

CENTRAL QUARTET 2

**Mr
Enigmatic**

JENNY PAUSACKER

MR ENIGMATIC

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This book is for Nathaniel Mclvor, the original Mr Enigmatic, and for Nancy Peck, who gave me the time to rethink it.

A lot of people helped with the various stages of this book. The Literature Board provided a Category B Fellowship that saw me through the first draft. Ellie Flutey, Merrilee Moss, Andrea Rogers and Alison Tilson were generous with assistance and information. The Artists-in-Schools Program sent me to Footscray City Secondary College where the students and staff gave me a fresh perspective on my work, especially Michael Hyde and Helen Parr, who answered heaps of questions and read the second draft. Others who gave valuable advice and comments include my editor Maryann Ballantyne, Libby Gleeson, Kerry Greenwood, Helen Pausacker, Nancy Peck and Nadia Wheatley. Thanks to all of you and, last but by no means least, thanks to Meredith Egarr, friend, typist and first editor to twenty of my books — what am I going to do without you, now that I've finally bought that word processor?

Note to my Future Biographer

Hi, Biographer. I bet you're pretty pleased to find this stuff all ready and waiting for you. The early works of Rhett Foley, with dates on them and everything. Most famous writers wouldn't be this considerate, would they?

What's more, you get an extra bonus. These stories aren't just some of my first pieces of serious writing — they're also the record of a fairly crucial year in my life. Right at this moment I'm not entirely sure why it's been so important but I'm hoping to figure that out in the process of reading through the drafts and putting them in order for you.

Okay, down to business. The facts. These are the first drafts of the work I did for my writing folio, written as part of my VCE English course between February 11th and October 15th on a Mac Plus with a hard disk, using Microsoft Word.

I suppose you're wondering how come I knew you'd want me to keep the first drafts, as well as the finished stories. Well, here's the answer. Back when Mick (my stepfather) finished uni, he went travelling overseas and along the way he spent a week in the British Library, reading the manuscripts of all these books by famous writers like D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. He told me he learned heaps about how to write, just by studying the words they'd crossed out and the sentences they'd added in and so on. Then he pointed out that these days all that sort of information is getting lost, because with word processors you don't have any record of the changes you make — not unless you deliberately save the original version before you go on to the rewrites.

That made a lot of sense to me, so at the start of this year I decided to transfer all my first drafts onto the one disk as I went. Now I'm printing out a clean copy to stash in a folder alongside the final version of my writing folio. It ought to provide you with some

great material, Biographer. Or I might use it myself if I decide to write an autobiographical novel — after all, heaps of famous writers start off that way.

Or maybe I'm just doing this to fill in time. There's something pretty crazy about the final year of school. You slave away non-stop for ten months and then suddenly it's all over and you realise you can't remember what you used to do for fun. I'm bored out of my brain but I'm too restless to tackle anything interesting. I've watched all the movies that I taped during the exams, I've arranged my CDs in alphabetical order, I've had five fights with Solo. And now I'm going through my old notes and essays and etcetera, in the hope that I can file it all away and forget it.

By the way, Biographer, you'll notice that I've also typed up some of my English teacher's comments. I started by trying to copy the scribbles in the margins as well but (a) it looked messy and (b) they were mostly about spelling and punctuation anyway. However, I'm transcribing the serious stuff from the end of each draft, word for word, even when I don't agree with it. After all, biographers are meant to be interested in the early influences on a famous writer's career and I suppose your English teacher has to count as an influence. So give Carson a footnote somewhere, will you, mate? It'd be the generous thing to do.

And I know you're writing the biography, not me, but please, go easy on me. I'm only starting out, right? I'm not even 100% certain that I want to be a writer — it might be more interesting to become an actor or a lawyer or start my own business instead. Which makes it even nicer of me to organise all this stuff for you. You'd better be grateful, Biographer, or I'll shove this folder up the back of my drawer in Mick's filing cabinet and lose the key.

Rhett Foley
December 4th

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun February 11th

Date Completed February 11th

Title PICTURE THIS

Purpose Personal piece

Audience I'm not used to this idea of picking an audience before I even start. I just write for anyone who's interested.

Redrafted NO Number of drafts —

Writer's comments I couldn't really relate to that 'guided brain storm' stuff you did in class, taking us back from being seventeen years old to being four. So I don't know whether you'll think this is personal enough for a personal

Teacher's signature:

J. Linnon

Date

20th Feb

piece. But you told us to
choose a topic that was
triggered off by something in
the session and here's what it
triggered off in me.

Picture This

Picture this.

A shopfront of dusty glass.

Behind the glass, a pair of grimy curtains dangling from a plastic string. They're the see-through type that's supposed to stop people from peering in but these particular curtains don't actually meet in the middle. So they're basically there as a sign. A sign that, even though this is a shop window, you're definitely not invited to look inside.

Behind the curtain, two kitchen tables. One tablecloth is covered with a pattern of splotchy poppies. The other is covered with geometric shapes, marked out by faded gold lines. If the material was new, it'd fetch a pretty good price in those back-to-the-fifties shops along Brunswick Street. But these tablecloths must've been washed at least a million times, probably ever since the fifties.

Behind the tables, two groups of middle-aged guys, each with a fistful of cards. They have faces like brownstone statues, they have eyes like dark water. Cigarette smoke hangs from the ceiling above them. They shuffle and deal and play, as silent and settled as if they were home in their own lounge room, not out in a cafe.

Behind the cigarette smoke, some empty tables and way up the back, slightly blurred by distance, a different kind of group. This lot look as if they're out in a cafe, for sure. Two of them sprawl across the table, heads together, whispering. One of them leans back and laughs, like the beautiful people in a Coke commercial. They're posing, though they're obviously not doing it for the benefit of the old guys, who don't even glance in their direction. More likely, they're posing for each other. Or just for themselves.

It's a snapshot, right? A snapshot that no one has ever actually got around to taking. The blur on the left — that's me. The other two blurs are my friends, Anna and Justin. One thing is clear right away: we don't exactly blend into the surroundings. So what are we doing here?

Well, they reckon every picture tells a story. The story behind this snapshot started about a year ago, when Anna and Justin and I met up on the corner that's equidistant from our three houses. (Juss worked it out mathematically. He's a puzzle freak.) We strolled down the road, looking for a place to have coffee, arguing about whether to give up and catch the bus to Brunswick Street. Anna stopped to peer between some grimy see-through curtains and Justin closed in from behind to hustle her along.

Seconds later he realised he'd made a big mistake but by that time Anna had already dodged around him. Justin and I glanced at each other, our eyes saying, 'Oh no!' Before we could make a move, Anna reached for the door handle. We hesitated for a second and followed her across the invisible boundary line.

The old guys looked up in unison as we entered. Then straightaway they looked down at their cards again, blocking us out. I would've been happy to take the hint, say 'Hey, wrong place' and leave. But Anna kept on walking, so Juss and I kept on following.

Finally we arrived at the back table. 'Tell me something,' I hissed, the moment we sat down. 'Why are we doing this?'

'Because Justin made me.'

'I did not!'

'Did so. You tried to push me around, remember, and no one pushes me around. Besides, I thought we were looking for somewhere to have coffee.'

'We were. We are. But why pick some seedy joint that looks like it's a front for the Mafia?'

'The Mafia? Be real, Rhett. These guys are Turks, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'Yeah, and we aren't,' Justin told her. 'What gives us the right to come muscling in on their territory? We're making them pretty uncomfortable, y'know.'

'Who's more uncomfortable, them or you? Just give 'em time — they'll get used to it. Think about my *nonno*, Juss. He got used to all sorts of things, didn't he?'

'Knowing you and your mum, I'll bet he did.'

Then the argument stopped suddenly, because the waiter loomed over us. He was a lot younger than the card-playing mob, though he had the same sort of stone statue face. I was worried that Anna might start on him next, so it was a big relief when she smiled.

In general Anna Parente is a strictly practical person who doesn't waste much time on chitchat and being nice. But once she decides to use it, she has a smile that can get her out of any kind of trouble. (And into trouble too, sometimes.)

'Three coffees, please,' she said, still smiling, and the waiter's stone face softened slightly round the edges.

'We don't do cappuccinos here,' he warned her.

'No,' Anna agreed. 'So we just want three of your coffees.'

We sat there in silence until he plonked some small white cups in front of us. The first sip seemed to push my eyebrows right up through my fringe but I could see the waiter watching us over the top of his magazine, so I took the dare and swallowed another mouthful. Anna raised her cup in a toast and this time the guy actually smiled back.

I felt a bit better now we'd become mates with the waiter. On the other hand the old men were as stony as ever, apart from a few times when they swivelled round to stare at us with stormwater eyes. Basically I was still planning to finish my coffee and get the hell out of there, except that Justin asked me about my new school and I started to tell him and Anna butted in and all of a sudden we were chatting away, just like we'd done, off and on, for thirteen years.

It'd take more than one snapshot to explain about me and Anna and Justin. I'd probably need an entire imaginary photo album, starting with a picture of our first and best cubby house. From the outside, a giant hydrangea bush. From the inside, a magic cave, a safe place, the centre for all our games. As soon as we crawl underneath the leaves, we're convinced we're invisible, although actually the snapshot shows that Justin's parents are keeping a close watch on us. They're worried that we're going to eat dirt or bash the hydrangea flowers to bits but they're doing their best to smile for the camera.

We met at kinder and then we went to primary school together. Here's my favourite photo from that time, taken at the Christmas play. Anna, the world's bossiest Virgin Mary, is organising the shepherds and the wise men into an orderly queue. Justin, playing Joseph as the first househusband, is anxiously nursing Baby Jesus. I'm the second camel from the right.

Of course, once we moved to Central Secondary College, we didn't spend as much time together. Anna hung around with the girls, I hung around with the guys and Justin hung around with the dags who played chess and computer games every lunchtime, even though he isn't really a dag himself.

All the same, I've got one very clear imaginary snapshot of the three of us, standing together in the yard on the last day of Year Ten. There's a large white speech balloon hovering above my head which reads, 'Wish my folks hadn't pressured me into changing over to Kingston Hall. I'm gonna miss you guys.' Justin's balloon says, 'Hey, we'll still see each other at weekends.' Anna's balloon says, 'No, we won't. Not unless we make a regular arrangement.'

So that's what we did. We decided to meet every Saturday morning during term time

and on our first try we landed up at the Turkish joint. I can't say it seemed like a particularly great omen to me but in the end we raved on together for a couple of hours and drank several cups of Hazchem coffee. As we left, Anna waved to the card players and called, 'Thanks a lot. See you next week.' Most of the men pretended they hadn't heard her but one old guy nodded and said, 'Yes. Very good.'

The moment we hit the street, Justin turned on her. 'What was all that about?' he asked. 'You don't seriously think I'm going back there again, do you?'

'I promised,' Anna said. 'They'll miss us if we don't turn up,' and then she looked at her watch and raced off in the opposite direction before we could even start to argue.

On the way home Justin and I had a quick discussion. Juss thought the old guys must've reminded Anna of her *nonno*, who'd died a year or so before. I thought Anna just enjoyed putting people through the hoops. Either way, we decided to tell her it wasn't on.

But fourteen months later we're still drinking Turkish coffee on Saturday morning and I'm still not sure why. Anna Parente's willpower had something to do with it, of course, and then after a while we began to find out more about the people there.

For example, the old guy who'd spoken to Anna turned out to be the owner, Mr Bicer, and the waiter, Sami, was his nephew. Mr Bicer flirts with Anna and tolerates Juss and me. Sami sometimes chucks a sentence or two in our direction, although mostly he just slouches at a back table, reading Turkish newspapers and leaping up to refill the coffee cups before anyone needs to ask. Even the card players have started to nod at us occasionally and say, 'How you going?'

Mind you, I don't feel as though I've acquired a dozen Turkish grandfathers overnight. We'll never really blend into the surroundings. But that's the great thing about this place. There's no need to think about whether the blonde at the next table might be going out with someone from Central — or whether my snooty sister's listening at the door — or whether Justin's parents are checking up on us again. We're in our own private world here. We can say anything we like.

So this is where I admitted that I like my half-brother Tate more than my whole-sister Solange. This is where Justin first said out loud that he thought he was gay. This is where Anna suddenly grabbed our hands and said, 'Listen, you guys are the only ones I can talk to. Everyone else reckons you're a cold-hearted bitch if you're not prepared to hook up with the first guy who smiles at you. Just because I try to use a bit of commonsense, they act like I don't have any feelings.'

Important stuff, right? Important enough to explain why, after months of feeling jumpy every time I set off towards the shopfront, I suddenly discovered that I like the place. I like its grimy curtains. I like the one bit of decoration — this gold-framed picture, so faded that you can't tell whether it's meant to be a choppy sea or a mountain range or an enormous mosque. I even like the cobwebs of cigarette smoke that hang down

from the ceiling.

But that's not quite it, all the same. There's something else about this place, something I haven't managed to put into words. Maybe every picture tells more than one story because, when I took a second look at my imaginary snapshot of the shopfront, I finally started to understand.

The fact is, I was right when I thought the card players didn't behave as if they were out in a cafe but I was wrong when I thought they behaved as if they were in their own lounge room. This isn't their home — it's their club. In other words, their own personal giant hydrangea bush.

And that's the thing I like most about it. When we walked through the door, we crossed over a boundary line. In one way, we shouldn't be here. In another way, that's exactly what makes it work. It's a magic cave, a safe place. A place where no one's watching you. A place where you can pretend you're invisible.

A place which proves that growing up needn't be all bad, because grown-ups can have cubby houses too.

Carson's Notes

An excellent first piece — although of course it's not actually the first piece of your writing that I've read. I've had the chance to form my own opinions about your approach and technique from your stories in the school magazine over the past couple of years. You're good, I can't deny that. But ...

But technique isn't everything and I *would* like to ask a couple of questions about your choice of subject matter. Why did you decide to write about this particular situation, Rhett? Yes, I know you've given several different explanations for being attracted to the shopfront but at the same time you seem to have sidestepped some fairly vital issues — almost as if you're using technique to disguise your feelings, rather than express them.

For example, although you describe Justin and Anna very vividly, you never really explain why the friendship is so important to you. I couldn't help noting that Anna's female and Justin's gay. Is this why it suits you to keep them hidden away in 'a place where no one's watching you', a place that also happens to be on the margins of this society?

These are just suggestions — feel free to ignore them if they don't seem useful. The basic point I'm trying to make here is a general one. Clearly you've already thought a lot about *how to say things*. Maybe you could use this year to think about *what you really want to say*.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun February 23rd

Date Completed not completed

Title Don't know

Purpose Description

Audience Not sure

Redrafted

Number of drafts —

Writer's comments WARNING: this isn't

even a proper draft, more like
the first draft of a first draft.

But you said we could show you
our work-in-progress if we were
having problems. And I'm having
problems, for sure.

Teacher's signature:

J. Larson

Date

27th Feb

Greg Marshall

My dad

Long lanky body. Smooth brown face, deep creases between the eyebrows and on either side of the mouth. This might give you the impression that he thinks a lot and laughs a lot but you'd be wrong. My dad isn't particularly keen on thinking. He prefers making piles of money and working on his house, his garden, his swimming pool and the rest of his gadgets and status symbols. His sense of humour's pretty basic too — like, primary school practical jokes. So I reckon the deep creases must be genetic. My grandparents both have really lived-in faces as well and they've never done anything riskier than go to the Gold Coast for the winter.

Meredith Marshall

My mum

Long black hair that hangs right down to her waist when she loses the combs that are supposed to keep it in place. Always staring with dreamy concentration at the middle distance — or waving her long thin hands around to help explain her latest idea — or clutching at her forehead while she tries to remember where she left her briefcase. Looks like an artist, actually works as an organiser for the teacher's union. Always the centre of attention, although she never seems to notice it or care about it.

Mick O'Connell

My stepfather

Orange hair that sticks up in a cockatoo crest. Eyes like a galah that's spotted an excellent joke but doesn't intend to share it. Mick works for an advertising agency. He's responsible for some of the all-time great TV commercials, like the dolphin-friendly tuna ad and the one with the rapping cashew nuts, but he keeps saying that he's going to chuck it in and write poetry instead. Then he says, 'Listen to me, will you? That must be the corniest idea I ever had. An even bigger cliché than Deera the Happy Dolphin.'

Dad and Mum and Mick. The three adults who've had the most influence on my life so far. I was seven when Mum and Dad told me they were splitting up and it really threw me. I'd hidden my teddy bear at the back of my cupboard a few years before but that night I had a dream where we were all trying to push Dad into a river and I woke up in the dark and went scuttling through the dangerous shadows to find Tedder and bring him back to bed with me. It seemed like he was the only one I could trust.

Then a few weeks later Mum cornered Solange and me and sat us down for a talk. She explained how she'd known Mick ever since she was eighteen, when they were both studying English at university. The two of them fell in love at first sight but straight after their final exams they had some major argument and Mick went storming off to America. And Mum went to this party and met Dad and married him three weeks later.

Seven years go by in a flash and suddenly Mick rocks up to the school where Mum's teaching. (Something to do with filming a margarine commercial, I think.) One look at each other and zap! they realise they're still madly in love. Except that now there's another guy and two young kids in the picture as well, which makes everything a whole lot more complicated and painful.

Well, that was Mum's version, at any rate. You can't always trust other people's stories but the more I thought about it, the better it seemed to fit. Dad making snap decisions. Mum going with the flow. Mick storming out and storming back in again. Believe me, I've seen them do the same sort of thing a hundred times since then.

So from that point on I didn't feel quite as bad. The way I saw it, if Mum and Mick hadn't had the Big Argument, then Mick might've been my dad, instead of Dad. It was a little kid's fantasy, for sure, but it was a fantasy that meant I could start liking Mick without feeling as though I was being a traitor to Dad. And that was pretty important to me at the time.

Stepfathers are supposed to be a hassle but on the whole I find Mick easier to deal with than Dad. For one thing, I see him on a day-to-day basis, not just at weekends. For another thing, Mick and I have a lot in common, like books and movies and a seriously

twisted sense of humour. Whereas Dad and I

Listen, Carson, this is dead fucking hopeless. I can't write the sort of *True Confessions* garbage you seem to want. It's boring. It's stupid. I'm not getting a thing out of it.

Let's face it, we obviously have fairly different ideas about the best way to write. Well, I've tried it your way and I can't hack it. Not because it was hard to do — hey, I could rave on like this forever but what's the point? I'm not interested in picking deep, serious, personally meaningful subjects for my stories. I happen to believe that a good writer should be able to take some trivial incident and make it important by the way they write about it. In other words, I think technique is a lot more crucial than you'd like to make out.

You claim you're not sure how I feel about Anna and Justin but frankly, I reckon you ought to be able to work it out from what I said in the story. It's all there, Carson. Why should I have to analyse everything in detail as well? As far as I'm concerned, that'd be the quickest way to turn the shopfront story into something as boringly obvious as this piece of bullshit about Mum and Dad and Mick.

If you want to know how I feel right now, I feel totally confused.

Carson's Notes

Relax, Rhett. I'm not trying to pressure you into writing a particular kind of story. True, I tend to encourage students to draw on their own experience, especially strong emotional experiences. But there aren't any hard and fast rules where writing's concerned. You don't need to take that bit of advice personally if it doesn't suit you.

So don't waste your time trying to prove that you write better about 'trivial incidents' than about personal traumas. The real difference between your first two stories is something else again, something that can be summed up by a bit of advice from Anton Chekov: 'Don't tell, show.' In your first piece you were trying to *show* us the shopfront and recreate the impression it made on you. In your second piece you're simply *telling* us about various members of your family — and I'm willing to bet that this is why you started to feel bored halfway through.

