

# **Holding Baby**

**A Creative Exploration to Raise Awareness  
About Kinship Care Through the Writing of a Play,  
*Holding Baby*, and a Poetry Collection, *Holding***

**Final Script of *Holding Baby***

***Holding*  
Poetry Collection**

**Critical Commentary**

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# ***Holding Baby***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Holding Baby: A creative exploration to raise awareness about Kinship Care through a play, *Holding Baby*, a poetry collection, *Holding*, and a critical commentary placing the work in a cultural, societal and practice-led context.

The dramatic work *Holding Baby* covers a crisis where a grandparent is left taking responsibility for a young baby. In the tradition of social realist and community based drama, it reflects the real life stories of a growing number of connected persons or family members raising children who are not theirs by birth. The poetry collection *Holding* considers the personal response of the author, as a kinship carer, to that role's challenges and its rewards.

In the critical commentary issues around kinship care are considered together with the history of the writing and its context. A detailed account is offered of the stage production process, as well as problems and possibilities around reaching potential audiences for both play and poetry. The relationship between the direct focus of the script and the comparative subjectivity of the poetry is reflected on and discussed.

## ***Holding Baby the Play***

### **Cast**

#### **Tia Marie**

Tia Marie Whitehead is 6 weeks old in Act One and 22 months in Act Two. Tia is a heroin baby, because her mother Eva used heroin during her pregnancy. Tia Marie travels in an old Silvercross pram in Act One and a buggy in Act Two. Eva is her mother, Barbara is her grandmother. Gracie is her great grandmother.

#### **Eva**

Eva Whitehead, 27, is Barbara's daughter and Tia Marie's mother. Gracie is her grandmother. Eva is a heroin addict.

#### **Barbara**

Barbara Whitehead, 55, has been a widow for 11 years. She had a battered Silvercross pram that she gave to her daughter Eva for her daughter's baby Tia Marie. She will become Tia Marie's full time carer. Gracie is Barbara's mother. She also has a son, Joe, and a daughter, Fiona. She's the widow of Davey who she nursed through cancer.

#### **Gracie**

Gracie Boycott, 94, mother of Barbara, grandmother of Eva and great grandmother of Tia Marie, who is looked after by DG at the Comfort at Sunset Home for the Elderly. Gracie brought up her brothers and sister after her mother died in an air raid in the Second World War. She knits and make paper dolls.

#### **Divine Grace**

Divine Grace (or DG) Dalca, 45, from Romania has three daughters in Maramures, being brought up by her mother and extended family. She is Gracie's carer. She has worked in the UK since Romania joined the EU. Divine Grace has had stomach pains. She wants her test results. She has pancreatic cancer. She will stay in the UK for medical attention. She wants to return to Maramures.

#### **Maria**

Maria Dalca, 21, is DG's daughter from Maramures. She arrives in Act Two and is **played by the same actor as DG**. She has been brought up by her grandmother and her extended family. She has come to the UK to collect her mother's ashes and to take her things back to the family. She is a medical student in Bucharest. She speaks American English.

#### **Maeve**

Maeve O'Sullivan, 62, receptionist - she has to work because she looks after her dead sister's two teenage daughters (Siobhan has learning difficulties and Orla has spina bifida).

#### **Dr Abdulla**

Zoe Abdulla is 37, a GP and single parent to a daughter Haleema. She could not cope without the support of her mother, who looks after her daughter

when she is at work. She is a popular, but junior partner in the large G.P. practice.

**Set** For a performance in the round, a circle of stools with a central small table. An area to one side as a reception desk and exits off to denote front door and a corridor to consulting rooms.

**Props** There are no props - everything is meticulously mimed.

**NB** Rhythm is very important in the delivery of the script. A new line indicates a break in the rhythm and two line break shows a new thought. These could be thought of as very short pauses.

Stage instructions are placed close to the speeches they inform.

## **The Script sections for rehearsal purposes.**

### **Act One**

Section One - Opening  
Section Two - Crisis  
Section Three - Stripper  
Section Four - Coping  
Section Five - Twinkle  
Section Six - Doctor Call  
Section Seven - Coffee And The Past  
Section Eight - The Fart  
Section Nine - Doctor's  
Return

### **Act Two**

Section Ten - Gracie's Monologue  
Section Eleven - Self Help  
Section Twelve - Enter Maria  
Section Thirteen - Catching Up  
Section Fourteen - Eva Arrives  
Section Fifteen - Trying To Leave  
Section Sixteen - Maria As Traitor  
Section Seventeen - Fight  
Section Eighteen - Home Truths  
Section Nineteen - Eva with Buggy  
Section Twenty - The End

## Act One

### Section One - Opening

*(Maeve is at the receptionist desk, tidying up as the audience enter. Enter Dr Abdulla)*

**Dr Ab** No one? I've got two, haven't I?

**Maeve** Two left - Barbara Whitehead - 'flu jab and someone who rejoices in the name, mmm, what's it? Ummmm...Divine Grace.

*(Enter Barbara.)*

**Barbara** Barbara Whitehead - 'flu jab.

**Maeve** Yes, I know who you are.

**Barbara** Well, hello to you too.

*(Barbara sits and picks up a magazine. Enter DG with the pram and Gracie who strokes her cardigan and tries to undo her buttons.)*

**Barbara** Silvercross.  
I had one like...  
God! This one's filthy! *(She goes back to her magazine.)*

**DG** *(Whispers to Maeve.)* There's a lady. In the phone box.

**Maeve** Well, it's a phone box...take that outside...there's a buggy park by the door. *(The pram stays there.)*

**DG** *(DG opens a consulting room door and shouts in.)*  
Girl. Needs doctor. Funny colour. Outside.  
She's on the ground.  
Terrible smell.  
  
Vomited.

**Gracie** Vomited...yes, she vomited. Sick as a...sick as a...sick as a dog.

*(Enter Dr Abdullah. Gracies tries to take off her cardigan - she is completely absorbed with the task.)*

**Dr Ab**       Where?

**DG**           Dreadful. The phone box outside.  
Caruciozem...erm...pram, pram, outside.

*(Dr Abdullah rushes out and exits.)*

**Maeve**       I am not responsible for a phone box.  
And the pram cannot stay there.

FX - surgery phone rings.

Good afternoon, Mandela Surgery.  
This is Maeve speaking - may I help you?

Ante-natal class are on Thursday at 10pm.

Yes, here at the surgery.  
Thank you - we'll see you then.  
Good bye.

*(Barbara puts down her magazine to take another one, sees the pram and recognises it as hers.)*

**Barbara**     *(Whispers.)* Sweet Jesus!

**Maeve**       Outside with it! The pram!

*(Barbara picks up the filthy bundle from the pram.)*

FX - Tia starts howling.

**Barbara**     Baby?

**Maeve**       There's a child?

In that?

**Barbara**     It's Tia...I think it's Tia...It's granny, yes, Granny... you hungry  
Darling Girl... you're starving, aren't you, Petal?

It's Tia Marie, my granddaughter.



*(She clings to the baby.)*

FX - howling stops.

What are you doing with Tia? *(To DG.)*

Her mother? Where's Eva?

Oh my God...oh my God...

**DG** I hear bebelus crying outside...outside...

*(Gracie goes over to the pram, inspects it and pushes it around the stage.)*

**Gracie** You had a pram like that.

**Barbara** Mum?

**Gracie** You had a Silvercross. Just like that.  
Silvercross.

Good prams.

*(Gracie pushes the pram back and fore.)*

**Barbara** Mum? What are you doing here?

You are here with Tia, Mum?

And Eva?

FX - Tia cries again.

It's me, Granny, Darling Girl.

*(DG takes off her coat and puts it on the table, ready to change Tia's nappy.)*

**DG** Put her here. Make her comfy...clean...cleaner.

Mrs Barbara? It is you.

You know me, Mrs Barbara.

*(Barbara makes no move. DG goes to take the baby from Barbara.)*

I'm DG...you know Comfort at Sunset. I look after your mother.

You know, I look after Gracie. I'm her carer at the...home.

**Barbara** What?

Oh...?

**DG** It's OK, love. I'll just put her here on my coat. Got wipes for your mother...

**Barbara** I know you?

*(To baby Tia)* Oh, Little One...oh dear...yes, it's me Granny.

Remember me...?

**Maeve** Here, have a Newborn Baby Bounty Pack.

**Barbara** From the home?

Where's her mother?

Where's Eva?

**Maeve** It's got a bit of everything.

*(To DG indicating the pram.)* Now that - outside!

**Gracie** Bounty - rich, moist, tender coconut - the taste ...the taste of...

*(Gracie does a hula hula dance.)*

Paradise! *(She falls asleep.)*

**Barbara** It's me, Granny Co-op.

*(To DG.)* Where's Eva? You, where is Eva?

*(To Tia.)* Remember I met you and Mummy at the Co-op.

For a cuppa at the Co-op.

**DG** Let me help now. We can clean. Make comfy...

**Barbara** SHE'S My Baby! SHIFT!

*(Barbara puts Tia on DG's coat and pushes her away. She undresses Tia and DG hands out wipes from the Bounty Pack. Barbara weeps and cleans Tia. Maeve runs off.)*

FX - Tia crying, and then stops.

Who's very wet? Pooey too? Need a clean...a bit snooty?  
Shhhhh...shhhh...shhhh...

I want to know where her bloody mother is?

*(Maeve returns with a black bag and holds it for Barbara to put soiled clothes in.)*

Granny clean you up.  
Nice clean girl.

Who's Granny's nice clean girl?

**DG** Scamasat. Sorry, a nappy? There's just one in the pack.

*(DG hands gives Barbara a nappy from the pack. Barbara puts it on Tia and wraps her in DG's coat. She rocks her.)*

She needs a bottle. A bottle now.

*(Maeve runs off again.)*

**Barbara** *(Singing.)* Row, row, row the boat. *(Repats just that line.)*

*(Maeve returns and hands over a spoon and a bottle of formula.)*

**Maeve** Found this in a drawer - carton of formula - it's made up.  
No bottle.

**DG** Spoon - spoon it! Towel to catch the drips.

**Maeve** Disposable spoon?  
In a pack - it'll be clean.

Towel? Yes, got it. *(She rushes off.)*

**Barbara** Sang 'Row, row, row...' to your Mum.

**DG** Here we go - baby milk on a spoon.  
To feed her...the baby...

*(Barbara feeds the baby.)*

**Maeve** She's starving. Starving...

FX Phone rings. *(Maeve answers it.)*

Good afternoon. Mandela Surgery.  
This is Maeve speaking - may I help you?

**Barbara** Starving... oh, dear...

Her mother should be here.

Where's Mummy, Darling Girl?

**Maeve** *(Into the phone.)* And the same to you too!

**Barbara** How...how...could this...?

**Maeve** I'll raid the Health Visitors' stocks.  
This scrap won't be breast fed - God help us.

What brand of milk?

SMA? Aptamil? Cow and Gate?

Better to have the right one, rather than a random carton.

If I can find a choice. *(She runs off.)*

**DG** Do you know what formula?  
It's better to keep to one formula. You know Cow and Gate...

**Barbara** It's SMA, I think, yes SMA. It's SMA. Yes, I think it's SMA, yeh.  
Or is it Cow and Gate? No, Cow and Gate... there's a heart shape,  
no cow...

What are you doing with my granddaughter? You're the woman  
from the home. You look after my mother. My mother. Not my  
granddaughter. What's happened? What are you doing with my  
granddaughter? Where's her Mum? Where is Eva?

Where is Tia's mother?

And what on earth are you doing with my mother in here? Surely  
she should be at the home. What's my mother doing here at the  
doctors?

Are they ill? Is Gracie ill? This little dap is... oh my God, she's not  
good, is she?

But what are you doing here with them? I only came in for a 'flu  
jab and now I'm here with all my family. Except Eva.

What the hell are you doing here with my mother and  
granddaughter?

Where's me daughter? Where is Eva?

## **Section Two - Crisis**

**DG** The girl?

**Barbara** Girl? 27 next birthday.

**DG** Droguri. Junky?

**Barbara** JUNKY? (*Whispers*) Junky.

**DG** It looks like drugs to me.

**Barbara** How dare you! She's just got problems, that's all.

Where is Eva?

**DG** Girl in the phone box.

**Barbara** Phone box?

**DG** Needs a doctor. Gone funny colour. Sick. Ill or something.  
In the phone box. Outside. She needs a doctor.  
Couldn't leave without...without...without...the baby.  
A crying baby. She left her.  
  
Left her crying.

**Gracie** *(Singing.)* Big girls don't cry.

**Barbara** SHUT UP MOTHER!!!  
Sit down.  
  
FX - Tia crying, and then stops.  
  
Tia needs clothes.

**Maeve** OK - got the message. I'll have another look. There's a box...  
  
*(Maeve runs off to return with a box.)*

**Barbara** *(To DG.)* I know you. Yes, you are the nice one who gives me a cuppa when I visit Comfort at Sunset. The others just give Mum a cup, but you always give me one too.  
  
And a biscuit.

**Maeve** Divine Grace Dacla?

**DG** Yes...I prefer...

**Maeve** *(Indicating the pram.)* That needs to be outside.

**Barbara** Excuse me, Maeve O'Sullivan.  
  
I need to talk to this woman.  
  
*(To DG.)* You're a care assistant at Comfort at Sunset.

**Gracie** I'm Gracie. Not the other bit. The Div bit...I'm Gracie. Gracie. I'm Gracie. Yes...I think...yeh...I'm Gracie. I am Gracie. Amazing.

*(Gracie laughs like a drain.)*

**DG** Don't know, but...

**Barbara** Where's Tia Marie's Mum?

What are you doing with Tia Marie?

Eva? Eva.

**Gracie** Tia Maria. Tia Maria. I like a little Tia Maria in my tea at Christmas.

**Barbara** SHUT UP Mum!  
This is important.

**DG** Yes, you Gracie and me Grace too. But you call me DG, don't you?  
Everyone calls me DG.

Hello, Mrs Whitehead. Fancy seeing you at the doctors.

**Barbara** Where did you get the...? Where is Eva?

*(Gracie goes to say something.)*

Sit down Mother and shut up.

**DG** Need my results, but couldn't get time off work.

I've had some tests. You know. Tests. I haven't been very well.

I need to have my test results, Mrs Whitehead.. You understand.

Dr Abdullah, a nice woman, she won't mind...Mrs Boycott in the corner. They wouldn't let me have time off to come.

Might lose my job...

**Barbara** And the baby?

**Maeve** That's really not on.

FX Phone rings.

Ignore it. The answerphone will cut in.

I should be home now.

**Barbara** (To DG.) I'm not interested why you are here.  
My mother should be at Comfort at Sunset, NOT HERE!

Where did you get the pram?

**DG** By the phone box. A girl in the phone box.

Off to A & E...

Very ill.

**Barbara** Eva! I must go...

*(Barbara hands Tia to Maeve and goes to leave the surgery. Maeve goes to put the baby back in the pram, stops when she realises that it is filthy. Gives the baby back to Barbara and bars the door.)*

**Maeve** Dr Abdullah is dealing with outside. You have claimed a relationship with the pram. With the baby. You will not leave the child here. I forbid you to leave. I am a receptionist not a nanny.

I will not be left holding the baby. Again.

*(Under her breath.)* The...?

No, the most important - Social Services.

**Barbara** (To DG.) What's happening outside? I need you to explain again.  
Why did you bring Tia Marie...?  
...and her in here?

I need to know.

**Gracie** She needs to know. She needs to know.

**DG** Have an appointment here and had to bring, Gracie, Mrs Boycott.

**Barbara** Forget Mrs Boycott.

**Gracie** That's not very nice, Barbara.



**DG**            There's a girl in the phone box, not very well.  
She needs a doctor. This is a doctors'.  
Dr Abdullah has gone to her.

And the pram was just there - with no one.  
So, brought it in.

This is part of the Safe Places Scheme.

The logo on the door.

**Maeve**        What do you mean, we've got the logo on the door?

*(She goes out to look and comes back. Barbara goes to follow her out. Maeve stops her.)*

No you don't.  
We have, we've got the logo on the door.  
No one tells me anything.

**Barbara**      So there's some girl in the phone box.  
And it's a junky and it's my...Eva?

Is it my Eva?

**DG**            Well, Mrs Barbara. Couldn't be sure. Don't think she visited  
Comfort at Sunset.

*(To Gracie.)* Has your granddaughter Eva visited you since you've  
been with us.

**Maeve**        She means in the home, Mrs Boycott.  
Have you seen Eva since you've been there.

This is a waste of time.

**Gracie**        My sisters haven't been. Young Winston hasn't been.

**Barbara**      That's because they are dead, Mother.

**DG**            So sorry, don't know, Mrs Barbara. But if this is your  
granddaughter then the girl in the phone box is probably your  
daughter. And if her name is Eva, then yes...expect so.

**Barbara** Has she been...? Has she been...um...you know...you know...to herself...? You know...

She's getting lots of help. She gets lots of help. She's monitored. She's been in a special mother and baby unit. You know, special.

They're monitoring her...her...her...her...medication.

**DG** Yes, her medication...

**Gracie** She had a needle stuck in her hand. A needle between her fingers. A needle her hand. In her hand, a needle.

**Barbara** SHUT UP MOTHER!!! It's Eva.

FX - ambulance siren.

**Maeve** You have a choice. Your daughter or your granddaughter. You can't keep them both safe.

**Barbara** You don't know anything. I've got to go to my daughter.

Is Dr Abdullah with her?

**Maeve** I presume that was the ambulance arriving to take her to A&E just then. Dr Abdullah will be back soon.

You cannot leave the baby here.

*(Indicates the pram.)* And that health hazard has to go.

**DG** I work - look after old people. Can't do anything about a baby.

If I could look after babies, I'd look after my own, not leave them with my mother.

**Barbara** I'll take Tia Marie with me to the hospital.

*(Barbara goes to the pram to put Tia into it, but thinks better of it.)*

She should be with her mother.

**DG** Really? *(DG bars the way.)*

**Maeve** You can't do that. A & E is no place for a baby.

**DG** Full of germs.

**Maeve** It is my responsibility to get the emergency social worker out. It's out of hours now.

*(She rings a number and hangs on.)*

**DG** Don't worry - very capable. Social Services will be here like that.

**Barbara** Take her? Take her where?

**Gracie** God knows. Take her where? God knows. God knows where they'll take her, but they will take her. Take her where?

**Barbara** Mum sit down over there and it's best if you keep your mouth shut. I need you to be quiet please.

Just this once.

**DG** *(To Maeve.)* Any luck?

**Maeve** They must be out on an emergency. I'll hold on.

**Barbara** So hospital, but without Tia Marie. I can't leave Tia here?

**Gracie** Yes, leave her here with me. Leave her here with me.

*(They look at Gracie.)*

**Maeve** *(Puts her hand over the receiver.)* NO! NO! NO!  
I'll get through, just wait a minute.

How many times have you rescued her, what's her name?

**Barbara** Eva, my daughter Eva?

**Maeve** Yes...well, I know you have been in here many, many times over the years and it wasn't for your varicose veins, was it?

**Barbara** I have never had varicose weird in my entire life.

**Maeve** Well, I have and they are an absolute bugger. You have to have them stripped...

### **Section Three - The Stripper**

*(Gracie starts stripping and da-daring 'the Stripper' and then stops abruptly.)*

**Gracie** I've never had a varicose vein in my whole life. You have veins, don't you Barbara? You have veins? I've never had veins. Never. Never had them. Never wanted them. Her Dad had them, though. You never think of a man having them, having veins, do you?

### **Section Four - Coping**

**Barbara** Read your Home and Garden, Mother.

**Maeve** You can do too much for them.

**DG** Call it enabling. Did a course...

**Maeve** Yes, they do - it means the bugger can carry on without any...

**DG** Consequences...

**Maeve** *(Into phone.)* Yes, hello...we have a baby here...Mandela Surgery...a baby...in a pram...well, we know who she is, but...

Tomorrow is unacceptable.

Too busy? Too busy for a baby?

Her mother is being taken to hospital in an ambulance.

Find a social worker now...

...and send them here, NOW!

Mandela Surgery.

Yes, you all know it - it's in the place it's always been.

**Barbara** Too busy? They are too busy.

**Maeve** Why I rang the emergency number is because it is an emergency. Someone must come now.

**DG** Don't know anything, Mrs Barbara...but they will have two options.

**Barbara** Two options?

**Gracie** Two options?

**Barbara** *(To Gracie.)* READ!

**Maeve** Surely you have a sat nav...the postcode is B58 9RD...The baby is asleep in the waiting room...Maeve O'Sullivan. MAEVE...yes, it's Irish...O'SULLIVAN.

**Barbara** Two Options?

**DG** Well, they can either...

*(Maeve comes off the phone.)*

**Maeve** Some chit of a girl will turn up eventually and the baby will either be allowed to go with you or they will whisk her away and they will dump it with a foster carer - somewhere.

