austere years that followed the liberation of the country in 1979. Survivors against the odds, they were part of what made the city unique, though whether they would survive the construction boom remained to be seen. In the meantime, Anna would tolerate a cramped room in exchange for the privilege of sitting on the communal balcony and gazing at those trees.

It took her less than a week to find a job, another couple of days for the paperwork to come through. In the interim, she did touristy things, taking a boat trip along the Tonlé Sap River to a pottery village, feeding bananas to the deer at a wildlife rescue centre, pretending to keep her mind off Meg, Nate, Christophe and what the hell she was doing with her life.

The work, for a non-government organisation, was to review projects for children affected by HIV, known in industry jargon as 'OVC'. Orphans and Vulnerable Children. A new acronym in an industry founded on them. Her job was to get a handle on existing services, and conduct what was known in the consultancy trade as a 'gap analysis', by reading reports, interviewing Cambodian government and United Nations officials, and visiting organisations that cared for affected children.

Anna remembered a time when HIV rates were skyrocketing and media headlines warned "AIDS could be Cambodia's next Pol Pot". Back then, HIV infection was a death sentence in a country as poor as Cambodia, and the main task of organisations working with HIV infected infants was to help them die with dignity.

Fast forward ten years to 2009 and despite a barely functioning public health system, HIV rates had fallen, antiretroviral therapies were widely available, and people no longer died from AIDS in vast numbers. The American government took the credit, having pumped significant aid funding into Cambodia, although Anna felt the Cambodian people's legendary resilience could equally account for the turnaround. Whatever the case, those organisations offering palliative care and cremations for HIV infected babies had to radically reorient their programs. Thanks to the treatments, those babies were growing up into children and teenagers.

The picture remained far from rosy, especially for Cambodian women. Anna was shocked to learn that while life expectancy for people with HIV had increased, maternal mortality had actually worsened. The country's highly effective condom use program that protected sex workers from their clients did nothing to protect married women from their husbands. If anything, it allowed men's sexual behaviour to go unchallenged. As a result, most new HIV infections were from husband to wife, and from the mother, via the father, to the unborn child. New infections in women outnumbered those in men by four to one.

Anna interviewed an official at the National AIDS Authority, who drew her attention to a priority in their new strategic plan, "to address gender inequality and gender-based violence, challenge male sexual norms and promote responsible behaviour." But the column next to it headed "expected results" was blank. 'We also have a strategic plan to address gender inequality,' a Ministry of Women Affairs spokesperson told Anna. 'But unlike the National AIDS Authority, we have no funding or support.'

As it was, Anna saw little appetite on the ground for systemic change. Most people she spoke with were too busy meeting immediate needs to pay much attention to the bigger picture.

Her interview with the co-directors of an orphanage for HIV-positive children in Phnom Penh was a case in point. Chanheng was one of Cambodia's few qualified social workers, Ray an American doctor, who wore a crucifix on a leather string around his neck. She interviewed them on a bench overlooking a yard, where some twenty children aged between two and twelve years old were playing. Chanheng outlined changes they were making, now that the children

looked set to enter their teens and could contemplate a future. It was a good news story, but as a consultant, Anna was paid to be sceptical.

‘Any problems arising from these developments that you hadn’t anticipated?’

Chanheng’s half-moon smile faltered. He nodded across the yard. ‘You see that girl in the blue-checked shirt?’

Anna looked up from her notes at a girl pushing a younger child on a swing.

‘Her name is Thareth. She was brought here seven years ago by her grandparents. They work as garbage collectors at Steung Meanchey, you know it?’

Anna nodded. You couldn’t live in Phnom Penh without hearing about the infamous garbage dump and the ghastly existence eked out by those who scoured it for a living.

‘The father gave permission for her to come because she was so sick. Her mother had died from AIDS already. We gave her medical treatment and good food, and her health improved a lot. She started going to school.’

Chanheng cleared his throat and his smile disappeared. ‘After a few years, when she was well again, the father came to take Thareth back. But the grandparents warned us that he planned to sell her to a brothel, like he did with her mother. We went to the police to stop him from taking Thareth away. We were successful.’

He nodded at Anna’s notebook. ‘This is one example of a problem we did not anticipate.’

Anna wondered how the hell anyone could anticipate that improving a child’s health would place her at risk of being sold to a brothel. She glanced again at the girl in the blue-checked shirt. ‘How old is Thareth now?’

‘Eleven.’

The girl must have felt Anna’s gaze on her, as she caught her eye, lifted the child from the swing, and walked over to join them on the bench. Up close, her face was drawn and she had dark circles under her eyes. She looked much older than her eleven years.

Anna turned back to Chanheng. ‘So what can you do now?’

The Cambodian man's smile returned. 'The girl will be safe with us until she finishes high school. Then we'll help her find a job.'

'I'm sorry. That's not what I mean. For example, would you advocate for law reform to better protect women and children based on this experience?'

'We mostly advocate for individuals...' He looked to Ray.

'We've got limited time and money,' the American said. 'You understand, Anna. Our mission is to reach out to the poorest of the poor, and try to make a difference to their lives. If we go in too hard and agitate for political change, we risk getting kicked out of the country. And then where would all these children be?'

As if to underscore Ray's point, the child on Thareth's lap extended her arms to Anna, who put aside her notebook and transferred the child to her knee. Anna didn't initiate contact with orphaned children as a matter of principle, mindful of the vagaries of 'orphanage tourism' in the region. But there was always one who, like a cat, was drawn to the person who fussed over them the least. In this instance, a gangly little girl with curly hair and a gap-toothed grin.

People like Chanheng and Ray did good work, and Anna understood why they chose to meet the children's immediate needs, which were significant, over the slow, thankless task of trying to effect legal reform, let alone cultural change. At a time when she was questioning the value of her own life's work, the thought of making a difference to one person's life—the child on her knee, for instance—was genuinely tempting.

But that, as her Buddhist friends would say, was not Anna's karma. Hers was to be like Cassandra, the prophet whom no one believed, arguing for a whole new system, when everyone else thought the existing one just needed a little tweaking.

Later, as she typed up her report on the balcony overlooking the guesthouse garden, Anna included among her recommendations that Chanheng, Ray and others use their experience on the ground to advocate for high-level reforms to address gender inequality. Most likely, the advice would be ignored. But she felt she owed it to girls like Thareth to point out that without such reform, any individual gains remained fragile.

This, she realised, was at the root of her problem with commercial surrogacy. A single surrogacy arrangement might improve the financial circumstances of an individual woman in Thailand or India. But there would be no lasting change while the circumstances that drove women into paid surrogacy in the first place stayed the same. Surrogacy couldn't liberate women any more than charity liberated children. Only justice could do that.

But if Anna couldn't convince seasoned aid workers like Chanheng and Ray of that—people who spent their lives working among the 'poorest of the poor'—was it fair of her to expect Meg to understand?

She scrolled through the photos she'd taken that day at the group home, pausing at an image of Thareth carrying the curly-haired girl on her hip. Anna thought of the father who'd tried to sell Thareth to a brothel. Likely as not, he'd been a child himself during the Khmer Rouge period. The regime had separated children from their parents, taught them to torture and kill. That legacy of abuse and trauma went some way towards explaining, if not excusing, the father's behaviour.

Why do you feel sympathy for everyone else except me?

Meg's word's came back to haunt Anna. If she could find a way to explain the unforgivable behaviour of Thareth's father, surely she could find it in her heart to forgive her sister?

Mod wasn't brave enough to ask how many embryos the doctor had planted inside her this time around. Nok was starting to look enormous, and although she still joined them on their evening walks around Benjakiti Park, her feet were so swollen, only men's rubber slippers would fit. It didn't help that the new girl, Dao, who'd moved into Ice's old room, kept regaling them with stories about what could go wrong.

'I heard about a surrogate mother who had three babies planted inside her,' Dao said, as they shuffled along the path that circled the lake. 'But there wasn't enough room for them to grow and they were as small as kittens when they were born.'

'Did they live?' Nok asked in a whisper.

Dao shrugged. 'I guess. I heard about another surrogate mother who had *four* babies planted inside her. But the parents said they only wanted two, so the doctor made the other babies vanish.'

'What do you mean, vanish?'

'I mean, the doctor made the baby disappear.'

'All the babies?'

'No, no. Only the two they didn't want.'

Mod had visions of babies eating each other like sharks.

'I heard about this one girl, she thought she was carrying twins and she got all excited because, you know, that means a bonus payment, right? But then she had a second scan and there was only one heartbeat. Turns out the other twin had disappeared.'

Mod was starting to regret having invited Dao to join them on their walk.

'I thought you said the doctor made them disappear.'

'I think maybe a *phi krasue* took it,' Dao said.

Mod shivered at the mention of the ghost, a beautiful, floating female head that trailed entrails in her wake and preyed on pregnant women. The idea of the *phi krasue's* long, thin tongue probing her body like the doctor's instruments made her feel dizzy. She stopped walking and put her hands on her knees.

'*Sa baai dee baaw, naawng?*'

Nok looked at her with concern.

'I'm fine,' Mod said. 'My stomach's rolling a little, that's all.'

Nok smiled. 'A good sign.'

'Really?' Mod eased herself up. 'I don't know, sister. Khun Pimsuda says I must go to the clinic every two days for blood tests. Maybe there's a problem.'

'No problem,' Nok said. 'It's just these glass tube babies, they're not as strong as natural babies. You have to take more care, that's all.'

Mod supposed she was right. Carrying a baby for someone else was very different from carrying your own baby. She was more than six weeks gone before she even knew she was pregnant with Pui, and couldn't remember having a blood test at all. When she was pregnant with her own child, she'd never worried about working or lifting things or riding a *motercy*. But now she felt the need to watch every step.

'Let's sit and *gin lohm* for a few minutes,' Oy suggested.

Mod, Nok and Oy sat on a bench overlooking the lake, the city lights pooling into gold on the water. Dao, who had walked ahead, retraced her steps to join them.

'You know, I heard about another agency where the surrogates stay in a condo with a pool,' she said.

'A pool would be no good to me,' Oy said. 'I can't swim.'

'Nor me,' Nok piped up.

'Me, neither,' Dao said. 'But that's not the point. The farang customers must be much richer if they are paying for their surrogate mothers to have a pool.'

'So what's stopping you offering your services to them?' A note of irritation had crept into Oy's voice. 'You're not pregnant yet. You're still a free agent.'

Dao gazed out over the lake. 'Actually, my boyfriend already borrowed money from Khun Pimsuda's brother.'

Mod exchanged shocked glances with Oy and Nok. Poor Dao was no different from those girls from the village who got sold into bonded labour in order to repay the family debts. The lucky ones as servants. Suddenly Dao's obsession with all the things that could go wrong made sense to Mod.

'*Naawng*, have you ever had a baby before?'

Dao shook her head. 'My boyfriend says after we have the money from the surrogacy, we can get married and have a family.'

Mod wanted to take the girl by the shoulders and shake some sense into her, make her see that her boyfriend was no better than a pimp—a crocodile. But Dao was unlikely to listen to her advice, any more than Mod had listened to mother's warnings about Rungrot.

As the foursome sat in silence, a turtle's head poked out of the water in front of them. People were always releasing turtles into the lake to make merit.

Mod turned to Dao. 'I have a banana in my bag, *naawng*. Why don't we feed it to the turtles for luck?'

Dao leapt to her feet. 'Oh, cool!'

She skipped to the edge of the water, leaving Mod and the others shaking their heads in her wake.

'A chick in the fist,' Nok said sadly.

Mod followed Dao to the edge of the lake, peeling the banana and breaking it into small pieces. As the girls threw the fruit into the water, more turtles appeared, jostling for a share. The reflected lights on the lake wavered like flames.

Wednesday 24 June 2009. Meg had circled the date on her calendar in red. Ten days after frozen embryo transfer, aka FET. The surrogate's beta test was due.

She checked her email every ten minutes, heard nothing, sent text messages to Nate with nothing to report. She tried working on a piece of jewellery but couldn't concentrate. She turned to administrative matters instead—filing, sending invoices, paying bills—but kept losing track. She printed out multiple copies of the same document, and caught herself filing a bill before it was paid. Her transactions timed out as she toggled between online banking and email.

By the time Nate arrived home, Meg was convinced the FET had failed.

'They would've have let us know by now if it had worked,' she said, pouring Nate a glass of red from a bottle she'd already opened.

'Not necessarily. You remember how inconclusive those bloody beta tests can be.'

'But they would've told us if the betas looked okay, even if they weren't conclusive.' Meg shook her head. 'I think it's failed and no one at Team Baby wants to break the bad news.'

Nate put his arms around her. 'Are you going to be all right?'

Meg touched his cheek with her free hand, the other still holding her glass of wine. 'I'm fine.'

'Are you sure?'

She paused. She felt calm. Disappointed but not bitter. Resigned.

'Yes, I'm sure. I guess I've gotten so used to bad news, I expect it.' She pressed her forehead to his chest. 'Perhaps it's time I accepted that this is how it's always going to be. Just us.'

Nate took her chin between his fingers and raised her face to his. 'Is that so bad?'

Meg met his gaze. 'Not at all, my love.'

She'd often mused that getting used to life without children shouldn't be hard because that's what she already had. Life with children was the great

unknown. But it wasn't quite that simple. Life with no hope of children would still take some getting used to.

As she touched her glass to Nate's, the mobile phone on the kitchen bench beeped with an incoming message. Wine splashed from the glass as she put it down and snatched the phone.

She saw the word 'congratulations' in capital letters, asterisks on either side, like those spam messages saying you've won thousands of dollars in a lottery you never entered.

'It says, "Congratulations. Your surrogate Mod is pregnant. From your friends at Team Baby".'

'Pregnant?' Nate whispered.

'Pregnant.'

She threw her arms around him and kissed him through happy tears. 'Oh my god, Nate, I can't believe it.'

Nate lifted her and spun her around, something he hadn't done since they were in their twenties.

'I honestly did not see that coming.'

They reached for their wine glasses with trembling hands and touched them together.

'To our first ever pregnancy.'

'A big fat positive,' Meg said. 'At last.'

She took a sip of wine and nodded at the phone. 'I wonder why they didn't email me earlier.' She frowned. 'Maybe the betas don't look all that good and they're waiting until tomorrow to send the results in the hope they'll look better.'

Nate put down his glass and took her by the shoulders. 'Meghan Louise Brookes, you stop that right now. You said it yourself, you're used to bad news. But that text message? That was good news. That was great news. Get used to it, sweetheart. I've got a good feeling about this.'

Meg smiled and nodded. She suggested they go out to dinner to celebrate. She put on lipstick and a warm coat for the walk to the local Italian. She ate and drank and laughed.

But later, when Nate was asleep, she wrapped herself in a woollen shawl and sat in her studio, gazing past the photo of Mod on her desk, out through the

window to where a dead silver birch cast a bony shadow on what remained of the lawn. Only the native plants could withstand the drought: the hardy, gnarled grevillea, beloved by the wattlebirds; the leucadendron that looked set to topple the fence.

Meg calculated the baby's due date as late summer. Could her garden be made to flourish, her ferns revived, her lawn brought back to life by then? Even if she did succeed in reviving it, could she trust such flourishing to last, knowing how easily it could all turn to dust?

She sat with these thoughts until the windowpane grew misty with her breath. When she crept back to bed, she lay close to the edge, keeping her cold feet away from Nate.

Anna and Francesca entered the beer garden in the grounds of a run-down villa to find Sreymom and Marat waiting for them. With their short bobs, trademark jeans and activist t-shirts, their young friends stood out among the female patrons, most of whom favoured big hair, skirts and blouses in lurid shades of sateen. Sreymom and Marat ran the only local organisation that addressed violence against women. Francesca worked with them on legal reform. They were the ideal audience for Anna to vent her frustrations.

‘These guys at the orphanage are sitting on evidence they could be using to advocate for reform. But they just want to do the touchy feely stuff of looking after orphans.’

‘At least those kids *are* orphans,’ Sreymom said. ‘Most so-called orphans in Cambodia have parents.’

‘Only the parents are too poor to look after the child,’ Marat weighed in. ‘And instead of supporting the parents to look after their children, foreigners keep opening up more orphanages.’

‘And then they offer the children for adoption overseas. Never mind if the family wants to take them home someday.’

Anna thought of Thareth and the father who wanted to sell her to a brothel. She was about to suggest that family might not always be the best place for the child, when Francesca, who had an adopted Cambodian son, weighed in.

‘I went to enormous lengths to make sure Virak was genuinely abandoned.’

‘We know you did.’ Sreymom said. ‘But a lot of *barang* are not moral like you. They just want a baby, no questions asked.’

‘And it’s so easy to raise money for orphanages. Like Anna says, it’s touchy feely stuff.’

Anna smiled, knowing that Marat, who devoured words like rice, would’ve been waiting for an opportunity to use the expression the moment she heard it.

‘If the money supported the families instead, hardly any kids would *need* orphanages,’ Sreymom said.

‘Yes, but try telling that to donors.’

Anna sipped her beer, the conversation doing little to lift her spirits. The young women argued on principle, just as Anna did. But what was the point of occupying the moral high ground if nothing changed? It seemed increasingly less like virtue and more like hubris to be constantly criticising things that she didn't have to live with, while judging those who did.

Sreymom and Marat left promptly at seven. While prepared to push boundaries by wearing short hair and drinking beer, their rebelliousness didn't extend to letting their mothers fret for their safety. The promise of rain was in the air as Anna and Francesca walked to a quieter restaurant nearby. They took a table on the verandah, ordered drinks and food. Francesca lit a cigarette.

'So how is Virak?' Anna asked. 'How long until you can take him home?'

'I wish I knew.' She gave a smoky sigh. 'I'm still waiting on paperwork from the embassy to apply for his visa. They're going through exactly the same process as I did to establish that he's a genuine orphan, but in their own time.'

'How long has it been now?'

'Nearly three years. The longer we stay, the better it is for him. But the harder it gets for me to find work back in Sydney. Sometimes I think I should just resign myself to staying in Cambodia.'

Francesca gazed out across the garden as though contemplating the prospect, when a large, ginger rat emerged from the shadows and ran across the yard. She shrieked and leapt on to her chair, her cigarette falling to the ground.

'Oh god, I hate the rats here.'

Anna started to laugh. But her smile froze as Christophe appeared at the entrance to the restaurant with an achingly beautiful young woman on his arm.

'*Salut, Anna.*' He stopped at their table to kiss her cheeks, and turned to his companion. 'Yasmin, meet my old friend, Anna. *Une australienne.*'

'*Enchantée.*'

Yasmin's smile made her look even younger. She was as dark as Anna was fair, her olive skin flawless. Her long, black hair formed glossy parentheses around a pair of pert breasts in a tight, white singlet.

Anna extended her hand, intending for the young woman to shake it. Instead, Yasmin pulled her close and kissed her cheeks, leaving Anna feeling scalded.

'Christophe has told me about you,' Yasmin said.

Anna hastened to introduce Francesca, who'd climbed down from her chair to exchange kisses with Christophe.

'You are a consultant also, like Anna?' Yasmin asked Francesca.

Francesca shook her head. 'Lawyer.'

'Me also,' Yasmin said. 'I work in human rights.'

It wasn't enough that she was beautiful. She had to be smart as well.

Anna listened as the two women compared notes, unable to summon the energy to intervene when, inevitably, Francesca invited the couple to join them. Her friend was only dimly aware that Anna and Christophe had been romantically involved. She didn't know their affair had gone on for more than five years. And she had no idea of the pain it caused Anna to lose him.

She felt like the understudy in a play, watching from the wings. Christophe couldn't take his eyes off Yasmin, who chatted away with Francesca as though they were old friends. The food arrived—communal dishes designed for sharing—but Anna had no appetite. She helped herself to one of Francesca's cigarettes while the others finished eating.