However, 'feel' is the operative word here, isn't it? Maybe you don't want to hear this but — will I? won't I? oh, why not? At the risk of putting you on the defensive again, I have to ask whether the reason you went into a flat spin was because I talked about the feelings in your story. Sorry, Rhett, I can't back down on this one. If you're planning to become a writer, you'll have to deal with feelings. A story about drinking Turkish coffee contains just as many emotions as a

story about divorce and it's just as important in both cases to get the emotions right.

There, I've had my say and I promise to lay off in future. Just remember, we wouldn't have launched straight into debating such major issues if I hadn't been impressed by your writing in the first place.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun March 1st

Date Completed March 2nd

Title PICTURES IN MY MIND

Purpose To show, not tell.

Audience People who don't expect
the writer to do all the work
for them.

Redrafted

Number of drafts —

Writer's comments You told me I could
feel free to use some of your
suggestions and ignore others, so
I've decided to ignore your
stuff about feelings, because I
still don't find it all that useful.
On the other hand, I liked what

Teacher's signature:

Hanson

Date

9th Mar

you said about showing, not telling, and I wanted to try it out for myself. This started as a rewrite of the description of my folks, except that I approached it from a different angle and you couldn't exactly call it a description anymore. I know it's not what we're supposed to be writing at present but could you have a look at it anyway and tell me whether Anton Chekov would approve?

PS I'm not doing this to be a suck- believe me, I haven't handed in extra work for any of my other subjects. It's just that I don't mind working a bit harder on the writing folio, because it's good practice for when I become a writer. (Though I'll be writing novels then, not this short story stuff.)

Pictures in my Mind

I'm on the phone. Pictures in my mind. (A shopfront of dusty glass, French windows opening onto a patio. Where I've been, where I'm going next.) Nicole's voice in my ear.

'Okay, what do you think?' she asks.

'Think?' I say. 'Me? Think?'

'Oh, you're so cool,' she tells me, half sarcastic, half for real. 'Mr Enigmatic.'

'Style — you've got it,' I say and she laughs.

I don't know why she's laughing. That's Mick's latest slogan, for the Style Jeans advertising campaign. He tries his ideas out on us first and they tend to get stuck in my mind. Still, the ad hasn't even been released yet, so it shouldn't mean anything to Nicole. But it does. Mick's stuff is like that.

Mum materialises beside me. She holds a magazine five centimetres away from my nose. I pull back and say, 'Gotta go, Nic. Due at my dad's place.'

'But you haven't told me whether you want to come to Katy's party.'

So that's what she was talking about. 'Listen, Nic, I'll ring you tomorrow, okay? See ya.'

I put down the receiver and squint at the cover of the magazine.

'Melbourne University Magazine 1973. Huh?'

'It's for Jeanette,' Mum explains. 'There's five photos of me in it, taken by one of my photographer friends. Apparently they made a big impression on Jeanette at the time — her older brother was at uni then and he brought the magazine home. She hadn't realised that they were photos of me until we were talking on the phone last week.'

‘Photos? Like pin-ups?’

Mum flicks the magazine open. A ghost girl stares up from a shadow pattern of leaves. Swirling hair, hollow cheeks, wistful eyes. I could fall for her on the spot, if I hadn’t been warned.

‘All *right*,’ Mick breathes from behind me. ‘Style — you’ve got it.’

She has, too. She still has.

‘But it’s seventies style,’ I point out. ‘Hippy style.’

‘Style is eternal, Rhett. Real style never dates.’

‘Oh yeah? Those Style jeans fell to pieces after the third wash.’

Mick swats me on the backside. I flick the magazine shut and head for the door.

‘Hang on. Where’s Solo? Hiding again?’

Mum clutches her forehead. ‘Sorry, Rhett. I could’ve sworn she was ready. I’ll go and check.’

Solo is my sister. Mum wanted to call us Rhett and Scarlett, out of *Gone With the Wind*, but Dad convinced her that you can’t really name your kids after two of the most famous lovers in literature. So Mum switched from Scarlett to Solange, by skipping to the next page in *The Australian Book of Babies’ Names*. I call her Solo because she’s always going off to sulk in her room.

Mum comes back shepherding Solo. We collect our bikes and cycle off. Half a kilometre and two major intersections without exchanging a single word. If Solo keeps this up, she’ll have ingrown scowl-lines before she turns eighteen.

We stop at a shiny white picket fence. Instantly Jeanette flings the gate open. She’s wearing a brand new pink tracksuit and white leather gym shoes without a single scuff mark. Her lipstick matches the tracksuit.

‘Rhett! Solange!’ she gasps. ‘You’re here! I just rang Meredith — I was getting worried — but she told me you were on your way. She says you’ve got a surprise for me, Rhett.’

I frown and her face crumples. Then I remember the magazine and hand it over. We walk up the front path, with Jeanette telling us at the top of her voice how beautiful Meredith (Mum) is and how she hasn’t changed a bit.

Dad’s on the patio with Tate, repainting the set of cast iron chairs. He looks up in surprise but that doesn’t mean anything. He always seems surprised to see us, every time.

Seconds later Tate spots us as well. He drops his paintbrush, scrambles down the steps and flies into my arms. (It’s the literal truth. A three-year-old kid couldn’t possibly jump that high.) I hoist him onto my shoulder and whirl him round the patio, like Falcor the Luck Dragon in *The Neverending Story*, carrying Atreyu on his back.

By the time I put him down, Jeanette and Solo have vanished. Dad has wiped Tate’s paintbrush clean and now he’s busy turning over all the bits of gravel with paint

splashes on them.

'Well, Rhett,' he says. 'How are things? I've been reading in the papers about all this pressure on VCE students and I wondered how you were coping. Just remember, I've got a lot of contacts. I could find you the right tutors, no expense spared. You only have to ask.'

'Thanks, Dad. But I'm doing okay.'

'Hmm, you're probably right. Make it on your own, without any favours from anyone. That's how I got where I am.'

'Yeah, Dad.'

Tate grabs a handful of my t-shirt and swings on it. 'Wolves,' he announces.

'All right, Tate, mate. Let's go and look for wolves in the garden. I bet heaps more of them have turned up since last week.'

We mountaineer down the side of the patio. Tate tucks his hand into mine and points at the grevillea bushes. To start with, we hide together from invisible wolves. Next I become the wolf, hunting Tate in circles around the gum trees.

Then Dad finishes his painting and comes to take over the wolf role. He does a great job, down on his hands and knees, growling while he chases us, howling when we escape. I get caught because I'm laughing so hard but Tate rescues me by stabbing the wolf with a long stick.

Dad rolls over and checks his watch. 'Snack time,' he says and Tate and I race each other to the kitchen.

I get there first and fling the door open. For a moment I think that some neighbourhood kid has dropped in for a visit. But it's Solo, looking happy. I recognise her because her face turns sulky again as soon as she sees me.

'Solange and I have been making pizza together,' Jeanette gushes. 'You've got a very creative sister, Rhett.'

She's obviously about to describe the entire process, from recipe book to oven. Except that she glances in Solo's direction, notices the scowl and stops herself straight away. Amazing, I think. Jeanette's capable of being tactful. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself.

'Time to get the plates out,' she says. 'Could you help me, Tate?'

Tate knows exactly where the plates are kept. He carries them over to us, one by one. When he drops Solo's plate, he looks shocked at himself but Jeanette laughs.

'Did you see it bounce?' she asks. Tate's eyes widen and he starts to laugh too, like a bird in the treetops.

We sit at the kitchen table and eat designer pizza — artichoke petals on slabs of fetta cheese, with twists of red capsicum and carefully placed black olives. When I pick up my slice, it falls apart. Solo glares at me.

While I scrape the pizza topping together, Dad tells us about his new company car

and Jeanette tells us how she's planning to redecorate the bedrooms. I try to sound interested but it isn't easy. I can't get that enthused about matching fabrics and cars that cost as much as a two-bedroom flat.

Style — you've got it or you haven't.

Luckily Tate soon loses interest in the pizza and we start to play hide and seek with the tablecloth. I used to say I couldn't stand little kids — probably the result of growing up around Solo. But by now Tate's basically my only reason for being here. I hardly ever think about Dad and Jeanette between visits and I never talk about them, even with Solo.

So it's a relief when Tate hauls me off to the lounge room. He sits up straight on a leather footstool and I read him half a dozen stories. Then it's time to go home.

At the last minute Jeanette realises she's left *Melbourne University Magazine 1973* on the kitchen table. Dad and Solo and I stand around on the footpath with nothing to say, so I encourage Tate to climb me again. He's sitting on my shoulders and pulling my nose when tyres screech and a voice says, 'Rhett?'

I tip Tate over my head, catch him and lower him to the ground. Then I look up.

A guy's staring at me across the handlebars of his bike. He could've ridden out of a poster for some American teenflick but in actual fact he's Terry Sampson, my best mate from school.

(He's also the last person I would've wanted to meet right now. You know those guys who seem to have it all? Like, top of the class, top at sport, popular with the girls and popular with the guys as well. Good. In that case, you know Terry.)

'Oh, hi,' I say. 'Dunno whether you've met my dad and my half-brother Tate. Dad, this is Terry — he goes to Kingston Hall too.'

'G'day, Mr Foley,' says Terry, turning on the charm. Then he turns it off and adds, 'Awesome, Rhett. I didn't recognise you with a little kid on your head. Nearly rode right past you.'

'Hey, everyone's wearing kids for hats these days. You going to be at Manny's place tomorrow? I'll catch up with you then.'

That's a clear signal but Terry doesn't get the message. He's still standing there when Jeanette comes back. Naturally, she's rapt.

'Terry, it's so nice to meet you. We don't often have a chance to talk to Rhett's friends. Tell me, how do you like Kingston Hall? Rhett seems to be doing well there. We're all very proud of him.'

Terry switches on the charm again. Any minute now Jeanette will start telling him how she met Dad at a singles party and fell in love with his two wonderful children. If that's not freaky enough, when I look around, I see someone watching us from the far side of the road.

I see Anna Parente, right here in this street.

Pictures in my mind. Anna with a cup of Turkish coffee. Terry clowning in the school yard. Dad and Jeanette behind their white picket fence.

Suddenly they're all together. They're all talking to each other.

Dad and Anna catch up on the ten years since they last met. Terry and Jeanette continue to trade information about me. Solo sits on the ground with Tate, smirking to herself. Then, just as I'm starting to get used to it, they all change places.

Now Dad and Jeanette are telling me in stereo what lovely friends I have. Tate is trying to climb me but I push him away. Terry edges towards Anna and introduces himself. He cracks some kind of joke and she smiles.

Anna's smile. It softens stone. It makes music. It brightens grey days. It can get her out of any kind of trouble. And into trouble too, sometimes.

For a moment I stare at her, forgetting my own troubles. But the kaleidoscope's already turning again. Jeanette catches Tate eating a chocolate-coloured lump of dirt and whisks him inside, with Dad following. Anna and Terry cycle off together with a backwards wave. I'm left there alone, apart from Solo.

She looks at me and sniffs. I can tell she knows how badly I wanted to keep all those people separate. Now Anna and Terry have seen me with Tate and they know what Dad and Jeanette are like. Dad and Jeanette have met Terry and they know I'm still friends with Anna. Anna knows about Terry and Terry knows about Anna, which means that within twenty-four hours Nicole will probably know about Anna as well. And it's going to be a whole lot harder to play Mr Enigmatic in future.

Style — I think I've lost it. Let's hope this is only temporary.

Carson's Notes

Yes, this one works — and in a completely different style from your first story. After reading *Picture This*, I would never have believed that you could write a piece with almost no adverbs and adjectives!

Don't worry too much about the categories I've suggested in class. They're just guidelines, not direct orders. The main point of the writing folio is for you to prepare a number of pieces written for different purposes and different audiences. You can test out as wide a range of ideas as you like, before you go on to select the five drafts that you want to develop to a finished state.

Oh, and one other thing: your mother used to be Meredith Taylor before she married, didn't she? I thought I recognised her from that first description and then your mention of *Melbourne University Magazine* settled it pretty conclusively. She probably won't remember me — I was in the year behind her, so I used to see her around uni, with all the other stars from the English department. But say hi to her from me, anyway.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun March 25th

Date Completed March 26th

Title PRETTY AS A PICTURE

Purpose I decided to write a send up of
teenage romances (a) to make people

Audience Kids like my sister, who read
Teen Dream books instead of facing
up to the real world.

laugh and (b) to make them think about
the seriously twisted messages in books
like this.

Redrafted

Number of drafts

Writer's comments

Okay, Carson, I give in. This time.
I want to know what you really
think, even if it means I get
another lecture about feelings. I
can handle that better than the
polite meaningless garbage you

Teacher's signature:

Carson

Date

31st Mar.

wrote on my last story. So no
holds barred from now on,
right?

Pretty as a Picture

A nearby Walkman throbbed to the haunting sound of 'Love Will Find You (Wherever You Are)' and right on cue Nicole Tanner appeared, framed in the doorway of the old mansion that housed Kingston Hall private school. Rhett Foley's pulse quickened. Heads turned to watch her in admiration but she sped straight towards him, like an arrow released from the bow.

The breeze ruffled her neat cap of blonde hair, reminding Rhett of the way she had looked during their passionate embrace the night before. Something stirred deep within him. Her cornflower blue eyes met his and her lips parted.

'I've been looking for you,' she said. 'Terry just broke the news about Anna.'

Oh hell, thought Rhett. I've got the wrong script. We're not talking love's young dream here. We're talking jealousy, misunderstanding, finding out about the other woman. Better change course, and fast.

Instantly his heart sank and an expression of despair twisted his handsome features. How could I have been such a fool? he thought. Why didn't I mention Anna to Nicole before? Now she'll never believe that Anna and I are just friends. Not in a million years.

'Come on,' Nicole ordered, eyeing him imperiously. 'Tell me all about her.'

Rhett hesitated and bit his lip. 'Well, she wouldn't exactly stand out in a crowd. She's little and pale and she mainly gets around in blue windcheaters and faded jeans. But she's got a will of iron, just the same. She's been bossing me about ever since we were in kindergarten.'

He was deliberately trying to make Anna sound as unromantic as possible. So when

Nicole frowned, he almost groaned out loud in dismay.

‘That’s funny,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Jan saw Terry and Anna in the city on Sunday and she reckoned Anna looked stunning. Still, maybe that’s because she’s in love. I mean, Terry seems to have changed overnight too — like, one minute he’s a supercool charmer, then next minute he’s seriously blissed out and wants the whole world to know. It’s great when a guy’s prepared to show his feelings like that. Right, Rhett?’

Rhett clenched his jaw. So that was it. Anna and Terry. Two of his best mates. In love. And they hadn’t even told him.

Nicole was still raving on, her eyes all soft and dreamy. Suddenly she stopped in mid-sentence to say, ‘Hang on, they’re your friends, not mine. How do *you* feel about it?’

‘Feel?’ Rhett echoed cynically. ‘That’s Terry and Anna’s territory, isn’t it?’

Nicole’s blue eyes narrowed. Snatching his writing folio from his backpack, she produced a black texta and scrawled MR ENIGMATIC across the cover. ‘See ya later,’ she said, thrusting the folder at him with a mischievous grin. ‘Perhaps you’ll be more communicative then.’

Rhett watched her go, his emotions in turmoil. Ten minutes ago I was living in a rational universe, he thought. Now I seem to have wandered onto the set of a B-grade movie. Anna and Terry in love — that was bad enough. But when he considered the timing, it became pretty clear that they must’ve fallen in love at first sight, which was totally impossible.

And Nicole was getting a real buzz, out of the whole thing, even though it had nothing to do with her. It’s a conspiracy, he decided. Love terrorists, that’s what they are.

All afternoon Rhett brooded about Anna and Terry, until finally he decided he had to check the facts for himself. Twenty minutes later he was knocking at the Parentes’ front door.

Mrs Parente was a widow and bitter about it but she was the funniest bitter person Rhett had ever met. She whisked him into the lounge room, talking at top speed.

‘You want Anna? She’s not here. It’s wonderful to be young, out all the time. When you’re old, you’re not even invited to your own sisters’ parties because they’re frightened that you might steal their friends’ men — or their men, *no non lo farei mai.*’ She swung around to face a silver-framed photograph on top of the china cabinet. ‘What do you think, Giorgio? Is that fair?’

Rhett was used to Mrs Parente’s habit of talking to her husband’s photo. ‘Anna’s out with Terry, right?’ he said firmly. ‘How’s it going, Mrs P? Does she seem, um, different?’

Mrs Parente’s dark eyes widened dramatically. She leaned forward and whispered, ‘Yesterday she borrowed my silk shirt. You should’ve seen her! Pretty as a picture.’

An unexpected image formed in Rhett’s mind. Anna, a blaze of brightly coloured silk,

waltzing with Terry down a long hall of mirrors. Cinderella, laughing in the arms of her Prince Charming. He caught his breath and squeezed his eyes shut to wipe the image away.

‘But that’s just on the outside,’ Mrs Parente was saying. ‘Inside, she’s the same Anna. Too smart to make a fool of herself.’

His eyes opened and he let out a sigh of relief. Yes, he thought, Anna’s no fool. For a moment he and Mrs Parente gazed at each other in mutual understanding. Then she flapped her hands at him.

‘Go,’ she said. ‘Go, go, go. Tell him, Giorgio. Tell him I’ve got work to do.’

Outside on the footpath Rhett sighed again and decided to drop in on the Theostratis brothers before he headed home. He found Con relaxing in the backyard after work, a tinnie beside his chair, his feet propped on the handle of the Hills hoist.

‘Yo, Rhett,’ he yelled enthusiastically and after a few minutes Manny came out from the bungalow to join them, blinking at the sunlight. He was wearing an old grey tracksuit that looked as though he’d slept in it; Con wore jeans and a heavy metal t-shirt.

You couldn’t get much further away from romance than the Theostratises’ backyard, Rhett thought with a grin. So he felt safe enough to say, ‘Seen Terry lately? They tell me he’s going with Anna Parente.’

The brothers nodded. Up until Manny left Central Secondary College three years ago, he’d been in the same form as Anna. Con was a year older but he knew a lot about Anna Parente, just the same.

‘One of Terry’s better ideas,’ he said to Rhett’s surprise. ‘The guy needs a chick who’ll keep him in line. And Anna can do it, no worries.’

‘Steady on,’ Manny protested. ‘You make it sound like an arranged marriage or something. They’re in love, for Christ’s sake. Couldn’t be more obvious.’

‘What do you mean?’ Rhett asked cautiously. ‘Are you saying that Terry’s changed?’

Con took another swig at his beer. ‘Everything changes,’ he stated flatly.

‘But not very fast,’ Manny added with his kind smile. ‘I reckon you’ll still recognise Terry all right.’

Rhett settled back in a patch of sunshine, feeling reassured. He’d done his research and now he knew exactly what he wanted to say to Nicole.

‘The thing is, everyone places too much emphasis on love. It’s like nothing else really matters. Okay, Terry’s going with Anna but what’s so special about that? Guys pair off with girls every day of the week — not to mention guys pairing off with other guys and girls pairing off with girls. That’s nice for the people concerned but it’s not the only thing going on in the world. Look at Mrs Parente, bringing up a kid on her own. Look at Con Theostratis, slaving away as a packer. Look at Manny, trying to cope with being

unemployed for three years. Are all of them supposed to think that their lives are totally meaningless, just because they don't happen to be in love? Seriously, I don't reckon that Anna and Terry have changed as much as you'd like to believe. There's no reason to make such a big deal out of it.'