The baby is lucky, because she has family.

You know - you.

**DG** What about Tia Marie's father?

**Barbara** She doesn't have one of those.

**DG** Doesn't have one of...? Oh, I see.

**Maeve** Looks like you are going to become one of us...

**Gracie** I knitted Eva a white jumper with a scotty dog on. Remember that Barbara - for her birthday. I ran out of wool and I had to go to the haberdashers in Kings Heath High Street by Boots.

**Maeve** That went thirty years ago. I'll check and see if Doctor has gone in the ambulance. She probably has. She is horribly efficient.

*(Exit Maeve.)*

FX - Tia cries and it turns into whimpering.)

*(DG finds a packet of cigarettes and a filthy bottle in the pram and puts them in the bin bag. Gracie tears pictures out of a magazine. Enter Maeve.)*

**Barbara** Anything of any use in the pram? Perhaps not.

*(Enter Maeve carrying a syringe.)*

**Maeve** This bloody filthy thing. Left for any kid to pick up.  
Just anyone could have picked up this bloody thing.

Your daughter used that. Your daughter.

Really out in the street...

**DG** In the phone box.

**Maeve** ...with her baby in tow. She sticks this thing in herself. She sticks this into herself. No thought for her baby.

What sort of woman does that?

I mean...sorry...

**Barbara** Yes, yes, that's...that's...what she does.

*(Barbara goes to take the syringe from Maeve.)*

**Maeve** No, you silly bugger. You've got no gloves on. I'll put it in the sharps box behind the desk.

**Barbara** Have you got any more baby milk? You know, from the baby clinic. More free samples.

Tia Marie needs another feed. She's hungry. She needs...

...I'll take her home.

She needs...she needs...looking after.

**Maeve** I'll have a look.

FX Phone rings. (*Gracie answers the phone.*)

**Gracie** Mandela Surgery...Gracie speaking.

BUGGER OFF! (*Slams down the phone.*)

**Maeve** I can't be responsible for a madwoman answering the phone.

**DG** Take her home. Take her home. Give bath. Clean `jamas, warm bottle and cuddle up.

**Maeve** She means the baby, not your Mum.

**DG** You got the stuff?

You know - all the bits and pieces?

**Barbara** Oh yes, at home I have it all. A travel cot I managed to pick up from Cancer Research in the High Street. Managed to get in before the man with the twins, spare nappies and babygros.

FX Ambulance siren.

An ambulance - she's gone then.

She will come to me from time to time. Well, I've offered. Bring her to me, I've said when...

**Maeve** (*Holds up bottles triumphantly.*) Yes, I've got free samples. In bottles - close to sell by date, but..

(*To Gracie.*) What on earth are you doing?

(*Gracie holds up a line of paper torn from a magazine. They are supposed to be paper dolls.*)

**Gracie** I used to make these for you, Eva.

**DG** No Eva. I'm Grace. No not Gracie. You are Gracie. I am Grace. Or DG, because I am Divine Grace.

*(Gracie laughs like a drain.)*

#### **Section Four - Twinkle**

**Barbara** Do shut up Mother.

*(Singing)* Twinkle, twinkle, little star.  
How I wonder what you are?

*(Gracie does bat actions.)*

Twinkle, twinkle, little bat.  
How I wonder what you're at ?  
Up above the world so high.  
Like a tea tray in the sky.  
Twinkle, twinkle, little bat.  
How I wonder what you're at?

FX Phone rings.

#### **Section Five - Doctor Call**

**Maeve** Might be Dr Abdullah. We do need her here.

*(Maeve gets to the phone before Gracie.)*

Good afternoon, Mandela Surgery.  
This is Maeve speaking - may I help you?

Sorry about that.  
Gracie Boycott trying to be helpful...

There's a filthy baby in a pram.

FX Baby crying.

Yes, crying - starving.

The 'flu jab is the grandmother.



I'm trying to get Children's Services to come and take the child.

Yes, I'm ringing the emergency number.

I've spoken to them.

We still have Divine Grace and 'flu jab here.  
Together with 'flu jab's mother.

Great grandmother of the child. Grace Boycott.

Yes, she's here with Divine whatsit. Works at the care home.

Must have thought a trip to the doctors' a nice trip out.  
How would I know?

Can you try?

We need a social worker here.

How is the stupid cow, who caused all this?

Yes, it's not a professional word, but I am a receptionist.

So, I'll keep them all here and wait for you and a social worker.

So, you'll be back?

I'll put the kettle on.

Yes, I know it's the end of my shift, but I am human...  
...this is a situation not far from home.

I'll text Alka next door to keep an eye on the girls.

*(She puts the phone down and fiddles with her mobile.)*

Dr Abdullah will be back from the hospital soon - dependant on the traffic.

Who wants tea and who wants coffee?

I'll put the kettle on.

Must make a quick phone call.

## **Section Six - Coffee And The Past**

**Barbara** Well, I've got to go. I can have my 'flu jab anytime.

*(Barbara makes no attempt to leave.)*

These little bottles are great.  
Does it matter that it's cold?  
Does it?  
She's enjoying it cold, so...

**DG** Wait. Now I'm here. Want to talk to the doctor as soon as possible.

Test results.

**Maeve** What about Grace Kelly over there? It's the end of my shift. I have responsibilities. I just can't be here forever. I've left a message for the Social Services, Dr Abdullah will chase that up...

I said I'd make some tea, then I have to go.

When she turns up...

You can't leave her, ummm Mrs Boycott unattended in my waiting room.

She needs controlling.

**Barbara** You be careful there - you're talking about my mother. She's a brick, she is.

And mine's a tea, milk and no sugar. Mum will have a milky coffee with four sugars and what will you have dear? *(To DG.)*

**Gracie** I like a little coffee with my sugar.

**Maeve** Did you say 'brick'?

**DG** Mine's a coffee with milk and one of those little sweeteners - don't worry...always carry my own.

**Barbara** Well, she was a brick. She was a lovely Mum.

Okay, so she's lost it a bit.

**Gracie** Yeh, I've lost me marbles a bit. I used to be a bit of a bright spark. Life and soul. Soul. Soul? Sole. You never see sole now, do yer? I used to like a nice bit of sole. Fish fingers now. It's all fish fingers. Isn't it? I didn't know fish had...

**Barbara** Sit down Mum. Everyone's has enough now.

**DG** Time for your afternoon cuppa, Gracie. We might not be at home, but we always have our milky coffee now. And this nice lady is going to get you one. Have a packet of bourbons, your favourite in pocket and you can have one and then...?

**Gracie** JUST ONE MORE! *(Gracie and DG laugh.)*

**Maeve** I'm senior receptionist! My job is to administer the appointments' system.

*(Maeve turns away and makes a private call on her mobile.)*

Thank you very much - I owe you one.

**Barbara** *(To Gracie.)* Here Mum. You'd like to hold Tia Marie wouldn't you?

Sit down there. I'll wrap her up tight in my card. There you go.

*(Gracie sits and competently holds and rocks Tia.)*

**Gracie** What a little darling. What a little darling.

*(Maeve returns not with tea, but with a box.)*

**Maeve** *(Indicating Gracie.)* Should she be doing that?

**Barbara** Oh yes, she should.

She's an expert.

My grandmother was killed in an air raid in the War. Mum's sister was only seven weeks old. Mum was just ten. Anyway, she brought up them all up.

The whole family and then her own family.

She's a whizz with a baby.

Even now.

**Maeve** I've found a box of stuff. In the Health Visitor's room. There's everything here for a baby. I think they give it out or demonstrations...? There's dust...you can have it.

Why not?

Those women just sit on their arses, weigh babies and fill in red books. There you are.

I'll get the tea.

*(Barbara and DG rummage through the box. Barbara takes out a baby hat.)*

**Barbara** Eva had one just like that. She came home in it.

Home from hospital. It always seemed to be at a jaunty angle. Lovely. She looked just lovely.

Lovely when she was clean and tidy.

The day she started school, she went in her little uniform and her hair all plaited nicely with ribbons.

Blue ribbons. The uniform was blue.

White shirt, grey pinafore and a blue sweat shirt.

You know.

Anyway, I left her in the playground immaculate and then at 3 o'clock, she looked as though she'd gone through a hedge backwards.

Plaits unraveled with a lost ribbon. Tie undone. Knee socks round her ankles all grubby.

Grubby. Grubby now and no mistake.

**DG** Good stuff in here.

**Gracie** I like a cup of coffee. Coffee? How about a cup of tea?  
It's time for a cuppa. Is it time for a cuppa? Is it? Is it time for cuppa tea? It is, isn't it? It's tea time. Don't give me any filthy coffee. I don't like coffee. I don't like coffee very much. No, I don't like coffee very much.

**Barbara** You love a coffee, Mum. You like a milk and a dash.

*(She pulls out a bag of nappies.)*

Oh, a pack of disposables and your size teeny tiny Tia Marie.

**Gracie** I don't like it. And I don't want any of that tea bag rubbish. Either. No teabags. Loose tea and a strainer. Strainer. When did I last see a strainer? When did I...?

*(Talking to Tia.)* Typhoon and no monkeys. No monkeys, just Typhoon. The cup that cheers. The cup that cheers. Yes, the cup that cheers. The cup that cheers.

Did I already say that?

I hate coffee. It's bitter, bitter, bitter. Needs plenty of sugar. Do you remember Auntie Doll saying your father liked a little coffee with his sugar?

**DG** All tiny. Premature baby.

Early baby in Mothercare now.

Tia Marie is...very tiny.

How old?

**Barbara** Just six weeks old on Monday.

She shouldn't have arrived yet, of course. She's only just out of hospital. They had to... *(Barbara starts to cry.)*

**Gracie** I like Camp coffee. In a bottle. Camp coffee in a bottle. There was a Sikh chap on the bottle. Do you remember a turban on the Camp coffee. One of those turban chaps on the bottle of coffee. A picture of a turban on the Camp coffee.

**DG** Nice blanket, oh yes and sheets here.  
Tell you what.  
I'll make the pram clean and comfy.

Nothing wrong with a Silvercross that a bit of greasy elbow...

**Barbara** That's what you do for my mother. Greasy elbow her nether regions.  
Are you OK with this? Are you sure?

**DG** Very good at it.

Plenty of practice.

**Barbara** Part of me thinks I should run home with Tia immediately, but perhaps it would be better to talk to the doc first.

Yeh Maeve - I will wait and see Doctor Abdullah - you know with Tia Marie.

*(Maeve comes carrying a tray of drinks . Barbara takes Tia from Gracie, DG brings out more biscuits.)*

**Gracie** I like Camp coffee. I like it. Turban bloke and a man in a skirt thing from Scotland. Two of them on the bottle. We used to give them names. We called them names. We did. We called them Flanagan and Allen. Flanagan and Allen. On the bottle. They weren't the real Flanagan and Allen. Well, one of them was the wrong colour, wasn't he? Flanagan and Allen the real ones, used to make us laugh on the wireless. On the wireless. On the wireless.

**Maeve** Let me take her. Have your tea.

*(Maeve is ignored and Barbara dresses Tia in clothes from the box.)*

**Gracie** We used to all sit around the table.

**DG** What to do with the bedding in the pram?

**Maeve** Burn it!

**DG** That's a bit harsh. It needs a good soak in the pink stuff in a big plastic tub. It works well with ...

**Barbara** Understains. That's what they are called. Here.

**Gracie** We used to sit...no, we didn't all sit around the table. There wasn't room.

**Maeve** I think this baby deserves nice clean, new bedding. There's enough stuff here to stock Mama's and Papa's.

Put the old stuff in the black bag.

**Barbara** My mother used to give me lots of understains. It was a relief to pass the understains on to you at your place. It came after doing understains and everything else for poor Davey. Eva's Dad before...

**Gracie** There wasn't room for us all.

**DG** Hot water, J cloths? Disinfectant?

**Maeve** I'm a receptionist. Senior receptionist.

Oh, alright then.

*(Maeve goes and comes back with cleaning stuff and starts to clean the part with vigour with DG.)*

**Gracie** More room after Mother...after Mother passed...I loved her. I loved Mother. She loved us. She loved all of us.

**DG** Your grandmother. Talking about your grandmother?

**Barbara** Yes, tragic really.

**Maeve** Many of us have tragic lives. Nobody knows though, they just see the superficial.

**DG** Learn to be careful with people. Don't judge.  
People see me as a foreigner and it's OK for me to shovel your shit - oh, don't take offence!

Love my job, but rather be with my children. I'm only here for the money.

It's not my choice for my Mum to bring up my girls.

**Gracie** She did. She loved us all. And we loved her too.

Around the table, it was dad, then me, 'cos I was like, sort of, like Mother...Joanie, Edith, Mabel and little Winston. We had a highchair for Winnie.

**Barbara** (To DG.) I'm sorry.

I don't have a highchair.

**Maeve** The child doesn't need a highchair yet.

**DG** Got lots on eBay or at Betel. You don't have to get one from Mothercare or John Lewis. Thought they have lovely things at John Lewis.

Used to send home posh socks from John Lewis.

My girls have the best sosete in Marmure.

**Gracie** He didn't like it. He didn't like it one jot.

**Maeve** Who didn't like what?

**Barbara** So you are interested.

**Gracie** Winnie didn't like the highchair.

Around the table, Joanie, Mabel, Edith and Winston in the highchair - we would squash him in. And when he was home on leave. Dad. We loved Dad. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't. It wasn't his fault. He



had to go, didn't he? He had to. No choice. No choice. He had to serve his King and Country. He had to go and fight the bloody Germans. No, not them. He was somewhere else. He was somewhere else. He was somewhere else. He had to go.

**Barbara** It was the Japs.

That's why he always had sweets in his pockets.  
Because they starved him.  
He was in Malaya not Europe, Mum.

**Gracie** Dada liked a cup of Camp coffee, too. We've all got a sweet tooth.

FX Baby howls.

Put Tia along your arm, tummy down.  
Rock gently.

She was hungry and a bit of pressure on her tumtum will make her feel full.

FX Howling stops

**Maeve** That's like magic. Poor little mite.  
Where are Social Services?

I'll try again. *(Goes to phone and rings.)*

Straight into answer phone now.

This is Maeve O'Sullivan from Mandela Surgery. We have an emergency here. A baby's mother has been taken into hospital with Doctor Abdullah and the child has been left here. The child is Tia Marie...

What's the surname, 'flu jab?

**Barbara** I am Barbara Whitehead.

**Maeve** No, the child.

**Barbara** Tia Marie Whitehead and I'm Mrs Whitehead to you Maeve O'Sullivan, not 'flu jab.

**Maeve** Tia Marie Whitehead,  
The baby is Tia Marie Whitehead.  
Got that?

**Barbara** Give me the phone!

*(Barbara tries to get hold of the phone, but Maeve keeps it.)*

I'm her mother, the mother of the girl in the phone box...  
and the grandmother..

**Maeve** *(Into the phone.)* The shouting is the grandmother of the child.  
Don't take any notice. She's a nice woman really.

Send someone immediately to Mandela Surgery.

Like asap.

Or ring back. *(Puts the phone down.)*

**Barbara** Give me the phone.

**Maeve** It was an answer phone.  
No real person at the other end.  
I'm official.  
They want a message from me, not you.

**Barbara** I'm the baby's grandmother.  
That makes me a...a...a...stakeholder!

**DG** Makes no difference. If Social Services are out.  
  
So what happens now?

## **Section Seven - Fart**

*(No one reacts to DG's words, but Barbara, Maeve and DG can all smell poo.  
They all go to Tia and then they all turn to Gracie.)*

**Gracie** What are you all looking at?

**Barbara** *(To DG.)* She's all yours now. You're her carer now.

I did it, but now it's you, 'cos you're paid.

I'll do the baby, won't I?  
So you do Tena Lady here!

**DG** I am fully aware of my responsibilities.

*(Under her breath.)* Yes, and not paid very much.

*(DG takes Gracie and her bag, exit off to the loo.)*

Come on then, Gracie.

**Gracie** It's OK. It's just a fart.  
Honestly just a fart.  
Not the other thing...  
Just a great big trump!  
Not a dump.

**Barbara** *(To Maeve.)* Why are you being such a bitch?

I'm sorry you will be late home.  
I'm sorry that you have been inconvenienced.

Thank you for all this stuff for Tia Marie.  
Thank you for trying... in some ways...

But why are being such a bitch?

**Maeve** I'm tired. Knackered.  
I never had children of my own.  
Not a decision I made. It just happened.  
And then just as I'm making retirement plans...  
...they arrived with a social worker..  
...and the news that my sister is...

On the doorstep with the social worker - just like that.  
I knew it would happen of course.  
Her survival with that sort of cancer was...unlikely, but  
when it happened, it was quick and we were all taken unawares.  
It was a relief - quick. Quick for her - less pain.

Can you ever be ready?

**Barbara** It was cancer with Davey, slow...liver, then everywhere...

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...  
You are quite...  
...prickly, you know.

**Maeve** Being late home throws the whole routine out.

Everything has to work like clockwork.  
Everything has to be in its place for us to function.  
I need this job.

I need this job.

Kinship care? I'm your expert.

**Barbara** What's that?

*(DG and Gracie enter.)*

**Gracie** I told her I hadn't.  
If they feed you beans - what do you expect...?

I am not a baby. Not a baby. Not...

## **Section Eight - Doctor's Return**

FX Phone rings

*(Enter Doctor Abdullah. Maeve and Barbara rush for the phone, the doctor reaches it first.)*

**Dr Ab** Good evening. This is Mandela Surgery.  
Dr Zoe Abdullah speaking - can I help you?

Ah, Children's Services.

Yes, the receptionist Maeve O'Sullivan has been trying to get hold of a member of the duty team.

I can confirm that Eva Whitehead has been taken into A & E as an emergency admission.

I went with her in the ambulance - overdose.

Her daughter Tia Marie Whitehead is here in the surgery.

She's...? How old?

**Barbara** Six weeks now,

**Dr Ab** *(On phone.)* Six weeks old. Very prem.  
She must be on your radar already, I should think.  
The baby and her mum are patients of Dr Paretti in this practice, here at Mandela.  
The grandmother and great grandmother are my patients.  
Anyway, Tia Whitehead is here now.  
She is with her grandmother Barbara Whitehead.

I'm not sure of the circumstances...

'Flu jab, I think...and her, the baby's great grandma too.  
All by accident, I think...

So you want me to check the baby over and then let the baby go with grandma overnight.

You have an emergency.

This is not an emergency.

Right, I see. Mmmm, I think I understand,

So, the plan is that Barbara Whitehead takes Tia Marie to her home overnight and one of the Duty Team will call tomorrow morning.

Address? I'll put Barbara Whitehead on the line.

*(To Barbara.)* They want your address Mrs Whitehead.  
It's one of the Children's Services Duty Team.

*(Barbara takes the phone.)*

**Barbara** Hello?

**DG** (To Dr Abdullah.) My test results, Dr Abdullah?

**Maeve** (To Barbara.) Be careful, 'flu jab.  
Be careful.

They are not there to help you.

They just want you to look after a child, so they don't have to pay someone else to do it.

**Barbara** That's 38 Balaclava Street, B2 9LH.  
Tomorrow morning...

**Gracie** I used to live there - 38 Balaclava Street.

**Maeve** They never come when they say.

**Barbara** About 11 o'clock then.

**Maeve** They never come when they say.  
Never.

**Barbara** So I'll see you tomorrow then...

Oh, not you - who then?  
How will I know they are the right person.

**Maeve** They flash ID if you ask.  
But you'll know they are social workers, because of their silly earrings.

**Gracie** I went to school around the corner. Mixed infants.

**Barbara** Yes, well, thank you for trusting me. *(She puts down the phone.)*

**Dr Ab** You'll be fine.

**Maeve** Yes, for one night...I need to get home, Doctor.

**Barbara** It's a long time since I looked after a baby with my three flown.

**Maeve** I've got Alka looking after the girls for me, but I don't like to take advantage, because she is so good.

I need to be home now, Doctor.

**DG** I know this is not a normal surgery with all this going on, but...

**Dr Ab** Yes and I have to pick Haleema from my Mother's...

**Maeve** I'm off. Be careful 'flu jab - beware of being dumped on.  
Kinship Care.

**Dr Ab** Let me have a quick look at Tia and then you can go home.

Maeve, can you ring for a taxi, before you go?  
Maybe two taxis.  
One for Mrs Whitehead and Tia.  
And one for Mrs Dacla and Mrs Boycott.  
Put them on the surgery account.  
No, put them on mine.

**Barbara** I can pay for my own bloody taxi.

**Maeve** And then I can rush for the bus, can I?

**Dr Ab** I'll pop you home. I pass your house after all, Maeve.  
But you will have to wait while I quickly check the baby.  
And have a word with Mrs Dacla.  
Yes, I do have the results.

Can you strip off Tia for me, Mrs Whitehead?  
While you do that, I'll have a word with Dacla.