'Alors, shall we order coffee, ma tendre amie?'

It was the first time since arriving that Christophe had addressed her directly, the reference to her as 'dear friend' jolting Anna out of her torpor.

'Not for me.' She stood up, her cheeks burning. She fished ten American dollars from her wallet, and tucked it under the toothpick container on the table. 'I've got an early start.'

It wasn't true but she felt the need to dignify her exit with an excuse.

'But it looks like it's about to rain,' Francesca said.

Anna looked at Christophe. *'Tant pis, alors.'*

'What's that?'

'I said never mind, Frannie.'

She steeled herself for another round of cheek-kissing, avoiding eye contact with Christophe and Yasmin, and promising to visit Francesca and Virak soon. In case Christophe was watching, she walked out with her chin up and shoulders back, but once out of sight, she deflated. The tuk-tuk drivers with their cheery calls of 'Hello, where you go?' brought her close to tears.

She covered four or five blocks before the rain started. Lightning flooded the street, followed by a thunderclap so close it made the ground shake. Profound though it was, Anna's melancholy could not withstand the power of a monsoonal downpour. Melbourne's gloomy drizzle might be the ideal backdrop for a country and western song. But the monsoon had an energy that made Anna's heart race. No blue eyes crying in this rain.

She clutched her handbag to her chest and ran, leaping over puddles and dodging overflowing gutters. Not that it made any difference. The rain was almost blinding, falling in great, wet swathes. She was running through waterfalls.

The night guard opened the gate to the guest house, extending an umbrella to her in a polite, practised gesture. Anna looked from her sodden clothes to the umbrella, and pulled a face that made the guard laugh. All the same, he insisted on sheltering her for the walk to the door.

She peeled off her clothes and took a shower, washing mud from her feet and mascara from her cheeks. She wrapped herself in a sarong and opened the window in her room. The rain stopped as abruptly as it began, the pounding din giving way to the slow, sad drip of water sliding from eaves and leaves.

Anna felt her misery return as she recalled Christophe's adoration for his beautiful, young lover. While their relationship had been casual by mutual agreement, she'd always believed they'd settle down together. She'd been prepared to wait. Christophe was worth waiting for.

But a month before her fortieth birthday, Anna ran out of patience. She told Christophe that if he wasn't prepared to commit to her, she didn't want to be with him anymore. She quit her job, packed up her things, and returned to Australia. Despite what she'd told Meg, her aim wasn't to get him out of her system so much as force his hand.

Instead, he'd found Yasmin.

She took a bottle of duty free whisky from her wardrobe, sloshed it into a glass and downed half in one gulp. Her stomach burned. How the fuck did she ever think Christophe would choose her, when she'd let herself be taken for granted for so long? She swallowed the rest of the whisky and poured another.

What the hell was she going to do now? Her career was in limbo. The love of her life was in love with someone else. Her sister was no longer speaking to her—

Whisky-sodden tears welled in Anna's eyes. She'd been a crap sister lately, self-righteous and judgmental, totally lacking in compassion. No wonder Meg had given up on her.

She put the lid back on the scotch and returned it to the wardrobe. Her eyes fell on her laptop that she'd stashed before going out. It struck Anna that of all the things wrong in her life, Meg's silence was the one she could do something about.

She swapped her whisky glass for bottled water and turned on the computer.

“Dearest Meg.” Anna’s keyboard tapped to the metronome of dripping water.

I feel awful about what happened in Bangkok. Please forgive me. I overreacted. I should never have abandoned you and Nate like that.

You were right to accuse me of being judgmental. I was seeing the situation from the surrogate’s point of view, which as you’ve pointed out, is what I tend to do. I don’t know why, but it’s like a default setting with me. Remember how I always supported the underdog, even when I was a kid? Dad reckoned I did it to be contrary. But I felt that someone had to cheer for the losers, and it might as well be me.

Nowadays, I’m no longer sure who the winners and losers are.

Anna frowned. Where the hell had that come from? She deleted the last sentence and resumed writing.

Anyway, I’ve been trying to look at things from your perspective. I’m guessing the whole surrogacy thing must be an emotional minefield. On the one hand, there’s a human life at stake, a much longed-for baby for you and Nate. On the other, it’s run like a business. I guess this means you have to make tough decisions along the way if you stand a chance of fulfilling your dream. Life is full of them – tough decisions, I mean. One of my toughest was to be away for so many years when I could have been with you. I know you had Nate by your side. But I’m sorry I wasn’t a better sister to you.

I’m writing to you from Cambodia, where I’ve been working for the past six weeks. A friend of mine here adopted a little Cambodian boy, but after three years, she’s still waiting for the paperwork to come through in order to take him to Australia. I remember you telling me how complicated adoption could be, and I’m sorry that I wasn’t more sympathetic about it at the time. I’ve been slow to appreciate just how much time, patience and trust, as well as money, is at stake when you struggle to become a parent. I hope you can find it in my heart to forgive me, Meggie-Lou.

Speaking of Cambodia, things are over with that French guy I told you about. I feel completely gutted and I have no idea what to do next –

Again, Anna hesitated. The email was about re-connecting with Meg, not an account of her personal dramas. The news about Christophe would keep. She deleted the paragraph.

I'm not sure what lies ahead for me. I don't think I can face coming back to Melbourne in the winter, so I'll probably stick around and look for more work, at least to get me through the next few months.

In the meantime, if there's anything I can do for you, just say the word.

Anna read over the message, signed off "your loving sister", and hit send.

Dearest Anna,

I'm soooo happy to hear from you. I'll be honest and say it does drive me crazy the way you judge those of us closest to you by higher standards than everyone else. But there's no question that I forgive you for it ☺

Besides, you had a point. While I do think it was the right decision to change surrogates, I could've handled it much better. Will you forgive me? We didn't even stay on in Bangkok to meet the new surrogate, which was a big mistake, because she is actually pregnant.

I can hardly believe these words, even as I type them. But it's true: OUR SURROGATE IS PREGNANT!!!

It's early days, only 4 weeks. But we've never experienced anything like a 4-week pregnancy before.

As you can imagine, me and Nate are beside ourselves with excitement. But I feel terrible that we didn't meet the surrogate. Her name is Mod, by the way. Nate says we can't beat ourselves up with the benefit of hindsight, but when I found out she was pregnant, I wanted to drop everything and fly over to see her. Nate talked me out of it and made me see sense (he's like that!). As he says, it would be crazy to spend what little money we have on flights at this stage. Instead, we're going to wait and fly over for (fingers crossed) THE BIRTH.

(OMG! I can't believe I just wrote that).

In the meantime, if you're in Bangkok, would you try to meet Mod for me? I just want to know she's OK, and that she knows how grateful and excited we are.

There's a six-week scan scheduled for 10 July, when we should be able to see the baby. When I say 'we', I mean whoever is at the clinic. If there's any chance you could be there, let me know ASAP and I'll line it up with the people at Team Baby.

My dear sister, I'm trying not to get ahead of myself. But I am so glad to share this news with you.

Love always,

Meg xoxoxo

PS Send me your phone number so I can call you.

PPS So are you back together with your Frenchman?

Pimsuda pressed her hands together at waist-level and flashed a tepid smile. A half-hearted *wai* by local standards. Anna pretended not to notice.

‘Your sister said you might come.’

‘Meg wishes she could be here herself. But since I’m in Bangkok, she thought I might see the scan in her place.’

Pimsuda frowned. ‘It’s a most unusual request.’

‘My sister does not take the surrogate mother’s privacy for granted, and she’s happy to compensate for her time.’

‘That is kind of her.’ Pimsuda seemed cheered by the prospect. ‘I must check with the surrogate mother, of course. If she agrees, then we can meet your sister’s request.’

Anna was left to wait in the space she thought of as the airport lounge. The negotiation with Mod, assuming it happened at all, took less than five minutes.

‘The surrogate mother has agreed you can attend the scan.’

Anna followed Pimsuda into a consulting room. The woman she assumed to be Mod was lying on an examination table, sheet in a tent over her lower body, surgical cap on her head.

‘This is Khun Anna, the sister of the farang mother,’ Pimsuda said in Thai, adding in English, ‘This is Miss Mod.’

Mod returned Anna’s *wai*, but looked away before Anna could make eye contact.

Pimsuda addressed the clinician wielding the ultrasound device. ‘Get the baby back up on the screen so she can report to her sister that the pregnancy is progressing well.’

Naturally, they’d already done the scan. They wouldn’t risk any unpleasant surprises in front of Anna.

A nurse ushered her in front of the examination table, and drew her attention to a large screen showing what looked like a grey band of cloud. Anna glanced over her shoulder to make sure she wasn’t blocking the view, but Mod had turned her face to the wall. As the doctor’s hand moved below the sheet

between Mod's legs, Anna looked away, mortified. She'd assumed the ultrasound would be abdominal, not vaginal, or she'd never have wheedled her way in. Now it was too late to leave without creating a scene.

Grateful for the distraction, she watched the screen as the grey cloud parted to reveal a black hole like a cave.

'The gestational sac,' Pimsuda said over her shoulder.

It made Anna deeply uncomfortable to peer into the private recesses of another woman's body. But she thought of her sister and tried to imagine what Meg would do in her place.

'The gestational sac—is that good?' she asked.

'It's a good size, yes,' Pimsuda said.

The ultrasound operator zoomed in on the cave. Nestled on the floor of the dark cavity was what looked to Anna like an open pipi shell. The image froze.

'That's the yolk sac at the top and the baby underneath,' Pimsuda said.

Anna nodded, though the amorphous shape bore no resemblance to a baby at all. At the side of the screen, numbers ticked over like a countdown clock.

'Just how big is the baby at this point?'

'About five millimetres.'

Not even as big as the nail on Anna's little finger. No wonder the images looked so strange, blown up out of all proportion.

The screen came back to life, the grey clouds billowing around the cave. In the lower pipi shell, Anna saw a flicker of movement. The technician zoomed in closer.

'The heartbeat,' Pimsuda said. 'You cannot always see it so early in the pregnancy. You are lucky.'

The pulsating mass looked no more like a heart than the rest of it looked like a baby, but Anna was mesmerised. The palpitations looked to her like tiny hands clapping or cymbals clashing together. She found herself inwardly cheering on this minute percussionist.

'It's amazing,' she whispered.

'So, now you can share the good news with your sister, yes?'

Anna was aware of being given a wind-up signal, but playing the dumb farang gave her licence to ignore it.

'I can actually see the baby's heartbeat.'

'Yes.'

Out of the corner of her eye, Anna saw Pimsuda nod at the ultrasound technician. Seconds later, the screen froze again. There was a buzzing sound, followed by a click, and the technician handed Anna a picture.

Anna looked from the picture to Mod, whose face remained hidden behind her mask. She turned to Pimsuda.

'Would you please tell Miss Mod that my sister wishes to thank her from the bottom of her heart.'

'The farang says thank you,' Pimsuda said in Thai.

'From the bottom of her heart,' Anna repeated.

'*Naawng sao chan saap sueng jai ma ka*,' Pimsuda added. Translated literally, it meant 'her heart is thoroughly suffused with appreciation'. Closer to the sentiment Anna felt Meg would want her to convey.

It was for Meg's sake, too, that after leaving the Team Baby office, Anna waited in the lobby for Mod to appear, followed her out into the street and said in her most polite Thai, 'Hello, Miss Mod. I am the auntie of the baby you are carrying.'

The café was Dao's idea. She was coming from her own appointment at the clinic, newly pregnant with the baby of an Australian man and his Thai wife, when Mod spotted her. Though the least favourite of her housemates, anything was better than being with Khun Anna alone. Mod seized Dao's arm, obliging Khun Anna to include her in the invitation to go somewhere for a cool drink. Dao promptly suggested a place well beyond their means, the kind she considered fashionable and modern. To Mod, the freezing air-con and black décor made the café cold and bland as a cave.

Dao ordered an iced chocolate that came with a tower of whipped cream and sprinkles. Mod felt queasy just looking at it. She declined Khun Anna's offer of cake to go with her lemon soda and kept one eye on the toilets.

Dao seemed to think a Thai-speaking farang was a great joke. She kept asking questions, nudging Mod and giggling behind her hand when Khun Anna responded. Thanks to Dao, Mod learned that Anna had originally studied Lao, which was almost identical to the Isaan language spoken in the northeast provinces where Mod and Dao grew up.

'Sabaidee baw?' Dao asked her.

'Sabaidee,' Anna answered, sending Dao into another fit of giggles.

Anna had lived in many different countries, Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as Laos and Thailand. But she'd never married, had no children. And she was forty years old already. Mod found it all very sad.

She noticed the way Anna's eyes grew brighter when she talked about her sister whose name, Meg, sounded like the Thai word for 'cloud'. She told them that Meg had tried for ten years to have a baby without success, and not even visiting the Mae Tuptim shrine had helped. She showed Mod and Dao a photo of Meg and her husband, Nate.

'She has lovely clear skin,' Mod said shyly.

*'Yes, not like me with all my *khee meng wan*.'*

It was true. Khun Anna did have a lot of fly-shit spots. Perhaps if she tried whitening cream on her face, she might have more luck attracting a husband.

'Ja muuk dohng.'

Dao's admiration of the husband's nose made Khun Anna laugh.

'If you're lucky, the baby will have a big, straight nose like that,' Dao added.

'Meg and Nate don't mind what the baby looks like, so long as it's healthy and the *mae oom boon* is healthy.' She turned to Mod. 'Would you like to keep this?'

Mod accepted the photo with both hands, slipping it into her handbag alongside the tablets she was given at the clinic.

Anna continued to talk about her sister, how grateful she was, how *saap sueng jai* for what Mod was doing for her. Mod nodded politely, wondering how much longer it would be before she could go home and lie down.

'Would you like anything more to eat or drink?' Anna asked at last.

Mod touched her knee to Dao's under the table. 'Thank you but no.'

'I guess we should get going.' Khun Anna signalled for the bill. 'I'll see you again soon. You have my contact details, so if there's anything I or my sister can do for you, just ask.'

'You're so lucky to meet a farang who speaks Thai,' Dao said, as they rode the Skytrain back to the apartment. 'You can ask for things you want. Not like the rest of us, getting food we'd never eat and clothes we'd never wear, only good for selling in the market. You could ask for face cream and body lotion and nice clothes in the right size and...'

Mod tuned out as Dao rattled off her wish-list, unable to share her flatmate's enthusiasm. Before that morning, Mod could think of the farang parents like she thought of farangs in general. Rich. Exotic. Distant. Details of their lives left to the airbrushing of her imagination.

But along came Khun Anna, speaking Thai to her, making Mod notice the freckles on her nose and throat, her strange eyes like a magical cat, the way she held her breath after asking a question.

Mai pen rai, she says. Baw pen yang. She spoke not only Thai but the language of Isaan, making Mod feel even more exposed. *Never mind. It doesn't matter.* But it did matter to Mod.

She knew Khun Anna was not the baby's mother. She knew the egg that made the baby didn't even come from Khun Anna's sister. But it didn't make any

difference. Up until then, the baby she was carrying meant nothing more to her than a stranger.

Khun Anna had given that baby a face.

The wind played havoc with Meg's hair as she tramped along the Merri Creek trail, hands clenched in her pockets. It was cold but dry, the middle of winter and still no significant rain. The creek, reduced to a trickle, smelled like old vase water. Still, the surrounding bush flourished, as though the drought was merely an excuse to demonstrate its mettle. Bird species Meg didn't see in Melbourne when she was growing up—rainbow lorikeets, eastern rosellas, crested pigeons—flocked to the city's flowering scrub like poor relatives fleeing the countryside.

Meg passed a company of lorikeets feeding on an early flowering gum, a chattering riot of red, blue, green and gold among the dull olive of the eucalypt leaves. On a low branch, bare of flowers, a lone wattlebird coughed in protest, fleshy red wattles wobbling like jowls. The rainbow lorikeets, superior both in looks and numbers, ignored it.

'Meggie, I saw your baby's heartbeat.'

They'd spoken half an hour earlier. The excitement in Anna's voice still echoed in Meg's ears.

'It was amazing. They say you can't always see a heartbeat this early on. But I could see it so clearly. I think it's a good sign.'

Meg wanted to share Anna's excitement, but she felt so far away. 'I can hardly believe it.'

'If you'd seen it, you'd believe it all right.'

Meg didn't know how to respond without sounding petulant. She asked instead about Mukda.

'It's pronounced *mook-da*,' Anna said. 'But she's known by her nickname Mod, which means ant.'

'Ant?'

'Funny, I know. Anyway, she's lovely. After we met at the clinic, I took her out to a café so we could talk.'

'Oh?'

'She has a young son. They live with her extended family in the northeast. A town called Sisaket. But she plans on spending most of the pregnancy in Bangkok.'

Meg pursed her lips. 'I knew she had a son.'

'I got the impression that's the hardest part for her about being a surrogate, being away from him.'

'It is hard being so far away.'

'Good news is, I've been offered a month's work in Laos, which means I can easily get back to Bangkok to check up on Mod and the baby whenever you like.'

Meg wasn't sure why the idea of Anna checking up on Mod made her nervous. She should've been happy to have this special link to the baby. Instead, she felt usurped. And afraid. Worried Anna might somehow use her involvement to make a claim on the baby, like the witch in the Rapunzel story.

The moment the thought crossed her mind, Meg felt herself burn with shame. What on earth was wrong with her? Her dream of motherhood was closer than ever to being realised. Why the dark thoughts?

Watching the wattlebird's futile protest, Meg recognised the problem. She was jealous. No point trying to pretend otherwise. She was jealous of Mod who got to be pregnant when she could not. She was jealous of women who made babies without having to use donor eggs. She was jealous of everyone who got to have babies without even trying. She was jealous of her brother, David, who'd never really thought about having kids until his wife fell pregnant. She was jealous of Anna, who didn't even want to have kids but who got to see her baby's heartbeat before her.

At some point during her walk, Meg decided it was time to reconnect with her online community, especially now that she could graduate from infertile to mother-to-be. A brief search took her to a forum in the US called 'Mommies Thru Surrogacy'. Nothing too close to home. Signing in as ThingWithFeathers, she started a new thread with the subject heading, "How to handle the green-eyed monster?"

"My pregnant surro is in another country, where my sister also lives," she typed. "I'm jealous of them both. What can I do about it?"

When she logged back in the following morning, she found twenty-seven responses.

“I’m jealous of young mothers.”

“Me, too. Teen moms make my blood boil.”

“My pet hate is the woman who decides after years of not wanting children to try for one at forty and gets pregnant instantly.”

“It’s natural to be jealous of what comes so easily to others. We’re only human.”

Whether or not “the truth shall set you free”, as one writer suggested, Meg did feel better after scrolling through the posts. Recommendations for prayer and yoga aside, the overwhelming advice was that jealousy was natural and she should learn to live with it.

She pushed the laptop to one side and surveyed her desk. At its centre was a sketch she’d made for a piece inspired by the still from the 6-week scan. Making jewellery was how she’d learned to live with infertility. She’d envisaged using a seed pearl to represent the baby’s heart, setting it against a kidney-shaped disc of oxidised silver to represent the amniotic sac. In the late morning light, the design looked dull and uninspired.

Meg tossed the sheet of paper into the recycling bin. She needed a completely different approach, something that spoke to the maelstrom of emotions—excitement, resentment, fear, envy—that she was experiencing.

Something with depths of green and maybe gold.

Meg's school friend Eleni had worn a blue glass eye on a fine gold chain around her neck since she was ten years old. 'A gift from my papús to protect me from the evil eye,' Eleni explained.

'What's the evil eye?'