He swivelled his chair around, expecting Nicole to reply, but instead his bedroom walls echoed with a thunderous silence. Suddenly she slammed her folder shut and turned on him, blue eyes blazing.

'All right, then,' she snapped. '*Don't* make a big deal out of it.'

Rhett stared at her in genuine astonishment. 'What's the matter now? I thought you wanted me to talk about Anna and Terry.'

'Yeah, but not for the entire night, okay?'

He studied Nicole for a moment, attempting to make sense out of her strange reaction. Then, like a magician who has finally hit on the right magic spell, he swept aside the tower of textbooks between them and drew her into his arms.

According to the love terrorists, he should've been overwhelmed by a surge of passion. Bells should've rung. Fireworks should've exploded. His lips should've started to melt and he should've felt a sense of mystical union with Nicole that shut out everyone else on the planet. But he didn't.

When he pulled back, he saw that Nicole's eyes were wide open. 'Listen, Rhett, would you say that your mum and Mick were still in love?' she asked, watching him intently.

'Hey, full voltage.' He did a double-take and added, 'Why do you want to know?'

She sighed. 'Oh, I don't know. I suppose I thought that if your folks were having hassles it might explain some of your weird attitudes. But I'm probably just in a bad mood. Maybe I'd better go home.'

Rhett followed her down the corridor, scowling irritably, as though Nicole had somehow managed to transfer her bad mood to him. Right at that moment he didn't want to be alone with her for another second, so it was a relief when his mother appeared in the doorway of the lounge room and started chatting with them. Mick came over to ask her a question, tucking his arms around her from behind. She settled back against his shoulder, her oval face trusting and serene, and he gazed down at her with eager tenderness.

There, Rhett thought triumphantly. That'll show Nicole how wrong she was about them. And it ought to make her think twice before she starts talking like a major expert on love again.

After that, he felt he was entitled to take a break from the love terrorists. Luckily Nicole and Terry weren't in the same classes as he was and he never saw Anna during the week anyway. When Saturday morning came around, he called in to collect Justin for

reinforcement, before going on to the shopfront.

Juss stared at him in surprise. 'What are you doing here?' he asked, running one hand across his brushed-back blond hair.

'Just being friendly, mate. Want me to go away again?'

'Like they say, enter at your own risk. You can have a nice chat with Jill and Tom while I finish getting ready.'

Both the Petrie parents had brushed-back blond hair as well, though theirs was slightly more faded. Amazing how different the same hairstyle can look, Rhett thought with a private grin. It all depends on whether you combine it with a drip-dry shirt or a fluffy jumper or a U-Real t-shirt.

'Hello, stranger,' Mrs Petrie sang out, whisking off her apron. 'I spotted you in the street the other day with a very attractive girl but you were far too preoccupied to notice a middle-aged housewife waving at you. She must be someone special, hmm, Rhett?'

'Ask her if she's got a friend for Justin,' Mr Petrie chipped in heartily. 'You could make up a foursome and go dancing, just like we used to do when we were young.'

Rhett squirmed with embarrassment, remembering why he'd stopped dropping in at the Petries' house. The hints continued relentlessly until it was time to leave.

'Oh, mate,' he breathed, the minute they hit the street. 'It's going to be pretty rough for you when you finally break it to them that you're gay.'

Justin shrugged. 'Actually, I've told them several times already but they don't believe me. I suppose the next step is to bring home a very attractive boy — except I'll have to find one first.'

He shrugged again, looking resigned but a bit sad. To distract him, Rhett passed on the gossip about Anna, although Juss wasn't as interested as he'd expected. Probably because he doesn't know Terry, Rhett decided. Terry liked hanging out with Con and Manny — he kept raving on about how totally streetwise they were. But Juss didn't exactly seem to fit into that category, so Rhett had never got around to introducing them.

The shopfront was as grubby and smoky and reassuring as ever. While Justin ordered the first round of Turkish coffee, Rhett stared out the dusty window, brooding about true love. For Mrs Parente, love had meant a lifetime of loss. The Petries were desperately trying to recapture their youth by making their son relive it for them. His mum and Mick — well, they'd got there in the end but only after a whole lot of drama and trauma. Basically, there's no future in love, Rhett thought for the hundredth time. There's no need to make such a big deal out of it.

Suddenly he spotted Anna and Terry on the far side of the road. After puzzling and agonising about them for so long, he was relieved to discover that they looked exactly the same as usual. Anna, small and pale and capable. Terry with his warm confident eyes and his wide vulnerable mouth, radiating energy even when he was standing still.

As he studied them, they turned to face each other. For the space of ten heartbeats

they paused there, intent and focused. Then they both stepped forwards, like dancers moving with perfect grace and timing. Their arms reached out, like a conductor gathering the orchestra to a crescendo. They clung together in a timeless embrace, like a sculpture that captures a single moment and preserves it forever. Rhett watched unselfconsciously while they kissed, enjoying their enjoyment of each other.

‘So I was wrong, after all. It’s true love, just like everybody said. I’ve been keeping an eye on them for a few weeks now and it checks out pretty convincingly. When they’re hanging around with other people, they seem like the same old Anna and Terry. But when they’re together the magic takes over, every time. I’m not sure how it works and I’m not sure whether I’d want it for myself. Still, I know it exists. I’ve finally had to accept that it’s a real possibility.’

Rhett glanced sidelong at Nicole. He felt as though he’d just made a major concession and he wanted to test her reaction. But her eyes were fixed on the open folders spread across his desk and her hand was masking her face.

‘What are you thinking about?’ he asked, reaching out to touch her silky blonde hair.

She swung around and her blue eyes looked directly into his. ‘About us,’ she said straightaway. ‘About how different we are. I used to like the way you keep analysing everything but lately it’s been getting to me. I can’t handle it any longer, Rhett. I wish I could explain more clearly but then again, I’m not sure whether you really want to know. I suspect that’s been our basic problem all along.’

While he gazed at her in shock, she started to pack the folders into her bag. ‘Then this is it?’ he said, trying to sound like Humphrey Bogart or Mel Gibson or anyone with a better grasp on the situation than he had.

Nicole paused in the doorway, as neat and blonde and self-possessed as she’d always been. ‘I suppose so,’ she said eventually and then she was gone.

Rhett clenched his fist and thumped it hard against the wall. ‘Oh wow,’ he said out loud. ‘I don’t believe this. Did I ever really know her?’

Automatically he turned back towards his desk but it was impossible to go on studying in his present mood. Instead he found himself prowling restlessly through the empty house, examining the photos on his mum’s chest of drawers, flicking through a pile of *Teen Dreams* in his sister’s bedroom.

So this is what you get, he thought ironically, staring down at the smiling models on the glossy covers. You end up on your own, with nothing but a stack of old love stories for company. Maybe I should check out a few of them, to help me understand what Nicole wanted from me.

He opened a book at random and read.

The orchestra throbbed to the haunting sound of ‘The Lovers’ Waltz’ and right on cue Tacia Cavendish appeared, framed in the doorway of the old mansion. Max Mellor’s

pulse quickened ...

Carson's Notes

I suspect you think you're doing something pretty outrageous by picking a hero who's cynical about love, but as a matter of fact the cynical hero is one of the oldest cliches in romantic fiction. (Your namesake Rhet Butler, for example.) And like most cynical heroes, your hero turns out to have been secretly fascinated by true love all along. That isn't parody, Rhet — it's the classic ending for any romance.

The truth is, you're imitating the *Teen Dream* books far more than you're parodying them. You're an ace mimic, so you've picked up the style pretty quickly — in fact, I'd be tempted to say that it's run away with you. Which leads me to ask a few basic questions about your motivation.

Such as: what drew you towards the *Teen Dreams* in the first place? Are you having a bob each way — writing about love but protecting yourself at the same time by pretending that it's all a big send up? If so, my advice is to drop the defences and go for it. As far as I'm concerned, the best parts of this story are when you forget about your so-called purpose and just *write* — about Mrs Parente or Con and Manny or Justin's parents or whatever.

Having said all of this, I also want to tell you not to worry too much about it. We're only nine weeks into first term and you've already written two pieces which are fine by any standards, so you can afford to sit back and let your next idea develop at its own pace. Maybe you could try something completely new next time, rather than continuing to rework the same material in different ways.

P.S. (two hours later)

Ouch! For once I wish I wrote these comments in pencil, so I could go back and rub out that last sentence. I just remembered your throwaway line about how you want to write novels, not short stories, and suddenly everything clicked into place. This business of sticking with the same characters and situations — it's deliberate, isn't it? You're not going to settle for the standard writing folio, right? You've set yourself an extra task, writing interconnected pieces that fit together like the chapters of a novel — yes?

Let's have a talk about it soon and in the meantime, congratulations on an unusual idea. You've hit on a fantastic way to practise novel-writing, especially since it can be easy to get overwhelmed by the thought of such a long-term project. (That's right, you guessed it — I want to write a novel when I grow up too.)

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun April sometime

Date Completed Can't remember

Title _____

Purpose _____

Audience _____

them but I thought you might like to see how my mind was working at the time.

Redrafted _____ Number of drafts _____

Writer's comments G'day, Biographer. It's me again. Just wanted to explain that there isn't a proper signed-by-Carson cover page for the next section, because Carson never actually saw this stuff. They're just some ideas that I fooled around with for a bit. As it turned out, I didn't go ahead with any of

Teacher's signature: Rhett Foley
Famous writer's

Date December 4th

So what am I going to write about next? Fucked if I know. It's been easy so far. Even the *Teen Dream* story poured out of me in one long burst, straight after I'd flicked through a dozen of Solo's trashy romances. But now I'm stuck, stuck, stuck.

If I'm trying to create this total picture of a year in my life, I suppose I ought to fill in the background by giving some sort of a description of school. Or — hold on — maybe I could compare the school I used to go to with the school I go to now. Central Secondary College versus Kingston Hall. That might be interesting.

Start with the handheld video approach. Jerky images. Asphalt. Smooth lawns. Graffiti on a wall, tags and spraypaint skulls. A cheerful mural of multicultural children playing together. Two dying eucalypts protected by iron railings. Green leaves of English trees rustling in the sunshine. High wire mesh like the fence around a prison compound. A red brick wall, flecked with friendly glints of mica.

Pull back to show Central Secondary College in full: grey concrete slabs shunted together to make a school. Pull back to show Kingston Hall in full: a gracious old house set in bushy gardens, carefully renovated to make a school.

Hmmm. That's all true but it's way too obvious. What am I trying to prove? That people with money get more of the good things in life than people with no money? As if everyone didn't know that already. Besides, I'm making it sound as though Central was a total hellhole, which it wasn't. Try something a bit more subtle, Rhett.

Okay, how about this? A contrast between Manny Theostratis and Lindsay Faulkner. Manny: kind, gentle, completely unassuming. Once, when he came around to my place, I didn't hear the doorbell and he waited outside for three quarters of an hour, even though he could see there was a light on, because he didn't want to hassle me. Manny

got lost in the school system. He left Central the minute he turned fifteen and nobody did anything to stop him. Now he lives in the bungalow at the back of his house, sleeps a lot, smokes a lot of dope, watches a lot of TV. Sometimes he applies for a job but he always gets knocked back, so basically he's given up trying.

Moving right along to Lindsay Faulkner. He's not exactly a close mate of mine but I see a reasonable amount of him at Kingston because he hangs around with Terry — they used to live next door to each other or something. Lindsay makes loud comments while the principal's trying to address the school. Lindsay gets mad and throws paint around in art class. Lindsay slashes his wrists in the toilet and writes on the walls in blood. And all the teachers at Kingston are really cool about it. They just try even harder to understand him and then his parents send him to another shrink. I can't help feeling Manny would've benefited from that much attention but Lindsay just soaks it up and goes on acting crazier than ever.

Funnily enough, Lindsay gets on really well with the Theostratises — he met them when Terry and I started to hang round with them. Con sends him up unmercifully but he seems to thrive on it. And he and Manny watch cartoons together, laughing like little kids.

Lindsay's okay, I guess. He just irritates me sometimes.

It's starting to sound as though I'm as ungrateful about all the fabulous Kingston Hall privileges as Lindsay is — and in a way I suppose I am. Listen, I didn't want to change schools in year ten. But Solo couldn't hack it at Central and my folks decided that they ought to give both of us the same opportunities. Which is fairly ironic, seeing that I can handle this joint just as well as I handled Central, whereas Solo can't hack Kingston Hall either.

Still, Kingston isn't all bad. I'll never forget my first day in the place. There I was, brand new, lonely as hell, wearing all the wrong gear and making all the wrong moves. At the start of morning recess everyone split off into their nice well-established little groups, except for this one guy who walked over to me and said, 'G'day, I'm Terry Sampson. What's your name?'

We've been best mates ever since. Sometimes I wonder whether Terry still sees me as one of his lame ducks, like Lindsay, but I don't think so. Terry's not like most of the other private school types. He doesn't want to hide behind those high red brick walls — he wants to find out as much as he possibly can about the world he lives in. He was rapt to meet Con and Manny: he likes going to sleazy pubs and listening to the latest indie bands.

Terry's good at everything and liked by everyone — the sort of guy I normally can't stand, except that he's so energetic and enthusiastic and *interested*. He asks you all about yourself and then he lays a rave on you about some new piece of information that he's just discovered — the way to write a computer game or the meaning behind those

little shrines at the back of Vietnamese groceries or how to double the world's food production through permaculture. I suppose he has his faults, just the same as everybody else, but I can't think what they are. As far as I'm concerned, the guy's a hero.

Yeah, well, that's all very fascinating but it's not shaping itself into a piece for my writing folio. I'm still left with the same problem as before. What the fuck am I going to do next? Carson reckoned I ought to try something completely new, so if I can't work out how to write about my everyday life, maybe I ought to go to the opposite extreme and have a shot at testing the boundaries of realism, like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. (Hey, he even won the Nobel prize for it.)

Here's an idea. Mrs Parente's holding the photo of her husband and suddenly he comes alive and they — hang on, that's so gimmicky that I can hardly stand it. Frankly, I was writing better stuff back in year seven, when I used to churn out feeble imitations of Stephen King. Gabriel Garcia Marquez would spit on it from a great height.

Jesus, this is frustrating. Nothing seems to gel. What's the matter with me? Have I suddenly developed writer's block or something? I'm acting like I can't get started on my next piece unless I hit on an idea I feel really strongly about. I bet that's Carson's fault, for laying so many lectures about emotions on me.

Well, sorry, Carson. It'd be nice if I could just arrange to have some big intense emotional experience, then sit down and write you a terrific piece about it. Unfortunately, life's a bit more complicated than that. Sometimes I feel pretty strongly about an idea but I can't actually put it into words. (The Kingston Hall versus Central Secondary College idea, for example.) Other times I don't even realise how strongly I was feeling until ages after I've finished the piece. (My story about Anna and Juss and the shopfront would be a good example there.)

And yes, I've had some fairly strong feelings about Nicole giving me the flick but believe me, I have no intention of using that experience as the basis for a story. Living through it was enough. I don't need to write about it as well.

But what the hell *can* I write about?

Phew. Wow. Huge sigh of relief. Got it at last. I know why I've been pissfarting around. It's because Carson sprung me with that last lot of comments. Fact is, they were dead accurate. Way back when I first heard about the writing folio, I decided to give myself some extra entertainment by writing a mini-novel — well, a series of pieces that sort of followed on from each other at any rate. But I wasn't planning to mention it to Carson for a while yet, just in case the idea didn't work.

Now the whole thing's out in the open and I'm starting to get seriously cold feet.

What if I've taken on more than I can handle? What if nothing else interesting happens to me for the rest of the year? What if? What if? What if?

Okay, I think I can see what's going on here. Before, I was just mucking around. After Carson's lucky guess, I feel like I'm committed — like I'm stuck with this idea for the rest of the year. That's bullshit, though. For starters, Carson wouldn't give a stuff if I changed my mind and wrote s.f. or songs or letters to the editors instead. And anyway, I *like* the whole business of writing interconnected stories. I've gone too far with it to back off that easily.

So my next move seems pretty clear. I have to write the third episode of my mini-novel. I suppose the most obvious choice is to start from scratch and write the Anna and Terry story all over again, but seriously this time. I'd leave out the send up stuff about love. (Carson was right — that was a bit juvenile, like little kids at the movies groaning and carrying on whenever the hero and heroine pash on together.) I'd leave out the stuff about Nicole too, which means I could write from the point of view of a detached observer. The 'I am a camera' approach, Carson calls it.

Except that once I've cut out all the irrelevant parts, I'm not sure whether there's enough left. So Anna and Terry fell in love at first sight — so what? It meant something to me, because I was waiting to see whether Anna would still turn up at the shopfront on Saturday and whether Terry would still be available to go hooning around with the guys. But frankly, I can't see why it'd mean a thing to somebody who didn't know Anna and Terry. That love-at-first-sight story must've been told at least a million times before. If I want to write another version of it, I need to have a new angle.

Or else I need to wait for some new developments.

This is freaky, y'know. Like I'm living in a novel. Like I'm perving on Anna and Terry, hoping they'll have a spectacular bust up or whatever, just so I can write about it. Like I could almost be tempted to do something wild, just to move things along a bit.

I don't think I'd ever go that far, not really. Still, this project's having an effect. I mean, normally I'm all in favour of a quiet life but right now I'm practically looking forward to the next major event.

I want to find out what happens in the next chapter of my mini-novel.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun May 21st

Date Completed May 21st

Title THE PICTURE OF HEALTH -
PARAPLEGIA IN THE 90s

Purpose To write a feature article, along the
lines of the science notes in the newspaper.

Audience Ordinary newspaper readers,
without much background in the subject.

Redrafted No Number of drafts —

Writer's comments I've been writing a lot of
fictional pieces lately, so I thought I'd
try non-fiction this time. I researched
this article by interviewing a friend of
my mum's, who's a nurse at the Austin,
and then I wrote up her information
in the appropriate style.

Teacher's signature:



Date

23rd

The Picture of Health — Paraplegia in the 90s

We have all shuddered at the Transport Accident Commission's TV advertisements, which depict the consequences of road accidents more chillingly than the latest Stephen King movie. These advertisements aim to encourage people to drive more carefully by reminding us how vulnerable the human body is.

The road toll in this state continues to fall, due to increased driver awareness, wider use of seat belts and better medical techniques.

At the same time, more and more people in our society survive road accidents, only to suffer the on-going effects of spinal trauma.

The spinal cord has been described as a telegraph wire which transmits messages from the brain to the rest of the body. Normally it is protected by the spinal column but if the bones in the back or neck are broken, this is also likely to damage the spinal cord.

The extent of the damage varies from case to case,' explains Sallie Drummy, a nurse who works at the Austin Hospital Spinal Injury Unit.

Depending on the height of the lesion, the injury may result in paraplegia, involving paralysis of two limbs, or quadriplegia, involving paralysis of four limbs.

After such an accident, survivors will

need to relearn many basic skills. These include learning how to become mobile again, how to dress and feed themselves and how to control their bladder and bowels. They will also need to learn how to come to terms with their situation emotionally.

In the past people with spinal cord injuries were often no longer considered to be productive members of society, despite the fact that paraplegics are able to drive specially remodelled cars and to take care of themselves on a daily basis and may even be able to use crutches for part of the day.