*(Dr Abdullah changes her tone from brisk to concern and ushers DG to her office. Gracie stands sentinel by the door. Barbara undresses Tia. Maeve rings for taxis.)*

**Maeve** Two taxis please, for Mandela Surgery.

Yes, as soon as possible.

*(Maeve hangs up, puts on her coat and gathers her bag and shopping. She tidies her space.)*

I'm raising Orla and Siobhan, my sister's kids, you know.

It's not easy.

**Barbara** So how old are they then?

**Maeve** 12 and 14.

**Gracie** Old enough to be running a family of their own then.

**Maeve** Well, they are quite a team.  
Orla's the brains and Siobhan is the muscle.

**Gracie** What do you mean?

**Maeve** Siobhan has learning difficulties and Orla spina bifida.

**Barbara** Say sorry, Mum. Please say sorry.  
The daft bat didn't know.  
She doesn't know anything anymore.

*(Gracie goes to say something.)* SHUT IT MUM! SHUT IT!

I'll look after Tia until Eva comes out of hospital.

She'll be fine. She will.  
She'll be back home, full of beans, you'll see.  
She will. I know she will.

**Maeve** When Brigid died...

**Barbara** Oh, I'm so sorry...

**Maeve** I looked after the girls when she was ill.  
Well, their dad was working away, well, at the beginning.  
I knew it was coming and it was all I could do for her.

**Barbara** Yes, well, I'm so sorry, but it won't be the same...for us.

Eva will be out of hospital in a couple of days?  
They don't keep you in for long now - do they?  
They throw you out, just like that, don't they?

**Maeve** So it's just going to be a quick stay then?  
Your daughter is going to be out and ready to take over again?



**Barbara** Oh, yes. She'll be fit as a fiddle. In no time.

**Maeve** And they'll let her go back to her?  
Do you think?  
That tiny baby.

To a drug addict?

**Barbara** What are you saying?

**Maeve** That kid came in here filthy and starving and her mother is a heroin addict.

I'm sorry, but I'm just telling you how it is.

It'll be either you, a foster carer, then adoption.

They'd rather you, because you are cheap.

There you are, I've said it.

You are cheaper.

They'll say they want you to have her, because you'll keep contact with her birth mother.

Tia is being neglected - can't you see that?  
She's at risk...

**Barbara** I don't know..

*(Barbara goes over to Gracie and puts her arms around her.)*

Give us a hug. You were a great Mum.

*(DG comes out, followed by a subdued Dr Abdullah. DG is unsteady on her feet. She has heard devastating news. Her test shows pancreatic cancer. DG goes to leave.)*

FX Door bells rings.

**Dr Ab** That will be the first taxi.

Mrs Dacla, you have one with Mrs Boycott.

**Barbara**    Bye, Mum.  
                 Say goodbye to Tia.  
                 Yes, she's family, Mum.  
                 Eva's daughter, Mum.  
                 I'll bring her to see you.  
                 On a visit.  
                 Not tomorrow, but soon.

*(DG remembers Gracie and takes her by the hand and they leave, followed by Maeve saying her last speech.)*

**Maeve**      I'll wait by the car, Doctor.  
                 Remember the alarm when you leave.

I'll rinse the tea things first thing.

**Dr Ab**        Now let's have a look at this little one.

Let's go into my office.

She's a sweetie.  
Come on this way.

*(Dr Abdullah goes back to her office, followed by Barbara holding the baby.)*

Interval

## Act Two

### Section Nine - Gracie's Monologue

*(Twenty two months later, DG has died. The results that she received from Dr Abdullah at the end of Act One showed that she had an aggressive pancreatic cancer. The actor who plays DG in Act One, now plays DG's daughter Maria in Act Two. Maria is visiting the UK to pick up DG's ashes. For the ten months DG was ill and it is now a year after her death. Enter Gracie on stage alone.)*

**Gracie** I know I'm gaga. I know it. But I woke up this morning and thought,

not anymore.

I think it's time

to go.

They'll eventually remember me as I was.

You know - with me marbles fully rolling.

'Cos

I wasn't always a stupid old cow.

You become invisible, except to those paid to put me in a chair.

In a chair.

Telly, pictures. Noise.

'We go pee, pee...'

Bugger off.

'Come on Gracie old girl, be a good girl for me and drink this lovely cocoa.'

Lovely cocoa - my arse.

I wasn't always a loser.

But I've lost it now.

I need a jolly good sleep.

*( Gracie takes off her black T shirt to reveal a white one. )*

## **Section Ten - Self Help**

*(Surgery waiting room in darkness. It's raining outside. Enter Maeve who switches on the lights, takes off her coat and hangs it up. She takes out a packet of biscuits and a bottle of milk from her bag. She starts putting out stools.)*

**Maeve** My Sundays are precious.

*(Enter Barbara struggling with a buggy. Tia is encased asleep inside.)*

**Barbara** *(Whispering.)* Hello, 'Flu Jab here.

**Maeve** Call me Varicose Veins.

No one to have Tia then?

I know the rule, no kids, but I love to see her.

**Barbara** Tia's asleep. Sorry I had to bring her.

She's under the plastic. Oh! Did I remember to put her in?

Mavis and George Next Door are so good. Don't like to ask them unless it's really dire.

Going to the bank next week, don't want to take Tia with me. Actually, I should. Show them reality.

Fine tuned nap. She dozed off on the bus.  
Should be safe for the whole meeting.  
She's very good...

I've got biscuits and milk.

**Maeve** Snap! *(She waves her biscuits.)*

**Barbara** Fig rolls? No one likes fig rolls.

**Maeve** Good for the bowels.

**Barbara** Shouldn't say those sorts of things.  
You're a receptionist, not a bottom doctor.

**Maeve** Gastroenterologist.

Poor DG...

It's a year you know...

**Barbara** What?

**Maeve** A year since she died.

**Barbara** That's gone quick. So sad, just like that, but...

*(Barbara takes off her shoes and massages her feet.)*

I must stay fit.

**Maeve** It was a good idea - do you think we'd have done it, if DG hadn't come up with the idea.

**Barbara** Probably not, but it is a self help group for kinship carers?  
Where is everybody? People would be here by now, if they were coming?

We are saving the country millions.

**Maeve** Perhaps...

**Barbara** We both brought milk and biscuits

Oh dear. She was the one who always...

**Maeve** She always brought the best ones.  
Those chewy ones with bits of ginger.

**Barbara** Gorgeous. They miss her at Comfort at Sunset.

**Maeve** She met her sunset before...

**Barbara** Before Mum that's for sure...

Dear Gracie will outlive all of us.  
I don't know where she gets her energy from.  
I haven't inherited it.

She drives us all bonkers.

DG got her results from the doc, didn't she - that night,

The cancer thing...  
She always seemed so...well...

**Maeve** I'll put the kettle on.

I was thinking...I've never asked... Is Eva an only child?

**Barbara** No, we had three. There's Eva, Joe, that's Joseph, that is, and Fiona.

**Maeve** So, where are they? What are they doing?

**Barbara** Joe went down south. He's got a good job - computers, I think.

I'm thinking of getting some de-caff tea bags...

Fiona, she's the clever one. She's just left university. Well, a couple of years ago. She lives in Perry Barr. Got a boyfriend - nice, I believe. She's got a degree in mmmm something or other to do with history. Yer know, old things.

**Maeve** Right.

**Barbara** On the management scheme at Sainsbury's, so she tells me, but... she still has her dreams.

We talk about once a week.

I ring her.

You know how busy young people are nowadays...

I leave a message on the answer phone. I tell her my news.

I think they don't come, because of the house.  
It's where their Dad...

Sainsburys.

They do sorts of de-caff there. Have you tried red rooibos tea?  
They do it in Sainsburys.

**Maeve** It's not my cup of tea. (*Laughs.*) So do they help out with Tia?  
Give you a bit of peace and quiet from time to time...  
you know...respite.

**Barbara** They would if they could. They would, I s'pect.

**Maeve** Fiona, is it? She's just across the city. She could help surely.

And your son, Joe, is it?

**Barbara** But he has an...alternative life-style, if you know what I mean...

**Maeve** All the better. He might be in touch with his feminine side.

My Mum would have had Siobhan and Orla if I hadn't and I mean  
full time, she would, after Brigid died, she would have, but...

I think it should be done by someone the same generation. This  
caring malarkey.

I did have energy once. I did. Really I did.

**Barbara** But Tia just came to me, didn't she? She just dropped into my  
arms.

Just like that!

She is my responsibility.

**Maeve** For a night perhaps. But there were other options.  
There are other options.  
To be frank, you look knackered.

**Barbara** Apologies.

Frank can't make it again.

Little Frank has a bug and Doris doesn't want to sit, because she doesn't want her little one to get it.

Doris said that they are not telling Poppy that her mum is visiting, because she usually doesn't.

How often can you say 'mummy is poorly'?

**Barbara** Linda's got to take Melanie and Zoe over to Peterborough for a visit. Her Carrie is out on parole soon.

I don't know what happens then.

**Maeve** I haven't heard from Pammy. The phone's making a funny noise.

**Barbara** They might have moved. She'd had an offer of a bigger flat in West Heath. I do hope so...

I've had emails from Betty, Shabana and Cora. Perhaps we should change the day? Perhaps the time?

Make it easier for everybody.

Had a long chat on the phone with Clive. Their three grandchildren turned up in their 'jamas with no shoes on their doorstep at 3 in the morning with a police escort.

They had nothing...  
and they didn't know them.

**Maeve** Lucky they had 'jamas.

**Barbara** And someone else can't come, mmmm, the woman from Sparkhill. Might meet her for a coffee in Costa.

**Maeve** Marlene.

After this meeting, I'll get the newsletter together and email it to her and the others. Oh yes, and I had an email from a great



grandmother who has got three great grandchildren living with her - Josephine something or other. I've got her details somewhere.

She's had the children a long time. She was really pleased to hear that someone was trying to help carers like us. Sounded lovely, she'll try and get to next month's meeting.

**Barbara** How old is she then?

**Maeve** I don't know, but she must be getting on a bit.

**Barbara** Could be younger than you, if her daughter and her granddaughter had children at 16.

Or she could be in her 80s, maybe like my Mum.

I think we should have a special party for her 85th - what do you think? A sing song around the piano - all the old songs. Yer know 'Daisy, Daisy', 'Bull and Bush'...Big coffee cake with Camp coffee.

**Maeve** At Comfort at Sunset?

**Barbara** Where else? They've got a big room. You know the one that's got all the chairs around the edge. Where they sit them. It's a sort of deadly circle with Jeremy Kyle shouting from the wall.

Could invite loads of people - she knows loads.

Well, those who are still alive.

**Maeve** We are building up a network of people with the kinship care stuff. It takes time...

**Barbara** It's getting the information out there. Getting professionals to let people know about us.

**Maeve** Yes...

**Barbara** I do think a creche would be a good idea. We need funding for that. I'll write a letter to that nice Sir Lenny Henry. I always fancied him.

**Maeve** How's your Mum?

**Barbara** What?

**Maeve** How is she? Your mother, Gracie?

**Barbara** Same...she fancied Sir Lenny too.

Same-ish...

Her good bits are getting further and further apart...

Doesn't like the change of staff.

**Maeve** Yes.

We could do with new members, maybe someone who has time and transport to go and see people.

**Barbara** New members who turn up. New members with cars...

Anyway, let's start the meeting. Attendees - Varicose Veins and 'Flu Jab. Any problems Maeve?

**Maeve** Strange couple of weeks.

**Barbara** One of the girls?

**Maeve** I don't think Siobhan remembers her mum. She said 'I was in your tummy - wasn't I?' I said 'no', though I really wanted to say 'yes'. I said she was in Brigid's tummy. 'You know the photo on the wall in the hall. Brigid was your mummy. I am Brigid's sister.' She sometimes calls me mum and I always say, I'm your Auntie Maeve'.

But I want to say 'yes'.

She understands sister, because she and Orla are sisters.

So anything for you this month?

**Barbara** Not especially.

Well, money as usual. Tia needs shoes.

Oh, yes, at Aldi, I get cross at Parent and Child parking.  
Children are always with a parent? No.  
It should say Carer.

I keep a pen and a postit in my bag to write a note when people  
without a child park there.

**Maeve** What do you write?

**Barbara** If parking is so important - get yourself a child. I've got one to  
spare.

**Maeve** You don't.

**Barbara** I do. I know it's madness, because I've never had a car. I don't  
need the sodding parking, but...

And I've been thinking, I must have been a lousy parent the first  
time around.

## **Section Eleven - Enter Maria**

*(Enter Maria, very wet.)*

**Maria** I love cold rain! It's just...

**Maeve** Hold on to that thought, Barbara.

Hello, the Youth Club is over the way in the church hall.

**Barbara** Can we help you? What are you looking for?

**Maria** What's the word?

Kinship?

**Maeve** Yes, this is the...

*(Maria runs up to the buggy, opens up the front cover.)*

**Maria** Tia - you must be Tia...Tia sleeping...

FX Tia whimpers.

Oh, I mustn't get you wet, little darling.

**Barbara** HEY - OUT OF THERE!

*(Whispering.)* Oh my God - Divine Grace. It's Divine Grace.

**Maeve** DG? Can't be, she de...

**Maria** No, Maria. I'm Maria.

**Barbara** Maria?

**Maeve** Maria? One of DG's lot...  
You must be the big one.

**Barbara** You know Tia?

**Maria** Mama tells us all about Tia Marie.

And you Barbara who knits and Maeve who...doesn't.  
Thank you for my scarf...I have it with me...

And Gracie, Mrs Boycott. *(She laughs.)*

**Barbara** But she didn't go home, did she?  
Before she...

**Maria** Before she left us.

No, she didn't but we talked every day on Skype.

*(Maria takes Tia out of the buggy and sits down cradling the sleeping child as someone with lots of experience of small children. Barbara watches in awe.)*

**Maeve** Just dreadful.

**Maria** But I had cuddles with Bunica.  
I always had cuddles with Bunica.

*(Maria puts Tia back into the buggy and rocks it back and fore.)*

**Barbara** Bunica?

**Maria** Mama's mama. DG's mother.

**Barbara** Like me a grandmother.

**Maeve** Holidays? You saw her holidays?

**Maria** Yes, holidays. She tried to get home once a year.

**Barbara** She was a good woman - kind and considerate.  
She was lovely to my Mum - she misses her.

**Maria** Milky coffee, four sugars.  
  
'I like a little coffee with my sugar.'

**Maeve** She talked about you all the time.

**Barbara** She was so proud of you.

**Marie** Yes, I know and she came here for me.

**Maeve** Tough?

**Marie** No work. It's difficult.  
No school for me or the others without her money from here.

**Barbara** You know that she used to come to our meetings...  
  
Well, she did come a couple of first ones, before she got proper poorly.

**Maeve** We got sort of friendly...  
We met her here when Tia...and she got her results...

**Maria** The night she found out...

**Maeve** In a way the first meeting of the Mandela Kinship Care group.

**Barbara** The night that Tia came to me...

**Maeve** God, she stank! Tia that is, not your Mum.

**Maria** Stank?

**Barbara** One could think you are a hard nosed bitch, Maeve...

**Maeve** Tia stank to high heaven. She was sitting in her own faeces. She hadn't been changed for, oh, I don't know how long.

## **Section Twelve - Catching Up**

**Marie** Mama say you were very kind.

How are Orla and Siobhan? She told me all about them.

**Barbara** Orla's at catering college - you know for slow learners...

**Maeve** Oh shut up 'Flu Jab - let me tell her.

You can go and have lunch there. They do a lovely fish pie. The food is very good and Orla really loves it. She does lots of cooking at home. I'll have a Sunday roast when I get home now with a crumble to follow, if I'm lucky.

And Siobhan? She's the brains of the family - she's going to sit her AS Levels this year. She's going to do Animation at Uni, hopefully...

She wants to go to Uni in the States...

Lots of opportunities - you know, Toy Story, Monsters Inc...

**Barbara** But she's in a wheelchair...

So what...good luck I say.

**Maeve** So what!

**Maria** So what! It's good to have an ambition.

**Barbara** Her Mum would be so proud.

**Maria** You and her mama were sisters, Maeve?

The mamas are sitting together in heaven...

**Maeve** It must be great to have a faith.

I had one once - 'hail Mary full of grace...'

**Barbara** (*Aside to Maeve.*) Give the girl a break, Maeve.  
Her Mum popped her clogs.

So what brings you here now, erm... Maria? Is It?

(*Maria takes out an urn with DG's ashes from out of her bag.*)

**Maria** I'm taking her home. I'm taking her to her home.

**Barbara** We gave her a nice send off here. Lots of flowers.  
We had flowers and donations to Cancer Research.  
Crematoriums are quick, but we got hold of a nice priest.  
He knew DG - you know, in person. Father Liam?

It's so disappointing to go to a funeral and the vicar had never met  
the person who's died. It's just poor, very poor.

And you know, don't you, that Maeve went to see her regular like.  
At the hospital and then the hospice...

I couldn't go - you know the baby...

**Maeve** You could have gone, if you'd wanted to.

**Barbara** I'm sorry dear.

It's not that I didn't want to go. It's just that one of my problems is  
that I think I might... pass over, before Tia has grown up. She'll be  
without me. I have to keep going.

**Maeve** And death is catching?

**Barbara** No, I know it isn't.  
Me house used to feel... I don't know, but now with Tia it's alive  
again.

If I'd realised how ill she was...

**Maria** No worries, she had Maeve, comfort at Sunset and me and the family on Skype.

With Skype, of course, everyone has to take a turn,  
In ages, oldest to the youngest. I had to take my turn.  
A large family, everyone wants to chat.

**Barbara** Yes, I wanted a chat...

**Maria** I wanted her to myself when she came home. But I had to take my turn.  
I wanted to have a family like in books, mummy, daddy and the boy and girl.

I wanted my Mum and I got Skype.

**Maeve** We got together often.  
A bit sad that I saw her and you, flesh and blood, had to stand in line for a virtual version.

We'd have coffee here, around the back, when she came to see the doc and then in hospital and the hospice.

They were very kind.

I enjoyed my visits to DG. She never talked about herself.

And the old girls were marvellous.

The older you are, the more death is a friend.

**Barbara** Tea, dear. We are going to have a cuppa.  
I'll put the kettle on.

**Maria** Mama never told you about the surgery. I haven't done surgery yet, but...

**Barbara** No, she didn't tell you about the surgery, did she Maeve?

**Maria** They removed the head of the pancreas, her gall bladder, some of her small intestine and part of the bile duct...

and then, put it back together again.



Like a jigsaw.

**Barbara** You know a lot.

**Maeve** Maria is studying medicine, Barbara.

**Barbara** Really? Here? In England?

**Maria** Oh no. I am studying medicine at Bucharest Medical University.

A good woman, Mama - a care assistant.

But given the opportunity, Mama might have been a doctor.

A doctor back home.

Mama might have been anything she wanted to be.

**Maeve** The chemo took its toll...

**Maria** No hair.

**Maeve** And the sickness.

**Barbara** Why didn't she go home to you?

**Maria** I think she thought that here in England there might be a better chance.

**Maeve** So, she never got home and you never saw her face to face.

**Maria** Just virtual.

But most of my life, Mama was virtual.

I want to visit the places where Mama lived. See her old ladies. Her room with the doors into the garden. Red buses. Eat fish and chips. Not many fish in our mountains.

Close in a real way, though she isn't here.

**Barbara** I understand that.

**Maria** I wanted to come here.

To the place where she heard her...news.  
and where she was kind to a baby.

This baby, Tia, a toddler now.  
A tired toddler, who will go to school, like me.

She won't be taken to school by her mother.

At home, children are often taken to school by the grandmother.

I was not unusual - it was common - everywhere...

**Barbara** Taken by her grandmother.

### **Section thirteen - Eva Arrives**

*(Enter Eva slowly.)*

**Eva** Taken by her grandmother?  
Yep, I can believe that.

**Barbara** Eva.

**Eva** Well, if it isn't the baby snatcher.

I wasn't expecting to see you here with the Irish cow and an  
unmarried mother.

*(To Maria.)* No, we are called a lone parent now. Aren't we?

**Maria** Oh, no this isn't my...

*(Maria puts the rain cover over Tia in the buggy.)*

**Eva** That's right, put it back in its cage.

Be careful, they'll snatch your baby away from you!

So, where is my baby, then, Mother?

Where is she?

The social say I'm not responsible enough. But are you?  
So where is she?

**Maeve** The surgery is closed today for a special event, Miss Whitehead.  
It is closed to patients.

Dr Abdullah is not here. Sunday is her day off.

If you want to see a doctor urgently, then you'll have to go to Alice Road.

You know where that is?

**Eva** Just been there - you must be joking.

There's a cast of thousands - the queue goes round the block.

Not waiting there.

And I thought that Zoe might be a bit more sympathetic to my situation.

**Maeve** Dr Abdullah is not here. This is a private event.

You need to leave now, please.