'You know, when someone stares at you like they hate you? It's like a curse. But this—' she fingered the glass bead at her throat '—is also an evil eye. It turns the curse away.'

Meg was intrigued by the idea of using a monster's own power to drive it away. Years later, she recognised the same concept in the mirrors above Chinese shopfronts in Bangkok, designed to scare off evil spirits with their own reflections. The more Meg thought about it, the more it seemed to her that an evil eye, specifically a green one, was the talisman she needed.

She started with an eye-shaped pendant, but the flat disc wasn't substantial enough for the effect she was seeking. She experimented with spheres and hemispheres but, once strung on a chain, she couldn't prevent them from rolling over. On a symbolic level, it felt like closing the eye. She wanted her eyes wide open.

A chance reference to green nail polish in something she read gave her the idea of setting an eye on a ring. While she usually created labour-intensive, one-off pieces, a ring also lent itself to being reproduced—the irony of which was not lost on her.

Meg made the prototype out of hard, blue wax, honing it with a bastard file until she'd fashioned a kind of eye-shaped signet ring. Using a compass, she engraved a circle to symbolise the iris, and cross-hatched the surface with a dental tool, a reminder to the person who wore it of the hands that made it. At a service in one of Melbourne's art deco buildings, she had the model cast in silver, and was pleased with the result. Her evil eye was solid, substantial, unblinking.

All that was left was to select a stone for the pupil. She ruled out emerald as too expensive, and also too fertile a colour to associate with something as fruitless as jealousy. She discovered that malachite, a semi-precious stone, was used in the Middle Ages to ward off the evil eye. But it was soft and, like emerald,

the colour seemed too lush. In the end, she went with peridot, a crystal found on comets. Its hardness was well suited to a ring, while its olive-green glassiness struck Meg as fitting for an emotion that sapped the colour from life.

She was sitting at her desk, admiring the finished result, when Nate appeared behind her and kissed the top of her head. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'That depends.' She took off the ring and handed it to him. 'What do you think it is?'

Nate slipped the ring on to his little finger and held out his hand, fingers splayed, to inspect it. 'The green-eyed monster.'

Meg raised her eyebrows.

'We did *Othello* in year twelve.'

She frowned. 'Is it too obvious?'

Nate put his arms around her. 'I think it's brilliant, Meg. Of course, you're jealous. I'm jealous, too. I'm jealous of every bastard who ever had a baby without any drama. But you've turned that into something beautiful.'

It was unlike Nate to offer an opinion on the aesthetics of her work. He was more likely to comment on her productivity. Buoyed by his response, Meg showed the ring to Daniel, who ran the gallery that sold her work. He asked how long it would take her to produce ten.

She carved another prototype, casting it in metal in order to make a latex mould. This allowed her to produce multiple wax copies to cast as a batch, a tree of rings emerging from the plaster with their little sprues attached like twigs.

Daniel asked for a range of colours. As she glued each stone into its hole, Meg imagined how a wearer might interpret the different colours. Yellow heliotrope to ward off jaundice. Pink spindle to protect against shame. Synthetic sapphire to keep the blues at bay. She finished with a final layer of patination—some added cross hatching, a little needle filing—so that each ring was subtly different.

The first ten of what Daniel marketed as 'evil eye signet rings' sold out in less than three weeks. He ordered more. Meg worked long hours to meet the demand, glad to be busy, to have a focus other than Mod and the baby.

In her euphoria following the Big Fat Positive, Meg had found a pregnancy and parenting website that sent weekly bulletins on the baby's development

when you entered your due date. Though technically Mod's due date, she didn't let that lessen her enthusiasm for charting the baby's progress. Nate would often find her checking her email for the Monday morning updates before she'd even had breakfast, cross-referencing the information against the latest report from Team Baby. She tracked the baby's growth from poppy seed to pea-sized, recording each new measurement with a notch on her desk so splinter-thin only she would notice.

She skipped the section on pregnancy symptoms at first, reluctant to know what she was putting Mod through, and what she was missing out on. But as the weeks went by, she took to reading this information, too. Emotional ambivalence – could she honestly wish she was the one feeling nauseous, sore, exhausted and moody? – fuelled her work. The eyes on her rings became narrower, the silver more textured. Daniel put in another order.

At times Meg was so busy, it was evening before she had the chance to read her emails. Not that she ever lost track. She was acutely aware that the twelve-week mark was approaching and with it, the scan to test for abnormalities. She tried hard to think of this as a milestone, rather than a hurdle, but there was no downplaying the significance.

She and Nate had decided they would accept the child, regardless of the scan results. For Meg, having come this far, the alternative was unthinkable. But theirs was an unorthodox position: Anna said in case of abnormalities, both the surrogate and the doctors at Team Baby might feel under pressure to terminate the pregnancy, unless they were reassured there would be no negative consequences for them.

'Then you have to reassure them,' Meg said when they last spoke by phone. 'Please, Anna. Go to the scan. If there's something wrong with the baby, tell them it doesn't matter. We'll be happy. We won't blame them. Speak Thai if you have to.'

'Don't worry, Meggie-Lou,' Anna said. 'I'll protect your baby as fiercely as if it were my own.'

Under different circumstances, such a comment might have made Meg feel threatened. But on this occasion, and after years of having resented her sister for being away, Meg was grateful.

Anna was exactly where Meg needed her to be.

Mod winced as the Chinese doctor plunged a fine wire into the webbed skin between Oy's thumb and forefinger. The acupuncture was the idea of the Australian mother who, though keen for Oy to deliver the baby naturally, was becoming impatient. The mother had flown to Bangkok a week earlier, only to see the due date come and go. The acupuncture, she said, should help bring on labour.

'The farang mother can't keep her hands off my belly,' Oy told Mod, as she eased herself up from the Chinese doctor's table. 'I'll never get used to it.'

It wasn't the first time Mod heard a surrogate complain about being pawed by the intended parents. Khun Anna seemed unique among farangs in keeping her hands to herself. Then again, it wasn't her baby.

'She cries a lot, too,' Oy said. 'I feel pity for her.'

Mod nodded at Oy's bulge. 'Just think of how happy she'll be when you give her that baby.'

The mother was waiting when they emerged from the treatment room, wearing a moist-eyed smile. Her hands went straight to Oy's stomach.

'Feel anything yet?' she asked through the interpreter, a young family friend of Khun Pimsuda's.

'Not yet.'

The farang's smile lost a little of its warmth. 'Perhaps a walk around the park would help.'

Mod frowned as the interpreter translated the mother's words. Though odd to propose a walk on a hot day when it threatened to rain, that wasn't what troubled her.

'Oy, you said you'd come with me,' she whispered. 'For the *un traa sao*.'

The word, borrowed from English, tumbled awkwardly from her mouth.

'I have to stay with her.' Oy's eyes flitted to the farang.

Mod knew she would only lose face if she made a fuss.

She watched Oy and the farang walk away, the interpreter in between, waiting until they were out of sight to wave down a motorcycle taxi. Surrogates weren't supposed to take a *motercy*, tuk-tuk or ordinary public bus, only trains,

air-con buses and taxis. But they regularly flouted this rule, sending what they saved of their travel allowance back home to their families. Besides, Mod couldn't see why it mattered, when the baby could be gone within days.

She'd had no idea of any threat to the baby until the conversation at dinner the previous evening. They were eating fried fish and vegetables, and briefing Khajee, the new girl who'd moved into Thip's room, when Mod mentioned that she was due for her twelve-week scan.

'That's when they can tell if the baby is *mai somboun*,' Oy said.

Mod frowned. She didn't remember this happening with Pui.

'Farangs don't want a baby that's disabled,' Dao added.

'How do you know that?' Mod snapped, tired of Dao's scaremongering.

'Dao's right, *naawng*,' Oy said. 'The Australian mother didn't want a baby that had something wrong with it. She made me have a blood test as well as the ultrasound to make sure.'

'It's in the contract,' Nok said.

'But what happens to the baby if she doesn't want it?' Khajee asked.

'*Reet look*,' Oy said.

'Abortion?' Khajee's voice dropped to a whisper. 'But that's a sin.'

'It's not so bad when it happens early,' Dao took a wad of sticky rice and rolled it into a ball. 'But I heard about a surrogate who was carrying a deformed baby, and they didn't tell her until she was six months gone. Truth is, the later you have the abortion, the bigger the sin.'

Oy slapped Dao lightly on the knee. 'Stop it. You're frightening the poor girl. Don't listen to her, Khajee. They keep such a close watch on us, it could never happen.'

Mod was struggling to understand the implications. 'Can you refuse—to have an abortion, I mean?'

'*Long reua bpeh, tam jai bpeh*.' Oy shrugged. 'When you board the boat, you must obey the boat owner.'

'Read the contract,' Nok said.

Mod pushed her plate aside, though she'd barely eaten anything. 'I don't understand how someone could spend years longing for a child, then reject it just because it wasn't...complete.'

Oy shrugged. '*Baaw bpen yang*. I'm sure you won't have to worry, *naawng*. Everything will be fine.'

Mod wanted to believe her. But she was frightened of being punished for tempting fate. She'd agreed to be a surrogate mother not only because she needed the money, but because she had terminated a pregnancy in the past. To terminate another was unthinkable. How could she ever make enough merit to escape that karma?

It didn't help that her copy of the surrogacy contract was locked in a filing cabinet in Khun Pimsuda's office. She remembered being nervous when she signed, anxious for the money to start flowing to her family. She'd focused on the numbers. Her eyes had only skimmed the words. Did it mention abortion? Mod couldn't remember.

The nausea she felt as the *motercy* approached the clinic intensified as a bus passed, spewing black fumes from its exhaust. It was a miracle Mod didn't vomit into her lap. She managed to pay her driver before she succumbed, throwing up into a plastic bag she wrenched from her pocket. Mortified, she closed her eyes, not trusting herself to let go of the bag, wondering if it was possible to feel any more miserable.

The touch of a hand on her arm made her raise her head. She found herself looking into Khun Anna's cat's eyes.

Mod doubled over and vomited again.

Anna was distressed to find Mod vomiting outside the hospital, given she hadn't had morning sickness for weeks. God, what if it was food poisoning? Anna had read that some forms of food poisoning could cause miscarriage—

She took a deep breath. She was as bad as Meg, worrying about all the things that could go wrong. She handed Mod a bottle of water and looked away while Mod disposed of the plastic bag and rinsed her mouth.

Mod insisted she was fine and ready for the scan. But she looked awful, her skin pale and greasy with sweat. Anna suggested they have a drink first at a nearby street stall. When Mod tried to protest, Anna reminded her that she'd need a full bladder for the ultrasound. Mod began to cry.

It was out of character for a Thai woman, however pregnant, to cry in front of a farang. It took two rounds of iced lemon tea and gentle probing on Anna's part for Mod to reveal what worried her.

'I don't want to have an abortion.'

She spoke so softly, Anna wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. 'An abortion? Who said anything about abortion?'

'The other girls. They say farangs don't want a baby if there's something wrong with it. And the *un traa sao* today—' she gestured in the direction of the clinic '—will show if the baby is...*mai somboun*.'

Anna put her hand on Mod's arm. 'Is that what's making you sick, you're worried about having an abortion?'

Mod nodded, tears threatening again.

'But that's not what Meg and Nate want. They agree to accept the child, no matter what.'

'*Jing reuu?*' Mod sniffed.

'*Jing jing*. Absolutely. My sister asked me to attend the scan today to reassure you of that. They specified it in the agreement.'

'Khun Pimsuda has my copy.'

'Ah.' Anna sipped her tea and considered her options. Getting Mod to ask for her copy of the agreement might raise suspicions. 'How about I ask my sister to send her copy and we can go through it together?'

Mod nodded, the colour returning to her cheeks.

Still, when the ultrasound technician placed his wand on Mod's abdomen, Anna suspected they both held their breath as they waited for the image to appear on the screen.

Out of the swirling grey cloud came the cave and, cradled inside, a creature that looked reassuringly human. It jerked as though rudely woken and kicked one leg in the air. The technician pressed some buttons on a keyboard and zoomed in. The image froze, making the airborne leg look like a tail. The technician took measurements. Anna watched as numbers appeared on the screen. Five point seven five centimetres. About the size of a frog.

'Luuk-od,' Mod said aloud.

Anna smiled. *'Tadpole'* was spot on.

The screen unfroze and the creature wriggled some more, head twisting from side to side. The technician zoomed in on the face and froze on the profile. Forehead, nose, lips, chin. More measurements were taken. The skull. The space at the back of the neck. The bridge of the nose.

When the screen unfroze, the baby lurched as though freed from a trap. Anna was reminded of fish in the markets in shallow metal tubs, inert one moment, madly flopping about the next. But those fish were dying. What they saw on the screen was something coming to life.

The technician targeted what Anna gathered was the foetal heart. As he snared it in a square of yellow dotted lines, a series of white spikes appeared across the bottom of the screen. A wild, drumming filled the room, like cyclonic winds hitting a tin roof.

'Is that the heartbeat?' Anna said to no one in particular.

'Yes, heartbeat,' the technician said in English.

'Is that good?' To Anna it sounded impossibly fast.

'Very good,' the technician said, switching the sound off.

'Please.' Anna gestured with her hand. *'More, please.'*

The technician shrugged and restored the sound, while Anna called Meg.

'Listen to this,' she said by way of greeting. She held out the phone for Meg to hear.

'That's your baby's heartbeat,' Anna said.

'It sounds like a train,' Meg laughed. 'A train in the rain.'

'I wanted you to hear it. I'll call you back once the scan is finished.'

'Is everything all right?'

'Looks good,' Anna said. 'Talk soon.'

She put her phone away. 'Okay?' she asked the technician.

The man gave her a vague smile and returned his attention to the ultrasound unit. Zoom, freeze, measure, release. No one spoke, the only movement in the room coming from the man's hands and the image on the screen.

He tapped at the keyboard and a photograph emerged from the machine. As though waiting in the wings, Doctor Boribun appeared and retrieved the image. The technician removed the wand from Mod's abdomen and began packing up.

'Is everything okay?' Anna asked.

'Very good.' The doctor waved the picture in the air. 'I will email your sister now.'

The technician offered Mod a box of tissues to wipe the conducting gel from her skin. Anna waited for him or Doctor Boribun to say something to her about the pleasing results.

But it was left to Anna to give Mod the thumbs up as she headed out to call Meg back.

Through the bedroom window, Meg heard the magpies warbling in the park across the road. In what had become part of her morning routine, she reached for her evil eye ring on the bedside table and slipped it on, as if arming herself against the fierce emotions that could strike throughout the day.

Meg had learned the hard way not to get her hopes up. It still left a bitter taste to recall the doctors and nurses who encouraged her to stay positive throughout the years of failed IVF treatments, implying that it made a difference to the outcome. No doubt they were motivated by self-preservation, to diffuse the grief and rage of people like her, the majority of IVF patients who never achieved a live birth. But that didn't excuse their behaviour.

As Meg was convinced that repressing her grief and anger—'staying positive'—had only deepened her depression once she finally gave up on IVF, with the surrogacy, she allowed herself to be circumspect. For a week following the all-clear on the nuchal scan, she prepared herself for the possibility of a mix-up with the test results, and news that their baby wasn't going to make it after all. When this didn't happen, she imagined Doctor Boribun, overcautious, requesting more invasive tests that pierced the amniotic sac and caused the surrogate to miscarry.

She felt strangely vindicated when such negative thoughts had no apparent impact. Instead, Mod's pregnancy quietly passed the sixteen week mark. Meg's latest weekly e-bulletin informed her that the baby was now the size of an avocado. She cupped her hands and imagined holding an avocado-sized baby, laughing at her own folly as she got out of bed and heading to the bathroom.

Nate was standing in front of the mirror, towel around his waist, humming along to the waterproof radio she'd given him one Christmas. The song was a catchy blend of rock and folk with a swear word in the chorus.

'What are you up to today, my love?'

'Making rings.'

She turned on the shower and slipped off her robe and nightie. The signet rings were proving to be surprisingly lucrative. If demand remained steady—and

Daniel predicted it would only increase in the build up to Christmas—Meg might earn enough to justify more time in Bangkok with Mod before the baby's due date. Assuming the baby made it that far.

She stepped under the water and inverted the egg timer. They'd been having three-minute showers since water restrictions were tightened, collecting grey water in buckets to use on the garden. Meg guessed they could recycle the baby's bathwater in the same way, before she realised she was doing it again. Getting her hopes up. Tempting fate. She rinsed the soap brusquely from her body.

Nate tapped his safety razor on the side of the basin. 'Should we be starting to think about names for this baby?'

Meg spoke from behind the shower curtain. 'Anna says Mod calls the baby Tadpole. I can't remember the Thai word.'

'Tadpole's cute,' Nate said. 'But what about after he or she is born?'

Meg stepped out of the shower and began drying herself. 'I'm not sure I'm ready to go there yet, my love.'

Nate used a corner of Meg's towel to pat his face dry. 'Still finding it hard to believe our luck?'

Meg thought it a stretch to associate luck with a pregnancy so heavily orchestrated. But she smiled and wiped a stray blob of shaving cream from Nate's ear.

'I don't think I'll believe this baby is real until I actually hold it in my arms.'

'Fair enough.' He kissed her forehead. 'Any chance you could make coffee while I get dressed? I've got an early meeting.'

'Of course.'

Meg put on her robe, tying the belt on her way to the kitchen. She was grateful Nate hadn't pursued the question of names for the baby. As far back as their honeymoon, they'd brainstormed names for their future children. Nate had wanted Lola for a girl after The Kinks' song. 'But Lola was a drag queen,' Meg had protested, laughing. When she said she wanted a boy named Austen with an 'e' after her favourite author, Nate had accused her of wanting to scar their son for life. In their earliest attempts at IVF, they would refer to the embryos as Lola or

Austen. Later, they'd used names on their actual shortlist. Emma. Samuel. Louisa. Lachlan. Meg wanted to blame one of the IVF counsellors for the idea, but she had a sneaking suspicion it was hers. So much for the power of positive thinking. All it did was deepen her sense of loss at each failed IVF attempt—as though Emma, Samuel, Louisa, Lachlan and the others who came after them had actually died.

Other than Tadpole, Meg didn't want the baby Mod was carrying to have a name. She didn't want to imagine what the baby might look like either, beyond what she'd already seen from the 12-week ultrasound. She'd been beguiled by the photo at first, imagining she saw Nate's straight nose and the gentle protrusion of his chin in the embryonic profile. The mouth was slightly blurred; Anna had said she could see the baby's lips moving during the scan as though talking to itself. Meg often did the same thing, silently mouthing her thoughts while she worked. But the frisson this thought gave her died when she remembered there was no way this baby could take after her.

From that moment, she ignored the ultrasound photo, even after Nate stuck it on the fridge. As she opened the door to get milk for his coffee, Meg averted her eyes, reducing the image to a blur in her peripheral vision.

She would not name nor even imagine this baby. The imaginary babies with names all died. Meg was giving this one a chance at life.

The abbot's skin hung in folds almost as loose as his orange robes, but his voice was strong enough to fill the crowded prayer hall.

'If we look closely and honestly at our experience and resist the urge to ignore, deny or anaesthetise ourselves, we will see that suffering is part of life. We can learn to transcend mental suffering, but only if we start by accepting this truth.'

The Noble Truth of Suffering was familiar to Mod. Her attention wandered from the sermon to the murals that decorated the hall. An image of Xieng Mieng leading a rooster on a leash brought back memories of her childhood when her father would tell her stories of the legendary trickster. On this occasion, Xieng Mieng had been put to work at the palace, under strict instruction from the king to 'come before the rooster', meaning to arrive early. Xieng Mieng outwitted the king by coming late but nonetheless 'before the rooster', as ordered. In the painting, Xieng Mieng appeared to be whistling as he strolled in front of the bird.