However, as Ms Drummy points out, recent initiatives such as anti-discrimination legislation and the Year of the Disabled have had a significant effect.

During the 80s employers, especially in large firms, became more ready to take on employees in wheelchairs, although the main employers are government departments, because government buildings are more often designed to be wheelchair-accessible.

But much still needs to be done. 'While lives are being saved and a lot of money spent on dealing with the initial trauma, support stops once people quit rehabilitation,' says Ms Drummy.

'The majority of councils still don't curb the streets. The majority of

architects still don't take wheelchairs into account when they plan hotels and public buildings.'

Despite the growing number of spinal injuries, most of us remain regrettably

ignorant about the basic facts. In order to make the necessary changes, we require a more informed and accurate picture of paraplegia.

Carson's Notes

By the end of this piece I still wasn't sure whether your main aim was to write about road accidents, spinal injuries in general or paraplegia in particular. There's a similar confusion in the style as well. You've used the detached tone and short choppy paragraphs of a news item — but news items usually centre around some recent discovery. You've taken the overview approach of a feature article — but feature articles usually contain more quotes, opinions, statistics and quirky facts. Either you need to decide which style you're imitating or, better still, you need to write a more challenging piece of non-fiction for your folio.

Okay, those are the sorts of comments I'm supposed to make. Now for the real stuff. Listen, Rhett, I'm not totally ignorant about what goes on out of school hours. I know who you're writing about here and I don't believe that this 'detached tone' is the 'appropriate style' to write in.

Let me backtrack for a moment. Over the past three months you and I have been engaged in a friendly duel about the place of emotion in writing. That was fine at the time but this is different. In the past I sometimes felt you were deliberately holding back from the emotions in your stories, so I stirred you about it. Right now I reckon you're in shock and that worries me.

Believe it or not, I think of you as an individual, not just as one of my brighter English students. So I understand why you need to find out everything you can about paraplegia at this particular point in time. But I want to make sure you know there are other things you need to do as well — such as working out exactly how you feel about your friend's accident.

I'd like to help, if I can. Come and talk to me.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun May 24th

Date Completed June 22nd

Title I COULD SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE

Purpose To write a short story in the style of Raymond Carver.

Audience An adult audience-like, if I was trying to get it published, I'd send it to one of the literary magazines.

Redrafted Yes Number of drafts Three

Writer's comments My comments wouldn't fit onto the cover page this time, so they're on the next page.

Teacher's signature:



Date

29th June

Sorry this has taken so long, Carson. Even after we had that talk, I still had a lot of sorting out to do. I kept remembering how you told me I'd laid myself wide open by writing all this personal stuff. I can see what you mean now but I wish I'd figured it out before I got started.

The trouble is, I didn't think things through. I just dreamed up some smartarse idea about writing a mini-novel and made a snap decision to use this year as material. Though I suppose it was a logical decision, too. I mean, the only other alternative would've been to invent an entire novel right at the start of first term, then write it, piece by piece, over the rest of the year. And frankly, I can't see myself planning such a major project, all in one hit.

So, okay, I started off by writing about whatever was going on around me. Then suddenly the whole thing got way too real. I knew I didn't want to write about the accident — and I knew I wanted to, as well. Which was pretty confusing.

Here's what happened in the end. I was reading those short stories by Raymond Carver, I was thinking something along the lines of, 'Hey, this guy's really ace at showing how the freaky things and the terrible things and the mind-numbingly ordinary things are all tied up together' and then — zap! I found myself going, 'That's it! I'll write a Raymond Carver story about the accident.' So I read a whole lot more Carver stories and I practised writing in his style and finally I wrote this piece.

Maybe you'll say I'm holding back from the emotions in the story again, by pretending to be Raymond Carver instead of just being Rhett Foley. But this was the only idea I managed to come up with, after weeks of trying, and somehow I had to keep on working at it till I saw how it panned out.

See what you think.

P.S. I'm not sure whether you've read Raymond Carver so I'm including a copy of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* along with this piece. It actually belongs to Mick but he reckons you can keep it for as long as you like.

I Could See the Whole Picture

I walked down the side of the house to the bungalow. I took hold of a loose board and stood on tiptoe. I looked through the window. Someone was dancing in the dark.

I stepped back and kept on going, round the corner to the door of the bungalow. Con went dancing past from the wardrobe to the bed with a shirt in his hands. He held it up and turned it this way and that.

'This shirt's the one, for sure,' he said. 'Truly rad. Come on, Manny. Mum reckons you've been lying around all day. You can't lie around all night as well.' He said, 'You gotta get out in the world, mate. You gotta see some action.'

'Forget it,' Manny said. 'No one's here, anyway.'

'Rhett's here,' Con said.

I looked down at my purple t-shirt, my blue pants and my high-tops. 'Yeah, I'm here,' I said.

I walked into the bungalow and parked myself on the edge of the chest of drawers. Manny lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He was wearing jeans but his chest was bare. There was a poster of James Dean on the wall behind him. Manny looked a bit like James Dean, only tired.

'What about Lindsay, though?' he said. 'What about Terry?'

'They'll turn up,' Con said. 'Don't they always? Have a tinnie, mate. Get in the mood.'

He slid his arm under Manny's shoulders and heaved him upright. Then he pushed Manny's arms into the sleeves of the shirt. Manny picked up one of the cans of beer.

After a while we heard footsteps outside. Lindsay came bounding in. He'd done something different to his hair again. This time it was shaved at the back and bushy on top, with blond bits fading into brown bits.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said. 'I had this evening appointment. My folks decided to send me to another shrink.'

Con turned around and looked at him. 'Did it hurt?' he said.

Lindsay's face went soft. He looked back at Con.

'Being shrunk, I mean,' Con said.

Lindsay blinked. Then they both laughed for a long time.

'All *right*,' Lindsay said finally. 'Are we ready to move?'

'Terry's not here,' Manny said.

'Hey, I hope he's not planning to pike on us tonight,' I said. 'He better not be out with Anna or something. He promised to bring along his brother's I.D. for me. His older brother, not his younger brother.'

'I reckon,' Con said. 'His younger brother's only ten. Relax, Rhett. We'll hustle an I.D. card for you, no sweat. You can't miss out on Silicon Fish. They're the best band.'

'What's the problem, anyway?' Lindsay said. 'I thought Terry was going to meet us at the pub. Right, Rhett?'

I tried to remember. But I remembered it both ways. I could remember Terry saying he'd meet us at the pub and I could remember him saying he'd meet us at Con and Manny's place.

'Dunno,' I said. 'Maybe he did.'

'Okay, then,' Con said. 'Let's go.'

Manny started to do up his shirt. He stopped with the last button halfway into the buttonhole. 'But what if they won't let Rhett into the pub?' he said.

'No worries,' Con said. 'We'll work something out.'

'Con's a skip with a wog face,' Manny said. 'If you stuck him down in some Greek village, he'd look around and say, "Where's the nearest McDonald's?" Just like any other Aussie.'

'They've probably got McDonald's in Greece by now,' I said.

Manny said, 'Big deal. See if I care. I hate Greece, anyway. How am I supposed to relate to men in skirts doing folk dances?' He said, 'Con doesn't hate Greece, y'know. It's just another blob on the map to him.'

A bunch of people divided in half and walked round us. They pushed through the swing doors into the pub. I looked over their shoulders and saw the Silicon Fish roadies, setting up the band's equipment on the small stage. Then the door swung shut again.

I turned away and looked down the street, thinking about stage diving. I'd done it once. The best time is when the band has just finished. The best place to dive from is

the speaker stack. I can't explain how it feels when you fall through the air and the people in the audience catch you. They hold you up.

'There's Con,' Manny said. 'Who's that guy with him?'

I looked around. 'Gavin Petty,' I said. 'Don't you remember? He used to go to Central. He was a mate of Con's.'

'Right,' he said. 'So he's older than us. He's probably got some spare I.D. for you.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Thanks for waiting with me, Manny.'

Con and Gavin came right up close to us. Then Con pushed Gavin in the side. Hard. 'Tell them,' he said.

'Lay off it,' Gavin said. 'Do you think I'm going to enjoy this or something?' He stared down at the ground. He said, 'It's about your mate, Terry Sampson. They reckon he had an accident this afternoon. They reckon he's in hospital.'

'No,' I said. 'Not Terry.'

Manny's lips were white. For a moment I wondered whether he'd put on zinc cream when I wasn't looking. But why would anyone want to use sun protection cream at night? It didn't make sense.

'What happened?' he said. 'Give us the details, Gav. We need to know.'

'Hey, no problem,' Gavin said. 'I don't mind telling you. As long as I'm not being pushed around. Well, evidently Terry was showing his kid brother some fancy moves on the kid's skateboard. This car turned the corner too fast. It must've clipped Terry with the bonnet or something.' He said, 'It broke his back.'

Con punched the air. 'He's not going to die,' he said.

'No,' I said. 'Not Terry.'

Inside the pub Silicon Fish started to play. They were playing, 'Don't Call Till You Need Me'. I can swear to that.

But after the music started I must've blanked out for a bit. One minute we were standing outside the pub, next minute we were in the doorway of a shop, further down the street. Lindsay had a bottle of whisky. He was passing it around. I took a swig and it burned all the way down to my stomach.

'Come on, team,' Con said. 'We can't just hang around here like a pack of dorks. We gotta do something.'

There were four other passengers on the bus. Two girls sat at the front near the driver. They giggled a lot. Behind them a man in a business suit leaned back with his eyes closed. The one nearest to us was an old woman. She had her head turned towards the window, looking out at the night streets.

Con was sitting with Manny. Lindsay sat next to me, on the other side of the aisle. He was waving the whisky bottle around. The whisky sloshed up the sides of the glass.

'Have a drink,' he said. He passed the bottle to Con. 'Drink a toast to poor bloody

Terry in the hospital.'

Con swallowed a mouthful and screwed the cap onto the bottle. He handed it to Manny with a nod. Manny nodded back and tucked the bottle between his knees.

Lindsay stood up. The bus hit a bump in the road. He hung onto the back of Con's seat to steady himself. Then he leaned across Con and made a grab for the bottle of whisky.

Manny put his arm around the bottle. Con shoved Lindsay in the chest. He staggered back across the aisle and landed on top of me. I pushed him off.

'The thing is,' Lindsay said. 'The thing is, Terry's a mate of mine. A fucking mate of mine.'

The old woman hauled herself upright. She moved one foot towards the aisle, waited until she was balanced and then moved the other foot. It took her about three minutes to get to the front of the bus. She sat down again, opposite the two girls.

'What we gotta do,' Lindsay said. 'We gotta find those doctors — the ones who are supposed to be looking after Terry. We gotta tell them they can't mess with our mate. Otherwise they'll think they can get away with murder. Murder. I should know. My old man's a doctor.'

Then he said it all over again, only louder and swearing. The two girls weren't giggling any more. They sat very still and stared out of the front window. The man in the business suit straightened up. He walked down the aisle and spoke to the driver.

The driver stopped the bus and turned around. 'You up the back,' he said. 'I won't have that sort of language on my bus. I won't have you drinking either.'

Lindsay swore at him. The driver turned away. He pulled on a lever and the doors opened. Then he came down the aisle and stood in front of us. He pointed to the door.

'That's enough from you,' he said. 'Out you get.'

I put my hand on the window ledge, getting ready to stand up. But Lindsay pulled his knees towards his chest and wedged his feet against the back of the next seat. The driver took a step forwards.

'Relax,' Con said. 'We're going, mate. We're out of here.'

He headed for the door. Manny followed, swinging the whisky bottle. Lindsay fell sideways and landed on his feet in the aisle. I pushed past him and jumped across to the curb. As the bus started up, Lindsay aimed a kick at the door.

'The guy's got no right,' he said. 'He's got no right to chuck us off like that. We ought to write to the transport authorities or something.'

'Ah, shut your face,' Con said. 'It doesn't matter, anyhow. We can walk it from here. Easy.'

The night air was cool and clean. We walked along in single file, past the housing commission flats, towards the playground on the corner.

When he saw the playground, Con let out a yell. He vaulted the low fence, swung three times around the frame of the swings and went running up the seesaw. The other end came down with a crash. Con stood on one foot and swayed about, acting as though he might fall off any minute.

Manny laughed. 'Maniac,' he said. 'Go, Con.'

There was a metal animal in the middle of the playground, on two heavy springs. Con jumped onto its back and rocked to and fro until he was almost bent double. The springs creaked.

'Unreal,' Lindsay said. He snatched the whisky bottle from Manny, climbed the fence and ran for the swings. He pushed himself higher and higher. 'I'm flying,' he said. 'I'm flying.'

'You and Superman,' Con said. 'Except Superman's dead.'

Manny laughed again. I tipped my head back and looked up at the clouds. I swear I could see the streetlight reflected on their underside. But it was probably just an optical illusion or something.

When I looked at the playground again, Con was standing at the top of a tall slide. He dropped to his knees and slid down head first. At the last minute his hands shot out to break his fall. He rolled sideways, jumped up and ran on to the next section of the playground.

In the next section there was a playhouse on stilts. It had a circular slide on one side and a small slide on the other side, for the little kids. Con walked up the circular slide. He climbed the railing, leaned out and hoisted himself onto the roof. He started to walk along the top of the roof, holding his arms out for balance.

'Manny,' I said. 'What's got into your brother?'

But Manny wasn't there any more. When I looked around, I saw someone going into the nearest tower of housing commission flats. I started to run.

Just before I reached the high rise flats, I turned to look back over my shoulder. Lindsay was standing in the middle of the roundabout, drinking from the whisky bottle. Con was running in a circle, pushing the roundabout. They were both laughing.

I turned away and looked into the foyer of the high rise. The lift doors were closing. I ran to the second lift and pushed the button. I had to wait for about five minutes. All the way up in the lift I kept watching the floor numbers on the panel above the door.

The lift stopped at the top floor. I got out and walked along the corridor till I found some stairs. They led up to a heavy iron door. I opened the door and stepped out onto the roof.

The roof was flat. There was a waist-high concrete wall around the edge, with a railing on top of the wall. Manny was standing by the wall. His right hand tightened on the railing. He flexed his right knee.

'Manny,' I said. He let go of the railing and straightened up but he didn't turn around.

I walked over to him. I said, 'Great view, right?'

We stood there and gazed down at the playground. Below us Con and Lindsay went dancing from the roundabout to the swings. They looked very small.

Manny said, 'I can't bear to think of Terry dying.'

'He's not going to die,' I said.

He said, 'I can't bear to think of him lying in some room and staring at the ceiling all day. He'd be better off dead than living like that.'

I almost said, 'Well, you ought to know,' but then I didn't say it. We went on standing there, side by side, looking down at the rooftops and the streets and the cars moving along the streets. From up this high, they seemed to be moving very slowly.

I kept thinking how I ought to get Manny down off the roof. I kept thinking how Con and Lindsay would be wondering where we were. But I didn't want to move.

Once I was down on the ground again, I would have to go and see Anna Parente. Anna was Terry's girlfriend. I would need to make sure that she knew. When I went to her house, Mrs Parente would open the door. She would tell me that Anna was at the hospital and she would ask if I wanted to go there with her. While I waited in the hall, I would hear Mrs Parente sobbing in the lounge room. She would say, 'Giorgio, Giorgio.' She would say, 'Giorgio, why did you leave me?' She would say this to her husband's photograph on the top of the china cabinet.

At the hospital Mrs Parente would stop to speak to Terry's folks. I would go on ahead. I would see Anna standing in a doorway and I would go and stand behind her. I would see her. I would see every hair on the back of her neck and every check in the pattern of her shirt.

My hands would go up. I would hold Anna for a long time. Then I would realise she was stone. I would realise she didn't even know I was there.

Anna would keep on staring through the doorway into the next door.

Terry would be in that room.

Up on top of the housing commission flats I could see the whole picture very clearly. Maybe I didn't guess all the details right then but I already knew that the next few hours would be the hardest hours of my life so far. I turned to Manny and took him by the arm.

'Come on, mate,' I said. 'Let's go.'

Carson's Notes

You do a good Raymond Carver imitation but believe me, this is a distinctively Rhett Foley story as well. For some reason it took me right back to our first argument at the start of the year. I've

been puzzling away at the whole question of the importance of subject matter ever since, setting myself the occasional test question, like, ‘Is a story about living through the aftermath of an accident automatically more memorable than a story about drinking coffee or staring at a mark on the wall?’

Well, the answer’s yes and no. On one hand, I can still remember Virginia Woolf’s story called ‘The Mark on the Wall’, long after hundreds of stories about violence or tragedy have slipped right out of my mind. On the other hand, if I was faced with a story about an accident and a story about a mark on the wall that were equally well- written, I suspect I’d always go for the story that packed the bigger emotional punch. In short, I’ve come to the conclusion that I can’t help responding to the subject a writer chooses just as much as I respond to their style or technique.

So am I telling you to keep on writing about violence and tragedy in future? No, not really — I’m just rambling on in a fairly general fashion about some issues I know we’re both interested in. While I’m at it, I suppose I might as well let you in on one of the big secrets about being a teacher. Us chalkies have a few definite statements that we can make with total confidence, because we’ve worked them out carefully and checked them over and over again. But we don’t necessarily understand how all our definite statements connect with each other, so we’re always learning — from our students from other teachers, from Raymond Carver and so on. What’s more, if we ever stopped learning, we’d probably stop being able to teach as well.

In other words, I feel as though I learned a lot from this last story of yours. You made me think, not only about the events in the story but about story-writing itself. I don’t have any major changes to suggest, because it’s excellent as it is.

Thanks, Rhett.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY
Date begun Early July?
Date Completed No such luck.

Title Never got that far.

Purpose Fucked if I know.

Audience Who cares?

Redrafted Not Number of drafts 2

Writer's comments Rhett to Biographer - can you hear me? This is another piece that Carson never saw, because I never managed to finish it. You'll probably understand why, once you read on.

Teacher's signature: Beginner writer's Rhett Foley Date December 4th

Here we are in the shopfront again. Everything's the same — Sami knowing when we need another coffee by ESP, Mr Bicer fussing over Anna, the old men playing cards and ignoring us — and yet at the same time everything's different.

Anna's face is white over olive. There are brown bruises under her eyes. She looks even smaller than before, so fragile that I expect her to crumple if anyone touches her, and she keeps staring into the distance, as though she can hear something that the rest of us can't.

After the accident Justin and I made a special point of telling her that we wouldn't mind if she decided to drop our Saturday morning meetings.

'You'll want to be with Terry as much as possible,' Juss said earnestly. 'That's fine by me.'

'And me too,' I muttered.

'Just remember, if you ever want to get away for a while, we'll be here when you need us. That's what old friends are for, right?'

'Right,' I muttered.

Then we looked at her anxiously. The truth is, we were used to Anna taking the lead. She's been organising us ever since kindergarten, so it was hard to know what to say to her. Now.

Still, she smiled at Juss and shook her head. 'Thanks,' she said, 'but I'd rather stick to our old arrangement. There's so much happening at present. It'd be nice to feel like at least one part of my life was continuing as usual.'

Good, I thought. She's not cancelling out. That proves she knows we're here for her.

Don't push it, Rhett. She'll talk when she's ready.

But actually she didn't seem to want to say much, not like the old Anna. She just got paler and smaller, week by week. Every now and then Justin would ask about Terry and she'd give a brief progress report. First the doctors were waiting to see whether the fracture would mend itself. Then Terry was diagnosed as paraplegic. And after that there were all the dramas of the rehab unit where he'd be staying for the next four or five months. Bed sores. Physio. The first time in the swimming pool. Learning about bowel and bladder care ...