**Eva** (*To Maria.*) Be careful. They'll have your baby off you.

JUST LIKE THAT?

**Maria** But...

**Barbara** How are you, Eva? Long time no see.

**Eva** Oh, I'm fine mum. Really good.  
Really I am. Really good.

On a new programme at the Centre.

Very supportive helpful people there. Yeh, they say we are going to beat it together.

Where's Tia? I was going to ring. To pop around to pick her up.

**Barbara** Pick her up?

**Eva** Yes, I've got a place.

**Barbara** A place?

**Eva** Yes, a nice little apartment. Moving in soon.

Lots of room for a Moses' basket.

They'll help me get one - a Moses' basket.

Nappies and stuff.

**Maeve** You have to be kidding.

**Barbara** You didn't come to court.

**Eva** Oh yes, well, you know me...

**Barbara** I've got a Special Guardian Order...

**Eva** Not keen on authority...

**Barbara** For Tia.  
I'm sorry, but Tia lives with me now.

**Maeve** Sorry? Why are you sorry?

**Eva** No, she doesn't, Mum. Tia will come back with me.

**Barbara** I don't think so.

**Eva** We'll go and pick her up now, shall we?  
She's at Mavis's - yes?

Come on let's go.

**Barbara** You haven't been in touch, Eva.

I gave them the address in Erdington.

Did you get the letters? About court?

**Maeve** We are having a private meeting here now.  
We have an agenda. We have to get through it.

Perhaps you could have this discussion some other time. I'm sure that Dr Abdullah would love to talk to you about the progress of - what was your baby called again, Miss Whitehead?

**Eva** Tia Marie Whitehead - you know that. Don't pretend you don't know.

**Maeve** A Special Guardianship Order, I believe, is quite serious...

**Eva** She's my baby. I gave birth to her. You know all that pain and huffing and puffing. *(She huffs and puffs.)*

**Barbara** Caesarian.

**Maeve** A Special Guardianship Order means that the person holding it, in this case, your Mother, has parental rights for that child.

Perhaps you could go over for a visit, Miss Whitehead.  
Meet your daughter sometime.

Get to know her.

**Eva** What?

**Barbara** It was a caesarian.

**Eva** I know my daughter.

Come on let's go to Mavis and George's. Come on Mum.

I'll just have a quick chat with the doc first.

**Maeve** The surgery is closed.

**Barbara** No, she's not at Mavis and George's, Eva.

She's not there.

**Eva** My daughter should be with me. Not with her interfering grandmother.

She was snatched away from me, by her. (*Indicates Barbara.*)

**Maria** Grandmothers are good carers.

**Eva** Excuse me, but this is none of your business.

You need to be careful that someone doesn't come along and take you... (*Doesn't recognise Tia.*)

Little girl, is it? She looks sweet.

Let's go then, Mum.

Hey you! (*To Maeve.*) Hey you! I need to see a doctor now. I'm on medication. I need a script now. NOW!

Don't send me to Alice Road.

Walk-in. You can't walk-in.  
Walk-in it's impossible to walk-in.

I need a doctor, please.

Please, Mum.  
On the way to Mavis's.

Where does Dr Abdullah live? I need to see Dr Abdullah.  
I need to see her now. She's a good doctor, isn't she?  
She was lovely, when.. I don't know when...

(*Eva squares up to Maeve.*)

I NEED TO SEE A DOCTOR NOW AND THIS IS A SURGERY!

**Maeve** You can shout at me, but it won't change anything.

Dr Abdullah is not here. There are no doctors here today.  
The surgery is closed until 8.30 tomorrow morning.

If you want to see a doctor now, then it's Alice Road Walk-in Centre in Alice Road or it's A& E.

I suspect they know you quite well at A & E - don't they?

**Eva** Dr Abdullah wants to see me now. She will be very cross that you haven't made the effort to call her in. She wants to see me.

SEE WANTS TO SEE ME NOW!

YOU CAN SEE I'M ILL!

**Maria** Yes, I can see you aren't well. You aren't feeling OK? Are you? You're burning up. It's probably a bug.

Maybe paracetamol - just to take your temperature down.  
(*To Maeve.*) Give her two paracetamols with a glass of water.

**Maeve** I'm a bloody receptionist, not a doctor.  
And today, I am not even a receptionist.

I am one of the two facilitators of the Mandela Kinship Care Group.

No one invited either of you here.  
You must leave now.

**Eva** She was lovely. Dr Abdullah. Wasn't she? She was lovely...  
I need a prescription. Now.

**Maria** You may need to see a doctor...

**Maeve** I have asked you both to leave.

**Barbara** (*To Maria.*) You're a doctor. You said.

**Maria** First year medical student. How did you get in this state?

**Eva** Well, I met this man, you know like you do. I meet a man and he said that if I took this stuff, you know, I'd feel...better.

**Maeve** Well, I think that concludes the meeting.

Goodbye, Ms Whitehead - good luck with your search for a doctor.  
Mrs Whitehead, I'm going to take Maria back with me and the little one. OK?

## Section Fourteen - Trying To Leave

**Barbara** What?

**Maeve** I'm going to take Maria back with me and the little one.

Back to my house.

**Barbara** Sorry I don't get... *(Realises that Maeve is removing Tia.)*

Oh, so the meeting is finished and you are taking Maria and the little one back to yours.

**Maeve** Yes, you've got my mobile - yes? I'll ring you.  
You'll be OK?  
Here with... with... If she doesn't go...

**Barbara** Yes, I'll call later.  
*(Quietly to Maria.)* Her snacks - you know, sultanas, are in the bottom of the buggy.

**Eva** *(To Maria.)* She's not yours. The little girl. Not yours.  
*(To Maeve.)* Not yours for sure. You're just a dried up old cow.  
  
Who's is she?

**Barbara** We have a lot to talk about Eva. We'll go to the cafe in the co-op - OK?

**Maria** She's...she's my sister's.

**Barbara** I'll get you something to eat. Egg and chips always a favourite.

**Eva** No, she's not your sister's - don't look like you.

**Maria** She was adopted.

**Barbara** Co-op. You know we can have a cuppa...



**Eva** You know, I always thought I was adopted.  
I loved my Dad, but...  
Did you really give birth to me?  
Did I really come out of your minge?

**Maeve** Really - wash your mouth out!

**Eva** Is it cold in here? Cold and wet.

*(To Tia.)* I've got a sweet girl like you.  
She's just tiny though, not a big girl like you.

I love her soooooo much and she loves her Mummy.

Oh yes, she loves her Mummy. She loves her Mummy up to the stars and back again, forever and ever.

And she's coming home. Coming home to her Mummy.

That's me, ME, yes me. I am Tia's Mummy.

## **Section Fifteen - Maria As Traitor**

**Maria** Actually, she has a right to know - doesn't she?

This isn't right...

I wanted to know my Mum. Really know her.

Not a photo, a phone call, a fleeting visit when all the family wanted to share her.

Don't get me wrong, I had a marvellous childhood with Bunica and my enormous family, but I didn't have my Mum.

I wanted my Mum and Dad.

**Barbara** What?

I'm beginning not to like you...

**Maria** You have a right to know.

*(Maria takes Tia out of the buggy and goes to hand her to Eva.)*

This is Tia. Your daughter. They grow up so quickly.

**Eva** You said she was your sister's?

Tia's a baby. Don't get funny with me.  
Tia is a baby girl. She's only...she's only...

*(To Barbara.)* How old is she? Mum, how old is Tia?

**Barbara** Your daughter - how old do you think?

**Eva** Tia is a baby, not...I'll know my baby when I see her.  
What do you think I am? Not knowing my own child.

**Maeve** Well, there we are then.

**Barbara** Tia is two years old next month, Eva. It's been a long time. She's been with me for twenty two months.

**Maeve** Time flies.

**Barbara** I have a Special Guardianship Order from the Court.  
You need a doctor. Can you call Dr Abdullah, Maeve?

**Eva** Yeh, call a doctor, Maeve.  
That's what I have been asking.

CALL THE BLOODY DOCTOR!

**Maeve** I'm Mrs O'Sullivan to you.  
I'll text her. Against my better judgement. Don't have much hope.  
It's her day off with her baby.

*(Maeve texts.)*

**Barbara** I'm going home, I'm going home, Eva.

I'm not being bullied anymore.

And Tia comes with me.

*(Barbara takes Tia and puts her in the buggy. Eva snatches Tia from her and goes towards the door.)*

FX Tia whimpers. A sound track of cries and whimpering starts.

**Eva**           Shit, she looks like me.  
It's me. She looks like me.

It's Tia Marie and I've lost my baby, but gained a little girl.

**Maria**       She's a lovely little girl and you're right, she looks just like you.

**Barbara**    If you try and take her, Eva, then I'll ring the police.  
In fact, I might do it now.

*(To Marie.)* Why don't you just sit down?

**Maria**       There's a bag on the buggy. There are things that might be useful.  
Take the buggy too. You need the buggy.

**Eva**           Police - yeh, I don't think so.

There's stuff here - isn't there? Stuff... this is a doctors - they'll have supplies...

*(Eva carries Tia awkwardly and jumps up on the reception desk and starts searching for drugs in drawers. Barbara tries to get to Tia. Chaos.)*

**Maeve**       OUT OF THERE!  
Right, this nonsense has gone on long enough.

Put that child back in the buggy NOW!

**Maria**       What's going on?

**Barbara**    Give her to me for Godsake, EVA!

**Maeve**       I mean it. GET OUT OF HERE!

No drugs are kept on the premises.

*(Maeve tries to get Eva and Tia down from the desk. Eva finds the sharp's box.)*

**Eva** JUST STAY AWAY FROM ME! I'll use this...it's full of needles and...

**Barbara** This has got to stop now, Eva.

GET OUT OF THERE!

We can get the... ummm...med...you need.

Give Tia back to me. You are frightening her.

**Eva** She's not frightened of her Mummy.

**Barbara** Tia knows me. She has been with me for the last twenty two months. I haven't had Tia on hold waiting for you to turn up. You need something, I know it. I'm not daft. I can see you are...

*(Maeve's mobile rings.)*

**Maeve** It's the doc - yeh, she says to go to Alice Road Walk-in Centre.

**Eva** ALICE FUCKING ROAD!

**Maeve** Yeh, thanks for that...

**Barbara** Tia's not the baby she was. Just give her back to me now. Perhaps we can talk about...

She's crying, Eva. She's crying...

**Eva** It's your fault, she's crying. All your fault.  
All of this. All of this. It would have been alright if it hadn't been for you.

*(Eva tries to comfort Tia. She starts to lose energy. Eva puts Tia on the floor behind the desk and frantically looks for drugs. During Barbara's calm speech, Maeve tries to retrieve Tia. Eva is completely out of control, but Barbara tries to talk to her.)*

**Barbara** Learnt to walk with me.  
Found her voice.

Had her first birthday with me - teddy bears picnic.  
Made a smartie cake.  
You used to like...  
She has had a life with me. A good life.  
It's knackered me, but brought such joy, Eva.  
Such joy.  
This wasn't how I was going to spend my old age.  
This wasn't in my great plan of things.  
But this is my life now. It's me and Tia.  
And the Court has said as much with the Order.  
You chose not to come to the Hearing.

**Eva** I DIDN'T! How was I supposed to know.

**Maria** So they took your baby without you knowing...

**Maeve** You've said enough.

**Eva** *(Spitting.)* Don't come near my baby you!

*(Eva finds a syringe and threatens them.)*

**Barbara** I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS!  
WE NEVER SAID NO! I'm saying NO NOW!

*(Barbara takes the syringe off Eva. Maeve runs to safety. Barbara picks up Tia and backs away. Eva is looking at syringes, one by one, not as a weapon, but to see if they contain anything for personal use - she is concentrating. Barbara puts Tia back in the buggy.)*

*(To herself.)* Tia lives with me now. I can keep her safe.  
If you want to have a say then you should have turned up at the Court.

*(To Eva.)* Read your mail, answer your phone. Tia's social worker tried her best to get to talk to you.

**Eva** *(Frantic.)* They don't give a toss. Not a toss about me.

I need a doctor. A nice doctor.

Bloody social workers.

## Section Seventeen - Home Truths

**Maeve** Social Worker? Who would be a social worker?

The child should come first not the parent.

**Barbara** Social workers must give a toss - why would they do such a thankless job, if they didn't care.

No time. Always an emergency. Working with children seriously abused or neglected.

**Maeve** And we know a baby who was neglected, don't we?

**Maria** Neglected?

**Barbara** Neglect is worse than abuse.

**Eva** What do you mean? Are you accusing me? I never did anything to my baby.

**Maeve** Yes, you never did anything. That child was brought in here with DG - starving and filthy. All you wanted was your addiction.

**Eva** You've been listening to her stories. I need a prescription.

**Maeve** We saw the neglect with our own eyes. Shooting up in the phone box.

**Eva** That wasn't me.

**Maeve** Yes, neglect is worse than abuse - a kid has the abuser's attention.

**Eva** It wasn't me. It wasn't.

I needed help. I NEED HELP!

**Maria** She says that wasn't her. She needed help...

**Barbara** You could have rung me. I'd have told you about the Court Case. 'Course I would.  
Ring me, ask after your daughter - why didn't you?  
Ring me? Actually just turn up on the doorstep - same house, Eva.

You just have to turn up. Just turn up.

No Co-op Eva. I'm taking away that offer. No quiet chat. I've had enough.

Why this sudden interest?  
It's just 'cos you're here.

**Maeve** It's just that you are both in this same place together.  
You like to be seen to be interested.  
Perhaps you'd like to be seen as a mother?

**Maria** A mum has to be interested.

**Barbara** We haven't seen hide nor hair of you.

You need to see a doctor and I'm going to ask Maeve again, can you get Dr Abdullah to come out to her here? She needs whatever it is that is more important than her baby.

**Eva** That's not very kind. I'm just a bit poorly.

Yes, I need to see a doctor, obviously, but...  
I've had a hard time, trying to do my best - on my own, with no help from you or anybody. I'm going to find a place for us to live.

Actually, all a baby needs is love...

**Maria** A baby needs mother love.

**Maeve** I've texted her.

**Barbara** I can't do anything for you, Eva. God help me, I've tried.  
I have done my best to support you over the years and all you have done is take and manipulate me. And your poor dear father...

Stolen money and sold things to feed your habit. Yes, I know you have. Should have confronted you, but you are scary, Eva.

You are scary.

You have taken advantage of my good nature and my guilt too.

Guilt? Yes, I feel very guilty that is how you are. I'm trying hard to do it differently this time. Wrong before, wasn't I?

You wrapped Dad around your little finger.

There is only one thing I can do for you now Eva and that is to bring up your daughter.

And it is the biggest thing I could do for anyone.

And the only reason that we are having this conversation now is that you have come here looking for a doctor.

Tia and me being here is neither here nor there.

FX Tia yells

I'm here! I'm here. Beautiful girl.

No need to cry, little shirt button.

**Eva** I'm your little shirt button.

**Barbara** *(To Tia.)* We are going home now. It'll be tea time soon - nice milky milky and pasta twirly whirlies and belly jelly for pud. Yes?

Have some sultanas now - keep the wolf from the door - yes?

And there's still drink in your beaker.

OK, feeling better - bus now. We like the bus, don't we?

*(Sings.)* The wheels on the bus go round and round.

Round and around, round and round.

The grannies on the bus go snore, snore, snore.

*(Laughs.)* We need to be home.

What book would you like tonight after your bath?

We've got new ones from the library.

The caterpillar one?



**Eva** I like the caterpillar one.

THAT'S It! WE'RE GOING!

## **Section Eighteen - Eva With Buggy**

*(Eva moves quickly. She pushes the buggy with Tia in and exits. Maeve rushes after after her, but Maria blocks the exit. Barbara watches, frozen to the spot.)*

**Barbara** EVA COME BACK HERE! YOU'LL GET INTO TROUBLE!

**Maeve** 999 or 101?

**Barbara** EVA!

**Maeve** 999 or 101? Police? Yes? Easier than running after her. You have the law on your side after all.

**Maria** She should have her daughter.

*(She snatches the phone off Maeve, then gets hold of Maeve's mobile and holds them both back from the exit.)*

**Maeve** Look you silly girl.

She's a junky. She can't look after herself. Her habit comes first.

Give me the phones!

**Barbara** She didn't come here for Tia. She didn't know she was here.

**Maria** A child needs her mama.

**Maeve** She's got one in Barbara here.

Give me the phones. I'm about to get very cross. I'm tired and about to get very, very cross.

This is supposed to be a meeting about holding a fund raiser in the summer, not having tug of love crap.

Give me the bloody phones! NOW!

999 Or 101 'Flu Jab?

**Barbara** I should do it, but...

**Maeve** No, I'll do it, then she can blame me. My shoulders are broad. She's not my daughter, and...

**Maria** You can't ring. She should have her baby...

**Maeve** I have had enough of this nonsense. Give me one of the bloody phones!  
She won't get far in that state.

**Barbara** We need a phone dear.

**Maeve** I'm sorry your Mum didn't raise you.  
I'm sorry she came to England.  
I'm sorry there wasn't enough money for your family.  
I'm sorry that you had to share you Mum with others.  
I'm sorry you were raised by Bunica.  
I am very, very sorry.  
But this doesn't mean that you know everything about everybody else's story.

It is truly sad that some children cannot be brought up by their birth parents, but that doesn't mean that others can't do a damn good job.

**Barbara** I don't think we'll have to ring. I think she'll come...

## **Section Nineteen - The End**

*(Enter Dr Abdullah.)*

**Dr Ab** Oh, I thought it was Eva with Tia.

It is.

*(Enter Eva pushing the buggy with Tia. Barbara rushes to the buggy and takes it to a corner of the space.)*

**Eva** So Zoe, give me a prescription quick and I'll get out of your hair. Yep, I'm getting off the Big 'H'. It's dollies for me from now on. They give me dollies up at the centre. I'm on their programme. You know their rehab programme. You know.

**Dr Ab** Again.

I shouldn't have said that - unprofessional.

**Eva** They don't open on Sundays. The Centre doesn't open on Sundays. Very silly not to offer a seven day service. We need it. It's good to see you. Alice Road is fine for most people , scratched knee, a bit of a head ache... but if you are busy...I haven't got time to wait. It's OK for some people you know when a script is not urgent like mine. Need to feel better. Can't waste time. Things to do. I'm a busy person. Quite busy really. Need to keep going, you know. Take it up to the out of hours. Know me there. I'm not well and it takes time to work. Big 'H' an instant hit. Like wow - instant, but methadone, another thing - two hours to get into your system. Two hours and if I don't go now, I have to find something on the street.

Bet you're pleased with me. Coming here, looking for you doc - methadone, dilly dollies, is OK for me. Yes, it's OK. It is. I'm through with Big 'H'.

**Barbara** The most I ever wanted was an occasional gin and tonic.

**Maria** *(To Maeve.)* Here, have the phone. Phones.

**Maeve** Good girl.

**Dr Ab** *(To Eva.)* Come into the consulting room and I'll give you a script.

*(They go to the consulting room.)*

**Maria** I'm going now. I'm sorry I messed up your meeting. I'll see you before I go back? Maybe ?

**Maeve** Maybe?

*(Exit Maria. Eva waving a script and Doctor Abdullah return.)*

**Eva** GOT IT!

*(Exit Eva without looking at Tia.)*

**Barbara** THE LITTLE BITCH! I knew it. Knew it! She doesn't want her daughter, she just wants people to think she does. I knew she wouldn't take her. I knew it. The little bitch. She doesn't want her.

**Dr Ab** Time to go home, I think. No one will come to the meeting now and I need to get back.

Home Mrs Whitehead with your beautiful granddaughter who is a lucky girl.

**Barbara** Lucky boys and girls have a mum and a dad. Not a dodderly old fart like me.

**Dr Ab** Rubbish!

Go home and go home, Maeve. I'll lock up.

**Barbara** I'll check my phone, Tia. It's wiggling, Tia. A message from the Comfort of Sunset.

I'd better ring them when we get home. Get to our home.

It'll be about Great Grandma's birthday party, I expect.  
We never did have that cup of tea.

*(Exit Barbara pushing the buggy with Tia.)*

**Maeve** We've got 37 people on our mailing list now. It's difficult for them to come...

**Dr Ab** It's Ok, we'll talk about it on Monday. No problem using the surgery, even if not many people make it. Now go home, Maeve.

*(Exit Maeve and Dr Abdullah goes to follow. Enter Maria and picks up the ashes.)*

Hurry up. I need to get home.

**Maria** Goodbye Mama. *(She opens the ashes and scatter some of them.)*

Half for here and half for home.