While Mod would never be as carefree as Xieng Mieng, she did feel as though a burden had been lifted from her heart. The baby she carried was healthy and normal. She'd passed the halfway mark in the pregnancy and received a large payment for that milestone. She sent most of it straight to her mother, of course, keeping just a little to join with Dao and Khajee to buy a yellow bucket of offerings for the monks. Dao had wanted to buy the hamper with the razors, nail-clippers and scissors, and fancy foods like chicken essence and Ovaltine. But Mod convinced her that as long as they were sincere, there was as much merit to be made from regular offerings of soap, candles and tinned fish. They'd brought their bucket to Wat Sra Prathum to mark Ok Phansa, the end of the Rainy Season Retreat. Although the temple was wedged between two colossal shopping malls on a busy road, the Xieng Mieng murals made Mod feel almost at home.

Her gaze fell on a painting of Xieng Mieng lying at the edge of a pond where the king, distinguished by his pointy gold crown, stood waist-deep in water. In the head-down, tail-up world of Xieng Mieng stories, a peasant could often trick a king.

Something about the king in the water made Mod think of Khun Anna. She was nothing like Mod had imagined farangs to be. Not that she'd seen that many farangs in her lifetime. The tourists who came through Sisaket before the border closed were a mixed bunch, often easily angered by small things. A few Sisaket girls brought farang husbands home to meet their families, chubby men with pink skin, who drank a lot of beer and 'smelled like white buffalo', according to childish wisdom. Anna was not like those farangs at all. She was patient and kind, if a bit serious.

Mod felt it would be impolite to refuse Anna's offer to go through the surrogacy agreement, though it made her nervous to invite Anna to the surrogate house. As it turned out, she needn't have worried. Unlike the Australian mother of Oy's baby, Anna left her shoes at the door 'like a Thai person,' as Dao put it. She brought flowers as a gift and accepted the tea and snacks they offered her. Nok, Dao and Khajee lolled around the sitting room like cats, pretending to watch television while eavesdropping on their conversation. Anna didn't get angry, even when they asked her lots of questions.

Mod was familiar with the main points of the agreement. She promised she was single—Dao's eyebrows shot up when Anna read that part out loud—and agreed to remain single until after the birth. She agreed to deliver the baby to the parents and not to try and keep it. She also promised to help with any documents they needed to take the child to Australia. She agreed to take care of herself during the pregnancy, not to smoke, drink alcohol or use illegal drugs, and not to—

'You agreed not to have sexual intercourse for one month before the embryo transfer until after the baby is born?' Anna sounded surprised.

'Easy as eating a peeled banana for some of us,' Nok piped up, making them all laugh.

'If you terminate the pregnancy without the consent of the parents, you have to repay all the money,' Anna continued.

'Who would do such a thing?'

'I'm just reading what's here. It also says if there's something wrong with the baby, you will agree to terminate the pregnancy if that's what the parents want. But my sister and her husband crossed that part out.'

Mod's confusion must have shown.

'It's a standard contract,' Anna said. 'That means the clauses appear automatically and the parties—that's you, Meg and Nate—have to choose whether to keep or change them. If there's any conflict between the English and Thai versions, the English version takes priority. It's not your fault that nobody told you.'

It was a relief to be told it wasn't her fault. Still, Mod wasn't sure she needed to know everything. Each detail gave her more to worry about, a sense of what could go wrong. But Mod didn't want to disappoint Anna. Besides, going through the agreement did give her warm feelings about the parents of the baby she was carrying. Mod figured they must have kind hearts to accept the baby, no matter what, though it was odd that they didn't want to know the sex.

'What if they're disappointed?' she asked Anna.

Anna smiled. 'They won't be. They don't mind. They want it to be a surprise. Me, too, for that matter.'

Mod found it hard to imagine anybody actually wanting to be surprised.

'There's not a lot of detail about the birth,' Anna said, leafing through the last pages. 'All it says is you agree to allow the parents to bond with the baby and take custody immediately afterwards.'

'Does that mean they will be there for the birth?'

'Up to you, though I imagine they'll be at the hospital.'

'I'm having a C-section,' Mod said.

'You know that already?'

She nodded at Nok, Dao and Khajee. 'We prefer it that way.'

'You're not just doing it because it's convenient for the parents?'

Mod shook her head. How could she explain to Anna, who'd never had a baby, her reluctance to feel the baby leave her body the natural way?

'What about your friend Oy?'

The previous week, Oy had safely delivered a baby girl after four hours of labour, and only five days late in the end.

'They agreed beforehand and she got paid extra,' Mod explained.

Anna raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

'Maybe you could be there for the birth, Khun Anna.'

'Oh, thank you, but wouldn't be me. If anyone, it would be my sister. But you don't have to decide that now, *naawng*. You might not want anyone there. Or you might agree and then change your mind. The important thing is, it's up to you. My sister and her husband will respect your wishes. *Laaeo dtaae khoon*.'

Laaeo dtaae khoon. Up to you. Khun Anna made it sound simple, as if the expectations of the farang parents and the obligations Mod felt towards them might disappear like steam rising from a hot road after the rain.

'In our minds, change always equals loss and suffering.'

The monk's voice drew Mod's attention back to the sermon.

'And when changes come, we try to anaesthetise ourselves as far as possible. We assume, stubbornly and unquestioningly, that permanence provides security and impermanence does not.'

Mod sighed. She had resigned herself to impermanence from the moment she agreed to become a surrogate mother.

'But in fact impermanence is like some of the people we meet in life: difficult and disturbing at first, but on deeper acquaintance, far friendlier and less unnerving than we could have imagined.'

Mod glanced again at the painting of the king in the pond and smiled.

When Tom suggested they meet for happy hour at Hemingway's Bangkok, it took a moment for Anna to place the name. The restaurant, housed in a teak building dating from the nineteen twenties, was in the same *soi* as the surrogate house, though she'd never been inside.

'Did I miss something?' she said, joining Tom at a table on a terrace decorated with coloured lights and potted palms. 'Did Hemingway actually visit Bangkok?'

Tom grinned. 'There's a blurb on the menu explaining that the place is a celebration of the author's taste in food and drinks and the countries he loved.'

'Which didn't include Thailand.'

'Correct, though that's no reason not to cash in on his name.'

'A case of TIT.'

'To be fair, the Thais aren't the only ones. There's a Hemingway's in Sydney, too, another place he didn't visit. In Manly, if I remember correctly.'

Anna grinned. 'How appropriate.'

They ordered Cuban cocktails and a bowl of Spanish olives.

'Since you first contacted me about this surrogacy business, I've been doing some asking around,' Tom said. 'There's a lot of money in it.'

'I can imagine.'

'The surrogacy agreement is basically designed to mollify the major fears of the various parties. The parents' biggest fear is that the surrogate won't hand over the baby. The surrogate's biggest fear is that she won't get paid. The agreement aims to manage those risks.'

'That's why the surrogate doesn't get the final payment until the parents take custody.'

'Until she's complied with her obligations under the agreement, yes,' Tom said.

'But the surrogate's in it for the money, not a baby. It seems like blackmail to me.'

'Maybe. But a few years back, there was an American surrogacy agent operating here, and once the baby was born, he'd tell the parents the surrogate

wouldn't hand it over unless she was paid an extra two hundred thousand baht. Needless to say, he pocketed the money himself. He was eventually exposed. But people still talk about it.'

'An American was at fault, but the Thai surrogates get treated with suspicion?'

Tom shrugged as a waitress appeared with their drinks, a mojito for him and a margarita for Anna.

'You've got to remember that engaging in overseas commercial surrogacy is not a rational decision. It's an act of desperation. Add to this an unregulated environment and it makes the farang parents very vulnerable.'

Her friend Fon's question came to mind. *You're worried about your sister being exploited?* Anna hadn't actually considered that the foreign parents might be vulnerable. She'd assumed they held all the power.

'A lawyer might tell you their agreement is watertight,' Tom continued. 'But the fact is, there are no laws governing commercial surrogacy in this country, and it's highly unlikely any surrogacy agreement would be enforceable under Thai law.'

'So those clauses about the surrogate having to refund all payments and reimburse expenses if she breaches the agreement?'

'As I say, unlikely to be enforced.'

Anna removed a garnish of skewered orchids from her margarita. 'So what value is there in having an agreement at all?'

'It clarifies the intentions of each party and imposes moral obligations on them.'

Anna sighed. After her session with Mod, it was inevitable that the other women in the house would come to her with questions. She'd hoped her meeting with Tom would make it easier for her to explain how the agreements worked. Instead, she now had moral obligations to contend with. Was she morally obliged to tell Meg and Nate their agreement wasn't worth the paper it was written on? Should she make it clear to the surrogates, including Mod, that they were unlikely to face penalties if they did breach the agreement?

She lay awake late into the night, listening to the muffled hum of traffic, turning these questions over in her head. The appeal of the moral high ground,

where she'd once felt so at home, continued to diminish as the night wore on. Was it her place to set the record straight, given she wasn't a party to the agreement? If it wasn't broken, did she need to fix it? Perhaps it was best that everyone believed the agreement was legally binding, even if it wasn't.

Of course, if something went wrong, Anna would have to reconsider, though the thought of having to take sides made her break out in a sweat. She couldn't imagine siding with Mod against her sister. But nor could she stand by and let Mod be duped.

Somewhere in the early hours of the morning, in an effort to calm her mind, Anna found herself summoning up the sound of the baby's heartbeat, *a train in the rain*, as Meg had called it. It struck her that her moral obligation didn't have to sit with either Meg or Mod, but with the baby—the eye in a swirling storm of hopes and fears. Keeping the best interests of the child at the forefront of her mind when offering advice to Mod, Meg or any one of the other surrogate mothers might just enable her to navigate through that storm.

#

'The parents will make payments as directed in writing by the surrogate. Is that what she just said?'

Anna was getting used to the women talking among themselves as if she wasn't in the room, relieved that they no longer felt the need to *kreeng jai* her—to treat her with the mix of deference and fear reserved for superiors.

'That's what it says in the agreement,' Nok said. Hugely pregnant with twins, she was scheduled for a C-section at the end of the week.

'No one told me that,' Jaeb said.

A newcomer to the house, Jaeb, whose nickname meant 'baby chicken', had been recruited by Oy, whose room she now occupied.

'So I could write to the parents and say please stop paying the money to Team Baby and pay it into my boyfriend's account instead?'

This from Dao who always seemed to be looking for angles. Dao had recently entered the second trimester of her pregnancy, carrying one baby, despite having three embryos implanted in the hope of being paid a bonus for multiples. Anna thought she'd had a lucky escape.

'I'd probably keep your boyfriend out of it if I were you, seeing as how you signed a paper promising to stay single until after the birth,' she said, keeping her tone light.

'Khun Pimsuda told us when we signed the paper that Team Baby would take care of our money,' Nok weighed in. '*Kwaeng tin ha sian.*'

Anna thought Nok was probably right and Dao would be looking for trouble—literally, 'swinging one's foot in search of a splinter'—if she tried to wrest control of her finances at this stage.

'What about the birth?' Nok said. 'What does it say about who can be there?'

'The agreement doesn't specify. Khun Pimsuda says it's up to the doctor. But you get a say, too.'

'I should hope so,' Jaeb said, helping herself to peanuts. 'Who wants a couple of farangs staring at your *haawy*.'

Her use of the slang term 'clam' or 'oyster' made Dao guffaw and Khajee blush.

'Yes, but what if they really want to be there?'

This from Mod. No matter how much Anna emphasised her choice in these matters, Mod always took the feelings of others into account.

'Maybe the parents will pay more if you let them watch,' Dao said.

'Can't you remember what it's like?' Khajee pulled a face. 'You want an audience for your pain?'

'Dao hasn't had a baby before,' Mod said.

Anna kept her expression neutral, though she was disturbed by this revelation. She wanted to ask if Dao had lied about that, too, or if Team Baby had recruited her, knowing she'd never had a child. But too many questions might jeopardise the women's trust.

'If the doctor decides, it probably comes down to money,' Nok said, adjusting her weight on the couch while still managing to keep the soles of her feet politely concealed.

'How would you feel about two farangs you've never met watching you give birth?' Anna asked.

Nok shrugged. 'I'd be shy. But if the doctor said it was okay...'

'Why do you have to obey the doctor?' Anna persisted.

'In Thailand, the doctor is a god,' Mod said.

'Sometimes in Australia, too,' Anna muttered, adding in a louder voice, 'But you can tell the doctor what you want. It says so in the agreement.'

'Oh, we couldn't do that, *mae*,' Khajee said. 'We must *kraeng jai* the doctor.'

Anna didn't know what troubled her most: being reminded of the cultural pressures faced by the young women, or being addressed as 'mother'. But she couldn't protest that, at forty-one, she was too young to be called mother by women in their twenties when Nok and Khajee, both aged twenty-one, had a five- and a four-year-old respectively.

Once Anna would have tried to empower the surrogates to call the shots. But she'd learned that power was mulish and unyielding, tending to dig in its heels at the prospect of being handed over. Up against the weight of culture and the power of capital, the best Anna felt she could do was advise the women to choose whatever mattered most to them and fight for it. To plant only one embryo. To stay home with their children. To give birth in private. Yet even as she gave this advice, Anna recognised that every decision could be unmade, every non-negotiable renegotiated with enough pressure.

Because there were no rules, everything could be broken.

Meg thought seriously about wearing a padded belly, telling people she was going on holiday to Thailand eight weeks before her due date, and pretending to be admitted to hospital there for complications. When she returned home, she'd tell people that she'd delivered the baby in Bangkok. To account for the baby's features, she might have to admit to using a donor egg. But at least she wouldn't have to explain that another woman altogether had carried and given birth to her baby.

She hated herself for even contemplating such a ruse, until she read an almost identical fantasy in a post on the Mommies Thru Surrogacy forum late one night. The writer, Barren_Karen, was using a surrogate in India.

"I had the exact same idea, though my surro is in Thailand," Meg wrote to her in a private message.

Barren_Karen responded straight away. "So not just me who's crazy?"

Meg smiled as she typed. "No. At least 2 of us."

"Good to know." She inserted a smiley face. "Problem is you need nearest and dearest to cooperate to pull off fake PG. Mine too unreliable." Another emoji, this time with its tongue sticking out.

"You put a lot of thought into this," Meg replied, adding a winking face.

"Like you wouldn't believe."

"I *do* believe."

Barren_Karen was right. Tempting as it was, Meg couldn't ask Nate, Anna and her parents, let alone her brother and his family, to conspire in a fake pregnancy. But with Mod about to enter the third trimester, the baby 'as big as a head of lettuce' according to the latest e-bulletin, she needed to find a way to prepare her closest friends for what was coming.

'We're having a baby at last,' she said to her reflection in the window above her computer screen.

No good. They'd be glancing at her belly and showering her with kisses before she got any further.

'Nate and I are going to Bangkok early next year to pick up our new son or daughter.'

They'd think she was talking about adoption.

'Nate and I hired a Thai woman to be our surrogate mother—'

Meg screwed up her face. To speak of hiring made them sound like mercenaries. Besides, she'd never felt comfortable with the term 'surrogate mother'. The word surrogate meant substitute and Mod wasn't a substitute mother. She might be a substitute womb, but Meg was the baby's mother.

She tried throughout the wakeful night that followed, but couldn't come up with a single statement to describe what she and Nate were going through to become parents. In the end, she assembled her four closest friends in her lounge room, silenced them by tapping a butterknife to a glass, and asked that they didn't interrupt until she finished what she had to say.

'You all know the hard roads I've travelled to try to have a baby. Well, I'm not pregnant, but I hope soon to be a mother. We had an embryo created at a clinic in Bangkok using Nate's sperm and a donor egg, and the baby is being carried for us by a woman in Thailand. Nate and I will be going to Bangkok for the birth in February and we hope to bring the baby home soon after that.'

The stunned silence that followed was broken by Eleni.

'Oh my god, Meg. That's amazing. I can't believe it. I'm so happy for you.'

Meg fell into Eleni's arms, relief making her weak at the knees. She hadn't realised how nervous she was.

'Congratulations Meg. I'm rapt for you.'

'That's wonderful news.'

Meg felt the women's arms around her, their hands on her head, their lips on her cheeks. She'd known Eleni, Simone and Michelle since school, Annika since they studied gold and silversmithing design together. Perhaps it was her imagination, but Meg sensed the relief in the room was not all hers. All four of her friends had children. Eleni's oldest was ten. As they speculated about whether Meg's baby would be a great sleeper like Simone's or a nightmare like Michelle's eldest, a 'chubby bubby' like Eleni's two or a whippet like Annika's, Meg realised it was a long time since her friends had talked about their kids like this in front of her. She was grateful for their sensitivity, though it bothered her, too, the thought that they'd spent years tiptoeing around her.

She was exhausted by the time they left, her face sore from smiling. But that night, she fell into a sound and dreamless sleep.

Mod gazed through the bedroom window, the dust-brown haze like a shroud over the city. With the arrival of the cool season, she'd taken to sleeping with her window open, although she distrusted Bangkok's night air and dirty sky. She longed instead to be home in Sisaket where there were stars and birdsong and a little boy she loved.

She placed her hands on the mound of her belly. Could she hide the pregnancy and risk going home for a few days? She switched on the bedside lamp and surveyed the clothes in her wardrobe. The high-waisted tops and dresses that Thip left behind only emphasised the bump. Likewise, Oy's old pinafores. She pulled on a pair of jeans but couldn't fasten the zip. She left them undone and looked for something to hide her waistline, unearthing the pink Hello Kitty t-shirt that Ice had given her. Slipping it on, she checked her reflection.

It was no use. She was foolish to think her condition could be disguised.

Mod changed back into her pyjamas and returned to bed. She recognised the sensation in her belly from her pregnancy with Pui. The flicker of a small flame. She tried not to think too much about the baby she was carrying, the baby she had to give away.

It would be easier to cope if she could be with her son. If Pui was around, she would have him to shower with affection, to preoccupy her thoughts. Pui would remind of why she was doing this and of what she had to look forward to once it was all over.

But she couldn't go home, not without the whole town knowing what she'd done. Nor could she bring Pui to Bangkok. All she could do was wait and take care of her surrogate child until she could be reunited with her own.

An upsurge in fairy-lights augured Christmas in Bangkok, as if an army of spiders had descended in the night and covered the city in a twinkling, silver-white web. Artificial fir trees sprung from mounds of brightly wrapped boxes in foyers and plazas. Reindeer and snowmen appeared behind windows dotted with fake snow and foggy with humidity. Carols in chipmunk voices squeaked through department stores and malls. Santa statues were added to retailers' shrines, alongside the beckoning *Nang Kwak* lady and the Japanese waving cat, while in the pubs and clubs, bargirls donned red bikinis trimmed in white faux fur to match their Santa hats. A banner over Siam Square urged visitors to 'Shop, eat, drink and be merry'. Anna smiled to herself, certain that the advertisers did not intend to invoke the other half of the aphorism '...for tomorrow we die'.

When she'd first visited Bangkok, Siam Square struck Anna's nineteen-year-old self as the height of sophistication: with its grid of teeming streets and walls of television screens advertising instant noodles and skin whitening products, it was like a set from *Blade Runner*. Twenty years later, Siam Square was dwarfed on all sides by glitzy shopping plazas and towering commercial centres, semi-concealed by a multistorey Skytrain interchange. Nowadays, Anna was drawn there for its retro charm.