Juss managed to listen intelligently to all the medical stuff but I have to admit that I generally glazed over. I was waiting for Anna to tell us what it was like for her: that's the part I wanted to know. She didn't, though. She never said anything about herself.

I could've asked her directly, of course — except that for some reason it seemed impossible. To start with, there was Anna herself: so silent, so pale, so sad. I didn't want to intrude on her. I couldn't.

Then there was this other problem. My own personal problem with the accident. The thing is, disasters belong in TV documentaries or the latest episode of your favourite soapie. You sit back comfortably, watching all these terrible events, and think, 'I wonder whether I would've survived in Auschwitz. I wonder how I'd cope if I was deaf and dumb and blind. I wonder what I'd feel if the rest of my family was murdered by a homicidal maniac.' In other words, disasters are somebody else's business. They're not supposed to happen to people you know.

And even if a disaster accidentally lands on one of your friends, you still have some of the same voyeuristic reactions. You want to know all the gory details. You want to say things like, 'Can Terry — does Terry — will Terry ever be able to have sex again?'

But of course you can't ask that. Especially not when you're talking to Terry's girlfriend.

So there we were in the shopfront again. Everything was the same — Anna at the centre, me leaning back, Justin dancing between us — but everything had changed. Anna looks so sad. I want

Oh hell, forget it. This isn't working.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun July 25th

Date Completed July 25th

Title PICTURE OF A YOUNG ARTIST
AS A DAG

Purpose Therapeutic

Audience For your eyes only

Redrafted No way Number of drafts One, and one only

Writer's comments Okay, Carson, I've finally blown my cover as Mr Enigmatic. This isn't meant to be part of my writing folio - I'm only showing it to you because it's all your fault. I mean, you're the one who told me to write about

Teacher's signature:

Carson Date 31st July

my feelings, right? So, after I had this weird experience, I didn't just listen to tapes till I bombed out - I wrote it all down instead. I thought I was just writing it for myself but you said in your last lot of comments that we were swapping ideas about writing, so I decided I'd test it out on you as well. Personally, I reckon it'd score twelve out of ten for emotion and a big fat zero for technique. What do you reckon?

Oh shit. Wild night. Gotta write it down. Gotta get it into some sort of order before my brain nukes out completely.

Where am I supposed to start, though? With Solo, I reckon. If she hadn't been hassling me, I would've at least gone into the whole thing better prepared. But that's Solo for you. She has to stick the fucking knife in, whenever she gets the chance.

So, okay, there I was, talking on the phone to Cameron Sutcliff, this guy from school whose parents split up last week. Don't ask me why but I seem to have turned into Kingston Hall's resident expert on divorce. Somewhere around the end of last year I got into a long discussion with a couple of kids and then at the start of this year they sent some of their mates along to talk to me and then the mates sent along some of *their* mates and by now I'm having serious personal raves with people I've never even met before, including Cam Sutcliff. That's cool, though. It's like I'm able to fill them in on all the angles, because it happened to me so long ago that I've had time to get used to it.

Anyhow, I put the phone down and turned around to find Solo scowling at me. Straightaway she starts whingeing that it's not fair because every time she wants to ring her friends, I'm always using the phone for some kind of stupid counselling service. So I flash her a cheesy grin and go, 'Sorry, Solo, I didn't realise you had any friends.'

Result: a major screaming match, which lasts till Mum drifts down the hall, clutches her forehead and says, 'Rhett. Solange. What's the matter now?' Solo goes into instant replay about how I'm running a counselling service from home and it's not fair and Mum blinks at her a few times and says, 'Why does that worry you, Solo? I think it's very nice.'

'Typical,' Solo yells. 'You think *everything* Rhett does is nice,' and she storms off to sulk in her room leaving me to make Mum a cup of tea and talk to her about Solo until

the helpless look fades out of her eyes again. After that we chatted about other things for a while and then I checked my watch and realised I was supposed to be meeting Justin in three-quarters of an hour.

So I threw on a clean shirt and raced out the door, without even getting five spare minutes to think about where I was headed and what I'd promised to do.

Flashback.

Last week Anna didn't turn up at the shopfront at all. Justin and I waited around until it was obvious she wasn't going to show and then somehow we got stuck into this rave about how we'd feel if we were in Anna and Terry's position. Halfway through trying to sell me on some totally wacky theory, Juss suddenly goes red in the face and announces that as a matter of fact he couldn't ever be in the same position as Anna and Terry because he's gay and so, if he sat there holding hands with his boyfriend in the middle of a ward, people would either try and beat him to a pulp or else they'd throw him out of the rehab unit. I reminded him that he could always count on his mates to back him up and he looked at me and said, 'Maybe.'

That got me really steamed. I go, 'Fuck you, Juss. Haven't I always supported you?' and he goes, 'Listen, you've never made a big deal about me being gay but that's not the same thing as support.' So I say, 'What's your definition of support?' and he rambles on for a while and then finally he says, 'Well, you sat through that heavy metal concert, just because Con wanted someone to go with. But I couldn't ask you to do the same thing for me — like, if I was nervous about going to a gay pub on my own or whatever.'

'You want me to go to a gay pub with you?' I say. 'No problem. Just name a time.'

Justin swirls the sludge in his coffee cup for a bit and then asks me if I really mean it.

And I say, 'Hey! Would I lie to a mate?'

Flash forward again. Me, walking into some late-night coffee shop in Fitzroy. Justin, waving at me and smiling. I catch myself wishing he wouldn't smile quite so hard and I realise I'm worrying about whether people will think I'm his boyfriend.

It's all Solo's fault. Why couldn't she let me have a bit of peace and quiet before I left? I shouldn't be thinking all these nerdy thoughts. I shouldn't be wishing I'd spent more time choosing my shirt, so I could've made sure I didn't look gay, so the guys at this pub would know not to try and crack onto me.

Meanwhile Justin jumps up and grabs his jacket. 'Ready?' he asks with another big smile. I tell him I need a cup of coffee first but when the coffee arrives, I spill half of it on the table before I can drink it. Juss starts to mop up the mess and then he looks at me sideways and says, 'Listen, are you scared or something? You don't have to do this, y'know.'

I do, though. I just need a bit of time to think things through, but I don't get it because

Juss keeps checking the clock and fiddling with the sugar shaker and generally wrecking my concentration. In the end I give up and say, 'Okay, let's go.'

We walk for half a dozen blocks and gradually my head starts to clear. I'm ready for anything, I decide. Sleazy dives. Neon fantasies. Leather to the max. Guys in sequins singing Barbra Streisand songs. The works.

What I get is an ordinary pub front. Three ordinary guys walk up to the door and go in.

I ask Juss to hang on because I think I'm getting a stitch and I lean against the wall and pretend to massage my ribs. The minute I straighten up, Justin's off again. I go, 'Jesus, Juss, give me a bit of time,' but he tells me I can sit down in the pub and he grabs my elbow and starts towing me along. Automatically, without even thinking about it, I pull away from him.

Juss says, 'Okay, I get the message. You're piking on me, right? Well, too bad. Go home, Rhett. I'll be fine.'

I try to explain that I'm not a piker but my voice seems to have given out on me. Juss says, 'Go home,' louder this time, and he turns and marches into the pub.

So that's settled. I may've lost a mate but at least I'll never have to walk through that door. I can head for home, listen to some cool music, watch a bit of late-night TV, forget the whole thing.

Except that I can't move. I'm stuck there in the middle of the footpath, rewriting the script. In this new version I stroll into the pub beside Justin, hang around till some spunky-looking guy comes over and then fade away into the night, smiling benevolently at them both. It's not too late. I could find Juss, easily. I could stay with him and make sure things work out for him. If only I could take that first step.

Then behind me someone clears his throat and says, 'Listen, I've been watching you.'

Sprung by the cops? Marked down by the latest serial killer? Either way, I almost lose it on the spot. By the time I manage to turn around, the guy's finished apologising and started explaining how the first time he went to a gay bar, it took him nearly three hours to get out of his car and cross the road. He thinks I'm going through the same sort of hassle, out here on the footpath. He wants to know whether it'd help if I had someone to go in with.

This is the moment when I should really start to get paranoid about guys cracking onto me but for some reason I look at his ordinary thirtysomething face and I get this mad urge to blurt out the entire story about Justin and me. It's my problem, though. There's nothing anyone else can do about it, so I just stare down at my feet and say, 'You wouldn't understand.'

'Probably not,' he agrees. 'Every time I think I've heard it all, I always come across an even curlier one.'

He starts to move around me and suddenly I'm blocking his way. I'm asking him if he'll watch out for a mate of mine. I'm describing Juss in more detail than I knew I'd registered. The guy listens carefully and says, 'No worries.' Then he goes, 'I hope it all works out for you too,' and he walks into the pub and the door swings shut behind him.

There wasn't much point in hanging round after that, so I strolled back up the street, watching out for a tram or a taxi, telling myself that, really, I'd done Juss a favour. I wouldn't have been much use to him in a gay pub, after all, whereas if that guy took Juss under his wing and introduced him around a bit, then basically he'd be doing all right for himself.

I'm not usually nervous on the streets at night. I know the rules — I know my way around. Still, that night I found myself glancing over my shoulder at every corner, fists clenched, muscles tight, ready to run. There were footsteps behind me. (No, not footsteps.) Shadows moving. (No, not shadows.) I could hear something. I could hear someone. A voice. There was a voice inside my head.

The voice inside my head said: 'Don't kid yourself. Even if Justin has a good time in the end, you still let him down. You think you're such a great guy, talking to all those total strangers about divorce and that, but you can't actually support somebody you've known ever since kindergarten. You think you're Mr Enigmatic, the coolest of them all, but you can't even handle walking into a gay bar. You're fucked, Rhett Foley, that's what you are. You're really fucked.'

I listen to the voice and I know it's all true. I can't argue back because there's nothing to say. I despise myself so much that I can hardly breathe and I want to crawl into a dark corner and hide but the voice keeps on chanting 'You're fucked, you're fucked, you're fucked' and my feet keep moving to the beat, as if it was a marching tune.

Then I bump into this board on the footpath that says DREAM MACHINE and some guy goes, 'Hey, wanna freebie?' and I take the ticket and he goes, 'Hey, wanna gram?' and I hand him twenty-five bucks and he hands me the bag of dope and I take it and walk through a silver door that says DREAM MACHINE.

I'm standing in the hallway of a place that could be a big terrace house or a small warehouse. There's a half-open door ahead of me and I can hear a roar like a football crowd and a voice yelling, 'Jeez, take a look at that, will ya?' The woman on the door lifts an eyebrow at me and goes, 'It's, like, a demonstration, y'know. Try upstairs, if you're not interested.'

So I climb the narrow stairs and next minute I'm in this room full of pool tables. At least I can understand what's going on here, so I watch the pool players for a bit and then work my way towards another door on the far side of the room, which turns out to lead into a toilet. I have a piss while I've got the chance and I manage to smoke three quarters of a joint before someone starts rattling the doorhandle at me.

After that I climb some more stairs and front up to a bar with a long mirror behind it. I decide to get something to drink but my mind goes blank, so the woman behind the bar mixes me a Dream Machine cocktail. I drink half of it in one go and then I look around and spot some steps and wander down them and find myself in Fantasyland.

There's a smoke machine, huffing out trails of cottonwool. Spotlights, cutting sharp bright tunnels through the haze. Bodies appearing and disappearing between the drifts of mist, sleek with sweat, dancing like marathon runners. A strobe flickering across the dancers, sending them into jerky slow motion. And, weirdest of all, there's a line-up of old sofas and chairs around the edge of the dance floor, so that the mist and the light and the music seem to rise up out of an ordinary lounge room setting, like a dope smoker's daydream come to life.

I grope my way to the nearest armchair and settle down to watch the dancers. You can obviously get away with any kind of gear in this place. I spot kids in flares, kids in minis, kids in skivvies and jeans, kids in sixties-style vinyl pantsuits, kids dressed to dance in loose stretchy sportswear, kids with pierced noses, bare-chested kids, kids with peace symbol pendants. There's a sweet musty smell on the air. I pull out the plastic bag and openly roll myself another joint.

After a while my mouth starts to feel really dry, so I go back to the bar and get two more Dream Machine cocktails, the first for now, the second for later. At least, that's how it's supposed to be, until this girl smiles through the smoke and says, 'Is one of those for me?'

'Oh,' I say, 'sure. Hey, why not?' and she comes and perches on the arm of the chair, next to me.

She's wearing tight crushed-velvet pants and a black top. She has short yellow hair, like Nicole's, but her eyes are brighter and more impatient than Nicole's eyes. She's lifting the cocktail glass as if she's about to drink a toast, when another song comes on and all these people appear from nowhere and pack the dance floor.

The song seems just the same as any other to me. 'What's the big deal?' I go to the girl. 'What's so special about this one?'

She grins and yells back something that sounds like 'topless barmaids'. I glance at the bar: no topless barmaids in sight. I say, 'Huh?'

The girl slides down to join me in the armchair. (I shift sideways but our legs still tangle together.) She leans over and says in my ear, 'Topless Barmaids. That's what the group's called. Four very tough ladies. They get the jocks in, because of the name, and mess with them. This is their latest single — "You Can't Get It If I'm Not Getting It Too".

I check her impatient blue eyes. I feel her breath, north-wind hot on my cheek. I say, 'Huh?' again.

So she explains. She tells me how the song's saying that a guy can't ever really have good sex unless the girl's having good sex as well. We look at each other for a bit

longer, asking some silent questions, and then she puts her glass down and moves closer and kisses me.

She tastes sweet and sticky. She tastes of magic. Hey, I'm a rocket! A whole fireworks display. Every nerve end blazing. Switch off the spotlights and the strobe. I'll light up the room for you.

But then suddenly I'm not light or bright any more. The magic's turned against me. It's dark. I'm cold. I'm winter earth and deep in the churned up mud two slugs, two fat slugs, are pushing and prodding at each other. Two fat slimy slug tongues.

I retch. The girl looks up at me with flame-blue eyes. Looks *up*? What's happened? Why am I on my feet, a metre away from the armchair? What did I do to her? I hope I didn't hurt —

My chest heaves. The girl's angry eyes turn impatient. 'Oh Jesus,' she says. 'I can really pick them. The toilet's over there.'

I nod. Retch louder. Clamp my teeth shut. Taste the sourness. Turn and blunder across the dance floor.

Away from her.

The night air hit me like a slap in the face. Next minute I was bent double over the gutter, spewing out yellow acid. I straightened up, took two steps and stopped to spew again.

Get out of here, Rhett. Find a taxi. Now.

I want to go home.

Except when I check my pockets, I only find one single solitary twenty-cent piece. Not even enough for a phone call, supposing I felt up to ringing Mum and Mick in this state. All the rest of my money has gone on coffee and dope and Dream Machine cocktails.

Looks as though Rhett baby will be walking home. Just like the night of Terry's accident.

I take a deep breath and set off up the street. (Need to step carefully, to keep my stomach in balance.) ... *grabbing at me like that*. It's the tail end of a thought and I catch hold of it and haul it back into view. *What did she think she was doing, grabbing at me like that?* Yeah, right. This is all the girl's fault. I grin fiercely and start to call her every name I can think of, until I almost make myself sick again.

Then, while I'm leaning against a wall and swallowing hard, my mind turns into a TV screen and I see a small detailed picture of the girl in the armchair, looking up at me. You kiss a guy and next minute he throws up. How would that make you feel?

Answer: Terrible.

In which case, it must be all *my* fault. I was trying to prove something. I wasn't thinking about her at all. And when I fucked up, I didn't even stick around long enough to

explain. How could I just walk out on her like that?

Answer: Easy.

Hey, I just walked out on a guy who's supposed to be one of my best mates. I'm running an unofficial counselling service from home and I can't even talk to Justin. No, hang on, that's Solo's line, I don't need to buy into her special brand of put-downs. But all the same, I'm sorry for the girl. I'm sorry for Juss. I'm sorry for myself. I'm sorry for everyone.

The girl. Juss. Anna. Manny. Nicole. Lindsay. Con. Terry. *Terry.*

Round and round, until I'm so giddy that I stop and throw up in the gutter again. Normally I'm fairly streetsmart but not tonight. Doesn't matter, though. Tonight I'm something even better than streetsmart. I'm wild. Crazy. Stay away from me.

I weave down streets and lanes, talking to the voices inside my head, thumping billboards to hear the tinny echo. Songs I didn't even know I remembered come back to taunt me, in the way only music can. They play and replay, amplified by my crazy brain, sending messages of love and dreams and happiness, to let me know what I'm missing out on. My face is grubby with sweat and snot, like a three-year-old kid who's fallen down and hurt his knee.

Sometimes I sing my own songs into the night. Anything from rap to nursery rhymes.

*And this little piggy cried, 'Wee, wee, wee'
All the way home.*

I got there in the end. Jiggled my key in the lock. Tiptoed down the corridor. Mick was in the lounge room, with a half-empty bottle of whisky. He flourished his hand grandly at me and said, 'Bless my soul, it's Rhett, sneaking in at three thirty a.m. No, don't look so worried. I'm not going to tick you off — I'm going to let you in on one of the important rules governing the behaviour of stepfathers. Meredith and I made a bargain when we got married, which went like this: I'm your dad during the daytime but I don't have to be adult and responsible between midnight and dawn. Of course, I don't usually run across you then, so it doesn't make much difference in the ordinary course of events. But now that the matter's come up, I'm in a position to offer you a completely free choice. Do you want to sit down and have a late-night chat, as one human being to another? Or would you rather pretend you hadn't seen me and go straight to bed?'

I like the way Mick can make speeches about anything and everything at two seconds' notice. 'I'd rather talk,' I said.

'Very well then, fetch yourself a glass. I'd share my whisky with you but you look as though you might've tried spirits already this evening. Let me recommend a cold beer instead. Hair of the dog — the best-known cure for hangovers.'

I went off to raid the fridge and came back with a beer and a lumpy cheese

sandwich. Mick looked me up and down. ‘Come on, tell me everything,’ he said.

So I did. I told him about Justin and the gay pub, the Dream Machine and the girl. The minute I’d finished, Mick started laughing.

‘In other words, you went dashing off to prove you were straight. No wonder you didn’t have much luck.’

It’s always a relief when someone puts your innermost fear into words, because once you hear it out loud, you can decide whether it’s true or not.

I go, ‘Nah, you’re wrong there, Mick. I thought all that through when Juss first told us he was gay. I’m straight, for sure — no need to bust a gut proving it. I’d reckon I’d know by now if I wasn’t.’

‘Not necessarily,’ Mick points out. ‘Logically speaking, you could be trying to hide it from yourself as well — except that under those circumstances I suspect you’d be a lot more defensive about the whole idea. But listen, if you don’t have any doubts about your sexuality or whatever, why were you so unnerved by that girl?’

‘Because she looked like Nicole,’ I say without thinking and Mick’s ginger eyebrows shoot up towards his hairline.

‘In that case, surely things should’ve worked out just fine.’

‘It didn’t work with Nicole, remember. We got too close, too soon. I never know how to react when that happens. If I back off, it’s a hassle. If I don’t back off, I start to feel claustrophobic.’

Mick slams down his glass and sits bolt upright. ‘Fantastic,’ he breathes. ‘I’ve got it, Rhett. I know what your trouble is. You’re non-exogamous.’