*(Maria blows a kiss and exits. Dr Abdullah exits. Enter Gracie. Sits on the floor in the ashes, picks some up and blows them skyward.)*

FX Heavy rain

**BLACK OUT**

# ***Holding***

Poetry Collection

# ***Holding, The Poetry Collection***

## **Full time, That Means Every Day.**

*You are my home, you two.  
You are my home.*

- With Us
- Janet And Jon
- Confidence Of A Gnat
- Believing Twaddle
- Play Centre
- Jacouin Poster From Rue Pernelle At The Foot Of The Bed
- Smeared
- Sand
- Stretches Like Lycra
- Ice Cream
- Last Day

## **Not The Life She Wants To Live.**

*The space we share,  
we are home.  
We are home.*

- The Myth of Mummy
- Emotional Intelligence
- Fall For The Line
- He Was Told
- Out Of The Deep Blue
- Sending Postcards
- Strange Week
- Homework
- A Step Away
- The Wood

## **We Never Have Fish Finger Sandwiches, Never Ever**

*You are my home, you two.*

*You are my home.*

- Routine 1
- Routine 2
- Routine 3
- Freeze Cars 2
- Suncream
- Wednesday Aunty Naomi
- Stuff
- No To Not Much

## **Space That Says Boy.**

*You are my home, small fry.*

*You are my home.*

*You are my home Big Fish.*

*You are my home.*

- Inevitable
- Clocks
- The Table Cloth
- Blank
- Chickenpox
- Joy
- Dogs
- Water Dog
- Hiccup
- The Visit
- Jetpack



## **Now Anger Simpers And Simmers Underneath.**

*We are home  
In this welcome rock pool.*

- Going forward
- Square Eyes
- Childhood
- Drowning Children
- Unblock Crap
- Anger
- Tempest
- Circus

## **Will Those Who Follow Know The Recipe?**

*We are Home.*

- Sleeping Boys
- Inflatable
- Here?
- At The Lively Meeting
- Five Drip Drops
- Naughty Step
- This Arm. This Foot
- I've Pinched A Banana
- After Alan
- Flapjack

**Full time, that means every day**

*You are my home, you two.  
You are my home.*

## **With Us**

'Lovely little boy...'

You can see what they are thinking...

You cannot be the mother

and him...

well, he could be the dad...

remember Charlie Chaplin, but not

the partner of the woman

with silvered hair, blatant lipstick and a big gob.

She couldn't have given birth

recently.

We are his grandparents and he lives with us.

Lives with us.

Full time.

That means everyday.

## Janet and Jon

We are Janet and Jon.  
Learn to read with them,  
his with an H.

Pleased to see your name in print  
when you are 5, a mixed infant,  
only and lonely,  
ripped from your mother,  
From 9 to 3.  
Smog.

Jonathan denied.  
Watts Minor,  
bewildered,  
scabby kneed poor boy  
ripped from his mother for  
months  
and months  
and months.  
From heat to cold drizzle.

Both lonesome then.  
Now Jan and Jonk.  
Jonk? Don't ask.  
Something to do with a trug.

Lone...  
made up for it since.

We have an enormous family between us.

## Confidence Of A Gnat

Don't let me lose the confidence  
gained through those years that filled the gaps  
between motherhoods.

First time the confidence of  
a gnat.

The first born fed, washed and dressed  
tucked into the red suit sewn by  
my hands  
and placed in the denim  
pram.  
Well, it was  
1976.

Then Brixton market,  
salt fish and ackee.

Seeing things I'd want to buy,  
I'd go to Tesco's.

No need to speak  
yer dumpling.

Second time?

Is it age, frustration  
or the return to the playground  
that saps certainty with a drip, drip,  
drop?

I must learn again  
to trust my judgement.  
Find the drawer it's been hiding in.  
Somewhere between  
the energy file and an envelope  
stuffed with good intentions.

## **Believing Twaddle**

'If you were meeting your Dad ten times,  
how often out of that ten would he be late ?'  
This is key to our history and present acceptance of trust.

This is how you can be manipulated by twaddle.  
It's your Dad's fault.  
Fault, if he was reliable.

Our Doc Marten wears black well.  
Her stuff is at the tip of her tongue  
and she tells us like it is.  
Kindly, she tells us kindly.

It is a learnt see-saw  
of trusting shit.

We aren't alone.  
Remember those who formally  
sucked the humbug, too?

But she, quiet and unassuming,  
is the first,  
the first on our wading through gloop  
to shine a moon beam on our enabling skills.

Thank you.

## Play Centre

A cloud of yummy mummies.  
Gender defined by softer fabric  
cosy hoodies,  
slack denim here,  
armoured bum there.

Strange carriages clasp seedlings.

A lone and vigorous dad  
waves a dinosaur sprout.

Other grans and pops  
do duty too.

We sip poor tired tea.  
Once.  
And watch.

And watch fingers stuck to  
screens.  
Candy Crush more  
demanding than  
the young,  
swinging above  
caught in the cages.

And watch hoping  
to glance a glimpse  
of our crazy four...  
pink leggings...  
blue T shirt...  
orange cap...  
leggings,  
shirt,  
cap.  
superman...

Then..  
antenatal bump whoops down  
bumpy slide with other little legs.  
Caterpillar speed.

Rumble of train, gossip, empty scream,  
thwack of ball...is that music?

Then...  
green frame with wheels for timorous  
girl with curls, such mother love,  
an attentive magnet.

Then...  
another magnet pairing...  
mum with boy wired for sound.

Ours,  
(Yes, we have other grandchildren, too).

Ours,  
whole,  
charging out of radar.

We are grateful.

We pour squash.



## **Jacouin Poster from Rue Pernelle at the Foot of the Bed**

Silenced hurdy gurdy from the dead.

Les bonbon boxes she carries  
                                  but only just  
  curved and towering ribbon  
tied without bows.

Direct stare  
leans back movement in jester  
togs with bells  
                  with bells  
that make the ruffles at his  
neck, the puppet with  
                  an arm for an eyebrow.

A third face hides facing right,  
                                  not left  
                                  not centre,  
Her ribbons make the beak, her face, its eye  
                                  a parrot on a candy ad.

Kindle dead already.

No wallpaper in the bedroom for patterns to make pictures,  
but I have my poster to read in the dead of night.

Later,  
We meet in the bathroom and he goes first.  
Then a cuddle up and wait for an animation  
on the next screen, but  
                                  chocolate girl takes his attention.  
He sees a wonky up  
                                  and down chicken.

So much for the candy parrot.

## **Smeared**

So much, so much...

Before dawn...

'I'm smeared.'

Smeared?

Smeared.

What do you mean...smeared?

'Smeared with snot.'

He is smeared.

Smeared with snot.

Could we be smeared  
with a campaign  
to put us down.

Down to accept that we have  
made mistakes.

Good intentions?

We were separately  
'good enough'.

Winnicott told us to be 'good enough'.

We did as we were told  
with a gladdie behind our ear.

But I was only a hippy at weekends.

I was 'good enough'  
choosing the new clutch over Glastonbury  
as we woke in the car  
by that fence to watch  
the man peeing in the hedge.  
Thank you AA for being a better parent than me.

Mistakes?

No, I rather good intentions.  
But...we all make mistakes.

Some mistakes work out.

## Sand

They are wearing wetsuits like you,  
the webs in their hands  
go on their feet.  
Their cameras have wet suits too.

Drink your...

We only got a coffee to use the loo.  
No way of weeing with a wetsuit on.  
Oh dear...

David said you do,  
to keep warm in water.

Their catamaran heads beyond the headland.

Resistant to sand  
until we are here.  
This is a smaller beach.  
Less...  
...windy?  
No not less... but closer to the room  
for a quick sprint.

He catches that I'm  
'Doing some poetry.'  
He recognises my need  
here on the towel  
consumed by sand.

Make a hole.  
Can you make a hole?  
Hole in the sand.  
'Why?'  
Here goes.

You have a choice of spade.  
You keep digging.

Not Welsh sand up  
to our exacting  
construction standards.  
Bucket shapes crumble.

There's no space.  
This towel is full of words  
shaped between the grains  
of sand.

'We'll shake it off later.'  
Sand or words?  
'S'cuse me guys.'  
Small workman bustles on.

Then grandfather  
drips sand windows in the tide  
instant homes for shrimp.

And I make my speedboat.  
Cut from an earlier pattern.  
No shells for control.

Both our separate  
specialities designed before we  
gaffer taped two  
families.

Another day and the shrimps have  
moved on.

But we find the boat shape  
splattered in circled memories.

## Stretches Like Lycra

Love stretches  
like lycra,  
if it's made  
in granite from the belly of your earth.

Lagy asked  
if I still loved him.  
The answer 'yes'  
sadly,  
because that puts him right  
at the end of my big list.

If it was just 'like' maybe  
his score would be higher.

But yes, Lagy, you are the only hairdresser  
cum counsellor I have ever loved,  
yes, you,

the chandelier and darling Kevin  
and Tracey with her colour brushes,  
George with the coffee in china  
and tiny wrapped biscuits  
and the ink blue girl  
with head massage hands  
and the others  
glorious in their attendance with House and Garden.

Love stretches like lycra,  
like lycra so far...

Ping!

## Ice Cream

I scream, you scream.  
We all scream for ice cream.

We needed a little one.  
A little scream.

This time no raspberry blood.

White coils curl with very pink,  
too big, too plush blush pink  
before it drops.

We just needed a little one.

Before it...  
'Finish it, Nan.'  
The experienced tongue licks  
and lips around,  
around and around before it  
topples.

That's ice cream.

(That's bird poo  
and nothing to do with us.)

A baby wipe for cleaning shoes  
and everywhere like  
inside T shirt.

Puts me off ice cream  
I scream.  
Been here before.

We needed a Hoover.  
We bought an ice cream maker.

## **Last Day**

At the beach  
familiar families nest  
with meaningful glasses that block  
the light, I can nose.

A dad fails to react to Small Fry shouts  
'that's my friend.'  
Here comes the mum who talks to ours,  
but refuses eye contact with me.  
Don't fit her expectations.

We are treated with suspicion often  
by real parents.  
I can hear them think  
- what is he doing with them?

And I agree.  
What is he doing with us?  
Our order has been reshuffled.

Let's burrow over there close to the water.  
The boys vow to build the biggest palace.  
After all it's Brum tomorrow and the plane.

Then three birthdays next.  
Three manga flamenco dancers front the cards with frills.

We don't have to explain.

**Not The Life She Wants To Live.**

*The space we share,  
we are home.  
We are home.*



## **The Myth Of Mummy**

I want Mummy.  
Where is she?  
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy  
She loves me more than chocolate.

Where is she?  
She wants to be here.  
She loves me more than chocolate?  
Not as much as...

She wants to be here?  
Kidney problem.  
Not as much as...  
Where is she?

Kidney problems.  
Doesn't turn up.  
Where is she?  
Don't tell me she's coming...

Can come, but doesn't turn up.  
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy.  
Don't tell me she's close...  
I want Mummy.

He wants Mummy.  
Where is she?  
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy  
She loves him more than...

Where is she? Home? Where is home?  
Not the life she wants to live.  
She loves him more than...chocolate?  
Meaning?  
Not as much as vodka.

Not the life she wants to live perhaps, yes, no,  
maybe?  
Kidney, liver problem.  
Not as much as vodka or anything with a hit?  
Where is bloody Mummy then?

Kidney, liver problems and the rest?  
Doesn't turn up.

Where is Mummy then?  
Don't tell him she's due.

Can come, but doesn't turn up again and again and again.  
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy.  
Tell him when she's due.  
No.

She says he has taken all her time.

He wants his Mummy  
and quite right too.

Not the life she wants to live.

## **Emotional Intelligence**

When you go away, that's not looking after.

That's what he said.

When you go away, that's not looking after.

## Fall For The Line

Every time we fall for the line.  
It is a new era of tiny commitment.  
An hour and a half per fortnight.

Sealed with a hug.  
'Thank you for looking after my boy.'

The new rules?  
Yes.  
The new rules...  
oh, yes they are the old rules, but...  
the new rules are a call the day before,  
a call an hour before,  
to confirm, you understand.  
To confirm, you understand.  
To confirm that tiny commitment.

So the first time...  
the first time...  
the first time...  
no call the day before.  
No call the day before.  
No call the day before.  
Silence the day until  
just before, just before, just before, to say she will be there.  
She will be there to see her son.

But she isn't.  
They search and she isn't.  
'Mummy, where are you?'

A boy shouts for his mummy and she isn't there.

'Mummy doesn't want to see me.'

Our house is sad.

An upset blanket on a sorry sofa.  
A basket of difficult Duplo.  
A box of lost cars.

Our house is sad, but rescued by a dear found Aunty.

When our sanity kicks in, we know that we are not alone in our despair.  
We know that she is too.

## He Was Told

Told him she would and then didn't turn up,  
didn't turn up, didn't turn up.

She didn't turn up the first time,  
the first time he was told, he was told

that she would,  
she would be there  
she would turn up to see him

He was told.

In three years,  
he hasn't been told,  
up to now,  
yes, not told, not told.

Why?

Because, she doesn't turn up,  
she doesn't turn up that often.

Absent.

We try to protect him from hurt.

We try.

## **Out Of The Deep Blue**

The call woke us from our doze.  
Sleeping through another  
red herring  
on the box  
again.

She rang and asked  
how was he.

Out of the deep blue.

Out of the deep blue.

A blue where he'd said  
that he wanted to go  
to the park  
with Mummy.

The keyboard is wet.

## **Sending Postcards**

Sending postcards, the list grows.  
Grows long.  
Send one to Daddy...yes.  
Send one to his other parent, should we?  
We add a greeting to her mother's post.  
A small decision, but we still try.

## **Strange Week**

The last past aunt has stepped over the edge.  
Bananas and basic custard in memoriam.  
Another adult orphan adjusts to life without visiting Mum.  
We have been there.

But new life too comes twice.  
The baby named after a State like her brother arrives safely  
and then the brave one  
who hooks up to a washing machine  
three, four times a week  
now has three kidneys.  
Three kidneys.  
Can two words sound more exciting?  
A new life.

## Homework

Superman was wet,  
but tomorrow's Monday.  
A 6 years old's  
time for homework.  
Renamed 'home challenges'.  
Use your super powers.  
Pill sweetened by new name.  
The princess frozen, reluctant  
yawns through loads of literacy.  
Know the meaning,  
please,  
as well as the spelling?

Help pushed to the limit, but still  
the oldie enthuses.

This Mum takes it in her stride.



## **A Step Away**

A step away,  
a close touch distance  
after meeting.  
I am a step away.

A step away,  
the adult child again  
so clearly absent.  
I am a step away.

A step away,  
the adult child again  
we see her here.  
I am a step away.

A step away,  
muddy returns  
from early history.  
I am a step away.

A step away,  
brush off the urge  
to absorb their pain.  
I am a step away.

A step away in blood,  
but that let down reflex  
in this old dry body  
still comes with hugging  
as if he were mine own.

## **The Wood**

Planted in this thicket.  
Our height, breadth  
and health  
dictated by weather,  
luck, lifestyle  
and that fecund mix of leaf mould  
around our roots  
that smells  
of the outdoors.  
The young tree here  
in the green centre,  
has grown from seed  
from the nurtured and loved  
willow at the edge  
by the motorway.  
She has grown  
32 years, but  
bearing only 12  
confused rings,  
branch whorls that  
show the times of drought.  
Unsteady growth  
too late for coppicing.  
He, the sapling  
has rooted, down  
to rich soil.  
He is sheltered  
by the gentle oak  
with my unrelenting, unrelated ivy  
springing from  
the undergrowth  
clinging to their limbs.  
The woodland is heavy with  
softwood, tender sprigs  
pinning the wind,  
swaying and bringing  
a kinder breeze to  
our woodland.

We pick sticks for fuel.  
Pluck and taste loaded blackberries.  
Remembering bluebells.

**We Never Have Fish Finger Sandwiches, Never Ever**

*You are my home, you two.  
You are my home.*

## Routine 1

Wake  
Wake at  
Wake up at  
Wake up at 6 am.  
Pee?  
Pee.  
Pee?  
Pee - right.  
Pee whether you want  
one or not.  
Urgent for one, two, three.  
Two standing and one sitting.  
Oops - wet pyjamas.  
Wet sheet.  
Oops - wet pyjamas,  
but dry sheet  
Wow - dry pyjamas.  
Dry sheet and a  
smiling Flat Dog.  
Yes that's what we do.  
We do and discuss first thing.  
Well done, a dry night.  
Cuddle in the big brass bed *-hey lady lay.*  
'Can I have some TV?'  
Hey Duggie, Postman Pat, Dinopaws.

Breakfast?  
Poppa's bread.  
Maybe Marmite and Ginger Jam.  
Porridge with Nanny's gravy all the way  
from Canada via Costcos.  
or seeds with letter cereal  
and fruit.

Tea in china cups and saucers.  
A habit from taking tea  
at the haven that is  
Kings Heath Park.

We do everything in moderation.

We never have fish finger sandwiches.

Never ever.

We never have chipolatas  
with bacon and eggs and beans and mushrooms and black pudding fried crispy  
and dippy marto  
cooked in a sticky, non stick pan.  
No never ever.

But the marto is reduced sugar and salt free.

We do everything in moderation.  
We do everything in moderation, I wish.

The adult bodies tell a different story.

I could see that picture from yesterday.

## Routine 2

5.30ish for supper with  
a lion or maybe a gnat.  
Pudding only if you eat your  
firsts...  
remember Aunty Mair..  
'What isn't eaten now, eaten at the next.'  
'50's, *waste not, want not.*

Hold back, hold back, but...  
we cannot resist to spoon feed  
chick, head up, beak open.

Then the slow up...  
front ways, backwards, crabways,  
fireman's lift up and over  
the wooden hill to...  
the jungle turned space station  
to check it's there and then ricochet  
to the temple of the bath - posh wallpaper!

Buttercup towel ready warming.  
Clothes off - easier said than...  
Water adjusted - bubbles and what toys?  
Is there room for the boy?

He climbs in, spoon feeding pays...  
a moment of wonder as we remember the tiny dab  
who first dipped here.

### **Routine 3**

Waiting in the cockpit  
buttercup oozes  
towards me. The boy is lost,  
eaten by the towel.

Found!  
Fight him into jamas.

Then the exquisite time.  
We hit our library.  
A story each to tell,  
before the snuggle  
and the big bed.

## Freeze Cars 2

Day off.  
Ignored strike so  
we are watching Cars 2.  
Boy, me, dog  
under the blanket,  
Big Fish still in his ocean  
dreaming of a misplaced  
mackerel.

Out of our blue,  
Small Fry  
'It's lovely with Mummy.'  
Freeze Cars 2.  
So I gently repeat what we  
have murmured before.

Did she come last time?  
Did she come the time before?  
Has she come often before.

'Mummy loves me.'  
Yes, she does but she can't show that love.  
Through turning up.

No, but I am gentle.  
I am gentle.

He had a More Nan, sadly gone,  
so  
we decide on More Mum  
for me.  
Just between us.  
When times are hard.  
When there is an ache.  
When there's a strike and we are watching Cars 2.

He talks about the boy with backward hair.



## **Suncream**

Extra water resistant...hypoallergenic...UVA - highest rating...SPF with antioxidant complex

Strip off the little nipper...squirt...and slather, slather, slather...rub it in...rub in well...only two tablespoons for the whole body...so it says...doesn't seem enough...is it enough?...rub it in carefully everywhere...everywhere...every nook and cranny...on this little torso...oops, there's a missed bit...where?...behind there...needs more ...another squirt...running out?...running out...need the other tube...50?...is it 50 factor?...is it 50?...he needs 50...not 8...he'll burn and then how do we explain that to...who to?

Explain to ourselves.

The buck stops here.

Remember ears and tops of toes.

Or seek shade and cover up.

## Wednesday Aunty Naomi

Never underestimate the role  
of aunty.  
We love an aunty.

*(Ah, but not the one who chased  
to remove the wobbly tooth.)*

Never underestimate  
the role of the aunty.

Aunties turn up.  
Regular like.

Others can let you down.  
But an aunty is regular,  
like...

Like, if you are lucky, bowels.  
Only prettier than...  
Often prettier than...

Let's hear it for Lost Aunties  
Paddy, Stella, Mary, Cora, Doris (not real), Mair  
and the almost lost Mary of Banana Custard fame.

Aunties never let you down.  
We love an aunty who  
turns up like clockwork,  
is so pleased to see us and  
puts us first, like a grandmother.  
*(Well, almost.)*

A round of claws for Aunties everywhere  
except those who think they are dentists.

### Aunties Revisited

I am in my office, pretending to clean and I can hear the shrieks of laughter from above. An aunty has arrived while he was asleep. She snapped him from eyes closed to eyes wide open and horrified. They are playing and I'm listening carefully, but I have no idea about this game. Is it loud 'shops'? The newly found micro goods were on the stairs. Have they made it to the under bedside? Beneath the space station, there is a tiny Aldi with a very nice Christmas wire basket and till.

They descend - I'll find the squeals wrapped in a towel are about bath toys.

## **Stuff**

Dog barking.  
Nodding off.  
Strawberry manilla milkshake.  
Toast, no crusts.