She made her way to the New Light Coffee House, a diner-style restaurant dating back to the 1960s. The coffee was so-so and the food ordinary—the house specialty was 'grilled chop'—but you couldn't go past it for period detail. Anna took a seat in a booth by the window, ordered coffee from a waitress in a crimson uniform, and settled in to read her newspaper by the glow of a low-hanging pendant light.

She was reading about the drawn out conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over ownership of a famous Khmer temple, when her phone rang. Meg's name flashed up on the screen.

'Everything's fine,' Anna said by way of greeting.

'That's good to know,' Nate said.

'Sorry, I thought you were Meg.' A splinter of fear pricked her skin. 'Is everything okay? Is Meg okay?'

‘All good,’ Nate said. ‘Listen, Meg doesn’t know I’m phoning you. It’s about her birthday.’

Meg was turning forty a few days before Christmas. She’d told Anna they were having lunch at the Fairfield Park Boathouse to celebrate the milestone.

‘I posted her a gift.’ Anna was aware of how inadequate it sounded.

‘It arrived today,’ Nate said. ‘That’s what made me call you. I’m guessing it’s a decoy and you plan to surprise Meg by turning up at the party. Am I right?’

Anna hesitated. ‘I thought Meg would prefer me to stay here where I can keep an eye on Mod and the baby.’

‘There’s not much you can do at this stage,’ Nate said. ‘Besides, Meg plans to go to Bangkok at the end of January to spend time with Mod before the baby arrives. So it’d only be a few weeks and you could go back together.’

‘I don’t know, Nate.’

‘Please, Anna. Just this once. You know it would mean the world to Meg.’

She looked out the restaurant window at a tableau featuring an infant Jesus being visited in the manger by Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. It would be churlish of her not to go home for Meg’s fortieth. Consulting work dried up over the festive season, and Mod would be fine without her. Still, Anna resented being pressured *just this once*—as if doing the right thing by Meg was something new to her.

‘I’ll look into flights and get back to you,’ she said. ‘And yes, let’s make it a surprise.’

Book 3

Afterbirth

Sweat trickled down Meg's throat and pooled between her breasts. She picked up a paper placemat to fan herself, sending her fork clattering to the floor. Heads swivelled, making her blush.

Anna plucked the placemat from her and restored it to the table. 'Calm down, Meggie-Lou. Would you like me to get you a cold drink?'

She shook her head, though Anna got up anyway. Meg's eyes skittered around the busy food court, registering the heads bowed over plates and bowls, the tinkling of cutlery against crockery, the low hum of conversation. Not what she would've chosen, but Anna said it was easiest on Mod if they met on neutral ground. Meg twisted the eye-shaped ring on her right hand, wondering why she couldn't visit Mod at home as Anna had done.

'Try not to get too emotional,' Anna said, putting a glass of cold water in front of her. 'You'll only embarrass Mod. She'll appreciate it if you stay calm.'

Easy for Anna to say. She wasn't the one about to meet the woman who was carrying her child.

'Ah, here she comes.'

Meg shot to her feet as a heavily pregnant woman shuffled into view. Mod looked younger and heavier than she did in her photo. She wore a high-waisted orange smock and a beige zip-up jacket that had seen better days. Her face was free of make-up, her only jewellery a Buddha pendant on a thin gold chain. A brown vinyl handbag dangled from one arm. Despite what she knew about Mod's circumstances, Meg was surprised that she looked so poor. She felt something shift, an easing of the weight on her shoulders.

As she drew closer, Mod stooped and raised her hands to her forehead. It looked to Meg as if she was kowtowing, the idea of which appalled her.

'Oh no, please don't.' Meg waved her hands in the air. 'Anna, tell her she doesn't need to do that.'

Mod's smile fell. She looked nervously at Anna.

'She's being polite.' Anna said through gritted teeth.

'But it looks like - '

'I know what it looks like, Meg. But you're making her feel uncomfortable. Just smile and give her a *wai*.'

Flustered, Meg did as she was told. Mod took a seat so that Anna was between them. She clutched her bag to her stomach, blocking Meg's view of her swollen belly. The thought of being so close to her unborn baby, and unable to communicate her feelings, made Meg want to cry. She gulped water, forcing back the lump in her throat.

Anna and Mod had a brief exchange in Thai.

'I'm going to get Mod a coconut water.'

Before Meg could object, her sister was out of her seat, headed to a nearby juice bar. Meg looked at Mod, who inclined her head and smiled. Meg did the same. They stayed like that, exchanging oblique glances and shy smiles across the table, before Meg dropped her eyes to Mod's belly.

'*Khaawb khoon kha*,' she whispered.

Thank you. The only Thai words she knew, apart from *mai pen rai*. It was woefully inadequate. But what else could she say? Even if she spoke the language fluently, Meg wouldn't have known how to put her gratitude into words.

Mod appeared to relax the grip on her bag. Her eyes met Meg's and in that moment, Meg imagined the Thai woman understood all the things she couldn't say.

The spell broke when Anna reappeared, bringing three green coconuts on a tray, plastic straws poking out where the husks had been cut at the top. For Meg, the juice tasted like a mix of sweet and sour, odd but pleasant.

Mod said something to Anna in Thai.

'She says you are more beautiful in real life than in your photo.'

Meg blushed. 'I was thinking the same about her.'

Mod shook her head at Anna's translation, though she looked pleased.

'Can you ask Mod how she is feeling?' Meg said.

'Speak to her directly as if I'm not here and I'll translate for you.'

'You'll just translate. You won't—'

'I won't editorialise. Just say what you need to say in your own words.'

'How are you feeling?' Meg asked.

'Fine,' Mod said through Anna. 'A little tired.'

'Not long to go now.'

'Only two weeks.'

'I read that at this stage, the baby is as big as a coconut.' Meg nodded at their drinks. 'I don't think they mean a green coconut.'

Mod stifled a giggle behind her hand.

Meg turned to Anna. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. You're doing really well.'

'No, I mean, tell Mod I'm sorry. I'm sorry it's taken us all this time to meet. But I've thought about you every day for the past thirty-six weeks and I'm so happy that we're finally together today.'

Mod nodded as Anna translated.

'I'm happy, too,' she said.

'There are no words to tell you how grateful I am.'

Anna hesitated. 'Actually, there's a phrase in Thai that might capture it, Meggie. *Dteun dtan jai*. It means my heart is overflowing. It's used when you're overwhelmed by another person's kindness.'

'That's perfect. Yes, my heart is overflowing with gratitude. My husband and I feel so lucky to have found you, Mod.'

'No, I'm the one who is lucky,' Mod said softly, touching the pendant at her throat.

Meg felt fresh tears threaten as Anna translated. She blinked them back and sipped her coconut water. She had a thousand more questions, but they could wait.

For now, it was enough to have made a connection.

Mod was accustomed to dozing through the scans. If Od wasn't already moving, she'd glance at Nurse Wasana for reassurance, then close her eyes, opening them only when she no longer felt the ultrasound wand on her skin.

But this time was different. The baby's mother was by her side, and Mod wanted her to be happy. She looked at Meg's profile, illuminated by the screen. Mod had meant it when she told Anna her sister was more beautiful than in her photo. Her skin was clear, her hair like gold. But there was also sadness in Meg that Mod saw up close, in the tears she held back and her restless hands, the hunger of her gaze when it rested on Mod's belly. The thought that she could make Meg's sadness go away made Mod's heart surge with pride.

As she felt the ultrasound wand on her belly, she reached out and let her fingertips brush against Meg's. Their eyes met and Meg raised her eyebrows. Mod nodded. Meg took Mod's hand, held it as she looked back at the screen.

Mod didn't need to watch the screen to know what was happening. When Meg gasped, Mod knew she'd caught sight of the baby. When she laughed, Mod felt the kick in her ribs and knew that Od was moving around. When the sound of the heartbeat filled the room, Mod heard Meg's sharp intake of breath and felt her grasp tighten.

Meg released Mod's hand as the doctor returned the ultrasound wand to its cradle and turned the lights back up. There were pink spots on her cheeks and her eyes were shining.

Nurse Wasana brushed past Meg to wipe the gel from Mod's stomach.

'Do you need the bathroom, *naawng*?'

Mod shook her head, aware of Meg hovering by the door, staring at her belly. Under the bright light, Mod felt shy about her jutting navel and the tapered stripe like a brown snake that stretched along her abdomen.

The doctor produced a tape measure, felt for her pubic bone and ran the tape over Mod's stomach. He checked his notes and made the measurement again, his fingers pummeling the area between her ribs.

He looked at Nurse Wasana. 'Thirty-six weeks?'

She nodded.

'The measurement is thirty-five centimetres.'

Mod frowned. Even in her detached state, she'd noticed the measurements were the same as the number of pregnancy weeks. Twenty-six centimetres at twenty-six weeks. Thirty centimetres at thirty weeks. Why had it fallen behind now?

'*Mii bpan haa mai?*' she whispered.

Nurse Wasana patted her hand. 'No problem, *naawng*.'

The doctor said something to Meg in English that made her smile falter.

'What's going on?' Mod said.

'The doctor is telling the farang mother he will do another scan on Thursday,' Nurse Wasana pulled Mod's dress down over her stomach. 'Don't worry, *naawng*. Everything will be fine.'

Mod wanted to believe her. But she worried that thinking she had the power to make Meg's sadness go away had invited bad luck. She'd committed the sin of pride, exaggerated her own importance.

She wasn't the one to make Meg happy. Only the baby could do that. It was Mod's job to keep the baby safe.

She must make amends for her conceit.

Not since their childhood had Anna felt such a strong urge to protect her sister. As they passed through the temple gates, she was reminded of walking Meg to school all those years ago, memories so strong, she almost reached for Meg's hand.

Anna had assumed all along that it was Mod, the Thai surrogate, who needed her protection. But witnessing Meg's efforts to interact, while wrestling with her hopes and fears, Anna realised her sister needed looking after, too, especially in the absence of her husband. Nate wouldn't join them until the day before the scheduled C-section, taking the bulk of his leave to spend time with the baby. Meg was trying hard, but she struggled without him.

Anna held Meg's elbow to steady her as they slipped off their shoes. Mod and Dao entered the prayer hall ahead of them, carrying garlands of jasmine and rosebuds, gifts from Meg. Both Mod and Meg had been on edge since the ultrasound, despite the doctor's reassurance that everything was within normal range. Anna hoped a temple visit might put their minds at rest.

She exchanged a few baht coins for incense sticks, handing three to Meg. She held hers to the flame of a thin, red candle and planted the smouldering sticks in a crowded brass pot, indicating for Meg to do the same. On the nearby altar was a bronze statue of the Buddha sitting cross-legged beneath a seven-headed serpent.

'Those snakes look scary,' Meg whispered.

Anna smiled. 'It's a nice story, actually. The Buddha was sitting under a tree, so deep in meditation that he didn't notice an approaching storm. The *naga*—that's the serpent king—rose up from beneath the roots of the tree, lifted the Buddha above the floodwaters by coiling his body under him, and flared the hoods of his seven cobra heads to shelter him from the rain.' She touched Meg's arm. 'Things aren't always as scary as they appear to be.'

They found a place on the floor behind Mod and Dao, and sat down, tucking their feet under them. The two pregnant women were absorbed in meditation, reciting one of the few chants Anna recognised.

May all beings be well. May all beings be happy.

Meg, too, closed her eyes and pressed her hands together. Anna wondered if her sister still prayed. They'd been brought up Catholic, but life had proven too unfair, death too random, for Anna to believe in a divine plan anymore. She closed her eyes.

She woke with a start and glanced at her watch, surprised to have slept more than ten minutes. She put it down to jetlag and the atmosphere of the *wat*, the soporific smoke, the chanting like a lullaby. Prising herself up on stiff legs, she caught Meg's eye and smiled sheepishly. Meg stood to join her, rousing Mod and Dao from their meditation.

The four retrieved their shoes, and walked back across the temple courtyard. Anna hailed a taxi, and ushered Dao, Mod and Meg into the backseat. The driver, a man with a face like a walnut shell, showed no surprise at Anna's ability to speak Thai, nodding in response to her directions. The car radio was tuned to talkback, disgruntled supporters of the ousted Prime Minister threatening to rally if new elections were not called soon. Anna was glad Meg couldn't understand what they were saying.

All the same, her sister was not letting her inability to speak Thai deter her from engaging Mod and Dao in conversation.

'Lovely temple. Very nice.'

She looked in the rear view mirror. Meg was making a steeple with her fingers. Mod and Dao looked bewildered.

'Meg says she liked Wat Sra Prathum,' Anna explained in Thai.

'Ah.' Mod and Dao murmured in unison.

'Do you go often to the temple?'

Anna had to admire her sister's perseverance.

'We go for festivals and holy days, other times in between when we need blessings,' Mod said.

'Ah,' Meg murmured in response to Anna's translation. 'And what's the temple like where you come from?'

'It's not so grand—' Mod inhaled sharply. '*Ooy*, your baby's kicking me in the ribs.'

Before Anna could translate, Mod had taken Meg's hand in hers and placed it on the upper curve of her belly.

'Dtae dtawng thee nee, mae.'

Both women sat statue still, eyes wide with anticipation.

'I felt it,' Meg gasped after a moment. 'I felt the baby move.' She leaned in closer towards Mod's stomach. 'Hello baby. Can you hear me? I'm your mo--'

The rest of the word was lost in a sob. Mod patted Meg's hand while Dao busied herself finding a packet of tissues in her handbag.

'Tell Mod I'm so sorry.' Meg accepted a tissue with her free hand, the other resting on Mod's stomach. 'I don't mean to embarrass her. But I'm so happy.'

Anna rolled her eyes. 'It's okay.' She switched to Thai. 'You've made my sister very happy, *naawng*.'

'It's the baby who makes your sister happy, not me,' Mod said.

Meg shook her head at Anna's translation and placed her other hand over Mod's. 'Without you, little sister, there would be no baby.'

This made Mod cry, setting Dao off, too, their collective weeping enough to distract the taxi driver from his radio.

'Is there a problem?' he asked Anna.

'Dii ok, dii jai,' she explained. 'They are over-the-moon with happiness.'

The driver mumbled something about 'crazy ladies' and turned up the radio.

Meg hadn't planned much in terms of spending time with Mod. She thought they'd go shopping together for baby clothes and toys, but Anna said that Thai people were superstitious about buying things in advance, believing it tempted fate. Why Anna constantly felt the need to enlighten her, making her responsible for things beyond her control, Meg didn't know. It was like the street-begging elephant incident all over again.

Apart from evening walks in the park, Meg was left with little to do other than sit around talking. That meant having Anna interpret for them. Meg had no doubt that her sister meant well. But Anna's constant need to manage risk could be suffocating. Besides, she wasn't always right. Take the incident in the taxi on the way back from the temple. Anna had been adamant that Meg was not to touch Mod's stomach, saying it would invade her privacy and cause her embarrassment. But Mod had wanted Meg to feel the baby, and didn't seem at all embarrassed by Meg's tears. Mod seemed to understand Meg's feelings better than her own sister.

Naturally, Meg didn't want to cause offence. And she knew her efforts to communicate by pulling faces and using sign language left her open to ridicule. But such risks were worth taking if it brought her and Mod closer together.

She used Anna's tiredness at the temple as an excuse to relieve her of translation duties for a few hours, saying she'd meet up with Mod on her own. When Anna tried to protest, Meg assured her she would muddle through with her dictionary and notebook, and phone if she needed to. She got Anna to call Mod and arrange to meet in the food court watched over by the tropical fish. It seemed like a lifetime since Meg had been there, yet it was less than a year. A year in which little had actually changed for her, and everything promised to.

She chose a seat beside a tank where white-whiskered fish drifted past like ghosts. Next to her, two Thai children, a girl and a boy, pulled faces at the fish. She studied the children's reflections in the glass, their eyes like pebbles, hair like wet slate. Her own reflection by contrast was cloud-pale and soft.

There was no other adult in the immediate vicinity, but no one would mistake the children for Meg's. She thought of her half-Thai baby, whose kick

she'd felt the day before. She imagined him or her in a few years' time, sitting there, the two of them pulling faces at the fish. Would it matter that they looked unlike if they were unmistakably together?

She was roused from her daydream by Mod, who approached with her hands pressed together. She wore the same beige jacket and carried the same handbag, but had swapped the orange smock for a floral tent dress. Meg returned her *wai*, and gestured for her to sit.

'Anna?' Mod said.

Meg shook her head and patted herself on the chest. 'Just me. Okay?'

Mod raised her eyebrows. 'Okay.'

Meg raised her hand to her mouth. 'Shall we eat?'

Mod chose noodle soup and Meg, throwing caution to the wind, ordered the same. They were handed plastic trays with steaming bowls containing wontons, vegetables, and balls of unidentifiable meat that proved to be delicious. They exchanged appreciative noises about the food, oohed and aahed at the fish. When they finished eating, Meg pushed their trays aside, wiped the bench with a serviette and took out a small photo album.

'My family,' she said, sliding it over to Mod. She flicked through her pocket Thai-English dictionary and read the transliteration. '*Khropkhrua*.'

'*Kha, kha*.' Mod nodded as she opened the book.

On the first page was a black and white photo of two girls in front of a camellia. Both wore pinafores. The slightly taller girl teamed hers with gumboots, the shorter with lace-edged socks and patent leather flats. It was taken in the garden of their mother's home in Melbourne's southeast.

'Anna,' Meg said, indicating the taller girl. 'And me.' She pointed to her chest.

Mod smiled and nodded.

Meg turned the pages, using the dictionary to explain who each person was. Her husband, her mother, her brother, his wife and their children. She wanted Mod to see the family that was waiting to welcome the baby.

She showed Mod a photo of her niece and nephew, taken on the beach at Airey's Inlet over New Year. She patted the air just above Mod's belly.

'Cousins,' she said. '*Yaat*.'

Mod frowned and looked at the word above Meg's finger in the dictionary.
'Ah, *yaat. Kha, kha.*'

Mod made the word fly where she'd left it flat. Meg marvelled that such a small nuance made all the difference between incomprehension and understanding.

Mod studied the photo. '*Suay.*'

A word Meg recognised, meaning beautiful. She assumed Mod was talking about the children. But Mod pointed to the background. '*Tha laeh.*'

'*Tha laeh,*' Meg repeated. 'In English, sea. And yes, the sea is beautiful.
Suay.'

'*Naawng yang mai kheeyu bpai tha laeh,*' Mod said.

'I'm sorry, I don't understand.'

Mod patted her chest, pointed to the sea and shook her head.

'You've never been to the sea?'

Mod smiled sheepishly.

Meg glanced at the fish tank. 'I can't exactly take you to the sea right now. But we can try for the next best thing.'

She gathered her things and waited for Mod to follow.

Anna should have been happy when Meg wanted to spend time alone with Mod. Instead, she felt abandoned. She took comfort in the thought that it wouldn't be long before they'd need her help, and read a novel in the hotel coffee lounge while waiting for the inevitable phone call.

When nearly two hours went by with no word, Anna started to worry. She fired off an anxious text and received a prompt reply. 'All good. See you 5-ish.'

It was five-fifteen by the time Meg returned, having spent the entire afternoon with Mod. Anna hadn't even managed lunch.

'What did you and Mod get up to?' she asked, trying to sound casual.

'As you know, we had lunch at that food court with the fish tanks, and Mod told me she'd never been to the sea. Can you believe that? So I took her to the aquarium under the shopping centre.'

Anna wanted to ask how the hell Mod, who didn't speak English, managed to tell Meg, who didn't speak Thai, that she'd never been to the sea. And why the sudden interest in the aquarium when, a year earlier, Anna couldn't get Meg to go there? Most of all, Anna wanted to ask why she hadn't been invited to join them.

'Did you have a good time?' she managed.

'It was amazing,' Meg said. 'Mod loved it. You've been there, right?'