And off he goes on another of his crazy raves. ‘Human beings,’ he says, ‘tend to be naturally suspicious of strangers — that’s how racism gets started, among other things. Basically we prefer to hang around with our own crowd: people like us. Now if you took this to its logical conclusion, we’d all end up marrying our sisters and our cousins and our aunts —’

‘Hold on, Mick,’ I cut in. ‘That doesn’t sound totally logical to me.’ Mick, who prides himself on his logic, looks offended, so I move in for the punchline. ‘But then again,’ I say, ‘I’ve got Solo for a sister.’

He narrows his eyes and pretends not to have heard. ‘Anyhow,’ he goes on, ‘way back before recorded history, a few bright sparks noticed that people who kept intermarrying with their close relatives ended up with some major health problems, because their gene pool wasn’t getting enough new genes. So they proceeded to invent this thing called exogamy. You can look it up in the dictionary, if you like.’

While I’m checking the definition of exogamy and getting ‘the custom of marrying outside the tribe or other social unit’, Mick reels off a long list of all the different ways that different cultures have worked the exogamy racket. Like, for example, the Wurundjeri people, who used to live around this area until the white invaders came

along, were divided into the Bunjil side and the Waang side, with Waangs marrying Bunjils and Bunjils marrying Waangs.

Then suddenly he skips a century or so and announces that we're still doing the same thing here and now, even if we're not as organised about it. 'We don't have specific rules about exogamy these days,' he says, 'but we still put out a lot of propaganda about how sexy strangers are, much sexier than the people you see every day. For some reason, though, the propaganda hasn't worked on you, Rhett. Apparently you can't get turned on by someone unless you know them fairly well, which makes you an absolute textbook case of non-exogamy.'

I can't say Mick's changed my life with this great revelation but I like listening to him anyway. When he finally takes a whisky break, I say admiringly, 'You know a whole lot of stuff, don't you, Mick?'

He narrows his galah-eyes and gives a galah-shrug. 'Hey, it all goes into the ads, one way or another. It'd go into other kinds of writing too, if I'd let it, but the other kinds of writing wear you down too fast. Look at your mate Raymond Carver. Drank hard, lived hard, wrote hard and died before his time.'

I say, 'Yeah,' and then, because we're talking as one human being to another, I say, 'So why do you drink this much?'

Mick pours himself another whisky and holds the glass up to the light, where it glows like a gold patch in a stained glass window. 'How can I describe it?' he asks. 'Booze shrinks me — not my body, of course, but the me that lives inside my body. When I'm pissed, I'm still looking out of my body's eyes but I've got a sense of distance, as though I was looking at everything through a telescope. I'm less sensitive, more like other people. And I have to feel more like other people if I'm going to write ads for them.' He reaches over and scoops up the whisky bottle. 'Which reminds me,' he adds. 'Those sexy strangers that we've been talking about just might help me to meet my deadline for the next stage of the Style campaign.'

I grin at him and go, 'Style — you've got it.' Mick detours around the coffee table to aim a punch at my bicep on his way out. After he's gone, I sit there and stare at the wall for a while. Then I turn off the lights and head for my room, switch on the Mac Plus and start writing about this wild night.

Three hours later I'm staring at the words on the screen, wishing I could come up with some final paragraph that'd make sense of this whole fucking mess. What would Carson say to me now? Some sort of bullshit about feelings, probably. Okay then, what am I feeling? Justin knew. He said, 'Are you scared or something?'

Yeah, Juss, I'm scared. Not about you. Not about the gay pub. Not about the Dream Machine. Not even about that girl.

I'm scared about feeling.

Next morning. Next episode.

I crashed. Fell on the bed and fell asleep. Didn't even bother to set the alarm because I was planning to sleep in but — wouldn't you know it? I woke up round about the usual time and instantly the entire wild night started replaying itself inside my head. I thought: no way. So I checked the clock and decided I could just make it to the shopfront on time, if I left straight away.

Juss was there already, looking scrubbed and neat. I scowl at him and say, 'Well, you obviously got a good night's sleep,' and Juss grins at me and says, 'Actually, I've been out all night. But I dropped in to have a shower at home before I came here.'

This isn't like Juss — or at any rate it isn't like my idea of Juss. He's supposed to be the gentle considerate one of the trio, as compared to tough Anna and streetsmart me. I ask him how his folks reacted to his night on the tiles and Justin tells me he'd kind of hoped it might push them into having a proper talk with him. No such luck. They just went straight from yelling mode to crying mode.

'Your dad cried?' I say in surprise and Juss goes, 'Nah, he gets Mum to do that for him, just like she gets Dad to do the yelling for her. They're pretty traditional, remember.'

'I remember, all right. What happened next?'

Justin sighs. 'I told them I would've rung except it was too late, and they just said I should've rung earlier. So I go, "Yeah, but I didn't know earlier. What would you like me to do next time?" and they go, "We'd prefer that there isn't a next time".'

'And what did you say then?'

'I said, "That's not very helpful, is it?"'

I stare at him and whistle softly. 'Unreal,' I tell him. 'How come you can get away with cheeking your olds like that?'

Juss shrugs and says, 'Let's face it, my parents aren't ever going to be much use to me. They're hopelessly straight — and I don't mean they're heterosexual. I mean they've got a mindset that totally excludes people like me. So they're never going to be able to give me useful advice and they're never going to be able to tell me what to expect out of life. That's a pity, in one way, but the pay off is, I don't have to take much notice of them.'

I say, 'Some pay off, Juss. Is it worth all the hassle?' and he says, 'Hey, that's nothing compared to the hassle of pretending to be straight. I've been out with half a dozen girls and I always end up feeling like I want to hide in the toilets and cry. How would you feel, Rhett, if you had to keep going on dates with guys until you could prove beyond all possible doubt that you weren't gay?'

I can't answer that one but I don't need to, because with his usual perfect timing Sami brings over another Turkish coffee, to settle the headache at the back of my skull and —

Oh shit, I'm back in the present tense again. Why do I keep doing that? The whole point of writing this stuff down is to get it into the past and put it behind me, except that I keep on slipping into the present tense without even noticing.

T.S. Eliot said:

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable.

That didn't mean much to me before but I reckon I know what he's on about now. It's like I couldn't make sense of the wild night while it was happening to me, so I have to keep living through it again, until I can understand it and talk about it in the past tense and redeem it.

Only trouble is, I still don't really understand any of it yet.

Once I'd finished my second cup of coffee, I remembered what I was supposed to be doing and I apologised to Justin for standing him up the night before. Juss laughed.

'Forget it,' he said. 'I was hitting out at you because I was nervous, that's all — and if / was nervous, I can hardly blame you for being nervous too. Besides, you did me a big favour by sticking around and telling Kevin to look after me. That's where I've been all night, at his place.'

'Oh wow,' I said blankly. 'Um, did you practise safe sex and that?'

'No need, mate. We just talked, like he was my older brother or something — and there's no need to look sympathetic, because it wasn't a letdown. That's what I really, really need right now. I mean, it's not the same for me as it is for you. If you want to find out how to act around girls, you only have to look at movies or TV ads or books or your folks or other guys. And you can rave away to anyone about the stuff that's going on inside your head, not like me.'

I felt a bit weird then. Juss sounded as if he was a member of some special club that I could never belong to. If he only knew, things weren't that easy for me either.

Although, of course, he couldn't know if I didn't tell him.

So I go, 'Okay, Juss, fair enough. But what if I didn't want the sort of thing that other guys seem to want?'

I wait to see if he'll take the hint. He takes it right over the top.

'Yeah?' he says, grinning. 'Got something to confess have you, Rhett? Are you trying to tell me you can't get turned on unless the girl's wearing big furry moccasins, like your first babysitter used to wear?'

I look him in the eye and pretend to laugh. 'Be real, mate,' I say. 'Come on, tell me some more about this guy Kevin.'

I figure that Justin won't be able to resist this particular sidetrack and I'm right. Over the next ten minutes I find out that Kevin was in Gay Liberation in the seventies; Kevin

has six close friends who've died of AIDS; Kevin reckons people helped him when he was young so he wants to help other young people now; Kevin lent Juss a book called *How Do I Talk to My Parents?* which means that Juss can see him again when he returns it.

And while I'm listening, I keep on thinking about the girl at the Dream Machine and I keep on thinking about Nicole. I keep wondering why I stuffed up so badly with both of them and I keep wondering whether I should have another try at talking to Juss about it. I'm just about to cut into the Kevin rave and say something to him when Anna bursts through the door.

She's smiling again, like she hasn't smiled since the accident. (Anna's smile. Softens stone. Makes music. Brightens grey days.) For a moment I think she's finally faced facts and broken off with Terry and then she tells us — well, Juss had already hinted at it last week but I didn't believe him — she tell us that she and Terry are getting married.

I suppose I ought to go on and finish off this episode. I mean, I've sorted things out with Justin and I know the type of rave I want to have with him some day, if he's interested in talking to anyone except Fabulous Kevin. Obviously, the next step is to sort out all that stuff about Nicole and the Dream Machine girl and Anna and so on.

But frankly, I don't give a damn. I didn't say much to Anna, anyway, because I had to head off to Dad's place for another game of wolves-in-the-garden with Tate, which sweated the last of the booze out of my system. Then I staggered home and wrote down the conversation with Juss, to get that out of my system too, and right now I just want to lie down on my bed and sleep for a week and forget all about wild nights and wild women and wild feelings and everything.

So that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Carson's Notes

Okay, you win. You've finally convinced me that technique is just as important as the feeling in a story and you've done it in the most disarming way possible — by letting me see a totally uncensored account of something that only happened a few hours before you wrote about it. I was with you all the way, I felt for you at every step of your wild night ... and I have to confess that in the end I missed the sense of structure you brought to your previous stories.

I wanted to find out what Anna said about Terry. I wanted to know where Mick's long rave about exogamy fitted in. I wanted you to tie everything together in the last paragraph. In short, I wanted the story to have some sort of shape, except that, as you said yourself, you can only see the shape of a story afterwards, when you've had time to understand what was going on.

So now I know. Obviously I always respond to shape and structure at an unconscious level, even when I think I'm mainly responding to the emotional impact of a story. Of course, this is in complete contradiction to the comments I made on your last piece, where I'd pretty much decided in favour of stories based on strong emotions, so I'm glad I've already warned you that teachers keep on learning all the time.

Mind you, I don't agree that this piece scores zero for technique. You may be spilling your guts but you haven't lost your knack of picking the right word and the effective image. At some points, I have to say this actually made me wonder whether you were being quite as open and spontaneous as you appeared to be — after all, an ability with words can be used to hide things, as well as to reveal things. So don't worry, Rhett, you're still Mr Enigmatic. There's still a lot hidden below the surface, even here.

For example, you don't actually mention Terry very often in this piece and yet I could feel his presence all the way through. He's clearly been a bit of a role model to you, in a way that Justin and Con and Manny haven't, and I'd tend to see the whole wild night as a delayed reaction to his accident. The other guys went on a rampage straight away: you left it till later on. If this is a worry, just remember it's okay to ask for professional help with this sort of thing — you don't have to be cracking up in order to see a counsellor. On the other hand, if you can get it out of your system by writing it down — well, that's one of the many and varied things that writing's for.

One last thing: I had an interesting talk with your stepfather at Parents' Night about Raymond Carver, Rhett Foley and other matters. (I was sorry I didn't get to meet up with Meredith again but perhaps she's planning to come to another Parents' Night later on?) Anyway, I couldn't help noticing that Mick's got a pretty romantic view of writers. So I thought I'd better remind you that, even if you decide you want to be a writer, you're not obliged to become driven and self-destructive — you don't automatically have to take on Mick's point of view.

Or mine either, come to that.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name _____

Date begun _____

Date Completed _____

Title _____

Purpose _____

Audience _____

Redrafted

Number of drafts

Writer's comments Oh wow. Biographer, you
are not going to believe what just
popped out of the printer. I won't
even try to fill in the rest of this
cover sheet. Just turn the page
and you'll get as big a shock as
I did.

Teacher's signature: _____

Date _____

Hi, Mr Biographer. It's me, Solange Foley. Or LoneRanger — that's my tag, for when I'm being a computer hacker. Mind you, it wasn't hard to hack in here. I just had to pick the right file name in the Mac Plus's directory. BIOGRAPHER. Wouldn't you know it? Rhett probably thinks I'm too dumb to understand what that means. But I got it straight away. I've heard him and Mick raving on. All these major fantasies about how they're going to be famous writers one day.

Well, I've read through this load of crap and I tell you what, I wouldn't want to be Rhett Foley's biographer. Boy, what an ego! My brother is really, really up himself.

He tells lies too and he fools people into believing them. It's time somebody set the record straight. Like me, for example. So here goes, Mr Biographer. I'm going to tell you the real truth about my family.

Except, where do I start? It's not easy. He tells lies about everyone.

Okay, I know now. I want to say something about Jeanette. Rhett makes her sound really awful. But if he's so cool, why does he care whether she wears pink tracksuits and matching lipstick and that?

I reckon he's just jealous of Jeanette, cos of her being married to Dad. I'm not knocking

him for that. It was hard for me to handle too. But I thought about it and now I like Jeanette. Rhett's supposed to be so smart but he hasn't even started thinking about it.

I'll tell you something really weird. Rhett's always putting Dad down. Like, he keeps talking as if Dad was only interested in money, nothing else. So why does he bother being jealous of Jeanette, when he reckons he doesn't care about Dad anyway? If you can figure that one out, Mr Biographer, I might even buy your stupid book.

I suppose it's probably got something to do with Mick. Everything does, around here. Rhett says he sort of decided Mick was his real father, which is fair enough, in a way. But I still reckon he could like Mick without dumping on Dad. Dad's okay.

Oh boy. Lies must be catching. Now I've started telling them as well. Not about Dad, about Mick. Actually, I don't think it's fair enough for Rhett to like Mick better than he likes Dad. Actually, I can't stand Mick. He sits around feeling sorry for himself, all the time.

But guess what? If Mick sits around feeling sorry for himself, Rhett reckons he's being sensitive or something. If I do exactly the same thing, Rhett reckons I'm sulking. He must've said that at least fifty times in his stupid writing folio.

He never says anything good about me. Not one single thing.

Maybe you think I deserve it, Mr Biographer. Maybe you think I'm a little sneak, hacking into Rhett's Mac Plus and reading all his private stuff. Well, he started it. Yesterday him and Mick were cracking all these stupid jokes about sexy strangers and Rhett got into doing this send up of a typical romance and I recognised it, cos it was the plot of *Heartbreak City*, which is my favourite *Teen Dream* novel. So then I knew he'd been sneaking into my room and going through my things. So I decided to go through his things, for revenge.

What makes Rhett so sure that I'm totally sucked in by the *Teen Dreams*, anyway? Actually, I'm not even interested in all that love stuff. I read them cos they're about *feelings*. Like Ms Carson says, Rhett wouldn't understand that.

And there's another thing. It's bad enough when Rhett keeps criticising me at home. Why does he have to do it at school as well? I really like Ms Carson. She took our English class once, when Mr Weissmuller was away, and I was really, really looking forward to having her for my English teacher in year eleven or twelve. Not any more,

though. Not now I know what Rhett's been telling her about me. It's not fair. No one could say that's fair, could they, Mr Biographer?

I don't know why I keep calling you Mr Biographer, except that, when I think about it, you'd have to be a guy. Rhett probably wouldn't even let a woman write his biography. In case you haven't noticed, he blames women for everything. Jeanette, Nicole, Ms Carson, that girl at the Dream Machine, me. Especially me. Like, it's all my fault if he has this wild night. It couldn't possibly be his fault, for being so screwed up.

But what have I ever done to him? Nothing, compared to what he's done to me. He tells everyone I'm a sulky little brat, just cos I can't help getting mad about things, and everyone believes him and then I get even madder and they believe him even more.

Plus he invented that horrible nickname for me. I hate my name. Talk about unfair. First I'm going to be called Scarlett, just cos it matches with Rhett. Next, Dad ditches that idea and I get Solange, as second best. And then Rhett decides to shorten it to Solo, which is the worst of the lot. Just listen to it, Mr Biographer. So-lo Fo-lee. It sounds like a cartoon character off a kiddies' TV program. But everybody who hears it, even just once, always calls me Solo for ever after.

This is how it goes around our house. Rhett thinks Mum's perfect, and so does Mick. So naturally Mum thinks both of them are perfect too.

That makes me the odd one out, cos I don't think anyone's perfect. (Not even Jed Johnson from Silicon Fish.) But you're not allowed to complain about anyone in this family. Like, if I tell Mum that Rhett's been picking on me, she just goes, 'Oh, Solo, you do make life difficult for yourself.' She shuts me up. She's always doing that. She doesn't want to know, and the same goes for Rhett and Mick.

I can give you another good example of that, Mr Biographer. Remember how Rhett thought it was so great that Mum sat us down and explained all about Mick when her and Dad were getting divorced?

Well, I didn't think it was great at all. The message I got was, 'Okay kiddies, don't make a fuss. You better accept Mick — or else.'

But that's not fair. I mean, look at Dad. He'd like Rhett to like Jeanette but he doesn't force him into it. So why does Mum want to force me into liking Mick? Why does Rhett go along with her?

I love Mum. Don't get me wrong. I just wish — anyway, I do love Mum.

Rhett reckons there's something the matter with Justin, cos Juss criticises his parents the same way he'd criticise anyone else. Me personally, I reckon there's something the matter with Rhett. He's too good to be true. He sucks up to Mum and Mick all the time. He worries about Juss and Anna and Manny and Con. He fusses over all those drooby kids whose parents are getting divorced.

Fact is, he runs around feeling responsible for practically everybody in the entire world, except me.

And Terry. Probably because we really need it.

Ms Carson thinks Rhett got upset about Terry's accident cos he's so ultra-sensitive. But I think he felt guilty, cos he wrote in this writing folio how he wanted something to happen and whammo — it did. That's his big ego again. I mean, only little kids think it has to be all their fault if there's an accident or if their parents get divorced or whatever.

Anyway, if Rhett's so cut up about Terry, how come he hasn't ever visited him in hospital? I bet Ms Carson takes it for granted that he's dropping in on Terry all the time. He isn't, though. He hasn't gone to see him once.

Nicole was right when she called him Mr Enigmatic. I live with him but I have to read this stupid writing folio to find out what he thinks. And it's all lies, anyway.

I hate you, Rhett. I really, really hate you.

Okay, Mr Biographer, I'd better stop now, in case Rhett comes home and catches me. Besides, I've already told you enough to mess up your stupid biography. Lots of luck, Mr B. You'll need it.

I hope Rhett doesn't get around to checking this disk, cos then he'll probably wipe everything I've written and you'll never be able to find out the truth.

I hope he checks this disk real soon, cos then he'll know exactly what I think of him.

Rhett's Notes

It makes me sick in my stomach to think of Solo reading all of this, especially the stuff about the wild night. I want to throttle her, very, very slowly. Okay, I went into her room and read some of her books but it's not the same thing. Even Solo ought to be able to see that.

She reckons she had to read my writing folio in order to know what I think. Well, I never knew she thought all those crazy things about me, either. I don't tell lies. I'm not jealous of Jeanette. I don't blame women for everything. If that's what Solo truly believes, how come she's never mentioned it before?

Then again, maybe she *has* mentioned it. I can't be sure. I don't usually bother listening to Solo, because she's always whingeing on about one thing or another. Frankly, it never occurred to me that any of her whinges might be important.