Nodding off with gentle snores.  
Where's the phone.  
Toast with no crusts, squares or triangles.  
Raining.  
Where's the phone? Too late.  
Shoes?  
Raining. No bike.  
Tea or proper coffee.

Shoes? Got one.  
Fresh pasta.  
Tea or proper coffee? Sweetner?  
Rescued.

Fresh pasta. More please.  
Strawberry manilla milkshake, more please.  
Rescued by Paw Patrol.  
Dog barking and farting.

Barking is worse than farting, so feed that dog now. He can't eat and bark.

## **No To Not Much**

No to not much.

No to dirty football shirt.

No to bare feet in the garden.

No to throwing marbles...anywhere.

No to airplaning in the Co-op by the bread aisle.

No to hiding under paddling pool when it's full of stagnant water.

No to skateboard after the bloody incident when Nan was splattered with blood...

...and you were too.

We will all obey Auntie Alice's Golden Rule.

There will be no kissing and hugging during meals.

Spag boled little fingers, tomatoed mouth - no thank you.

Kissy wissy, huggy wuggy will take place before and after meals,  
not during...

But yes to everything else.

## **Space That Says Boy**

*You are my home, small fry.  
You are my home.  
You are my home Big Fish.  
You are my home.*

## **Inevitable**

Knew it would happen.  
That blast of...  
and the truth coming home to roost.

Our nest would need to bloom again  
to enfold and nurture a particular chick.

And what a chick.

*"Nanny, I was in your tummy, wasn't I?"*

I want so much to say yes.

## Clocks

The clock was in the kitchen.  
Hands lap the roman numerals.

It ticks  
my life's spring  
it sounds slow  
and slows me. It thinks  
the beat with a tired eye  
and I'm late,  
because of its  
tardiness.

And I am never late.

The one before was mock.  
50's cream and red.  
Chosen because of  
Walthamstow  
and for the alarm  
built for eggs and  
nothing else.

Two faces and sets of hands.  
Mother above and  
the infernal pinger below.

Just in reach of another  
beating heart with exploring fingers.

Dismantled, believing 'Pop will mend it.'  
He loves to dismantle and now  
it falls at a touch from  
the crocked nail, never  
to tick again in the garden  
space that says  
boy

## The Table Cloth

The chicken on the plastic cloth  
is wiped...  
and wiped again...  
and wiped again and again.

Wiped of juice, ketchup, banana snot,  
cereaed lumps of letters.

Wiped of poppy paint that  
mixes blue to camouflage.

But over the edge hens  
miss the 'j' cloth  
and history sticks and stops.

Though both missing a clean  
cloth, little hands insist.  
Exploring the underneath,  
underside play world of  
brackets and legs.

But no...not that...

No, not that deep,

but exploring  
that special underbelly of the  
chicks, between cloth  
and smooth wood.

Featherless.

That game we stop, too  
tired to enjoy.

Sometimes...  
we are no fun.



## **Blanky**

Immersed in blanky  
and Sarah and Duck,  
the cereal is shouting.  
Cat boy wants his  
slippers on his paws.

A slow half term start  
to a week of, well, fun.  
We will survive.

We will survive, because  
others take the heat.

## **Chickenpox**

Waiting for the pox to arrive and cover this gorgeous little bod with vicious welts and pus and anger. We wait and watch. Have been living with the fever since swimming was curtailed. 'I am cold.' And now a cycle of Calpol - thank you syringe. The spoon that spilt down 'jamas has been relegated to the back of the cutlery drawer. Powerful heat is generated. Two sorts. One, when the whole body lights up burny hot feet through to forehead. The second when the blood has rushed up to the brain, the feet frozen. And then there is the sweating. The fever doesn't always come with sweats, but...where are the spots?

Staring, brave, still boy.  
We inspect again and again.  
Then just one appears.

Doc says it's not the pox.

## Joy

Joy is a balance bike  
ride to nursery  
across the two halves of the park  
with his buddy.

There are rules.  
Dismount here.  
Remount there.  
Hold a hand and the handle of the bike  
at the pedestrian crossing  
to wait for the buses.  
Down the slope and stop.  
Stop! Oops!

How about a bike with pedals?

No, joy is a balance bike.

## Dogs

Dogs Past  
Rationed 57 Spam,  
Judy the spaniel who ate lino,  
Rusty Welsh Terrier who liked pies,  
Skippy Jack Russell keen on the fresh meat of Alice's knee  
and solid friend Sandy.

We are placed in dog walking country.

Poppy comes each August and we remember Sandy.  
We meet our old friends and make new  
in the field.  
Two good walks a day makes for well being  
and regulates blood pressure better than  
hang gliding.

Sandy nurtures the dog rose by the harbour, but we or rather I want a puppy.  
A boy needs a dog.

We are placed in dog walking country.

So bulldogs, American french, English crossed, uncrossed, bull Staffordshire,  
Boston, boxer, rottweiler, mastiff - not at this age.  
Our list of wants  
friendly, loyal, relaxed.  
A dog without a history like Suzi the cat.  
Rescued? Don't think so.  
Had them before.

We rescued a child,  
can't risk a dog.

We are placed in dog walking territory.

Teacup, jug, lap, miniature, standard, giant?  
Working, utility, companion, show?

We are placed in dog walking country.

We need a small dog.  
Big dogs have big poos.

What has caught our eye.

Rolo the sausage is sleek, but challenging.  
The labradoodle, beautiful but bouncy in nature.  
Then there is a cavashon, cavapomtzu, cockerpoo, poochoon, pooshi, shipoo,  
jackapoo, yorkipoo, chugapoo, sprockerpoo, sproodle,  
a jackawawa, yorkie pom, schnacks, jorkie, shorkie, patterpug, malshi,  
jackadoodle, goldendoodle, cockerdor and jagdterrier,  
or the enormous chihuahua cross bison?

Read mongrel with an inflated price.

We are placed in dog walking country.

How about the exotic.

Blue fawn, solid blue, black tri carrying blue brindled, pied, tricolour,  
chocolate.

There's the Saluki x Northern Inuit,  
wheaten greyhound x collie bull.

We are placed in dog walking country.

We must be experts.

Perfect dog.

Rommel the Schnauzer.

Can we find another Rommel?

We are placed in dog walking country.

So we have bought a guinea pig of two weeks  
who will grow into a darling salt and pepper  
dog to complete this family.

We are placed in dog walking country.

Welcome Freddy.

## Water Dog

Between the bank and the boat  
the damp rat cried like his turtle  
with the little squeaker.

Screaming too,  
I plunge my hand in and out  
retrieving the frightened mess  
from the filthy water.

Towel cuddled to the vets.  
No damage done.  
We are still shaky.

She said he needed a life jacket.

So we bought it.  
Bright orange.  
Not wearing it for the plunge.  
He just wears it on Facebook now.

We know he can swim unaided.

He chose me when he was a black  
guinea pig with eyes shut,  
that opened and said 'take me'.

Salt and pepper and growing  
more salty every day.  
He's found his full voice  
with the sharp teeth that want to gnaw.

He's sitting on my lap as I type  
with one hand  
and farts.

## Hiccup

It was a vast eruption of  
a bits and pieces lunch.  
Lumpy, but disintegrating.  
He'd eaten well.

They say now that you don't have to wait 2 hours before a swim.  
But yes you do.

He swims.  
He swallows water.  
He vomits.  
Not fazed.

I am fazed.

Packed pool, but I'm a lone witness.

Big Fish goes to youth labelled SOS.  
No puke before on his watch.  
He seeks advice.

30 minutes later,  
the pool is closed wrapped with  
red and white tape.

Bobbing boys and girls are puzzled.

To the paddling pool...

A stew of hatted babies sit in wet warmth  
around adult rocks.

A dead whale festers on the edge  
it's perky brother eyes meaty limbs.  
His boat docks by the surprised giraffe.

'Why have they closed the big pool?'  
Woman indicates spew with her hand.

Small Fry hiccups.

We merge into the palms.

### **The Visit**

Big school is just there almost, hovering brain for learning. No more darling Miss from nursery but... The boy is ready. Receptions Everest has been conquered on the transition visit, but there is much more work to do with the teacher that bobs in water and the one who rhymes with a heartbeat. Roll on September and making a Duplo robot with a dog again. Learn to write numbers after one and the last two letters of your name. Grow next year's strawberries. Keep old friends and make new ones. Eat hot dinners with a knife and fork. Playtime!

Selling super school sweat shirts.  
Size too big for now,  
must stay on 'til September.



## **Jetpack**

'Are you happy Nanny?'

'Yes, I am.'

'My jetpack needs cleaning.'

'Yes.'

'My jetpack needs feeding.  
It's hungry.'

'Yes.

Is your jetpack happy?'

"Yes, it is, Nanny.'

'Good.'

Fully charged.

## **Now Anger Simperts And Simmers Underneath**

*We are home  
In this welcome rock pool.*

## **Going Forward**

Where's he heading then?  
Not backwards.  
Whatever, he can't return.  
But is he heading to Room 237  
and the mysteries of the 4th floor  
with the bulbs that lit up my Fridays?

This boy has stories.  
Huge narratives of wonderment  
that ensnare your soul.

The prenatal wash of Smirnoff  
won't drown his communication.  
This little piggy has been hogwashed  
in Dr Seuss.

## **Square Eyes**

Yes, we are arguing - a five minute argument or a ten minute argument? He says a one minute argument. The sing song is over the remote - I want Andy with his dinosaurs - my guilty pleasure. He wants to go straight to the Octonauts. I like it, of course, but I feel safe in the arms of the regular story line, the hat, the backpack, yes and the brontosaurus with Andy. Anything rather than Tree Fu Bomb and yes, I mourn the day when we still had new Sarah and Ducks to watch. Favourite? Umbrella Festival or Shallots Circus? Our Tom calls me Scarf Lady with a great face for radio.

Kids' TV all day.  
Midsummer Murders no way.  
Simple life - square eyes.

## **Childhood**

Children deserve a childhood.  
Children do.  
We were all children  
once.  
We were all deserving  
of a childhood.

Sadly many miss out on lashings  
of ginger beer and just get lashings,  
physical, sexual, emotional.  
Children deserve a childhood.  
Some children who suffer  
carry their abuse  
into adulthood.

Children can be denied a childhood  
because they learn to live with  
what's gone before  
for those who've gone before.  
Children deserve a childhood.

The back room of the pub,  
the golden child in that  
inappropriate place of past lives  
looks tired and bored,  
still sucking up what's gone.

Mature for her age?  
Yes, how sad not being able  
to squeal with delight,  
because you are the young carer.

Was that a childhood?  
Children deserve a childhood.

He deserves a childhood too.

## **Drowning Children**

Where are the children?  
There are no squirts  
in the splash pool,  
just water  
except our Big Fish  
drenched.

Different order today.  
We will swim in the big pool  
after the arse  
who is trying to  
drown children  
to their parents delight  
has sought a retreat  
in a different hotel pool.

I think: grooming.

## Unblock Crap

Today I want to turn away.  
The bog is blocked, not with my turds, but with the dog's.  
And where is the string?  
The thing is the string is kit.  
Basic essential kit for gardening.

Yesterday searched and it was in the wrong drawer.

Today,  
not in the wrong drawer.  
Not the right one either.

Beautiful new bunting as a present  
right colour with cows.  
Friesians.  
A surprise that today must be dealt with too.  
Old bunting down and in the garden.  
New bunting up, up where the old bunting was.

Can't be arsed with a blocked toilet  
and the memory of yesterday when he  
whacked the chair like a piñata and went for the dog  
whose turds now float in the bowl because I put them there.

After the anger, the cuddle, a round of the Rocket Game,  
the truth that he loves his mummy more than anything.  
He needs to see her and I need to unblock crap...

...and find the string.

## Anger

Learning contained anger.

This is the whole poem.  
I'll write it again.

Learning contained anger.

A slow burn.

Anger in a tin.  
Anger in tupperware with a seal that still works.  
In a pressure cooker when the steam is released v e r y, v e r y, s l o w l y.

*(Remember the angry rice pudding that flipped its top to hit the ceiling?)*

Past anger has been contained briefly  
and then has exploded,  
ambrosial  
...and then...gone, gone, g o n e.

Dealt with.  
Compressed into a chink at the back of the brain.  
A blip on the old walnut.

But now...

Learning contained anger.

There you are.  
I've written that poem again.

I am learning to contain anger.

New poem.  
Almost.

Now anger simpers and simmers underneath  
fed up,  
pissed off  
and tired.

Oh so tired...the more tired, the less you do  
and the more tired you feel.



So where is your get up and go?

Or where has my get up and go gone?

Well, it's got up and...

...gone fishing.

If only there were Dover sole  
or a plump mackerel here in the canal.

Contained is better for them,  
but I'm the only one to delight in sardines,  
headless talking to toes.

Contained anger is better for them.

Them out there.

Them who feel the spit  
off the tip of my harsh tongue.

Is it better for me?

Zip zap through the orange blossom  
to ease my snap  
and not to share?  
Shirty without a plan.

What is normal temper-wise?

Throwing a car,  
a wooden train  
or a plastic beaker of molten chocolate?  
SPLAT!

Normal?

Think Normal.

What is Normal?

Same circumstances,  
same behaviour.  
Different people.  
Same behaviour,  
same circumstances.  
Normal.

So...

...learning contained anger

and sea fishing

in Brum.

Gooseberries go  
well with mackerel.

Always an angry fruit.  
And never tinned.

So...  
...learning contained anger.

## Tempest

Deliberate blue beach ball hits  
the Beryl Cook fairies over the fire place.  
Empty glasses case hits on the upper arm.  
Odds and sods' drawer, in out, in out,  
in out, in out, in out, in out,  
in out, in...  
nails like claws...cut them quick.  
(Will have to wait 'til bath time,  
in this fury.)

Boy furious with no control.  
Shout?  
Holler?  
'STOP!'

What is normal?

This is normal.  
Appropriate behaviour for hurting.  
Hurting so bad.  
Hurting so bad.  
Hurting so bad.

This is appropriate behaviour for hurt so, so much  
for love denied.  
Boy furious with no control.  
Over himself and...

Hold him tight with a serious hug.

We dissolve.

## Circus

Safe in the roof bed  
listen to the lions' roar.  
Elephants trumpeting and trumping  
in their big top.  
The tent across the road and over the wall.  
Bertram Mills has come to town again.

But let's make this general.  
Not a particular circus in that part of town.  
Not a traveling show  
that tours around the summer months.

Our tunnel of love breathes fire,  
but then the conjurer may announce  
the arrival of those  
who look up and depend on us  
and deserving of healthy candy floss.

In theory,  
you protect your children  
from the lions.  
If troubled times  
overwhelm,  
and you see teeth  
you shield them.  
Put the danger behind the bars,  
but they still see in.

See in? Yes,  
and they wear the T shirt  
of their own show  
that this talent  
was too blind to see.  
They see us prance and rear.  
Performing for the ring master  
with his top hat and whip.

Shielding them from our horse shit  
is not a possibility.  
They hear the acrobats' conversation.  
They read that body language  
of the human cannonball.  
They observe all three rings  
and worse,

they absorb.

Absorb like the keeper's sponge.  
To acknowledge their knowledge  
means that we need to confront.  
We need to deal with them.

We are walking that tightrope.  
A high wire we know well,  
with fishnets ripped.

We are balanced.  
But only just on one tippy toe.  
Clubs to juggle.  
Plates to twirl.  
Hoops to whirl.  
Sweating under the spot light  
of no self confidence.

The trapeze swings.  
The feared fool flies so close, too close.  
We will fall off.

So we pretend to ourselves  
that they believe  
our painted clown faces.

All is well we grin or  
our circus will leave town.

It is not until our little audience has grown  
that we realise that we did not protect them  
from the spangles and the slapstick.

They saw all the performances.  
Every one.

Now a new little audience.

I have fallen from my tightrope  
and I am walking on wood shavings  
in the ring again, but it is firm ground at last.

I will not ignore those who perform

with threatening jaws  
for this next generation.  
I will say 'no'.  
I will speak up,  
even if no one listens  
to me banging the big drum.

## **Will Those Who Follow Know The Recipe?**

*We are Home.*

## **Sleeping Boys**

The boys sleep.  
A dust of snores.  
One wrapped in a tiger skin  
the other by sheets.  
Fans rhythmic bass.

Sipping a blackcurrant lemsip,  
my voice needs soothing,  
awaiting sunrise.  
Then breakfast and beach  
to watch his delight  
at making Warwick  
in sand.



## **Inflatable**

How would I know that Superdino means a supermarket? Dino is a dinosaur. Spar I understand. Yes, the fight and yes, the shop. Groceries here, including deli delights that are not around in our village at home. I promised a blow up row boat and a promise is a promise. Not one here amongst the wet fish and water melon. Try the sea front. Too much choice and impossible to compare the prices. Buy COMANARD from a Scot with good English. Bought it and extra air for euros. It is a good buy for a good boy. He doesn't want it in the water. It is a hiding place. It is a tortoise shell. It is a bed.

He curls up night tight.  
Feigning a sound sleeping.  
He can be still.

## **Here?**

When did you get in there?  
What time was it?

'I love my new bed.'

'Yes, but when did you creep from under the duvet, down the step ladder from its high place, across your space station and around the landing and to our brass bed into your special gap between us?'

The gap that is Switzerland.

'When did you get in here?'  
'What time was it?'

Do we care?

## **At the Lively Meeting**

At the lively meeting we are all different, but the same.  
We cannot understand  
how we have been left these children to look after.  
That there is no one in the line in front of us.  
You keep parental rights with neglect and abuse.  
We just negotiate your access through a pussy foot path,  
trying to avoid the fog of manipulation.

How are we the best to raise them up to adulthood,  
now we are old and grey?

We need drugs, but  
prescribed rather than street.

Street? Well, that's an idea,  
but beyond me after the grey ghost making a heroin call, Brighton '61.

So take the tablets,  
get out that hair dye  
or bleach it blonde.  
Pubic? No, head, silly.  
Pubes disappear, re-appearing on your chin over 60.

Don't relax into crimplene.  
Don't be reduced to beige trews.  
In fact, spurn taupe, ecru, brownness,  
except as a hair colour.  
Chestnut rather than mouse.  
Remember. Try and remember..  
Vidal Sassoon...

Don't disguise gnarled feet with flesh coloured pop socks - who's flesh?  
Don't don those curled up snap-on daps with velcro.

Go for citrus shocks and fuchsia trainers.  
Damn the expense.  
My Hyundai remembers in Ferrari red.

We need to think ourselves young.  
Younger.

I need lipstick...  
and interesting earrings.

### **Five Drip Drops**

The wooden drawer has lost its heart handle.  
Coarse string alone allows the pull.

Breakfast and medication time.  
We rattle with our cocktail.  
But five drip drops A, C and D  
for him.

### **Naughty Step**

Great Flea  
has been naughty  
so has to sit one minute for each  
year on the naughty step. She can leave  
after a blissful hour. I have an extra 4 minutes.

## **This Arm, This Foot**

This arm is Mum's.  
Crinkled, freckles merge with age spots.  
Good skin to keep it all in.

This foot is Dad's.  
Except for the varnish  
dried blood red and dumpy.

Phone call  
about a chair being thrown  
across a classroom.  
It happened yesterday  
avoiding her and the baby  
sleeping inside her.

It happened to me,  
just me.  
I remembered.

Turning into the past.  
We are history:  
in experience  
and in our bodies.

This arm is Mum's.  
This foot is Dad's.

## **I've Pinched A Banana**

I've pinched a banana.  
There are several.  
I'm not stealing from him  
taking away the possibility of a  
Nanny milkshake with cocoa to disguise the fruit  
and it's hit of potassium that will be good for him.

I've pinched a banana.  
It tastes claggy,  
Skin blotched.

Skin blotchy like mine...  
old age spot, liver spot,  
the senile freckle.  
It says a blemish on the skin associated with aging.  
Solar lentigo - sounds like a game for pensioners as they sit poolside in  
Malaga.  
Lentigo senilis - sounds like a game played by pensioners as they tip into that  
pool for the last time.

I've pinched a banana.  
We match.

## After Alan

After Alan, we have to believe that we will croak  
and maybe sometime soon.  
Sooner or later.

Not soon as in tomorrow  
probably.

Not soon as in next week  
possibly.

Not soon as in next month  
hopelessly.

Not as in next year,  
hopefully.

but we are reaching that final  
valley where we will  
croak.

So we need to put our house in order.

So we need to put our house in order now.

So we need to put our house in order  
while there is still time.

Clear out the roof space we call the attic  
and the shed, but  
there is also an awful lot of shit that lurks  
everywhere.

I still have car insurance papers  
on a car I can't remember.

Did we really go on holiday there?  
I have the boarding passes.

This is piddling.

Stuff is piddling.

It's the carving up.

And a boy can't be.