Anna nodded.

'You know the jellyfish at the end, in the tanks with the coloured lights and the piano music playing? Well, Mod said that's how the baby feels inside her. Like a dancing jellyfish.'

Again, Anna wanted to know how it was possible for Mod to tell Meg anything. Instead she said, 'She told me the baby swam around like a tadpole.'

Meg shrugged. 'Maybe it feels different, now the baby's bigger. What's the Thai word for jellyfish again? Mod told me but I forgot.'

'Maaeng ga phroon.'

Meg screwed up her face. 'Not exactly a catchy nickname. By the way, does Mod's name mean anything?'

'I thought I told you. It means ant.'

'I mean her real name.'

‘Mukda? It means mother of pearl.’

Meg raised her eyebrows. ‘Really?’ She muttered something about coincidence. ‘I’m going to have a shower. Do you want to go to that railway carriage place for dinner tonight?’

It was clearly Meg’s day for taking initiative. Anna nodded.

Later, sitting in the garden at the Rosa Bieng and waiting for Meg to return from the bathroom, Anna was reminded of a field trip she made years earlier to the Thai border town of Mai Sai, with an ebullient American she’d befriended at a guesthouse. Jules played bass in a lesbian rock band, wore designer baseball caps, and believed everything would be ‘neat’ if they just kept smiling. While Anna had studied local culture, spoke basic Thai, and took great pains not to cause offence, Jules simply bowled up to people with a cheery ‘hello’. Naturally, Jules was the one they gravitated to. Anna’s contribution to their time in Mae Sai was a trip to a local hospital and several fruitless hours searching for information on sexually transmissible infections. Jules’s was to befriend two Thai ‘gals’ at a disco, who arrived the following morning on motorbikes for a tour of the nearby temple caves. Anna had responded with envy and resentment, until she realised it was a case of what the Thais called *thoop maaw khaao dtuaa aehng*: ‘smashing your own rice pot’. She’d needed to lighten up. It was a lesson worth remembering.

‘I think what you did today with Mod was wonderful,’ she said as Meg resumed her seat. She raised her glass.

‘Thanks. It was fun.’ Meg touched her glass to Anna’s and took a sip of her gin and tonic. ‘But it also made me realise how hard it’s going to be to maintain contact with Mod after all this is over. I mean, you see it on the online surrogacy forums. The IPs who promise to keep in touch with their surrogates, then feel guilty when they don’t. I don’t want that to be me, Anna.’

Anna picked at the remains of the food, chicken pieces tightly wrapped in pandan leaves. ‘So what do you plan to do about it?’

‘We’re thinking of using Facebook, sending photos, that kind of thing—’

‘Does Mod have a computer?’

‘She could use an internet café. Or we could get her a good phone.’

Anna shrugged. ‘Maybe. But you’re right. It won’t be easy.’

‘But we have to try. Our child might want to know more about where they’ve come from. We have to keep the door open.’ Meg eyed Anna directly. ‘Of course, it would make a world of difference if you’d help.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘For a start, you could translate messages between us, maybe even teach our child some Thai. You said all those years ago that you’d bought a house close by so we could raise our children together.’

Anna drank deeply from her glass, the tonic bitter on her tongue. ‘That was a long time ago, Meg. Besides, you’re assuming I’ll come back to Melbourne permanently.’

‘Won’t you?’

‘I don’t know yet, Meg.’ Anna pushed aside her plate. ‘Besides, you’re also assuming Mod wants to keep in touch. The surrogacy agreement’s all about her not having any contact after the baby is born. Aren’t you shifting the goal posts?’

Meg raised both hands. ‘Okay, Anna, I understand if you don’t want to be tied down. By all means check with Mod that she wants us to keep in touch. And when she says yes—which I’m sure she will—ask how she feels about us paying for her to learn English, will you?’

‘Look, Meg, I—’ She was interrupted by the buzzing of her phone on the table, Mod’s name lighting up the screen. ‘Speak of the devil. *Hallo?*’

‘*Mod mii pbanha.*’

It was Dao. She sounded frightened.

‘What kind of problem?’ Anna kept her voice calm.

‘The water started to come out,’ Dao said. ‘She’s gone to the hospital already.’

‘*Bee en aeht?*’

Anna glanced at her sister, hoping she didn’t recognise the acronym for the Bangkok Nursing Home. The baby was due to be delivered there, but not for another ten days. Meg looked at her, eyebrows raised in an unasked question.

‘*Kha, kha,*’ Dao said.

‘We’ll go there now.’

Anna put away her phone and reached for her sister’s hand. ‘Mod’s waters broke and she’s been taken to hospital.’

As Meg opened her mouth to speak, her own phone rang. 'It's Doctor Boribun. Hello?'

Anna signalled for the bill while Meg took the call. She watched her sister's face for a sign, seeing only shock.

'Yes, I understand. I'll see you there.'

'What's happening?'

'Doctor Boribun says he's going to deliver the baby tonight.'

'Oh, how exciting.'

Meg's face crumpled. 'No, it's too soon. Oh god, Nate's not here.'

The anguish in her voice attracted the attention of people at the surrounding tables.

Anna handed a passing waiter a wad of baht notes, took Meg by the elbow and steered her out into the street.

'You can call Nate in the taxi on the way to the hospital. Everything's going to be fine.'

'Are you sure?'

Meg's fingers were claws on her arm. Anna thought of the line from Kipling about keeping a cool head while others were losing theirs.

'Absolutely,' she said.

Meg tightened her grip. 'Anna, I'm terrified.'

'Of course you are, sweetheart.' She smiled reassuringly. 'You're about to become a mother.'

Meg was trembling so hard, she misdialled twice before reaching Nate. Her words ran into each other. *BabyEarlyHospitalEmergency*.

‘Emergency?’

The fear in his voice mirrored her own. She took a deep breath.

‘Emergency caesarean,’ she corrected herself. ‘Doctor Boribun says there’s no cause for alarm. But Nate, you’re not here for the birth.’

‘I’ll be there for the long haul. That’s what matters.’

‘So you’re not disappointed?’

‘Are you kidding, sweetheart? A year ago it looked like we’d never have a child at all.’

He was right, of course. She had to keep things in perspective. She blew kisses down the line, promising to call back once she had more news.

‘Everything okay?’ Anna asked.

Meg sighed. ‘I just wish Nate could be here.’

‘What about you? I don’t think Mod would mind.’

‘Doctor Boribun says it’s not possible. Hospital policy. Only parents and the mother’s female relatives allowed. And I don’t qualify as either.’

Anna took her hand. ‘Oh, Meg. I’m sorry.’

‘I won’t even get to hold the baby for the first twenty-four hours.’

‘What?’

‘More hospital policy. Apparently I can look through the nursery window.’

‘That’s bizarre.’

She shrugged. ‘I’ve waited more than ten years for this baby, Anna. I can wait a little longer.’

‘Good on you, darling.’ Anna squeezed her hand and let it go.

Meg turned to the window and the blur of city lights. She’d put on a brave face, but secretly, she was devastated to miss seeing her baby enter the world. She’d heard stories of IPs bribing their way around the protocols. But Meg didn’t know the first thing about bribing anyone, and she could hardly ask her right-minded sister for help. She struggled to shake the feeling that she was letting her child down.

She imagined the birth that was taking place without her. Fuelled by images from TV, she visualised Doctor Boribun in a blue gown and surgical mask lifting a bloodied, writhing baby into the air for Mod to see, Mod's face flushed with excitement. Jump cut to the baby, now cleaned, weighed and wrapped in white flannel, being placed into Mod's outstretched arms. Meg felt a stab of jealousy, followed by a fresh wave of panic. What if the baby mistook Mod for its mother?

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than Meg felt the scald of shame. Who was she kidding? For all the careful talk of intending parents and gestational carriers, Mod was the only mother the baby had known for nearly nine months. If the word surrogate meant substitute, then it was Meg who was the surrogate mother, set to take the place of Mod. Not the other way around.

'Sorry about the traffic. It might've been quicker to take the Skytrain.'

Anna's voice jolted Meg back to the present.

'It doesn't matter,' she said.

Anna frowned. 'You sure you're okay?'

'I'm worried.'

'Of course you are, Meggie. But remember, thirty-six weeks is practically full-term. The baby's lungs are developed. The immune system is fully mature. And besides, if anything goes wrong—and I'm sure it won't—the facilities at the Bangkok Nursing Home are world class, probably better than what you'd get in Australia. The baby will be fine.' She put her hand on Meg's shoulder. 'You're allowed to get your hopes up at this point.'

Meg gave her a rueful smile. 'I thought you said hope is the worst of all evils.'

'That was Nietzsche, not me.'

Anna leaned forward and said something to the driver, who turned off the road into a high-walled courtyard. 'We're here. Come on, let's see what's happening.'

They made their way as briskly as decorum allowed through the ornate reception area and up the lift to the labour ward. Anna explained their situation to the receptionist, who ushered them into a waiting area. They sat side by side on a long beige couch, opposite a painting of carp in a pond.

'I haven't asked what names you've picked out,' Anna said.

'We're keeping it secret.'

She chuckled. 'I guess I'll find out soon enough. You taking bets on whether it's a boy or a girl?'

Anna's excitement was infectious. Meg felt her spirits rise. 'Nate thinks it's a boy. I think it's a girl. You?'

Before Anna could answer, a woman entered the room, making them both leap to their feet. She gave them an embarrassed smile and started clearing used drinking glasses from a sideboard. Meg sat back down only to jump up again as Doctor Boribun appeared in his surgical scrubs, grinning broadly, his eyes like crescent moons.

'Congratulations, Missus Meg. You have a healthy baby girl.'

'Oh—' Meg managed, before bursting into tears. She felt Anna's arms around her, heard her whisper, 'I'm so happy for you,' felt a tissue being pressed into her palm.

The doctor, still smiling, was reeling off numbers. Meg wiped her eyes and focused on what he was saying.

'...and the weight is two point two seven kilos.'

'So she's fine? The baby's fine?'

'Yes, very fine,' he said.

'And Mod? Is she okay?'

'She is also fine. No problem.'

Meg felt the swell of fresh tears and dabbed the sodden tissue to her eyes.

'When can I see her—the baby?'

'She will be in the nursery in about forty-five minutes.'

He nodded and turned to leave the room, just as Anna spoke.

'*Rao khuy gan dai mai maaw?*'

Doctor Boriburn spun around, open-mouthed with surprise, though quickly regained his composure. A brief exchange in Thai followed. Meg thought she saw Anna hand something to him, before he nodded again and left the room.

'What was all that about? Is everything okay, really?'

'Absolutely,' Anna said. 'Come on, you'd better phone Nate.'

#

After speaking with Nate, Meg made the mistake of phoning her mother, who cried and kept asking questions she couldn't answer about what the baby looked like. Thankfully Anna had taken notes on the baby's weight and height. After her elation and relief at the news of the birth, Meg felt deflated. In theory, she was the mother of a daughter. But the child remained an abstraction, motherhood as intangible as ever. The knowledge that she should be feeling joyful only made it worse.

If Anna noticed Meg's despondency, she didn't let on. While they waited what seemed like an eternity to see the baby, Anna waxed lyrical about the pros and cons of various Thai beaches, quizzing Meg on whether they should take Mod on a day trip from Bangkok or stay overnight somewhere. Meg was in equal parts irritated by and grateful for the distraction.

When a nurse appeared and issued them with hospital smocks and disposable caps, it didn't occur to Meg that these were excessive precautions for viewing a baby through glass. She and Anna slipped into the gear, before being ushered to what was labelled 'Nursery Department', a large window covered by a blind. There was a door to one side and an intercom with instructions in Thai and English advising them to press the button and state the name of the mother and baby.

Anna spoke in Thai into the intercom. There was a pause and crackle before a disembodied female voice responded. Anna said something more, eliciting a reply of '*kha, kha*'. Another pause. More static. Anna took Meg's hand.

'Get ready.'

Meg moved toward the window, but Anna pulled her back as the door beside the intercom opened.

'We're going inside,' she said.

Meg registered a spacious room, bright lights, a row of clear plastic tubs containing alternating mounds of pink and blue. A nurse wearing a face mask wheeled one of the pink tubs toward her. Meg held her breath and gazed on the face of her daughter.

'Oh, she's so beautiful.'

To her astonishment, the nurse lifted the baby out and gently placed her in Meg's arms. Meg felt her heart swell and crack open. Love rushed and tumbled

from her to fill the new world of space created by the tiny child. Her skin was pink, her mouth serious. She had the same dimple in her chin that Meg had seen in photos of Nate as a baby. Peeking out from beneath a white hat were tufts of hair the colour of cinnamon.

Meg bowed her head and whispered into the whorl of the baby's ear, 'Welcome, my little pearl. Your mother and father love you very much.'

She heard a click and glanced up. Anna lowered the camera, her eyes shining.

'I'm a mum,' Meg said.

She returned her gaze to her daughter.

Mod pressed her fingertips gingerly to her belly. It felt loose, like a deflated balloon. She brought her hands back up, the left one patched with sticking plaster where the drip had been. A nurse had given her tablets, saying they said would stop her feeling any pain. Mod hoped the nurse was right.

The birth was nothing like the first time. When her son was born, Mod had laboured for several hours before pushing him out, wet and writhing, into the world. She'd felt exhausted but also powerful, surprised by her own strength. Her mother had fussed over them, tucking Mod and the baby into woollen hats and blankets. Her most precious memory was of the early hours of the morning, when a nurse brought the baby to her to be fed. She'd kept hold of him long after he'd stopped suckling, gazing in wonder at his little face peeking out between his hat and blanket, watching as the sun rose on his first day.

This time around, there was no labour. Mod was told she'd be given an injection in her spine that would make the lower half of her body numb. It was important, the doctor said, that she did not move. Mod closed her eyes and thought of the Phra Paang Nung Samadhi in the stillness of meditation, recalling his vow not to leave his spot on the grass until he had attained enlightenment. "Skin, sinew and bone may dry up as they will..."

'Hold your breath.'

She felt a needle pierce her back. Hands guided her to lie down. Tubes were inserted. Her body felt strange, as though she was buried waist-deep in the earth, her toes turned to roots.

A screen was placed over her chest, shielding her from what the doctors were doing. Mod closed her eyes. There was a forceful but painless tugging in her abdomen. Somewhere in the room, a machine pinged with a rhythm that might have been her heartbeat. No one spoke loudly enough for her to hear what they were saying.

In the hush of the operating theatre, the baby's cry was startling, like a crow.

'*Look ying,*' someone said.

A girl.

Tears slid from Mod's eyes. She wanted to ask if everything was all right. But she couldn't tell if anyone was within earshot and didn't want to open her eyes in case she saw the baby.

The doctors continued to work on her body. A sucking noise joined the pings, whispers and squawks. When it abated, she heard female voices cooing. There were no sounds of distress, other than the baby's cries. She took it as a good sign.

'It's time for you to go into the recovery room,' a voice above Mod's head said. She felt her trolley begin to move.

'Is the baby okay?' she asked.

'She's fine.'

The sounds of the operating theatre faded as the trolley glided along the corridor. Mod felt the touch of a gloved hand on her arm and opened her eyes. The orderly's face was obscured between her surgical cap and mask, but her eyes were kind.

'It's a noble thing you've done, to carry another woman's baby. *Naawng tham goo sohn.*'

The memory brought comfort to Mod as she lay in the half-light of the cold and silent room. Her hands returned to her empty belly. She'd done a noble thing, the orderly had said, in carrying another woman's baby. She had earned merit.

She would return home soon to her family, leaving behind the baby who was never hers, carrying merit in its place.

‘Seriously?’ Anna raised her eyebrows. ‘You’re not telling me the baby’s name?’

‘Not yet.’ Meg’s voice was playful. ‘Seeing as how Nate couldn’t be here for the birth of his daughter, it’s only fair he should be here when she gets named.’

‘Fair enough. But we can’t spend the next twenty-four hours calling her the baby. She needs a nickname.’ Anna scrolled through the photos she’d taken the night before. ‘There’s a reddish tint to her hair. How about we call her Blue?’

‘Oh, really Anna.’ Meg pressed the intercom button by the nursery door. ‘We’re here to see baby Boonpranee-Brookes, please.’

‘Baby Blue,’ Anna murmured over her shoulder.

While Meg was reunited with her daughter, Anna briefed the nurses on the baby’s nickname, earning smiles and nods of approval. For people who traditionally nicknamed plump babies ‘Skinny’ and fair-skinned children ‘Black’ to confuse the spirits, the perverse Australian custom of referring to redheads as ‘Blue’ made perfect sense.

Thai protocols—at least in upmarket hospitals like the BNH—saw newborns cared for in the nursery for the first four days after birth. Anna suspected her sister would’ve been content to spend the entire morning cuddling and kissing her baby, but as far as the nurses were concerned, there was work to be done. New mothers were permitted to visit at set times, entrusted with their baby’s full-time care only after they’d attended daily lessons on bathing, feeding, swaddling and other parenting skills. It seemed very nineteen-fifties to Anna, but the arrangement was perfect for Meg: all new parents were treated with the same polite condescension, regardless of where they were from and by what route they’d arrived at parenthood.

Meg spent her first morning in the nursery learning how to bottle feed Blue, while Anna took pictures. She wasn’t permitted to use a flash, but that was no object: apart from the cheery animal print blouses worn by the nurses, and the pink and blue swaddling blankets, the whole nursery was eye-hurtingly white. When Anna muttered something about excessive hygiene—one new mother actually wore a face mask to hold her baby—Meg looked genuinely shocked.

'Any new parent would be grateful for their baby to have access to such high standards of care,' she said.

Chastised, Anna resumed taking photos.

After the feeding was done, the nurse demonstrated the origami of nappy changing and swaddling, before restoring the baby to her tub. Anna could tell from the way Meg pressed her hands to her sides that she itched to pick up Blue again. But the nurse made it clear that all babies were expected to sleep for the following few hours unobserved.

As they left the nursery, Anna suggested they visit Mod. To her surprise, Meg blushed.

'I suppose we should,' she said. 'I mean, I want to thank her and everything. I just feel really nervous about seeing her.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. It's like... This is going to sound wrong, but it's like the next time you see someone after the first time you've kissed them.'

Anna smiled. 'She's changed your world, that's why.'

They took the lift to the maternity ward and asked to see Mod. The receptionist ushered them into a waiting area. From the corridor they could hear chatter, the clatter of metal trays, and distant pinging sounds that might be the lifts or call buttons summoning the nurses.

After ten minutes, a nurse wearing a jaunty white cap and a serene smile advised them that Khun Mukda was not receiving visitors during her stay at the hospital.

'Did you tell her it was us, Meg and Anna?'

The nurse, still smiling, managed to nod and show them the door in the same fluid gesture.

'I reckon Team Baby's behind this,' Anna said as they returned to the lift. 'They probably got word that I can speak Thai and it's made them nervous. It's in their interests to keep you and Mod from getting too close, you know. There's still the final payment, and they won't want to risk missing out on their cut.'

The lift door opened on to the hospital's opulent lobby. Anna eyed the main reception desk. 'We'll ask for Mod's room number and call her directly.'

‘Anna, stop.’ Meg placed a hand on her arm. ‘Mod’s probably exhausted. Leave her in peace.’

‘But you want to—’

‘There will be time for that.’ Meg squeezed Anna’s arm. ‘Could we arrange for flowers and fruit to be delivered to her?’

‘Sure.’

‘I want to send Mod the address of our apartment, too, and invite her to visit as soon as she feels up to it. Would you write a note for me?’

Anna felt something loosen inside her, like a belt being let out a notch. ‘Of course, Meg. Let’s find somewhere to eat. My Thai spelling is pretty dodgy, so it will take a bit of time.’