So perhaps she's got a point when she says I don't want to know. I'm definitely feeling a bit shaken right now. I can handle her ideas about Mick, because I figured out ages ago that Solo and I saw Mick differently. But when it comes to the things she said about Mum and Dad — hey, she's lost me there. My mind just goes blank.

I suppose she shouldn't have needed to write everything down before she could get my attention. I suppose — oh shit — I suppose Solange and I ought to start talking to each other. I'll print out the rest of the stuff on this disk and then I'll think about it.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun September 2nd

Date Completed September 9th

Title THE BROADER PICTURE

Purpose To analyse a piece of writing by somebody.

Audience General - no particular age group or whatever.

Redrafted NO Number of drafts ~

Writer's comments This time you're getting two pieces for the price of one - an essay and an instruction sheet. I wrote the first piece on impulse. It's a bit scrappy but I'd like some suggestions on how to redraft it because I

Teacher's signature:

Carson

Date

16th Sept.

want to include something in my folio that will (a) prove I can write non-fiction and (b) move the action along at the same time.

Then I scribbled down the instruction sheet in class yesterday, while you were talking about manuals and technical writing, so I'm handing it in as well because you might get a laugh out of it.

The Broader Picture

This afternoon I received a letter from a friend of mine that really stirred me up. For a while I just stormed round the house and kicked the furniture but then I remembered how my English teacher had said that writing can be used for practical purposes, as well as for self-expression. So I decided to go through the letter, a paragraph at a time, in order to work out where it made sense and where it didn't.

Here's how the letter begins.

Hi, Rhett

We've got to talk!!!

I stopped coming to Mr Bicer's café because I couldn't stand the sight of your blank, shut-off face. I thought you were a mate of mine, Foley, but mates don't sit back and chat about their fabulous English teacher when somebody might be dying. Juss asked questions. Why couldn't you?

This opening paragraph is a good example of an argument based on a false premise. On the surface the complaint sounds thoroughly justified but the writer of the letter seems to have forgotten that she told me she wanted at least one part of her life — the part she spent at the shopfront — to stay exactly the same. Being 'a mate of hers', I naturally tried to do as she asked, even though there were times when it wasn't easy. And now she turns around and blames me for obeying orders.

Mind you, I can understand why the writer of the letter is behaving illogically at present. After all, she's been under a lot of stress. I'm even prepared to admit that I might've made a mistake.

But I still think she ought to be able to see that it was an honest mistake.

Another thing, Foley. What makes you so keen to judge me all the time? Right from the start I got the impression that you didn't approve of Terry and me getting together. How come? Because you didn't want to see one of your precious Kingston Hall mates involved with a wog? I hope not, that's for sure.

Anyhow, I kept thinking: Anna, don't be stupid, Rhett's your *friend*. But then I came back to let you know that we were planning to get married — and all your prejudices came right out in the open.

I don't think I need to buy into the letter writer's accusations of racism. After all, why would I have become friends with her in the first place, if I was like that? Still, she's on the right track when she suspects that I might be concerned about this marriage. I am — but not for the reasons that she thinks.

I mean, what are you supposed to say if one of your friends tells you that she's getting married? Basically, you can react in one of two ways. You might instantly picture a bride waltzing with her Prince Charming down a long hall of mirrors. You may think of words like 'forever', 'commitment', 'a life together', 'letting the whole world know that you're in love'. In that case, you're the romantic type and you'll probably say, 'What wonderful news! I'm so happy for you.'

On the other hand, you may instantly picture a roomful of feuding relatives, embarrassing speeches and telegrams, a honeymoon where you're supposed to act like Romeo and Juliet when you're completely and utterly exhausted. You might remember all the people (including your own mother and stepfather) who've decided that they can make a totally valid commitment to each other without getting married. In that case, you're the practical type and you'll probably say, 'If that's what you really want, then fine. But why bother? What difference does a wedding make?'

Mind you, that's only the broad overview. There's usually some more specific factors that you'll need to take into consideration as well. For example, what are you supposed to say if one of your friends tells you that she's getting married when she's only seventeen?

This changes things straight away. Even if you're the most romantic of romantic types, you're likely to be worried by the idea of your friend missing out on all that exploring and experimenting and generally having a good time. And if you're the practical type, you'll simply shake your head and start quoting the divorce statistics. Either way, you'll probably want your friend to get a bit more experience of life, before

she plunges into such a major kind of commitment.

That's fair enough, isn't it? Let's see what the writer of the letter says.

Frankly, Foley, I'm getting enough shit about this wedding without you joining in. My aunties are around here all the time, going, 'Anna, you're so young' and 'Anna, is this really what you want?' and 'Anna, have you thought about a long engagement?'

So I point out that they don't think I'm too young to decide about apprenticeships and uni courses and the career I'm going to follow for the rest of my life. I ask them why they can't trust me to make the same sort of long-term decisions about my personal life. I tell them that, right from my very first conversation with Terry, I knew I'd finally met a guy who matched me on every level and I ask them what we're supposed to prove by sitting on our bums for a year or two.

Actually, the writer of the letter could be onto something here. Seventeen year olds are constantly being asked to make all kinds of major life decisions: I know that from my own experience. It's true that I'd freak right out if somebody asked me to make a decision about marriage but then again, nobody's asking. Given that I haven't ever experienced 'love at first sight' myself, maybe I'm not really qualified to make judgements about my friend's situation.

On the other hand, that's not necessarily the whole picture. Let's consider another question. What are you supposed to say if one of your friends tells you that she's getting married, when she's only seventeen and the guy's paraplegic?

No two ways about it, at this point you'd be bound to feel that the cards are well and truly stacked against your friend. As the divorce statistics show, it's hard enough to make a go of marriage under the best of circumstances. But when one person is starting out with some serious disadvantages and the other person is making some serious sacrifices, you'll probably find yourself thinking, 'This can't possibly work.'

Just don't expect the writer of this letter to agree with you.

Then, as if the 'you're too young' line wasn't bad enough, I get my aunties and my uncles and my chem teacher and the school counsellor and the man who runs the milk bar on the corner all raving on about how we're bound to have serious problems because Terry's a para.

That one makes me so mad I could spit.

Of course we'll have problems. Who doesn't? Jesus, the entire world thought that Prince Charles and Lady Di were the most perfect match of all time and things still didn't work out for them. You can't say a relationship's guaranteed to succeed just because the people in it happen to fit the stereotype of

the ideal couple, any more than you can say that a relationship's guaranteed to fail just because the people in it happen to be young or gay or disabled or any of the million other things that get their friends and relations all hot and bothered.

By the way, since it seems to matter so much to everyone, I might as well tell you now that no, sex isn't totally out for us, okay?

(Oh wow. I don't know why the writer of the letter insisted on including that piece of information. It's none of my business. And I certainly wouldn't want to know any more of the details. Anyway, back to the letter.)

So that's why I talked Terry into getting married — because it seems like the only way to force everyone into seeing that we're for real. But we're only going to be able to pull it off with a little help from our friends.

How about it, Foley? You've been acting pretty strangely towards me and Terry lately. Are you our friend, or not?

Well, there it is. What are you supposed to say if one of your friends tells you that she's getting married, when she's only seventeen and the guy's paraplegic, because marriage seems to her like the best way to make other people take them seriously?

As a matter of fact, this kind of logic could easily turn all your ideas upside down. You may have been assuming that the writer of the letter was a romantic type, so high on fantasies and daydreams that she'd basically lost touch with reality. But once you've rung her and talked to her and asked a few more questions, you might discover that she's almost unnervingly practical. She may not be thinking about wedding dresses and honeymoons at all: instead, she may be thinking about how to find a house that can be altered to suit the guy's special requirements. She may not want to rave on endlessly about how she loves the guy: instead, she may just tell you that they'll need to work together far more closely than most couples, so they might as well get started on it straight away.

And while you're listening to her, you may suddenly remember your mum saying, 'Look, isn't that wonderful?' every time she saw a photo of Margot Fonteyn, the world's greatest ballerina, sitting beside her diplomat husband in his wheelchair. You might begin to wonder why you used to agree with your mum and why you started a major argument about exactly the same issue with your friend. After that, you may go on to wonder why people are so incredibly keen on stories about true love triumphing over obstacles, when in everyday life they seem to want love to run as smoothly as possible.

At any rate, somewhere along the way you'll certainly decide that your friend's tactics have worked. She's forced you to take her seriously. She's forced you to think a lot. And in the end all your thinking will probably lead you right back to your original

question.

What are you supposed to say if one of your friends tells you that she's getting married?

This is what I said. I said, 'Oh Anna, you can't do that.' I didn't plan what I was going to say. I just said it. Anna burst into tears and I got up and walked out of the shopfront.

That's why Anna had to write me a letter in the end. That's why I had to talk to her. And that's why I'm still sitting here at my Mac Plus, trying to get past my own reactions and see the broader picture.

How to Become a Human Being in Ten Not-So-Easy Steps

1. Get home on Friday afternoon to find a letter from your friend A that starts, 'Rhett, we've got to talk.' Freak right out. Ring A. Talk.
2. Discover that everybody at Central Secondary College and Kingston Hall knows you haven't been to see your friend T in hospital. Discover that everybody has been discussing you nonstop. Discover that A has decided to do something about it.
3. Meet up with A next day. Catch a tram to the rehab unit. Walk into the ward. Look at T.
4. Focus on the hospital bed with its ropes and pulleys. Focus on the red scar across T's forehead and the lines of pain drawn down from his mouth and the unexpected muscles on his arms and shoulders and the wheelchair next to his bed. Finally focus on T's eyes. Start to wonder what you've been so scared about.
5. Notice someone else sitting on the end of the bed. Recognise your friend M. Ask a few questions and find out that M has been there almost every day, running errands, reading aloud, playing cards and generally making himself useful to the entire ward. Realise that you're surprised. Realise that you thought M was basically a wimp who couldn't handle anything too real.
6. Admit that you're basically a wimp who can't handle anything too real.
7. Apologise to T for not coming to see him before. Remember that apologies are generally pretty useless. Tell a few stories about school. Wonder whether this is totally tactless. Try to think of something you could offer to do. Stare down at your

feet.

8. Hear T's voice, saying, 'Hey, mate, it's good to see you.' Realise that he means it. Mumble, 'Listen, I'll be back, no worries.' Hurry out into the corridor. Lean against the wall for a while. Turn around to find A watching you.
9. Apologise to A for what you said to her six weeks ago. Take off down the corridor fast, before you become so much of a human being that you crack up in front of her.
10. Walk home through the rain. Pause on the front step, get out your hanky and scrub your face dry. Go inside. Close the door.

Carson's Notes

Very interesting, Rhett. Did you really expect me to get a laugh out of this? Frankly, I can't remember the last time I felt so angry. Oh sure, I suspected that you were hiding something but I thought you were just skirting around some personal or family problems. I never would've guessed that you were holding back some simple, basic facts, like the fact that you hadn't been to visit Terry in hospital or the fact that you'd had such a stupid, self-centred reaction to Anna's news. It's left me wondering whether I can trust a single thing that you've said in this writing folio.

I'm disappointed in you, Rhett. Disappointed and hurt.

Two cups of coffee later, I'm a bit less disappointed and a bit more understanding. After all, even if you haven't been telling me everything, I still know a lot about you and I haven't ever told you much about myself in return. You only know that I'm married with two children and that I like Japanese movies, Thai food and Indonesian music. You don't know that Jack and I almost split up at the start of this year and that I've spent the past six months taking a long hard look at myself, revising my opinions about everything and recognising how much I've changed since I was a fat unhappy kid from the country who felt completely lost at Melbourne University and desperately admired people like Meredith Taylor and —

Ouch. This is the second time I've regretted writing in biro. Very well, that settles it. Much as I like to think of myself as the spontaneous type, I'm writing these comments in pencil from now on.

Which reminds me that I'd better get around to giving you some comments on your essay. You're right, Rhett — it *is* pretty scrappy. I could see that you were trying to give it some structure with the recurring question, 'What are you supposed to say when one of your friends tells you that she's getting married?' but frankly, I think you're evading the issue by using the second person instead of the first.

Whenever I say something like, 'You can't help feeling ...', my counsellor always asks me to change it to '*I* can't help feeling ...' so I've started to notice how often we all use 'you' to

distance ourselves from what we're saying. You've got an interesting topic here but I reckon you need to regard this first draft as a practice run for writing a more direct, personal piece about marriage.

And listen, I'm glad you talked to Anna in the end. I'm glad you finally saw her point of view — even though I'm still not entirely sure what I think about her decision myself. I intended to say a whole lot more about the issues you raised in this piece but, as you see, I got angry and forgot. Maybe we could have a chat about it some time instead.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun October 8th

Date Completed October 15th

Title MOVING PICTURES

Purpose To practise writing a film script. (And to provide a grand scale cast-of-hundreds finale

Audience for my mini-novel)

The sort of people who go to the Carlton Moviehouse or watch the short film seasons on SBS.

Redrafted Yes Number of drafts One, so far

Writer's comments (Mick read it through, to help me get the film script layout right. He reckons it'd make a great commercial for adolescent angst!)

I just wanted to say don't worry, Carson, I wouldn't ever pass on any of

Teacher's signature:

Carson

Date

18th Oct.

Moving Pictures

1. INT. FIRENZE RECEPTIONS NIGHT 1

An enormous reception centre. Mirrored walls, sweeps of gold curtain, dozens of tables clustered round the edge of a dance floor. The bridal table stretches across one end of the room. At the other end of the room there is a dais for the band, with a narrow balcony on the wall above.

A big Italian wedding is in progress, with relatives and friends and even friends of friends all gathered around. The best man is just finishing his speech.

BEST MAN

Okay, I'd better get serious now and wish Tina and Vito Ferrante all the best for their life together. And while I'm at it, I'd like to chuck a few more good wishes in the direction of Vito's cousin, Anna Parente, and her fiance Terry Sampson. As you probably know, the two of them have been through some tough times lately and we're all really glad to see them here tonight.

He raises his champagne glass.

BEST MAN

So here's to Tina and Vito, and to Anna and Terry.
Go, team.

2. INT. ANNA'S TABLE NIGHT

A spotlight swings onto a nearby table. TERRY, who is in a wheelchair, laughs and shades his eyes. Beside him, ANNA makes a rude gesture into the glare.

ANNA

Listen, I know who's operating those lights.
I'll catch up with you later, Alex Ferrante!

TERRY reaches over to take her hand and they smile at each other as the spotlight swivels back to the bridal party.

On the opposite side of the table, MRS PARENTE, ANNA's mother, leans toward the young man sitting next to her.

MRS PARENTE

See, Rhett. I'll be a *nonna* soon. No one will worry that I'm a widow then, not like before. You want to know what I did today? I moved Giorgio's photo from the lounge room, into my bedroom.

RHETT

How come?

MRS PARENTE

Because I don't want Anna's children to see it and be sad. No one but me will ever see it there.

RHETT

Hey, don't give up so soon. You could get married again, easy.

MRS PARENTE shakes her head vehemently.

MRS PARENTE

You know, last week I watch a television program about all the creatures who have only one mate, for life. The swan and the painted shrimp and something else. And me.

RHETT

You've lost me there, Mrs P. That's way too romantic for me.

MRS PARENTE

I'm not telling you it's smart. I'm just telling you it's how I am. Anna's the same — she saw Terry and she knew, straight away. But she's more lucky than me.

RHETT

Lucky?

MRS PARENTE

You think dead is better? When you grow up, you'll understand what they say — while there's life, there's hope. Now, *scappa via*. Run along. Go and dance with a pretty girl. Don't sit here all night, talking to an old lady.

RHETT

You're the youngest old lady in the room, Mrs P.

MRS PARENTE laughs and shoos RHETT away.

RHETT moves around the table to stand behind TERRY and ANNA.

RHETT

This is probably as good a time as any to say congratulations.

TERRY

Go right ahead, mate. I know I'm a lucky guy.

RHETT doesn't say anything but his face shows that he doesn't think TERRY has been particularly lucky. He glances down and catches ANNA's knowing grin.

ANNA

Thanks, Rhett. You're working at it, aren't you?

RHETT

I have to work fairly hard to imagine you as a married lady. Remember when you played the Virgin Mary, back in kindergarten? You left Justin holding the baby and —

ANNA interrupts him.

ANNA

That was a long time ago.

At this point several other people come up to congratulate ANNA. RHETT has to move aside to make room for them.

He tries to catch TERRY's attention again but TERRY is talking to his friend MANNY, who is seated beside him, watching over him protectively.

RHETT studies them for a moment and then turns away.

3. INT. JUSTIN'S TABLE NIGHT

RHETT weaves through the crowd, heading for a table by the far wall.

The people here are younger and punkier, lounging across the table or cadging extra serves of food from the waiters. Most of them are Italian but there are two blonds amongst them, RHETT's friend JUSTIN and LEITH, a young woman of roughly the same age.

JUSTIN

G'day, Rhett. So you turned up, after all.

RHETT leans past him and grabs a glass of wine.

RHETT

Yeah. Why not?

JUSTIN

Rumour has it, you're still dead against Anna marrying Terry.

RHETT

Well, rumour got it wrong.

FRANCO, one of ANNA's cousins, swivels around in his chair.

FRANCO

Rumour's like that. You should hear some of the gossip about me at St Joseph's.

LEITH

Bet it's not as good as the things they said about me at Central Secondary College.

JUSTIN laughs and introduces RHETT to FRANCO, LEITH and VITO's sister DANI, who is sitting on the far side of LEITH.

RHETT goes to collect a spare chair. He tries to squeeze in beside JUSTIN but JUSTIN is chatting with FRANCO.

RHETT sits down next to LEITH instead. He fills his glass and gives her a challenging look.

RHETT

Leith Dunbar. I know the goss on you.
You're the one who had two girlfriends at once, aren't you?

LEITH

Still do. But so? What's it to you?

This time RHETT tries to sound more conciliatory.

RHETT

Hey, here we are at this totally traditional wedding, right? I'm interested, that's all. It's something different.

LEITH

Not to me, it isn't. I'm the same, wherever I go.

RHETT

Come on, don't bullshit me. I really want to know.

DANI drapes her arm around LEITH and speaks to RHETT across LEITH's shoulder.

DANI

Leith's never noticed that it takes guts to be different.
But you're right — most of us need to work at it.

RHETT

So how do you manage?

DANI

Dunno. The most I can say is, once you've made a start,
it gets easier all the time.

Involuntarily RHETT glances across at ANNA and TERRY. His eyes are thoughtful. When he turns back to LEITH and DANI, they are whispering together. RHETT checks the room and spots MANNY's brother CON. He waves and CON hurries over.

CON

Jesus wept, it's Leith Dunbar. I haven't seen you
since —

LEITH

Since you were yelling 'leso' at me in the street?

CON is unabashed.

CON

Yeah, that'd be right. You still a leso, then?
Nah, don't bother — I can see you are.

LEITH

Like I can see that you're still a meathead.

Despite the insults, they are clearly pleased to see each other. RHETT's face registers surprise.

LEITH and CON continue to spar in a friendly fashion. After a while, RHETT stands up and offers CON his chair.

RHETT

Have a seat, mate. You obviously fit in here better than I do.

No one answers, because no one is listening to him. RHETT drifts away and stands by the wall, arms folded, surveying the room.

The speeches have ended by now. The band starts to play and the bride and groom move out onto the dance floor. The lights dim and a spotlight follows them as they begin the bridal waltz.

RHETT looks behind him and notices a flight of steps, leading up to the balcony.