## **Flapjacks**

In our fast quick time we are aware of death  
- we cannot commit to it.  
It mustn't happen.

What happens to small fry if we jump off  
to a heaven we don't believe in?  
What happens to small fry if we just jump off?  
No matter what our outcome,  
the ash won't make him flapjacks for his packed lunch.  
Flapjacks with nuts for home.  
Flapjacks without nuts for school.

Flapjacks.

No two alike, but cast with care.  
Will those who follow know his recipe?



## **We Are Home**

You are my home, you two.  
You are my home.

The space we share,  
we are home.  
We are home.

You are my home, Small Fry.  
You are my home.

You are my home, Big Fish.  
You are my home.

I am your home, the Limpet.  
Your limpet.  
I am your home.

The space we share,  
we are home.  
We are home.

You are my home, you two.  
You are my home.

We are home  
in this welcome rock pool.



## **Critical Commentary**

### **Chapter One - Introduction**

The Department for Education in 2010 published *Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities*. It offers a framework that should support the implementation of the Children Act 1989. It is a powerful document that sets out good practice for local authority children's services social workers to follow. It is meticulous in its detail, recognising the challenges for kinship carers, including assessment and the legal status options, plus parenting capacity, accommodation and health issues; both the mental and physical health of carers and cared for. The document also gives details about setting up family conferences to discuss attachment and statement stability.

With the arrival of one of our grandsons to live with us, we would have hoped that this document was mandatory, rather than for statutory guidance. We learnt very quickly that the implementation of the document was dependent on the local authority of the kinship carer and on the location of where their cared for child originally came from.

To access personal stories about kinship carers the reader may wish to refer to Grandparents Plus website [www.grandparentsplus.org.uk](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk) and/or, for the Australian experience, Grandparents Supporting Queensland website [www.grandparentsqid.com.au](http://www.grandparentsqid.com.au). These sites offer a broad perspective on what it is like to be a kinship carer in the 21st century.

We have been given support for our grandson who lives with us by the NHS, nursery, school and family. The frustration with other agencies was the initial spark that fuelled this piece of work. I wanted to write something that would help me to explore how I felt about our change of circumstances from being pensioners with visiting grandchildren to entertain to being the full time carers of a small child who had attachment issues. Contact with other kinship carers and the lack of support for them and us, heightened my need to write about the subject. The kinship carers that we have met and shared histories with have been the audience that I have wanted to reach. Many of us live in isolation and I wanted those carers to know that someone was telling their

story: to give their situation validation. I also wanted to reach those responsible for social work management and training as well as the politicians who make decisions about implementation of the statutory guidance.

As a playwright, I decided that I wanted to write a play. I briefly considered a novel (I have written one novel, *Benches*), but I feel comfortable writing dialogue. I have written six full length plays and fourteen short one act plays, so the decision to write a play was an easy one. The decision to write a poetry collection came later, but again it is a genre that I am experienced in ,being Birmingham Poet Laureate 2011-2012 with one poetry collection *Empty Talk* published.

It was suggested to me at an alumni visit on campus and that Dr Luke Kennard might agree to be my PhD supervisor at the University of Birmingham. Knowing Luke's work and his part of the vibrant international poetry scene, not just Birmingham's, I was keen to meet him.

The decision to take up a place to do a PhD was straightforward. I knew that completing a M.Phil in Playwriting under Steve Waters, had improved my writing. My motivation to do a PhD was not to further my career. It was to make the play the best it could be.

## **Chapter Two - What is Kinship Care?**

The key element in this Creative Writing thesis is the rising phenomenon of Kinship Care in the 21st century in the United Kingdom. Kinship Care or Connected Person's Care refers to children being raised by other family members or close friends rather than their birth parents. The most common situation is grandparents raising their grandchildren full time, rather than siblings of a birth parent or a family friend. Those of us who are kinship carers, know that our situation is often invisible to others. But when you tell people about bringing up your grandchildren, everybody seems to know someone who is doing it. Approximately 300,000 children in the UK, according to Grandparents Plus, a charity working with kinship carers, or 200,000 by statistics provided by The Family Rights Group, are being brought up full time by grandparents, great grandparents or other family members, not their birth parents. In June 2014 Grandparents Plus, Save the Children and the Family and Childcare Trust commissioned an Ipsos Mori poll that gave the figure of 200,000 children being raised by grandparents in the UK, but this was a figure researched in 2014. Grandparents Plus now believe that 300,000 is more accurate, because of the rapid rise in kinship care families and informal arrangements that slip through the formal calculation. So, the statistics are fuzzy, because the numbers are difficult to access. Informal arrangements can be made for a short or even a long time, maybe covering a parent's hospital stay or a prison term. These arrangements may be set up for the short term, but often they can last for a very long time.

Kinship care has always happened. In the past, with women often dying in child birth and fathers taking fewer family responsibilities, grandmothers in particular would raise a child or children. In earlier times when illegitimacy was thought shameful, children were often raised by their grandmothers as their birth mothers became their 'sisters'. Often the child was kept in ignorance of their true parentage. The incidence of international cross border kinship care has been common with the increase in travel opportunities for economic reasons, across all sections of the population. The flight of adult immigrants

has also meant that children are left in the care of their grandparents until a safe haven can be found for a whole nuclear family.

The kinship care family has always been around in its many forms, but the number of children being raised by family members and grandparents is rapidly increasing. The reasons why birth parents cannot look after their own children are numerous. Untimely death and illness may mean someone else needs to take over the caring role. A birth parent could be absent, perhaps serving a prison sentence. It could be that it has been recognised that a child has been neglected or abused. The reasons are unique to each situation. Children may need to be taken to a place of safety and grandparents can often offer that haven. According to both Grandparents Plus and the Family Rights Group, children are removed from birth parents, because of the increasing prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse.

Kinship care is not to be confused with regular or ad hoc childcare that enormous numbers of grandparents undertake to support the younger members of their families. *The Guardian*, 14th December 2000, acknowledges childcare responsibilities in an article 'Poll reveals crucial role of grandparents in childcare' by Raekha Prasad. This situation is updated in 'We lumber grandparents with the care of our children – but it has a price' by Gaby Hinsliff on 16th April, 2015, again in *The Guardian*. However, kinship care is full time parenting, taking responsibility for the day to day upbringing of a child or children. Kinship care was originally an American term now used widely in the UK for families and close family friends raising children, other than birth parents. Another term that is also used is 'connect families'. For this thesis the focus will be on kinship care or connected families, particularly with grandparents (and will concentrate on grandparents) taking on the role of full time carers.

Children and their complex needs should be at the centre of any decision-making around their futures. This is not always the case and the decision making in the first instance is made by social workers, unless the arrangements have been made on an informal basis. The informal arrangement was the usual one in the past and the one that crosses countries and

continents where parents leave their homes for financial reasons. Children remain with grandparents while parents work abroad to provide an income, often to pay for education for their children. An example of this arrangement in the play, *Holding Baby*, is Divine Grace from Maramures who works in Comfort of Sunset Nursing Home, to send money back to her family home.

Children will have a history when they arrive at their new kinship care home. Often they arrive to live full-time with grandparents, having had traumatic experiences. The grandparents may be traumatised, too. Having to acknowledge that one's own child is not able to parent their own birth children can be a great shock, added to by the need to step into that parenting role with your grandchildren. Many children will require protection by the local authority. Some have special educational needs or disabilities, often with emotional problems that cause challenging behaviour. Kinship Carers may have to fight for their child's educational and health needs to be recognised and for them to have the extra support they need.

Sometimes these children may not know their grandparents very well and now live out of their original home area. Sometimes they may be going to live with one single grandparent, rather than a couple. Many are living on a restricted income without the facilities needed to care for a young family. Love means there is no choice but to take in our grandchildren, because the alternative, foster care or adoption, is not something we could contemplate.

Being related and emotionally involved is both a positive and a negative factor. Usually it is good for children, but managing changing family dynamics and, at times, facing hostility from birth parents and other family members can be an emotional minefield for everyone, impacting on the children. From being a traditional grandparent with 'treats and outings' to being a full time carer with homework, school runs and setting boundaries means a fundamental change in the relationship. The grandchildren are no longer visitors. This can also compromise relationships with other grandchildren who do not live full-time with you.

The support that Kinship Carers get in their situation is largely dependent on where they live in the country and the individual social workers that oversee

their children's case. As referenced in the Introduction, there is *Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance* published by the Department of Education that offers a clear blueprint for good practice. Each local authority should have a pertinent Kinship Care Policy. Too frequently those thrust into a kinship caring role are not told that these documents exist. Information about the options and independent advice is essential. Some authorities have social workers who work specifically with Kinship Carers, and this should be the norm.

The Statutory Guidance is not a national policy. Some authorities treat families with the full support that is given to Looked After Children and foster carers with funding and training. Other authorities are not so forthcoming. Some do not support Kinship Carers in seeking Special Guardianship Orders (SGO), because this gives more financial support and training. A Residency Order means less involvement by Social Services, thus less commitment: financial, training, counselling. Children's wellbeing should take precedent over any local authority expediency and cost cutting.

Different local responses to families can cause particular problems if children have moved from one authority to another. If payments are being made, then maybe they can be transferred, but training often cannot be. Training should be available locally, but is not always. Furthermore, finance is often a problem for Kinship Carers. Benefits are available for some, but accessing information can be difficult. For those living on a pension, the arrival of grandchildren can be an impossible financial strain. Child Benefit that has been going to a birth parent has to be redirected to the new carer and this can mean tricky negotiation.

Taking a member of your own family to court to get a Residency Order or an SGO is challenging. Getting a good solicitor who specialises in family law is important. Social Services may be able to help fund these proceedings, but promises to do so do not always mean that the costs are forthcoming.

The family courts are used to dealing with complex family issues and can be positive and insightful. Evidence that social workers give has to be accurate. Children, when they reach adulthood, will be able to access documents; it has



to be the truth. Accurate reporting is crucial. This may seem obvious, but overwork and tiredness take their toll. Kinship Carers do see good practice and are generally very sympathetic to those who work for children's services, but there are cases when the response has not been positive and this impacts on the outcomes for children.

All of these factors contributed to the sense of urgency I felt in realising this creative project, and perhaps the foremost was professional development and training. The training of social workers is key to positive outcomes for children. It should not be a 'them and us' situation. Specific training around the Kinship Care should be compulsory for all and updated regularly. Junior staff need to be carefully supervised and supported too. However busy, it is very important to someone bringing up a child in difficult circumstances to have phone calls returned and emails answered. Many grandparents will have no experience of social services and communication is the key to promoting a positive relationship. An overview of the procedures would be most helpful and this may need to be repeated. As mentioned earlier, children may be traumatised, but so also those who have taken over their care.

Social Services together with the courts usually take a lead in determining the regularity of visits to and from birth parents, though the practicalities of those visits is often left to the Kinship Carers. Carers have to deal with tricky questions and behaviour fallout with coping skills tested before, during and after such visits, without training or previous experience.

Grandparents in kinship roles with their grandchildren are returning to parenting and things have changed since their own children were little. Acknowledging that times are different can be hard, but if those original children have turned to drugs and alcohol, there is also a sense of guilt. There is continuous personal questioning of your parenting skills. This can be damaging to self belief and kinship carers need reassurance and support that their judgements are sound. In *A State of Wonder* by Ann Patchett, Dr Swenson, pregnant at 73 years old in the Amazon jungle tells Dr Singh the obvious:

'women past a certain age are simply not meant to carry children, and I can only imagine that we are not meant to bear them or to raise them either.' (p 274).

And yet circumstances may dictate that we have to, and it is this situation my thesis seeks to explore in its creative writing.

## Chapter Three - Why Write About Kinship Care? Our Story

Five years ago, one of our grandchildren (we now have eleven between us) was taken from his mother by police officers because she was not able to look after him. I am, in fact, this little boy's paternal step grandmother. His grandfather, my partner and his primary carer, had taken early retirement a month earlier, because it had become increasingly obvious to us that the boy's mother would not be able to provide a safe and happy home for him. He was eighteen months old when he came to us. He is on the fetal alcohol syndrome spectrum. I am delighted to report that he is now a happy and healthy six year old who enjoys school and is making good progress.

However, it is not easy being a kinship carer and we have personal experience of very many of the issues that are raised in this doctoral thesis and as supporters of Grandparents Plus we know very many other kinship carers' histories. The experiences of the last five years has informed the whole of the *Holding Baby* process. The problem of failing health and the ageing process is one that many kinship carers who are grandparents have to face. We have both, over the past six years, had to face the problems of diabetes and failing hearing. My partner has a serious heart condition as well as a chronic problem with back pain. We have had to find ways of coping with our health issues and the raising of a small boy who needs physical activity.

The issues around the health of kinship carers has been researched by the Ageing Cluster led by Professor Peter Lloyd-Sherlock of Phase 1 of the SDA Initiative. *The health and well-being of grandparents caring for grandchildren: the role of cumulative advantage/disadvantage* does not focus on kinship care, but on the wider caring roles that grandparents take on. It does, however, look at how being with young children can be a positive and a negative influence on the health of older people.

This doctoral thesis is not a sociological study. It does not pretend to be. It is ultimately firmly set in a practice-led and practice based creative writing context; I have used experience as an inspiration and a basis for a play and a poetry collection. My main motivation for wanting to get these stories out

there has been that there is very little acknowledgement from anyone that we, kinship carers exist. Our stories need to be heard. As Gary Longden wrote in his online review 'Behind The Arras ' 17th October 2016 of *Holding Baby*:

'A fundamental response to any drama should be "why?" In this instance the answer is a fine piece of writing on a largely untouched subject, with contemporary relevance, which illuminates, entertains and engages in equal measure. This performance in the round added to the intimacy and emotional intensity of the occasion. Although the events of this drama are extraordinary, whilst mingling with members of the audience, I heard stories even more extraordinary, all welcoming the chance to see something which spoke to them.'

We were thrilled by Longden's words, but this final paragraph encapsulates my motivation for writing the play, the poetry and the PhD. I wanted to write a piece of theatre and a poetry collection that used our experiences and that of other kinship carers to expose a growing phenomenon that is becoming common, yet invisible. In terms of theatre, Longden confirms that we have a production of 'Contemporary relevance, which illuminates, entertains and engages in equal measure'.

In the Chapter, Writing and the Progress of the Play *Holding Baby*, I shall place the play in the broader context of issue-driven, social-realistic theatre.

## Chapter Four - Grandparents in Fiction

In the past, the role of the grandparent as a full time carer of a grandchild has occasionally been depicted in literature. Fictional Grandparents have often taken over full time caring because of the frequency of death of mothers in childbirth. Charles Dickens often reflected on the role of grandparents in Victorian times, as in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. In Hans Christian Andersen's, 'The Snow Queen', Kai's grandmother tells him and his friend Gerda about the Snow Queen, though in many of the interpretations of the story for stage and film, this detail is omitted. Later in the 20th century R.K Narayan captured the family history of his grandmother's search for her husband in *The Grandmother's Tale*. Doris Lessing explores grandparents' dilemmas in the four stories that make up *The Grandmothers*. Amy Herzog in her award winning play *4,000 Miles* explores the relationship between adult grandchild and grandmother in the 21st century.

In contemporary literature, theatre and media, the role of the grandparent is often neglected. The world is geared to families headed by Mummy and Daddy, whereas actually families come in very many forms, not often represented. For instance in a wealth of wonderful children's literature most of it presumes that a child lives with Mum and Dad. There is little evidence of positive validation of a family that does not fit into the perceived norm. This can make children and carers feel quite isolated. For grandparent kinship carers it is particularly daunting to see the older generation portrayed as past their sell by date. Learning to read can be fraught for small children at school, when not only do they see other children being taken to school by their mum, but then in the book they take home to read, they are faced with a mum again. Children might not know where their parents are, but they are faced with representations of the nuclear family as the norm. Lucy Pearson in *Children's Literature* explores the emergence of a more diverse range of childhoods represented in children's books in the 1960s and 1970s. The Children's Rights Workshop founded by Rosemary Stones and Andrew Mann published guidelines in 1973 to give support to writers in producing work to

combat racism, sexism and class attitudes. Family break up and change has been recognised in young fiction, but not necessarily kinship care families. With a six year old at home, we are still at the picture book stage, though our exploration into chapter books has begun. Our observations tell us that picture books and school Early Readers predominantly reflect the nuclear family. The books we like to read at bedtime show either a family like ours (*Grandpa and Thomas and the Green Umbrella* by the Australian author Pamela Allen) or a book that is open to interpretation (like *No Matter What* by Debi Gliori). Our experience of being on a beach is mirrored in *Grandpa and Thomas and the Green Umbrella*, though we have not got a green umbrella and we might not build a sand car (we build a sand boat always). Also this grandmother is on the beach too in our narrative. There is no mention of a grandmother in the picture book. We feel comfortable in the story. In our paperback edition of *No Matter What*, it saddens me to see the following quote from *The Scotman* on the back cover: 'A powerful yet witty story about parental love'. The reviewer has made an assumption that the illustrations show a mother or father and child. In fact, the drawings of the two characters Small and Large could be of any close relation. They could be foxes or kangaroos. They could be a parent and child, an aunt and nephew, a grandparent and grandchild. It is open to interpretation. The key issue in the book is death. As older carers we are aware that we have to live as long as we can to raise our grandchild. In fact, it is an issue raised in the poem 'After Alan' in my collection *Holding*. The poem deals with the practicalities of our dying and the repercussions for our grandson, but reading *No Matter What*, as well as making us laugh, prepares him for the emotional upset when we are not here anymore.

'Large held Small snug  
as they looked out at the night,  
at the moon in the dark  
and the stars shining bright -  
how they shine and glow,  
but some of those stars died  
a long time ago.

Still they shine in the evening skies  
love, like starlight, never dies.'

*The Hello, Goodbye Window*, by Norton Juster and Chris Raschka gives a good account of how some children's lives are affected by the coming and goings of change. *I Love My Grandpa* by David Bedford and Brenna Vaughan is a charming account of grandpa teaching a grandson to swim. They are bears, but the relationship is sound. The only book that tackles the transfer from parent to grandparent directly that we have found is *Snowflakes* by Cerrie Burnell, the CBeebies' presenter. In this book, Mia leaves the city to live with her grandmother in the wintery forest. The message is that everyone is like a snowflake, unique and perfect. These are heartening and positive representations, but very much the exceptions to the rule.

Classic stories that have grandparents as characters are not uncommon, but in contemporary plays they are rare. Mike Kenny's children's play *Walking The Tightrope* is an exception. This play is suitable for the youngest of audiences and confronts the death of a grandparent. Esme goes to stay with her grandparents every summer, but one summer only grandad is there. He explains that Nanna Queen has gone to join the circus to become a tightrope walker. The poignant tale ends with Grandad explaining that one day he is going to leave to become a cowboy. Parents are not part of this story, Esme has visited alone.

As a family, we watch children's television avidly. Cbeebies is our preferred channel. As grandparents raising a six year old, we get very tired, so we welcome television, because we watch sitting down. We are not couch potatoes, because we watch and discuss programmes. We are active viewers. We avoid *Topsy and Tim* where the nuclear family is alive and well, though it does have a grandmother with a dog who reflects a little of our daily reality. We love *Octonauts* that presents a working rescue service with each of the characters being a part of their own diverse family somewhere else. But we all adore, except for the doggy laughter, *Paw Patrol*. *Paw Patrol* has a similar premise to *Octonauts* of a rescue service, but it also offers the only true kinship carer family we have found on children's television. The green grocer/

baker Mr Porter is the grandfather of Alex and he appears to be raising him on his own.

*Grandpa In My Pocket* portrays a very positive grandfather image. Grandpa lives with Jason and then in later series with Josh and Elsie and according to Wikipedia, the BBC's press office says it 'explores the hugely important relationship between grandchildren and grandparents by turning it on its head'. Indeed, Mr and Mrs Mason, the parents of Jason and the aunt and uncle of Josh and Elsie, do not do much parenting. The dialogue between Grandpa and the children shows a tight, close relationship around the shrinking cap that Grandpa uses to become tiny and then able to become a rescuer. The theme of rescuer is common in many children's programmes.

For each of us in our household, our favourite programme is *Sarah and Duck*, an animation about a seven year old girl and her best friend: a mallard called Duck. There are no adults in the house they share, except for the voice of the narrator. There is a keen dialogue between Sarah and the narrator and we learn in the episode 'Old Toys' (Series 3, number 20, overall number 100), that the narrator does have old toys up in the attic, so there is the implication that he has lived in the house. The relationship is never, or up to now, defined. There are the other children, John with his friend Flamingo (who is a flamingo), Plate Girl, Scooter Boy and the Ribbon Sisters. There are other animals: Bug, Tortoise, Donkey and various Manatees. There are the Shallots who enjoy circus. And then there are adults, who are generally older, the age of grandparents: Moon, Breadman, Rainbow, Venus. Scarf Lady is a favourite with Bag, a very grumpy character. (My eldest grandson refers to me as Scarf Lady.) Though not defined as Sarah and Duck's grandparents, the magical positive relationships explored in the series between the young and the old, resonate for all of us in our family. In the haibun, 'Square Eyes', I recount a moment watching children's television with my grandson. It could be said that in many ways children's stories and media representations do better than those for adults.