They headed out the main entrance, saluted by the doorman, his white uniform like a sea captain’s. As they turned into the street, an unexpected breeze ruffled Anna’s hair and made Meg laugh.

Four days after the birth, Meg stepped out of the hospital with her daughter in a cotton sling across her chest. She'd talked Nate out of the stroller. It would be hot no matter what they did, and this way Meg got to realise a long-held vision of herself as the sort of mother who'd wear her newborn home from the hospital. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine that newborn would be gestated by another woman, and that hospital would be in Bangkok.

She paused at the foot of the stairs with Nate by her side while Anna captured the moment in her self-appointed role as their official photographer. A few steps brought them to the hospital's ornate spirit house, brimming with offerings of flavoured milk in UHT boxes, each fitted with a drinking straw. Meg found it hilarious that the guardian spirits of a maternity hospital should have a taste for milk and asked Anna to take another photo.

'Can you hold the sling to one side so I can see Pearl's face?'

Her sister had finally stopped calling the baby Blue. Meg smiled tenderly, remembering the moment they'd told Anna their daughter's name.

'You told me Mod's proper name, Mukda, means mother of pearl, right? Well, you might not know this, but my name, Meg, means pearl, too. So we're calling her Pearl, after both her mothers.'

When Anna said nothing, Meg added, 'I know, it's a bit old-fashioned.'

'No, no.' Her voice was a near-whisper. 'It's perfect. Pearl is perfect.'

As she posed for the photograph, angling Pearl's face toward the camera, Meg felt a wave of affection for her sister. Anna had been amazing. Any anxieties Meg had about her taking over proved to be entirely unfounded. If anything, her sister erred on the side of discretion. She'd withdrawn, unasked, to the waiting area outside the nursery while Meg and Nate were engaged in the daily lessons of feeding, bathing, changing and dressing their newborn baby, understanding their need for time alone to get to know their daughter. She seemed happy to take photos and run errands. Otherwise, she simply read books and waited around for them. What's more, Meg was pretty sure Anna had bribed Doctor Boribun on the night of Pearl's birth. She could think of no other explanation for

why they'd broken protocol and allowed her to hold her baby. Not that she'd ever ask Anna directly. She wouldn't want to risk offending her in case she was wrong.

Photographs done, they walked towards the gate, where the guard raised his arm to wave down a taxi.

'Oh, let's walk,' Meg said.

Both Nate and Anna looked at her askance.

'Just a few blocks,' she added. 'It's such a lovely day.'

Anna gave her a wry smile. 'That's something I never thought I'd hear you say about Bangkok.'

As they made their way along Convent Road, Meg noticed for the first time how green it was. The street was lined with tall, leafy trees, bright red and yellow butterflies dancing in the canopy. And there were birds everywhere. Not only sparrows and mynas, but exotic black ones with tail feathers like tuning forks, their trilling loud enough to be heard above the traffic.

There were beautiful, wrought iron lamp-posts, too, as unexpected as the one discovered by the children in the pine forest in Narnia. Meg made a mental note to tell Pearl, when they got around to reading *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, that there was the same kind of lamp-post in the street outside the hospital where she was born.

Everything struck her as magical. The flower vendors with their ropes of marigold and jasmine, coiled into towers of yellow and white. The shops with names like 'Charming Beauty' and 'Fruit in Love'. The cooks dishing out food from their tiny portable kitchens on the footpaths.

Meg stopped in front of a cart lined with large aluminium pots. 'Shall we get some food to take back to the apartment?'

'Good idea,' Anna said. 'Want me to order?'

'No, I'll do it.'

Meg pointed to the dishes she wanted. The vendor—a square-faced woman wearing large, round glasses—filled several clear plastic bags with curries and rice, tying them with rubber bands so they looked like bubbles. She piled the bubbles into a larger plastic bag and handed it to Nate, all the while smiling and nodding at the sling across Meg's chest. Meg peeled back the fabric to

reveal Pearl's face, earning her a broader smile and a thumbs up from the vendor.

She felt as though she could walk the streets for hours, showing off her baby. But she was hungry, and Pearl would soon be due for a feed. Reluctantly, she asked Anna to wave down a taxi.

Meg had agonised about how best to transport the baby around Bangkok, consulting online forums and even asking the Australian Embassy for advice. There was no point bringing a baby capsule to Bangkok, as local cars didn't have the bolts in place to secure it. The general consensus was to place the baby in a carrier, strap yourself—but not the baby—into the seatbelt, and offer the taxi driver a bonus to take it slowly. By no means satisfactory, but Meg had little choice.

Nate got into the car first and as she eased herself and Pearl into the backseat beside him, Meg realised there were no seatbelts. Before she could suggest they change vehicles, their driver swung out into the traffic. Meg cupped Pearl's head in the palm of her hand and pressed it to her chest, as the amulets hanging from the rear-view mirror lurched wildly from side to side. She squeezed her eyes shut, seized by a sense of powerlessness. Anything could happen to her baby. How was Meg to protect her?

'Are you okay sweetheart?'

She opened her eyes just in time to see a motorbike speed past them with a small child balanced on the pillion seat behind his father. Meg had to laugh.

'I'm fine.'

As she watched the little boy's back disappear into the traffic, Meg experienced what she would later describe to Nate as a blinding flash of insight. She could spend her whole life panicking about trying to keep Pearl safe. Or she could accept that she could never protect Pearl from the world, only equip her to live in it as best she could.

It was, Meg would tell Nate, the moment she understood how to be a mother.

Meg's smile was one that Mod hadn't seen before. It reached beyond the corners of her mouth to the corners of her eyes and made them shine, despite the dark circles.

She slipped off her shoes as Meg ushered her into the apartment. It smelled of furniture polish and plastic. The widescreen TV was bigger than Auntie Chompu's, though it wasn't turned on, and glass balcony doors showed a smoggy view. Mod exchanged a *wai* with Anna, who sat in front of a coffee table strewn with documents.

Meg disappeared through one of the doors off the main room and a man whom Mod recognised from photos as the husband, Nate, joined them. He looked older in real life, his beard ginger-grey like a cat, but his snaggle-tooth smile made him look like a cheeky child. He gave Mod an awkward *wai* and actually bowed to her as he said something to Anna.

'My brother-in-law is thankful for all that you have done for him and Meg,' she said.

Mod blushed at the oddity of having a farang man *kreng jai* her. She asked Anna to explain that she was happy if they were happy. The man looked at her with misty eyes in response to Anna's translation and held out his arms. For an alarming moment, Mod thought he was going to embrace her. Instead, he took her hands in both of his and resumed bowing and muttering, '*Khaawp khoon khrap.*'

He let go of her hand only when Meg reappeared with the baby in her arms. Mod's heart leapt.

'Here's our daughter,' Meg said. 'Look how perfect she is.'

'She's a bit yellow.'

Mod's response—traditionally, you contradicted a compliment paid to a baby to confuse the spirits—made Anna laugh and Meg looked bemused. In truth, the baby girl was beautiful, with clear skin and hair like the red earth of Isaan. Mod was reminded of Nok's joke about the dirt from the countryside rubbing off on the baby. If she ever saw Nok again, Mod would tell her that in this case, it turned out to be true.

‘Would you like to hold her?’

Mod didn’t need to wait for Anna’s translation. She held out her arms, feeling an unfathomable mix of achievement and loss as she gazed at the baby’s face.

‘We’ve named her Pearl,’ Meg told her through Anna. ‘After both her mothers.’

It took Mod a moment to get her head around what Anna was saying. The baby’s name sounded like ‘Pern’, a Thai nickname from the English word ‘Apple’. But Anna explained the meaning was *mook daa haan*. Pearl. Also the meaning of the name Meg and, of course, her own name, Mukda. Mother of pearl. Mod understood that she was being honoured. She looked from the baby to Meg, Nate and Anna, and felt her cheeks flush again.

Still, she managed to stay calm until baby Pearl woke up and started crying. The sound had a shocking effect on Mod’s body, causing her heart to race and her breasts to leak milk. Damp spots stained the front of her t-shirt. She saw Meg’s eyes widen and Nate look away. She blinked back tears of embarrassment.

‘I need to pump breastmilk for the baby,’ she blurted to Anna, holding Pearl against her chest to hide the damp spots.

Meg looked alarmed in response to Anna’s translation. There was a tense exchange between the sisters.

‘I have a machine in the bag.’ Mod indicated the contraption she’d borrowed from the hospital. ‘The doctor said the milk was good for the baby.’

Anna picked up the bag and showed it to Meg, who looked surprised, but no longer upset.

‘You can use my room.’ Still carrying the bag, Anna ushered Mod into a bedroom. Meg followed with a glass of water, placing it on a bedside table. Mod handed the baby to her.

‘Is there anything else you need?’ Meg asked.

Mod shook her head, keen to be left alone so she could clean herself up.

She found a power-point, made space for herself on the bed, positioned the pump on a cushion in her lap and hooked herself up. She’d practised using the machine while still in the hospital, but with Pearl’s cries audible in the next

room, the milk flowed easily. Though she kept reminding herself that she did not have a newborn baby of her own, her body acted otherwise.

She got the idea of offering breastmilk from Thip. It was something good for the baby that only she could provide, a way of showing gratitude to Meg and Nate for allowing her to spend time with baby Pearl.

Pearl. *Mook daa haan*. The idea of the baby girl being named after her was still sinking in. Mod's experience was so different from Thip, who never set eyes on the baby she carried and provided milk for; and Nok, who was threatened with legal action if she tried to contact the parents of the twins she'd delivered in November—though Nok reckoned this was because the Thai mother was going to pretend she'd carried the babies herself. As for Oy, despite all the fuss made over her before the birth and the promises made after, she'd heard nothing since the mother returned to Australia with the baby.

Of course, the same fate might still await Mod. It was one thing for them all to be in Bangkok together, with Anna to translate, and Meg and Nate needing Mod's cooperation to get the paperwork for Pearl's visa. It was another to keep in touch after they all went their separate ways.

Mod didn't want the relationships to end. She'd never known farangs before, and she liked them. Meg was funny and kind. Anna was more serious, but Mod liked her, too. She liked the way they made her see the world differently, made it seem bigger.

As for Pearl, Mod had carried her inside her body for nine months. She was the means by which Pearl's soul was reincarnated. Fate had connected them forever.

But would Pearl know that? Would Mod be part of the story Meg and Nate told their daughter? Or, like Thip, Nok and Oy, was she destined to be made invisible?

The immigration officer pushed the form back across the counter, shaking his head with enough force to make his jowls wobble. As if giving vent to their collective frustration, Pearl started howling.

'Jai yen-yen,' Anna told herself through gritted teeth, the Thai equivalent of 'be cool'. Losing her temper would get them nowhere, but her face ached with the effort of maintaining a smile. *Yim mai awwk.* 'To smile with difficulty'. A verb form that might have been invented specifically to cover encounters with bureaucracy.

'What seems to be the problem, *nai?*' Anna attempted to flatter the official by calling him 'boss'.

'The document needs to be registered with the local authority.'

'Already done, *nai.*' Anna pushed the form back across the desk. 'The stamp is quite faint,' she added diplomatically. The last thing she needed was to be punished for making him lose face.

The man grunted as he leafed again through the paperwork. Anna turned to Meg and Nate and smiled, projecting confidence she didn't feel. Even with her ability to speak Thai, and legal advice from Tom, the process of obtaining the documentation for Meg and Nate to take Pearl out of the country felt like a Sisyphean task. Nate smiled back, but kept a white-knuckled grip on his armrests, while Meg paced the room in an effort to settle the baby. Anna briefly contemplated the tactical advantage of letting Pearl wail.

A cough drew her attention back to the counter. Anna held her breath as the officer affixed another stamp to the paperwork. He added a perfunctory signature and handed it back while looking over her shoulder for the next in line. Anna turned and gave the thumbs up. Nate sprang from his chair and gathered their things.

'You're a champion,' he said as Anna handed over the document. 'So, is that it?'

'Together with the DNA test results, it's enough to apply for the Australian passport. But you still need a letter from Mod, endorsed by her local district office, giving permission for the baby to leave the country.'

Nate shook his head. 'It's a bloody marathon.'

'I can go to Sisaket with Mod and help sort out the letter,' Anna said. 'You two—' She was interrupted by a squawk from Pearl. 'Sorry, you three will be okay without me for a few days, won't you?'

Meg looked at Nate. 'Why don't we all go to Sisaket together? I'd like to meet Mod's family.'

'I'm not sure that's such a good idea,' Anna said quickly. Her offer to help with the paperwork was genuine, but after two weeks in close quarters with Meg, Nate and the baby, she also needed time to herself. 'Sisaket's a small town. Pretty rustic. If any of you got sick...'

She saw Meg tighten her hold on Pearl and knew she'd hit the mark.

'You could invite Mod to bring her family along on the beach trip you're planning,' she added as a salvo.

'That's a great idea,' Meg said. 'Do you think they'd come?'

'I'll ask on your behalf.'

Nate glanced at Meg. 'There's something else, Anna. We want to ask you a favour—'

'As if you're not doing enough for us already,' Meg interrupted him. 'But it's our wedding anniversary today, and we wondered if you'd look after Pearl so we could go out for dinner.'

Anna, though flattered, was hesitant. 'You sure you want to leave her with me?'

'Of course. You're her aunt, her family. Who better to leave Pearl with.'

It was on the tip of Anna's tongue to say 'her mother', but she stopped herself just in time.

#

Thai Buddhists believe newborn babies to be particularly susceptible to spirits. Spirits of mothers from past lives, guardian spirits, malevolent spirits—random laughter and tears were equally attributable to spiritual interference. Anna could almost believe it when, ten minutes after Meg and Nate left, Pearl woke up howling like something possessed. Her face turned red, tongue protruded from an angry mouth, and she punched the air with tiny fists.

The nurses had told Meg that babies cry because they're hungry, wet or tired. No mention of harassment by mother-spirits. Anna ruled out tiredness when her attempts to settle Pearl served only to further infuriate her. She transferred her to the change table and peeled off her sweaty clothes, exposing the limp remains of the umbilical cord, cinched with a plastic peg. Screwing up her nose at the yeasty smell, she dipped a cotton bud in saline to clean it as she'd seen Meg do, only to have the cord fall off. Anna picked it up with a tissue to throw it out, but left it on the change table instead in case it was important.

Shedding her cord stump did nothing to improve Pearl's mood. Nor did a nappy change and fresh clothes. Fast running out of options, Anna held Pearl over her shoulder with one hand, while she heated a bottle of milk in a saucepan.

Pearl kept crying. Anna wondered if the problem wasn't the presence of a spirit-mother so much as the absence of an earthly mother. But if that was the case, which mother was she crying for?

The milk warmed, Anna plugged the teat in the baby's mouth before even leaving the kitchen. The crying stopped. Pearl's whole body shuddered and relaxed as she guzzled the milk. Anna felt herself relax, too. She dimmed the lights and sat down on the couch. Pearl rolled her eyes as if in ecstasy, making Anna laugh.

Night fell abruptly in Bangkok, siphoning into the gaps and cracks between buildings, leaving only the light from the kitchenette to illuminate the sitting room. Pearl's sucking noises were punctuated by small sighs of pleasure. Otherwise the apartment was hospital quiet.

Anna watched the milk descend. When the bottle was empty, she propped Pearl on her lap, rubbing her back to induce burping as demonstrated by the nurses. Eyes like slits and parted lips dribbling milk, Pearl belched and smiled like a contented drunk.

Anna eased the baby back into her arms and walked over to the window. A near-full moon was rising, a rare treat in a city where smog often obscured the night sky. She started singing softly. *'Sing a song of sixpence, pocket full of rye...'*

Pearl stared at her, or possibly the lights reflected on the window pane. Anna sang a little louder. At some point, Pearl's hand found her way to Anna's and gripped her index finger. Anna stared at the tiny fist, and stopped singing.

She bent her head and kissed Pearl's fingers. She kissed her flawless cheek, her ear like a miniature abalone shell. She kissed her temple and sniffed the top of Pearl's head, inhaling her smell of clotted cream and talcum powder.

Anna tucked the baby's head under her chin and sat back down on the couch. She closed her eyes and resumed singing, allowing herself for a brief moment to imagine it was her baby she cradled in her arms, whose heart beat against hers. The baby she might have had. The baby she would have loved.

'When you are much older, remember when we sat / At midnight on the windowsill, / and -'

The words caught in her throat. Anna wept silently, brushing away the tears before they could fall onto the baby. She had no sense of time passing. When she looked down, Pearl was asleep.

There was a knock at the door. Assuming Meg and Nate were home early and careful not to wake Pearl, Anna wiped her eyes and switched on a lamp.

When she opened the door, she found Mod on the threshold, weighed down with various bags.

'Sawatdee kha, Khun Anna.' She held up a cool bag. 'I've brought more milk and I need to pump—' She hesitated, puzzled by what she saw in Anna's face. 'Older sister, are you okay?'

Anna held the door and let Mod in.

She returned to the couch with Pearl still asleep in her arms, listening to the sound of bags being unzipped, the fridge door opening, glass tinkling. The mobile phone in her back pocket beeped. Anna eased it out, surprised to see it was still early.

‘Everything OK?’ A text message from Nate.

She typed back, ‘All good. Mod’s here with more milk. Pearl asleep. Take your time.’

She leaned forward to return the phone to her pocket when it beeped again.

‘You’re the best, Anna.’

Nate had said the same thing, that night she’d turned him down. It was as if he and Pearl had conspired to force her memory back to that time, five years earlier. Time she’d told Nate was best forgotten.

#

She’d met Christophe at a conference in Chiang Mai, and made a spur of the moment decision to spend a long weekend with him afterwards on Koh Samet. When she ran out of condoms, Anna apologised that ‘it had been a long time between drinks’, an Australian idiom that, when she explained it, made Christophe roar with laughter.

‘What a bad example you set for the young people,’ he said, kissing her throat.

‘God, imagine if I accidentally fell pregnant. I’d never live it down.’

He snorted. ‘Women your age don’t fall pregnant accidentally.’

It was the only off-note in an otherwise blissful few days. For the first time in years, Anna had met someone she wanted to spend time with, and when she made noises about looking for work in Phnom Penh, Christophe didn’t discourage her.

But the call from Australia came before she could put her plans into action. Meg was in hospital. Complications arising from her IVF treatment. Life-threatening. Anna was on a plane to Melbourne the following day. She expected Meg to look sick. She was shocked to see her looking pregnant.

'The bloated stomach is a symptom of her condition,' Nate explained over coffee in the hospital café. 'She wanted to produce more eggs. She's basically overdosed on hormones.' He looked up at Anna through bloodshot eyes. 'They make them from the ovaries of Chinese hamsters, for fuck's sake.'

Anna frowned. 'This is madness.'

'I'm so glad you agree.' Nate took her hand across the table. 'I don't know what to do, Anna. Trying to have a baby is killing her. I want a baby, too. But not if it means losing Meg.'

'Can't you talk her out of it?'

'I was hoping you would.'

She withdrew her hand. 'Let me guess. You don't want to risk having Meg hate you for the rest of her life. But it's okay for her to hate me.'

'Come on, Anna, you can weather a storm better than anyone I know. And even if Meg does hate you for a while, you'll be too far away to bear the brunt of it. That's a luxury I don't have.'

Her coffee tasted like dishwater. She pushed it aside.

'What do you want me to say?'

'Tell her it's got to stop. She'll listen to you. Tell her it's not worth dying for.'

Anna returned to the hospital room alone. She took Meg's hand. Her skin was like paper, her hair when Anna stroked it was lank as rope.

'Meggie-Lou, sweetheart.' She linked their fingers together. 'I know how badly you want a baby. But you can't go on like this. You know that, don't you.'