4. INT. BALCONY NIGHT

RHETT leans on the balcony railing. Below him, the bridal waltz is coming to an end. As the bride and groom return to their seats, the bride gives the groom a push that propels him towards the next table. The groom steps in front of ANNA and bows.

ANNA and the groom waltz together down the length of the dance floor. Reflected in the wall of mirrors, the groom seems shadowy and anonymous. ANNA, in contrast, is sharply defined by the spotlight, her full skirts flying out as she sways and whirls in his arms, her small face serious and determined.

By the time the music ends, they are back at the point where they started from. The groom fades unobtrusively into the background as TERRY wheels his chair forward. He holds out both hands and ANNA clasps them tightly.

ANNA smiles.

RHETT turns to face the camera.

RHETT

Pretty moving, hey? Who knows, they may even

live happily ever after. I mean, what would I know about it?

5. INT. FIRENZE RECEPTIONS. NIGHT

RHETT hovers at the edge of the dance floor. He nods simultaneously to MRS PARENTE, waltzing past with the groom's father, and to LEITH and DANI who are bopping away in the middle of the dance floor.

He tries to wave to JUSTIN but JUSTIN is still talking too intently with FRANCO to notice him.

Then he looks down the room toward ANNA's table.

He shrugs and starts to push through the crowd, heading for the door.

6. EXT. STREET. NIGHT

Inside Firenze Receptions, the band is playing 'The Way We Were'. Outside, it is raining.

RHETT walks away down the street, shoulders hunched, hands deep in his pockets, looking like James Dean.

ROLL CREDITS.

Behind the credits, a series of snapshots:

ANNA, JUSTIN and RHETT, seen through the shopfront window;

ANNA and TERRY, facing each other in the street outside RHETT's father's house, while RHETT watches them from the sidelines;

RHETT in a hospital corridor, holding ANNA's shoulders as she stares into the room where TERRY is;

ANNA, waltzing down the length of the dance floor, her face serious and determined;

ANNA, clasping TERRY's hands.

ANNA, smiling.

END CREDITS.

7. EXT. STREET. NIGHT

The band from Firenze Receptions is now playing ‘Singing in the Rain’.

In the distance RHETT jumps a puddle, catches hold of a lamp post and swings himself around it.

He doesn’t look like James Dean any more. He looks more like Gene Kelly, dancing and singing in the rain.

He disappears around a corner, still dancing.

Carson’s Notes

Dare accepted — although I don’t feel as if I’m taking any great risk by writing these comments in biro. Basically, I just want to tell you how much I enjoyed visualising all the action at Firenze Receptions and getting a last glimpse of Anna and Terry and Con and Manny. ‘Moving Pictures’ mightn’t be a perfect short film — there’s a bit too much talking and far too many characters — but it’s the perfect end to your mini-novel.

What’s more, I reckon you made an excellent choice in deciding to write a film script. By its nature, film allows you to go for some full-on emotional effects — I could practically hear the background music swelling up as Anna waltzed down the hall or you made your James Dean exit in the rain — and yet you were able to avoid the sort of full-on emotional language that bothered you in your *Teen Dream* piece. I was pleased that you managed to end the film on an optimistic note and I hope this means that you’re ending the year on an optimistic note as well.

By now you’re clearly ready to make the final selection for your writing folio. Here are my suggestions:

1. ‘Picture This’ — descriptive piece — introduces Anna, Justin and Rhett.
2. ‘Pictures in my Mind’ — personal piece — Anna meets Terry.
3. ‘I Could See The Whole Picture’ — short story — Terry’s accident.
4. ‘The Broader Picture’ — essay — Anna and Terry’s decision to marry.

5. 'Moving Pictures' — film script — grand finale.

If you agree with this, then the unifying theme of your mini-novel would be the story of Anna and Terry, as seen through your eyes. Let me add straight off that, in many ways, it'd be a shame to lose all the material about you and Nicole, or about you and Justin. Still, in my opinion, these are your five best pieces for the year and if they're also your least personal pieces — well, that's just the way it is.

To round this off, I want to give away one of the very deepest secrets about being a teacher. It's not always easy to keep getting to know a whole range of interesting kids and then saying goodbye to them, year after year. But ~~you can cope with that~~ I can cope with that as long as I remember we're still part of the same city, which means that some day I might open a magazine and see you there as one of the writers, or I might go to a play and see you there as one of the actors; or — possibly — even — I might go to a school and see you there as one of the teachers.

I certainly hope so.

Good luck to you, Rhett, for whatever you decide to do.

VCE ENGLISH

WRITING FOLIO COVER PAGE

Name RHETT FOLEY

Date begun December 5th

Date Completed December 5th

Title None

Purpose Nothing much

Audience No one

Redrafted Not Exactly Number of drafts No more

Writer's comments (I wrote it in longhand
and then typed it into the Mac Plus
but I didn't change a word along
the way, I swear.

One last thing, ms Biographer
(After what Solo said I've decided

Teacher's signature:

Date

that you'd better be a Ms if you're going to tell the truth about me.) The next few pages are a sort of postscript to my writing folio, just filling in a few missing details. You know all the rest, so you might as well have this too.

And listen, don't forget to go easy on me, okay?

December 5th

Dear Carson,

Here's something I never got around to trying in my writing folio: a letter. What's more, it's a special kind of letter. It's a letter that will never get sent.

So why write it then? Well, I need to tell somebody what I did today and you're the obvious choice. No one else knows anywhere near as much about the things that've been going on inside my head over the past year. (Except for Solo, of course. I keep forgetting that my sister's read most of my writing folio too.)

Anyhow, this is what happened. I worked on the Mac Plus till four a.m. last night, typing up your comments, printing out my first drafts and reading through them again, from beginning to end. After that I collapsed into bed and woke up around ten o'clock, with this overwhelming feeling that I was trapped in a time warp.

For a while I just lay there, convinced that if I went downstairs I'd find Mick still drinking whisky and trying to write that Style ad — or Solo still whingeing about my telephone counselling — or Mum still clutching her forehead and saying, 'Rhett. Solange. What's the matter now?' Then gradually, one thought at a time, I started to put the pieces together. The truth was, history was genuinely repeating itself. It was exactly the same set up as my wild night, when I'd worked on the Mac Plus until dawn and collapsed into bed and woken up with an overwhelming compulsion to go to the shopfront.

It seemed like some sort of sign. I dragged myself out of bed, pulled on my clothes and went to the shopfront.

Once I got there, the time warp almost sucked me in again. I stood and stared at the dusty glass. Stared at the grimy curtains, dangling from a plastic string. Stared at the group of card-players, as silent and settled as if they were in their own lounge room. Stared through the cobwebs of cigarette smoke at the empty table near the back of the shop.

Then I stepped across the invisible boundary line and walked in. Mr Bicer nodded to me as I went past and Sami appeared from nowhere and loomed over me. 'Three coffees, please,' I said to him. His dark eyes flickered across the two empty chairs but he brought the coffees.

I waited for another ten minutes, even though I knew Anna and Justin weren't going to turn up. (Well, I was fairly sure of it, at any rate, although a guy can always hope.) Finally I reached for the nearest of the three cups. Maybe I had toasts on my mind, after Anna's cousin's wedding and all those toasts to the bride and groom, but anyway I lifted the cup slightly before I drank and said a silent toast under my breath.

This one's for Justin.

And while I sipped the bittersweet coffee, I thought about Juss. I started to write about him, as well, in this letter that will never get sent. It's a bit of a new departure for me, I suppose. Just for once, I'm not writing about things after they've happened. I'm writing here in the shopfront, on the back of some leaflets advertising a new Turkish restaurant.

I'm writing now.

I'm also writing to you, Carson, which automatically reminds me of my writing folio. You reckoned that my folio was basically the story of Anna and Terry but Juss had a story too, remember. I didn't tell it properly, though — partly because I got a whole lot more churned up about Anna but partly because I've got a tendency to take Juss for granted. I thought he'd always be there. I didn't realise he was only hanging around because he didn't really have a life of his own — and now he has.

You'd get a real kick out of seeing Justin and Franco together, Carson. Franco's not your typical Italian stallion. He's a neat, quiet, polite guy with a flat top and he was far more shocked than me about Juss's attitude to his folks. Right from the start he spent stacks of time listening to Mrs Petrie's opinions and laughing at Mr Petrie's jokes and generally bringing out the best in both of them. If I hadn't been there when he told Mrs Petrie about his first time with a guy (not Juss), I wouldn't have believed it was possible. You've got to watch those neat, quiet, polite guys. They can get away with practically anything.

Mind you, Franco couldn't have charmed the Petries unless they'd been ready for it, right? I used to think Justin was way too hard on his folks but now I'm starting to wonder. Maybe he had a point, after all. Maybe everyone needs to push their parents away for a while, in order to come back to them again as an adult.

Personally, though, I wouldn't even know where to start. For a guy who identifies with James Dean, off and on, I'd have to admit I'm not much of a rebel at home. Up until yesterday that wouldn't have bothered me. I would've just told you I'd got nothing to rebel against because Mum was more like a friend than a parent. Except that when I read through my writing folio last night I couldn't help noticing that, out of my family, Solange and Mick and Jeanette come across loud and clear, whereas Mum and Dad seem like these remote, shadowy figures in the background.

Especially Mum.

That's pretty confusing, because I thought I knew Mum best of anyone in the world. And it gets even more confusing as it goes on. For example, I can relate to Mum far better than I can relate to Dad but, when it comes to making my own choices, I can't hack the kind of grand, dramatic, make-or-break love that Mum went for with Mick. I'd much rather go for the everyday, low key stuff, same as Dad and Jeanette. And yet I can't relate to Dad and Jeanette half as well as I can relate to Mum and Mick ...

But hey, I'm not meant to be thinking about myself at present. I'm meant to be sitting here and thinking about my two oldest friends. Which leads me on to the next cup of coffee and the next toast.

This one's for Anna.

Anna. Anna. What the fuck am I supposed to say about Anna? No point looking out the window for inspiration: nothing there but heavy grey clouds, squashing the life out of the grubby houses. No point looking round the shopfront either: nothing here but Sami scowling at the cover girl on his magazine and the old guys slapping their cards down in a steady, relentless rhythm. No point at all. It all seems pretty pointless.

Not to Anna and Terry, though. Right now, they're busy making plans, plans and more plans. Plans for their wedding. Plans for their house. Plans about where Anna can get work and what Terry's going to do next. Terry's folks have given them a lot of money and Mrs Parente's giving them a lot of time and they're all convinced that everything's going to work out fine.

Still, even though I talked myself right around in that essay I wrote, somehow I can't manage to join in on the general enthusiasm. It's hard for anyone to make a go of it in this world and Terry's got a few strikes against him before he even starts. Okay, Anna's a battler. Okay, Anna's tough and stubborn and loving and loyal and smart. I'm just not sure whether that's enough.

Then again, maybe I can't see Terry as clearly as she can. We're not good mates any more, not the way we used to be. The accident changed all of that. Manny rallied around from the start, Con visited reasonably regularly and even Lindsay kept sending bundles of books and stuff that he'd raided from his folks. But I piked out completely and neither Terry nor I can forget it. Like you said, Carson, he was a bit of a hero to me. I didn't want to know that heroes can be vulnerable, just the same as ordinary guys.

Well, tough shit. If I've learned one thing this year, it's that there are no guarantees. Look at Juss and Anna and me, for example. Justin's gay, Anna's a girl and a wog: you can say what you like but that still counts against you. I'm straight and Anglo and a guy: you can say what you like but that still counts in your favour. And yet, despite the disadvantages they started out with, they're on the move. Despite the advantages I started out with, I'm marking time.

Which is why the two of them are out there somewhere, living their lives, while I'm stuck here in the shopfront, thinking about them and missing them both and reaching out towards the third cup of coffee.

This one's for Rhett.

Okay, Carson, here goes. It's the moment of truth — the moment you've been waiting for — the reason I'm writing this letter to you and no one else. You always suspected I was leading up to a big confession about some 'personal or family problem' and you were right ... but I bet it won't be the kind of thing you were expecting. My problem's not like the 'True Confessions' pieces you used to read out in class, all those kids writing about rape and domestic violence and cutting themselves. Oh no. My problem's even harder to talk about than that. Brace yourself, Carson, and let me fill you in on Mr Enigmatic's best-kept secret.

I'm non-exogamous.

Ha. Tricked you there, didn't I? I actually told you straight out, back in my 'wild night' piece, but you didn't realise what you were being told. Remember how you said in your comments that you didn't understand where Mick's rave about exogamy fitted in? Hey, I played fair, I gave you all the clues. You should've known.

I suppose I'd better run the facts past you again. I'm non-exogamous. Therefore I'm not turned on by sexy strangers. Therefore, I can only get attracted to people I know well. Now can you guess the next part of my best-kept secret?

Now can you guess that I'm in love with Anna Parente?

Well, I am — and I have been all year. What's more, I fell in love with her at the precise moment (*Anna's smile*) when she fell in love with Terry. You don't need to tell me how sick that is, Carson. I've had a year to figure out the implications for myself.

It gets worse too. Once you know how I feel about Anna, you can probably start to work out the real reason why I couldn't bring myself to go and visit Terry in hospital. Fact is, the morning after his accident, I realised I had a second chance with Anna. I mean, I knew she'd stand by him at first but I was sure she'd have to give him the flick in the end. That's why I was so stunned when Juss said he thought they might get married. That's what sent me off on my wild night.

That's why I keep hearing this voice inside my head: 'You're fucked, Rhett Foley. You're fucked, you're fucked, you're fucked.'

Mind you, it doesn't make any difference. I still love Anna, just as much or maybe

even more. When I read back through my writing folio, I could see I was always watching her, but sideways. Plus I think about her all the time, then and now. And yet I never told her — never came close to telling her — even though she's one of my oldest friends. If you can't be direct with your oldest friends, who can you be direct with? Why couldn't I be direct with Anna?

Answer: because she's one of my oldest friends.

Answer: because I had too much to lose.

It's not as if I had a whole lot to gain either. I knew how Anna felt about me. It would've taken a major campaign to change that and I could hardly conduct a major campaign with Juss and Terry watching from the sidelines, not to mention Manny and Con and Lindsay — oh, and Nicole too, for some of the time. Besides, Anna was too caught up with Terry to notice. And anyway, I know how she feels about me.

Anna sees me as a brother. She told me so, in the big talk we had after she wrote me that letter. She thought she was paying me a compliment. She said I was the brother she'd never had.

I don't feel like a brother to Anna. But how could I say that? She would've freaked. She would've backed off. She would've felt betrayed.

I wouldn't ever want Anna to feel betrayed by me. Not when I love her so much.

Okay, Carson, I'm back again. Bit of a tricky moment, just then. I let my feelings out at last and they almost ran away with me. Y'know, I've sometimes tried to force myself to cry about Anna, walking the streets at night or when I'm at home alone. It would've been ironic if I'd finally fluked it here at the shopfront, with the stone statue faces of the Turkish guys looking on.

Anyhow, that's enough about Anna for the moment. Don't worry, Carson, I'm not planning to pine over her forever. I've seen Mum and Mick in action and I don't want that sort of earth-shattering stuff for myself. I'm not like the swan or the painted shrimp or Mrs Parente and I can prove it too. Hey, even this year, even while I've been lusting hopelessly after Anna, I've fancied a few other people from time to time.

For starters, once I'd sorted out my feelings about Anna, I couldn't help noticing that I'd always been a little bit in love with Justin as well. Not enough to do anything about it — just enough to give me a twinge of jealousy when he wanted to go off and find other guys like himself. Then again, that's the main problem with being non-exogamous. I sometimes think I'm half in love with everyone I know well.

Like you, for example, Carson.

I had to say it some time. Now you know why this letter will never get sent.

All the same, while I'm at it, I may as well tell you the whole story. Right at the start of this year, Mum recognised your name and went off into a long rave about how you were this total nerd who used to follow her round all the time at uni. After that I nearly

wrote you off but you kept on arguing with me and I kept on thinking about your ideas and in the end I remembered that Mum has a habit of making sweeping judgements and I decided (Solange ought to be proud of me) that this time Mum was wrong. I decided that I liked you, anyway.

Loved you, anyway.

So there you are, Carson. I've been a bit in love with Juss, even more in love with you and hopelessly, helplessly, wet-dreams-and-fantasies-and-crazy-plans-that-go-nowhere in love with Anna. I'm not worried about the mix up of ages and sexes: that might spin some people out but it doesn't bother me. Frankly, my real worry's a whole lot more serious than that. I can only fall for people I know well and the people I know well have already slotted me neatly into some other category.

Old mate. Bright English student. The brother they never had.

Shit. Shit. Shit. I thought confessing your secrets was supposed to do you good but it hasn't worked. I still feel like a freak: an enigmatic, non-exogamous freak. Other people don't have these kinds of problems. Other people manage to fall for sexy strangers. Anna did. Justin did. Mum did. Mick did. You probably did too, Carson. But I've tried that before, with Nicole and a few other girls, and once I got past the first excitement of all the sexual stuff, basically I always found there wasn't much left to go on with.

For a moment, at Anna's cousin's wedding, I felt as though that girl Leith Dunbar might be able to give me a few clues on how to cope with being different — but she acts like she positively enjoys it. Her friend Dani helped when she said it gets easier as you go along — but that doesn't actually tell me where to start. I've been Mr Enigmatic for so long. I'm scared to let other people know what I really want, in case they laugh at me or look at me as if I'm not normal.

Unless, maybe, no one feels normal. Unless, maybe, everyone's got their secrets. Like you, Carson. I never would've guessed you'd been having such a hard time this year, if you hadn't told me. And I've never breathed a word about it, so nobody else knows, even now. The guys at school still think you're totally cool. They still think I'm totally cool too.

If only we could all tell all our secrets, all at once.

Yeah, well that's another fantasy, right? The reality is, I just swallowed a mouthful of coffee grounds, which means that I'm down to the last dregs of my last cup of coffee. It's time to accept that Anna and Juss have moved on. Time to go home and type this into the Mac Plus. Time to work out why Mum and Dad are the shadowiest people in my writing folio. Time to finally start talking to Solange.

In other words, time to get on with my life.

PS.

But there's one more thing I need to tell you, Carson, before I close this file for good. I

need to write down the things that went through my mind during those last few minutes at the shopfront, after I'd folded my sheets of paper and tucked my biro away.

This is what happened.

I sat there for a moment thinking back over the past. Coming here with Anna and Juss had been wild but coming here on my own would just be intrusive. Which meant that I wasn't going to come here again. Not ever.

So I sat there for a moment longer, thinking about the future. Then I reached across and turned the coffee cups upside down on their saucers, one by one. I don't know whether I'm romanticising the Turkish guys but I felt like they looked at me approvingly, as though they knew this was some kind of ritual.

Goodbye, Anna.

Goodbye, Juss.

Goodbye, Mr Enigmatic.

Normally I was the last one of us to arrive and leave. Sometimes Anna went first, with her here-I-am-okay? look. Sometimes Justin went first, with his I'm-not-sure-whether-you'll-like-me-but-let's- give-it-a-try look. I usually came last, with my Mr Enigmatic look.

But this time I'm on my own. I can't rely on Anna or Juss to deal with Sami and Mr Bicer and the card-players for me. So, as I walk out, I turn to the stone statue faces and I say, 'Goodbye. Thanks a lot.'

And the same to you too, Carson. Goodbye. Thanks a lot.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'R' and 'H' in a cursive, stylized font. The 'R' is tall and loops back, while the 'H' is shorter and more compact.

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Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

Ebook produced in Australia.