Meg's eyes remained closed but Anna sensed that she was listening.

'You nearly died, Meg. No baby and no you. What's the point of that? I can't stand by and let you kill yourself. Too many people love you to let that happen. Nate loves you. Mum loves you. Dad and David love you. I love you.'

Tears slid from the corners of Meg's eyes.

'Please don't hate me for being the one to say this, Meg, but you need to let it go.'

Meg's mouth was dry in the corners, her voice like sandpaper. 'If I let go of hope, I'll have nothing left.'

'Oh sweetheart.' Anna squeezed her hand. 'You have so much love in your life.'

Meg continued to cry softly. Anna held her hand and stroked her hair and told her everything would be all right. And she believed it. Meg would be all right. She had Nate, her family and friends, a comfortable home, a steady job. All things considered, she was doing much better than Anna, with her nomadic lifestyle, precarious employment and a relationship that was tentative at best.

By the time she got back to the flat where she was staying, Anna was exhausted. She poured herself a glass of wine, thought about food, and settled for a second glass of wine instead. Among some CDs in the lounge, she found *Messenger* and let Jimmy Little's soothing voice fill the room. Stretching out on the couch, she sipped her wine and closed her eyes.

She would've ignored the doorbell, but the music gave her away. It was Nate, unsteady on his feet, a bottle of red in one hand.

'Great minds,' she said.

She poured the remains of the bottle that was already open into two glasses.

'Did you see Meg after I left?'

Nate nodded.

'And?'

'She thinks you're right. She's agreed to no more egg retrieval.'

Anna shot him a look. 'Does she hate me?'

Nate shook his head.

'Well, that's good news. On both counts.'

'It's not that simple. She wants to keep trying for as long as we have embryos. We have seven. That's what she nearly died for.' He rubbed his temples. 'I don't know how much more of this I can take, Anna.'

She moved to the couch beside him and put her hand on his shoulder. 'You've got to be strong, mate. It can't go on forever. And there might still be a baby—'

'You don't believe that.' His voice was flat. 'I don't believe that. I love Meg. I do. She's enough for me. But it's all about having a baby for her. We haven't had sex in nearly a year.'

He looked up, registered Anna's surprise and seemed to search her face for something else. 'I know it shouldn't matter but I'm only human.'

He leaned his head against her chest. Anna hesitated, before putting her arms around him. Poor Nate. She knew firsthand the special kind of sadness that characterised long periods without sex; and now that her circumstances had changed, she could afford to be magnanimous. Her mind wandered to an image of a pelican piercing her own breast to feed her offspring with her blood. Something she'd seen in church of all places. Although a symbol of self-sacrifice, it had always struck Anna as unintentionally erotic. So when Nate raised his head and started kissing her, it took her a moment to come to her senses.

'No, Nate, no.' She pulled away and stood up. 'You don't want to do this.'

He put his head in his hands. 'Oh god, I'm so sorry. It's just—' He started to cry. 'Why aren't I enough for her?'

Anna sat back down and patted his shoulder. 'It's not you, Nate. The urge to have a baby, it's...it's *primal*. We're programmed for it.'

He sniffed. 'You're not.'

Anna thought of Christophe and his quip about accidental pregnancies. 'I've never ruled it out.'

'God, it would kill Meg if you had a baby and she didn't.' Nate shook his head as if to dislodge such a scenario. 'Forgive me, Anna. I'm drunk and exhausted and I should never have come here, especially after what you did today.'

'It's okay.'

'Not, it's not. I can't imagine what you must think of me. I've never cheated on Meg, ever.'

'I believe you.' She squeezed his shoulder. 'You're a good man, Nate.'

She stood up. 'I'm going to make coffee then call you a taxi. We'll meet at the hospital tomorrow, and it will be like tonight never happened.'

Nate smiled gratefully. 'You're the best, Anna.'

#

Anna agreed to Meg's request for her to stay in Melbourne until after the next embryo transfer. She found some short-term work writing up reports for a

Melbourne-based NGO with projects in Laos and Myanmar, and keep her eye out for opportunities in Cambodia.

When she woke one morning feeling sick, she put it down to a parasitic infection that had plagued her on and off for years. A couple of days later, still feeling nauseous, she realised her period hadn't come. When two pink lines appeared on the home pregnancy test, Anna burst into tears.

'How can life be so bloody cruel?' she asked her red-eyed reflection in the bathroom mirror.

If she had this baby, Anna's relationship with Christophe would be over before it had begun; and while she might keep working, her professional credibility in the region would be damaged by her status as a single mother. But these considerations were nothing compared to the impact on Meg. Nate's words kept ringing in Anna's ears. *It would kill Meg if you had a baby and she didn't.*

Meg's embryo transfer was still weeks away. Her chances of a pregnancy, let alone a baby, were slim—thirty per cent at best for her age group. Anna could hardly put off terminating her own pregnancy on those odds. All the same, she had to consider how she'd feel about having an abortion if Meg did become pregnant. And what if this turned out to be her first and last pregnancy and she didn't go through with it? Could she live with that decision?

Anna slept fitfully, but woke with a clear head. When she set the possibility of causing herself pain against the certainty of hurting Meg, her course became clear. If only one of them could have a baby, then it had to be Meg. Otherwise, neither of them would. But she couldn't wait around for Meg to have the embryo transfer. That was the proverbial bridge too far.

The termination, on the first of December, was uncomplicated. She was weepy for a few days, and put it down to hormones. When she felt strong enough, she visited Meg and told her she was going back to Laos.

'There's been an outbreak of cholera in the provinces and they need me to get the funding for clean water and medical supplies. It's literally a matter of life or death.'

'Always putting strangers before family,' Meg said.

Anna took a deep breath and forced herself to smile. 'You don't need me, Meg. Not really. You have Nate. Don't underestimate how lucky that makes you.'

#

Holding Pearl in her arms that night, Anna was forced to confront the scenario she'd tried to imagine years earlier. Meg had her longed-for baby, and Anna had squandered what was most likely her one and only shot at motherhood. Though she'd never talked about it with anyone before, she found herself telling Mod the whole story.

'Being with my niece reminds me of what I gave up, and makes me a little sad. But I'm okay, *naawng*.' Anna smiled to allay the concern she saw in Mod's face. 'I know in my heart it was the right decision at the time.'

Mod's eyes flitted to the sleeping baby. 'Yes, the decision that makes you sad can also be the right decision. *Hen ok hen jai*.'

The expression she used meant to sympathise, but the literal meaning in Thai was stronger.

'I see your mind and your heart.'

Anna took a wad of sticky rice from the bamboo basket, dipped it into the fermented fish sauce and put it in her mouth.

Chai whooped and clapped his hands. '*Falang gin pbaa daaek dai.*'

Anna smiled indulgently. Mod's younger brother was maintaining a running commentary on her every move, as though she were some kind of exotic attraction.

Mod's mother pushed a plate of spicy minced chicken salad closer, murmuring, '*Seurn, seurn.*'

The food, the language, the mother's wrap-around skirt all reminded Anna of Laos. She took a little more sticky rice to scoop the *laap gai* into her mouth, earning renewed applause from Chai and an approving smile from *Mae*.

Only when she'd sampled all the dishes did the family members eat. As well as sticky rice, dipping sauce and *laap*, there were grilled fish, plates of greens and a clear soup. Chai helped himself, *Mae* offered rice to the shy sister, Ying, and Mod fed her son Pui, who nestled beside her like a baby bird.

They sat together on floor mats around a low rattan table. The room was dark and the single pedestal fan did little to alleviate the heat. Anna was glad she'd talked Meg and Nate out of accompanying them to Sisaket. Even in the swoon of maternal bliss, Meg would have struggled with the heat and amenities. Mod's family home was poorer than Anna had anticipated.

Mae bowed and pressed a choice piece of fish on her. The constant show of deference made Anna uncomfortable, but there was no getting around it. The money Mod made from the surrogacy was significant for her family. And although Anna took pains to explain that it was her sister, not her, whose baby Mod had carried, and Mod who'd done her sister a great service and not the other way around, *Mae* continued to smile and bow and stroke her arm at random intervals while muttering thanks and blessings.

Anna knew not to overstay her welcome, feigning tiredness as an excuse to return to her guesthouse soon after the meal. The visit to the *amphoe* office earlier that day turned out to be time-consuming but uneventful. Mod had brought Pui along, who hid behind his mother's legs until Anna lured him out

with a drawing of a monkey. While she lacked Meg's artistic flair, she could sketch well enough to keep a toddler entertained, and emboldened, Pui was soon telling her what to draw. Cricket. Turtle. Motorbike. Truck. Anna kept drawing while Mod was bounced from one official to the next, finally obtaining the necessary document just as the office was closing for the lunch break.

She'd anticipated returning to Bangkok the following day, but Mod suggested they visit a nearby temple together and Anna, sensing it was important, agreed. They travelled by local train, sitting on wooden seats beneath sluggish fans in a carriage that smelled of rice. The landscape through the open window was dull and parched, a dam brimming with waterlilies like a startling pink patch on a tan blanket.

The temple was in a small town coated in red dust. A short walk from the station brought them to Wat Sa Kamphaeng Yai, sign-posted as the site of ruins dating back to the eleventh century Angkor Kingdom. The temple entrance was flanked by huge heads of moustachioed men, concrete replicas of the handsome stone faces that adorned Cambodia's famous Bayon temple.

Mod surprised Anna by bypassing both the entrance to the ruins and the modern *wat* in the same grounds, heading instead to a shady terrace at the temple perimeter. Among the trees was a collection of statues, humanesque bodies painted pale pink, eyes and lips bright red, faces distorted in pain. Some had the heads of animals. Most looked emaciated with protruding ribcages and limbs like sticks, though one had a huge belly and another was weighed down by a penis the same size as the rest of his body. Some excreted streams of shit and vomit, painted to look like flames.

Anna recognised the hallmarks of a Buddhist Hell Garden, a cautionary tale in concrete, warning of the fates that awaited those who violated the five Buddhist precepts in the multiple pits of *Narok*. Unlike Christian Hell, Buddhist sinners were not doomed for eternity, but only until their karmic debt was worked off, at which point they could be reborn. Anna thought it sounded great, until a friend pointed out that atonement could take millions of years.

To her Australian eyes, Hell Gardens were like B-grade horror movies: excessive, grotesque, unintentionally amusing. But she knew many Thai

Buddhists took them seriously—Mod included, judging by the grave look on her face.

Anna kept her own expression neutral as they wandered among the statues. In some cases, concrete Hell guards meted out punishments. Others cowered at the hands of invisible tormentors. Some tortures were literal enough for Anna to guess at the offences. Thieves had their hands cut off. Liars lost their tongues. Adulterers had their genitals mutilated. She remembered some of the quirkier sins associated with the animals, too—hooligans acquired crocodile heads and drug dealers became cows—but she couldn't remember what you did to warrant the head of a rat or a toad.

She recognised the figures with distended stomachs, long necks and tiny mouths as *praed*, or hungry ghosts, whose greed in their past lives was punished with insatiable hunger. Other offences were harder to match to the depicted tortures. She had no idea why one figure spewed flame from an anus shaped like a mouth, for example, or another had a throwing star embedded in his skull.

Mod stopped in front of a tableau of a naked woman sitting on a stump, being crushed in a screw vice by two Hell guards. The pressure of the vice bored into the woman's body, wounds on her abdomen and lower back painted bright red.

'Punishment for the ones who had an abortion,' Mod whispered.

Anna frowned in alarm. Was this how Mod saw her—a sinner destined to be disembowelled in the afterlife until she'd worked off her karmic debt? Was this what sharing her secret pain had brought her? Anna was appalled at the thought of allowing herself be so badly misunderstood.

'I don't think abortion is a sin,' she said quietly. 'I think it can be the right choice, the compassionate choice.'

'But you're not a Buddhist.' Mod nodded at the statues. 'I had an abortion, same as you. I was married already, but my husband said we couldn't afford to have a baby. He had debts. I was only eight weeks' gone. They say the sin is smaller then.'

'I'm sorry for you, little sister.'

'But it's okay, because I became a surrogate mother.'

'Oh?' Anna struggled to make the connection.

'I had a baby for your sister to make up for my sin,' Mod said.

'I thought you did it for the money.'

'The money helps my family. But if it was only about money, I could find another job. *Tham boon dai.*'

I can make merit. Mod looked so happy as she said this. The idea that she'd put herself through a pregnancy and given up a baby as a form of punishment—to atone for a perceived sin—struck Anna as tragic.

And yet who was she to judge? Anna had also made sacrifices, taking a perverse pride in her ability to endure the painful consequences in secret. When Meg offered her an opportunity to heal some of that pain—to be a real presence in Pearl's life—Anna had rebuffed her. How to account for her own actions, if not as some kind of punishment?

They wandered back to the Angkor-era sanctuary, the ruins surrounded by a neat, clipped lawn. The tops of its six towers were lost, but intricate reliefs on the lintels hinted at its past splendour. Anna recognised scenes from the Ramayana. One frieze depicted the monkey god, Hanuman, giving a ring to Sita, to prove he'd been sent by her husband Rama to help rescue her from the demon king Ravana. The rescue succeeds. But Rama later has doubts about Sita and demands that she walk through fire to prove her fidelity. She survives the test but heartbroken by the task, she allows the earth to swallow her up. Another self-sacrificing woman. Anna had a passing Thai tourist take a photograph of her and Mod standing in the stone doorway beneath the ornate lintel.

Going through her photos later, Anna saw that despite having positioned herself on a lower step, she still ended up towering over Mod. But there was another sort of asymmetry in the image. Something in Mod that was absent in Anna.

It was only on the train to Bangkok that Anna remembered the Thai version of the Ramayana, the Ramakien, had a different ending to the Indian one. Sita doesn't have to prove herself by dying, as Rama declares his faith in her, and they get to live happily ever after.

Anna wondered what it would take for her own story to end differently.

Mod returned to Bangkok after three weeks, this time bringing Pui and Ying with her to join Meg, Nate, Anna and the baby on a day trip to the coastal province of Chonburi. Anna was apologetic, saying Baeng Saen was by no means Thailand's most beautiful beach. But Mod was happy to be visiting any beach at all, touched that Meg had remembered their exchange at the aquarium. She was only sad that she couldn't convince her mother to come along, but *mae* insisted she was too old for such excitement. Secretly, Mod thought her mother was too shy to be around so many foreigners.

She was surprised, then, when they arrived at Baeng Saen, to see very few farangs at all. The path to the beach was lined with carts selling seafood, and a large stretch of the sand was covered by red, white and blue umbrellas. As they got closer, Mod saw that beneath the umbrellas were banks of canvas chairs and tables, mostly occupied by Thai families. Through the forest of umbrella stands, past all the people, she got her first glimpse of the sea.

'We'll eat first,' Anna said, gesturing to a free cluster of tables and chairs.

Mod directed Ying to lay out the plastic mats and towels they'd brought from the minibus, while Nate presented Pui with a bucket and spade. Her boy was soon absorbed in shovelling sand into the bucket and pouring it out again, cheered on by Nate.

Meg placed the baby on a cotton blanket on the sand. While other babies at the beach were swaddled in towels, hats and mittens, Pearl wore only a short-sleeved jumpsuit, her limbs free to wave around in the air. An elderly aunt at a neighbouring table shuffled over to tuck the blanket over the baby's exposed skin, but Pearl kicked it off. The old woman withdrew, muttering about stupid farangs.

When the food arrived, Mod coaxed Pui to temporarily abandon his bucket with the prospect of paddling in the sea if he ate his lunch. The meal was splendid, a spread of grilled squid, curried clams, steamed fish and fried rice with crab—dishes that Mod and her family never had the chance to eat in Sisaket.

When they'd finished, Mod and Ying started to clear the rubbish, but Meg waved them away. Mod would never get used to being around people senior to

her—farangs, no less—who didn't expect her to *kreng jai* them. Anna had explained that Australian people were not comfortable with formality like Thai people were. She said in Australia, people in positions of authority were more likely to be teased than shown respect. While Mod wondered how it was possible to have social order under such circumstances, at the same time, she felt a vicarious thrill at the idea of defying authority.

Pui and Nate had resumed their excavations, leaving Mod to join Anna, Meg and Pearl—all three decked out in wide-brimmed hats—for a walk to the water's edge, leaving Ying dozing in the shade. The heat of the sun was tempered by the cool breeze coming off the sea, and the air smelled of brine and barbecue.

Meg gestured at the view.

'Here it is, Mod,' she said through Anna. 'The sea.'

The three women stood together without speaking. Children floated in the inner tubes of truck tyres while teenage girls lay gossiping in the shallows in their jeans and long-sleeved tops. Jet-ski engines buzzed like bees.

Mod listened to the swish of the waves beneath the whir and chatter, watching as the water stretched up on to the sand, then tumbled back, over and over again. She lifted her eyes to the horizon.

'It looks as though it might go on forever.'

'I know it looks that way, but it doesn't,' Anna said.

Nate appeared hand-in-hand with Pui and asked Mod through Anna if he could take the boy swimming. Mod nodded, watching as they approached the water. Nate kept hold of Pui's hand, swinging him up into the air and down into the water as he jumped the waves, the boy's excited yelps making Mod smile. She wondered if one day, she might send Pui to study in Australia—if Meg and Nate would look after him as she'd looked after their child. But that was mere fantasy. She was the proverbial rabbit, reaching for the moon.

Meg handed Pearl to Anna and took a small drawstring bag from her pocket.

'My sister has a gift for you,' Anna said. 'Something she made herself. Did you know she's a jeweller?'

Mod wouldn't normally dream of opening a gift in front of the person who gave it to her. But Meg looked at her expectantly.

‘Please open it.’

She unwrapped a parcel of yellow tissue paper to reveal a gold pendant shaped like a shell. Set inside it was an exquisite white pearl that glowed in the sunlight as though it was alive. The pendant hung from a gold chain like thin rope. It was beautiful. Too beautiful.

‘Oh, Khun Meg, I cannot—’ Mod began.

‘I normally work in silver,’ Meg said through Anna. ‘But gold is more popular in Thailand, yes?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘I will never be able to thank you enough for what you’ve done for us,’ Meg said, clasping Mod’s hand over the pendant. ‘Please, Mod, it would make me very happy if you would accept this small gift.’

Mod’s cheeks burned with a mix of embarrassment and pleasure. The gift was too grand for her, but it was also perfect. She was the shell. Pearl was the baby. Meg had made it specially for her. It was their story.

She put the pendant back in the bag and pressed it between her palms as she raised her hands in a *wai*. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I’ll never forget you and Pearl.’

‘Do you want to hold her?’

Mod slipped the string of the bag around her wrist so she could take the baby. Her body no longer ached in Pearl’s presence, only quivered like bamboo in the wind. While Anna and Meg walked arm-in-arm along the beach together, Mod held Pearl close and sniffed her cheeks and neck. Ying joined Pui and Nate, who’d left the water to scour the sand for shells.

When the sisters returned, Meg retrieved the baby and headed back to the shelter of the umbrellas. Anna stood by Mod, the two of them staring out over the sea.

‘I’ll be going home,’ Anna said.

‘Home?’

‘To Australia. Meg wants Pearl to grow up knowing all about how she came to be born in Thailand. She wants Pearl to know you are her birth mother, and to be able to contact you in the future. It will be easier if I help.’ Anna glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. ‘But only if that’s okay with you.’

Mod nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Pui came barrelling across the sand towards her, Nate and Ying following with the bucket and towels.

'Look, *mae*, shell. Me give to the baby.'

Mod smiled as he ran off towards the umbrellas.

'We'd better go, too,' she said.

It didn't feel like an ending.