Making sense of a world where children all seem to live with a mummy and daddy, can add to the trauma of a young child who does not live with his



or her birthparents. Pointing out the different types of families can help, but for our boy this can add to the confusion. Why does my best friend live with two mummies and I don't have one? The enormous number of early years children's picture books can offer support to developing the wider view of family life. But children from kinship care families have to come to terms with the nuclear family too, because they will have friends that live in the traditional nuclear family. They have to get used to birth mother's raising their children. Our grandson is drawn to young mums. He wants a mum of his own. I explore this need in 'The Myth Of Mummy' (p. 96)

Returning to the day to day challenges of being a kinship carer, networks of support are important. Those lucky enough to be in loving partnerships have real advantages over those on their own. If immediate family are supportive, then the loving circle grows. Self help groups, to work effectively, need people with energy and organisational skills to run them. They need local professionals' support. Religious communities and charities do give help. But information must be readily available and too often it isn't. As referenced earlier, what's on offer varies tremendously from local authority to local authority. The best interests of the child or children must be the focal point for decisions around care, but this does not always seem to be put into practice. For most of us Kinship Carers, the sacrifice, heartache and change of life plans are worth it to see our grandchildren blossom, learn and appreciate the ordinary loving routine of family life. It is, however, challenging and very hard work and this reality only increased the imperative to produce a body of creative work which was informative, authentic and did not shy away from the trials and sacrifices.

The lack of early years children's literature that shows a kinship care family may be something that my grandson and I may address together in a future project.

## Chapter Five - Writing and the Progress of the Play

Social Realism and the influence of Edward Bond on contemporary playwriting is much in evidence in contemporary practice, and has had a clear impact on my own work over the years. His impact on twentieth century theatre is immense, and it continues. In 2012, two new plays by Bond were produced by Big Brum Theatre in Education Company in Birmingham: *The Broken Bowl* and *The Edge* deal with twenty first century issues. In 2014 Big Brum Theatre in Education Company presented its tenth new Bond play, *The Angry Roads*. Bond's long and productive career has to be admired. Bond has respect for his audiences, writing real plays that will make a difference to peoples' understanding and awareness. This is definitely an aim that I have as both a playwright and a poet.

The TIE movement and its use of Social Realism and Applied Theatre has been a strong influence on my writing since I spent a week camping in Leeds to watch productions at the TIE Festival on the opening of the West Yorkshire Playhouse in March 1990. The Festival brought productions from all over the world, addressing a variety of issues with the same commitment to social representation. That along with watching a production by Geese Theatre in HMYOI Swinfen Hall as a Writer in Residence, laid a firm foundation for my approach to writing plays.

The Birmingham based Women and Theatre company were founded in 1983 by Janice Connolly. They produce excellent productions about the human condition and contemporary issues. Their work has had positive influence on my work too. Their approach is to work through improvisation, often with a client group and then shape that work into a script for a performance with a writer. This is an approach that I have used in teaching A Level performing Arts, but was not workable in the case of *Holding Baby*. If we think of kinship carers as the client group then their isolation makes it difficult to work with them, particularly as I have that role and have to put my home commitments first. As a part of the kinship carer client group, I needed to be the informer and the writer.

It is worth considering the roots of the Social Realism movement before moving on to discussing the development of *Holding Baby* in depth. The founder of Socialist Realism, Maxim Gorky, in probably his best known play, *The Lower Depths*, depicts impoverished Russians living in a shelter. Produced by the Moscow Arts Theatre in 1902, Stanislavski directed and starred. It was the hallmark of Russian social realism. In my research I discovered that Gorky was born into a violent family and that for periods of time he was raised by his grandmother Akulina Ivanva Kashirin. The poignant description of her comes from his autobiography *My Childhood*.

'She had an endless store of tales about angels and devils, goblins and witches, in the recital of which she rocked from side to side all the time, just as if she were in a boat...connecting all my impressions by a single thread, she wove them into a pattern of many colours, thus making herself my friend for life, the being nearest my heart, the dearest and best known of all.'

Writing about his grandmother in such a way heartens me. Gorky's *The Lower Depths* reflects the Russia that he knew in stark realism. I wanted my play to show an imagined reality of a kinship carer alone.

Brian Friel, a master of Social Realism, wrote plays with strong older women characters. *Dancing in Lughnasa* is about a mother and her sisters waiting for something that will change everything. The play was based around Friel's mother and his aunts. This use of taking stories you have heard and weaving them into new work to share as a play was something I wanted to replicate.

Caryl Churchill also influenced my approach to the writing of *Holding Baby*. Her retelling of the *Bacchae* of Euripides in *A Mouthful of Birds* and the struggles of overcoming alcoholism and drug abuse, resonate. Her telling of the story is from a feminists point of view and her non-naturalistic techniques would be important later when I took over directing *Holding Baby* in October 2016. Another version of Euripides' *Bacchae* is also important to me. In 1972, I was a disorderly woman in a production of John Bowen's play *Disorderly*

*Women*. Both plays influenced my approach to a Social Realistic approach that I wanted to use in my portrayal of abuse.

The journey through the nine drafts of the play and the reading, rehearsed reading, and the two productions so far, have been critical in the development of the script. The production is not being judged for the PhD, but the production process and performances are key to the development of the script.

The script of *Holding Baby* has always been the driving force of this thesis. However, as time and work has progressed, it became clear that the script itself was not enough to fill my personal brief. The play tells imagined kinship care narratives safe to share with others: to validate grandparents who take on raising a grandchild full-time, to inform professionals working with families, to tell the general public about the complexities of living in such a family.

As a script is not a play until it is performed, it has been important for its integrity to reach its aims outside the remit of thesis. The script would not exist in its final form without the developments and rewrites undertaken through production and performance. This critical commentary can act as a record of that process. The progress through this process has taken the script from its first to its ninth draft. The ninth draft of the play offered for this thesis is the final one used in the production for the Social Work Conference on 12th May, 2017. It contains more stage directions than you would expect in a stage script, but I have used this draft to submit because it is a working script written and used for me to direct the play. For me, it tells the narrative of the play most clearly. The development of the work has benefited from having a reading and a rehearsed reading, before a first run at the Book To The Future Festival at the University of Birmingham in October 2016.

I decided on an all women cast as I wanted to reflect that the majority of kinship carers are women, usually women on their own. This can be because they are single, widowed or divorced. It can also be that when becoming kinship carers their partner leaves due to the pressure of caring duties. The other reason why I wanted an all female cast was because there are so few

hefty roles for women, particularly older women actors. There was one anonymous feedback form for the October 2016 production that requested a male carer in the play but the one voice did not move me to make one of the characters male. That would be a different play.

The aim was to explore the phenomenon, based on four years of meeting other kinship carers, without specifying anyone's personal story. The play was deliberately written to avoid our own personal story, but also other people's personal stories too.

Initially, I had planned to write a play about kinship care to tell everyone about this phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common in the 21st century. At the beginning, there was no question that the writing of a play would be part of any academic study, but the motivation to return to University has always been based on wanting the work to reach its full potential.

I wanted to write the play, but to also include a follow on piece of forum theatre. Forum theatre is a didactic proactive drama form first developed by Augusto Boal; a form seminally explored in his 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. Part of my initial degree at Wolverhampton Polytechnic (now University) was in forum theatre and much of my work teaching A Level Performing Arts at Codsall High School included producing theatre with the students for schools that include elements of forum theatre.

My idea back in 2014 was to provide workshops for kinship care grandparents that used forum scenarios around returning to parenthood. The challenges of raising a family now are different to those that we faced raising children back in the 1970s to 1990s. The rise of social media has had a tremendous impact. The Royal Society for Public Health and Young Health Movement undertook a survey published in April 2017 of almost 1,500 14 to 24 year-olds and found that social media made young people feel more inadequate and anxious, particularly around issues of body image, bullying and depression. Instagram was judged to have the most negative affect closely followed by Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter. YouTube was the only platform with a positive impact. Within kinship care circles there are undocumented stories of kinship care families being traumatised by birth parents accessing

their teenage children through Facebook and offering a fake truth of the early history. Helen Oakwater in *Bubble Wrapped Children* explores the issues and gives clear and specific strategies for dealing with social media and young people. She also covers dealing with challenging behaviour. Her focus is adoptive parents, but her techniques are pertinent to kinship carers. All children who don't live with their birth parents for whatever reasons are traumatised except in rare exceptions. Many are on the fetal alcohol spectrum, some have ADHD, and/or are on the autistic spectrum. Raising a child when you are older who has special educational and behavioural needs is exhausting. My plan was to get groups of grandparent carers together to watch scenes of confrontation between actors playing kinship care families in crisis in a forum theatre setting; and then to use forum theatre techniques to redress those issues through the reworking of scenes. I wanted to give people emotional and practical tools to deal with challenging behaviour. I attended a three day course with Geese Theatre to sharpen up my forum theatre skills. Geese work within the Criminal Justice System producing forum theatre for those in the system and inmates in prison. It is difficult to see their work first hand, but as Writer in Residence at HMYOI Swinfen Hall (now HMP Swinfen Hall) in 2001 - 2003, I was privileged to see one of their productions.

The idea to bring forum to kinship care was a good one, but on investigating the possibilities it became clear that it was not practical. Firstly, you have to find kinship carers who would like to participate. I was thinking about this at the beginning of our personal responsibilities with our grandson, and the weight of the changes in life style had not yet taken their toll. In our network of grandparent carers in Birmingham, we know that it is almost impossible even to get people together for a cup of coffee. As local contact for Grandparents Plus in Birmingham, my partner is involved in giving support to grandparents primarily who are in similar positions to us. Most of the work he does is on the phone. Finding people who might want support at first was difficult, because the local professionals did not pass on his contact details. Recently, we have forged a positive relationship with Children's Services and with school SENCOs and they pass on his contact details. We hold monthly

coffee mornings at a local children's centre and over the past eighteen months only two families have made those meetings. One of the most devastating results of being a kinship carer can be isolation. When we have a first contact with a family, their initial response is that they thought they were the only people raising their child's children.

The isolation of grandparents and their lack of confidence is not conducive to taking part in forum theatre workshops. Also, if you mention taking part in a drama workshop, many people will run away and will find the whole idea might be alright for others, but not for them. Grandparents who return to parenting their grandchildren often feel a keen sense of failure, if the birth parents cannot be responsible parents through drug and/or alcohol abuse. The unanswerable question is, what if I had done things differently before, the first time around? Kinship care is often tinged with remorse and guilt in respect of past parenting. Those of us raised in the 1950s and the early 1960s, were not encouraged to show or share our feelings. The 'stiff upper lip' culture of 'pull yourself together' was the norm and even if we have lived in freer times, it can be very difficult for some to share their current rollercoaster of raising grandchildren. I became aware that if forum theatre was going to get participants, I needed specific strategies to encourage people willing to come and also provide practical support to make it possible. Discussing personal issues publicly and dramatically would, for the self-conscious, be embarrassing.

I was Writer in Residence with Community Vibe 2012-2014, a theatre company that works primarily with those adults with mental health issues, the homeless and other communities who are vulnerable. In 2010, we produced a piece of forum theatre for a conference for older carers for Carers' Week. We had a very positive response to our scenarios. We spent a morning offering challenging scenes that might happen in homes where an older carer was looking after a loved one. Then on input from the audience we reworked the scenes to improve the outcomes for both carers and cared for. This work was the inspiration for the forum input I hoped I would be able to include in the *Holding Baby* package.

The decision to drop the Forum Theatre element of this project was not a difficult one. The challenges to getting participants has already been touched on. As well as the emotional preoccupations, many carers have tight financial budgets that make attending any sort of social or training event difficult. Many do not have their own transport and it is difficult to prioritise getting to a venue for support and/or training if you have to feed a growing family on a pension. Many carers will have pre-school children that have to be looked after and possibly no kindly babysitter who will take over the caring role for a short time. This means creche facilities would be a necessity. This has feasibility and financial implications for the organiser.

Additionally, and a personal opinion based on my being a kinship carer of a boy who is now six and has been in our care for five years, is the basic fact that you are completely exhausted. We, as a group, are lucky if we get support from other family members (we do), but if you are in your 50s, 60s, 70s or 80s, you don't have the energy that you once did. Raising children is very hard work and often as you get older you have health issues that make the physical demands of childcare very hard. I believe that most carers would say that the stress and emotional demands far outweigh those of the physical ones. Whatever I produced needed to offer the most complete artistic experience combined with the lowest outlay of time, money, energy for the audience.

If you are a kinship carer grandparent with no background in theatre or in the therapeutic nature of forum theatre, why would you make a tremendous effort to attend a forum theatre based workshop? Talking around people we meet, the answer is, that's a good idea, but not for me, I have not the time (or the energy). As a full time secondary carer to a six year old for five years, I have to choose my battles. Trying to find kinship carers who want to take part in a forum theatre workshop that explores coping strategies for raising children with challenging behaviour is a terrific idea. However, it is a step too far. Like those I would like to involve in a forum theatre project, I too have not got the energy. I like to think that I am keeping that option open for a later date.



The rejection of the use of forum interaction did not mean that this play should not be applied theatre. I intended that the work should challenge its audiences and be significant in changing perceptions.

In the Editorial of RiDE: *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* Vol.14, No 4 Taylor and Francis clarify Applied Theatre.

'Applied Theatre is an umbrella term that defines theatre that operates beyond the traditional and limiting scope of conventional Western theatre forms. It is often characterised by work which deliberately engages in spaces or with groups of people where the mainstream theatre still fears to tread. The boundaries between actors and spectators are purposefully blurred as all participants are involved as active theatre makers. Frequently, applied theatre is constructed as a response to social or political challenges and is seen as a process where difference and change can be wrought through its making.' (p.471-477)

My play *Holding Baby* would be Applied Theatre in its approach in a Social Realism context. In performance, presenting the work in the round meant that the audience were part of the waiting room observing the action of the play.

My full focus, I decided in early 2015, should be the play and working on getting a production: a production that would not be part of the PhD, because it is the script that is judged, not the production for a thesis in Creative Writing. As Steve Waters writes in his excellent *The Secret Life of Plays*: 'In a sense, an unperformed play doesn't in fact exist, or at least remains in a state of latency'.

My main motivation in the past four years has been to offer something to those, like us, who are caring for young children, when they should be taking care of themselves. This production would be for everybody, but first and foremost for kinship carers, to support them by telling them that they are not alone, they are not invisible and that they matter. I might have dreamed in 2014, that the play might reach social workers and offer them an insight into kinship care that they could use in their practice. But this was not a motivator in the first instance, because I had no idea that reaching out to social services could happen. Over the past four years there has been a development in the

responses to kinship carers that has been most welcome. The Ofsted Report of Birmingham Children's Services of 2014 was damning. Inspectors found that more than 400 Child In Need cases, referred more than two months earlier, had not been robustly risk assessed and the children not seen.

'Some of these cases, sampled by inspectors, identified children who were at risk of harm, and who had not received an appropriate response or intervention to ensure their safety.'

Inspectors also found that between October 2013 and January 2014 a "significant" number of children in need cases were closed without being risk assessed due to a lack of social workers. The later production for the Social Work Conference in 2017 was profoundly rewarding for myself and my family. To know that the play was being used in the training of social workers will improve the empathy and support given to carers. Hopefully this will develop further as more events are organised in 2019.

I knew that I wanted to write a narrative in real time as the time code, to have the most impact. For me, it has the most effect. Waters, again in *The Secret Life of Plays* notes

'In a sense, the true meaning of real time is the desire to tell a story without apparent artifice or cheating, to present to the audience events that seem to function without the intervention of director or writer. The authority of a theatrical moment, its authenticity and power to move the viewer to belief, is grounded in the exquisite sense of time possessed by the writer.'

Most of my plays are in real time. It's where I am comfortable. Also one of my key ideas was to show how easy it is to slip into kinship caring without even realising it is happening. I decided early on to write the play in two acts: the first act to cover a whole event where a grandparent becomes a kinship carer and a second act where the repercussions of that earlier event are exposed. The running time of the play is fifty five minutes for Act One, and Act Two shorter at forty minutes. I planned this timing at the beginning of the process, because it allows time for the narratives to drive through the performance and

to develop without losing momentum. I believe a shorter second act and its resolution is preferred by audiences, if possible.

I wanted to show an older person start the play as someone just taking responsibility for themselves and then ending up raising a child. I wanted to show the audience just how this could happen. The structure of the play evolved with the title *Holding Baby*. First no baby and then going home with one. Talking over the last five years with many grandparents who have become carers on a full time basis, the immediacy of enormous changes is like lightning. I wanted that to be reflected in the play and again real time offered that authenticity.

Before inhabiting this real time with people, I wanted to find a space where women might meet. A place with some sort of procedure that I could both use as a skeleton to the narrative and one that I could hack to pieces to add tension and narrative mayhem. In fact, making the propulsion and transformation needed to make a good story. I decided that a doctor's surgery was an ideal location for a real time play, remembering *The National Health*, a play (sul.1970) and subsequently a film written by Peter Nichols set in a hospital ward with Jim Dale as the lead. NHS settings, both hospitals and doctors' surgeries, offer spaces where anyone can meet. In television and film, the medical setting is legendary and I decided to plump for a doctor's surgery. The decision made before the full performances of the play, to produce it in the round enhanced the familiar sense of the GP waiting room that the audience would recognise.

I started with Barbara Whitehead who has no caring responsibilities, popping into the doctors for a flu jab, with the idea that at the end of Act One, she would have become a kinship carer. The fact that Barbara is going for a flu jab denotes that she fits 'flu jab criteria. She is not over sixty five, but she must be eligible for a vaccination, because she has a longstanding condition. From that 'flu jab reference at the beginning of the play and then again in Act Two, her status as someone with chronic health issue was established. The kinship care role has continued for two years, Barbara has brought up baby Tia

to toddlerhood. Barbara is the protagonist and it is her story that drives the action of the play.

There is no way a play can reflect every kinship carers' experience. Every story we heard is different, but there are none the less similarities. I needed to build characters that reflected the commonality of situations, but also characters who had specific realities. Tangible three dimensional characters improve the acceptance of the story by the audience. Each character had to have a history that put them in the real world. In my imagination, the play is set in Birmingham, but this is not over defined, because I want it to be flexible enough to be produced in other places, but if we look at Maeve, her roots are in Eire. She has retained her strong accent. Her commitment to family is built on a strong catholic faith that she has lost, but it is still engrained in her. Her persona at work is brusque, but she has home commitments that require empathy, love and organisational skills. She is a whole person. The characters have to be believed. Authenticity is important to an audience. It is important that carers in the audience can relate to the characters and also perhaps believe that some of the situations they find themselves in are not their fault. Guilt is common in kinship carers. As mentioned before, there is a common feeling of being a failure in your parenting the first time round. The reasons for birth parents to fail in their ability to parent full-time are numerous, but the grandparents often feel guilty that they failed to raise their children to adulthood, so that they, the birth parents, can independently raise their own children, as is the norm.

When creating imagined people for the play, I wanted to look at kinship care in as many types of relationships that I could. Barbara's narrative is the structure that the other subplots about kinship care hang on. Barbara takes over the care of her granddaughter Tia after her daughter, a heroin addict, is unable to parent her. Gracie, Barbara's mother, was a kinship and a young carer in the Second World War after the death of her own mother. She raised her siblings. Maeve, the receptionist, had to take over caring responsibilities after a death. She takes on the care of her nieces Siobhan and Orla after the death of her sister from cancer. Maeve's role at home is revealed bit by bit in

the play to reflect assumptions people often make about your family life without knowing anything. For most of Act One, we think that Maeve is just an officious office manager without compassion, but then at the end of the act we realise that she has a stake in kinship care too.

DG and Maria are my attempt at using one actor for two very closely related characters, mother and daughter. There are six actors playing seven roles for women in *Holding Baby*. The cast is all female, because this reflects the reality of care. Yes, there are men who do kinship care and in fact in our own kinship care family, my partner is primary carer, but generally women are the primary carers. As mentioned earlier, in the production of the play in October 2016, one male carer anonymously felt that there should be a male character in the play. Yes, and this relates back to picking my writing battles as well as taking the responsibility of representation. To focus on the majority is not to denigrate the exceptions.

D.G and her daughter Maria started life as characters DG and Amber from the Philippines. They were created to represent cross continent kinship care. The reason that I made them Filipino was that we have a daughter-in-law from the Philippines and we have travelled there. In her large family, grandparents have taken on long term caring roles of their grandchildren. We know that in the UK, there are very many people from the Philippines here working for financial reasons, so that they can offer their children back home an education while the grandparents are doing the caring. When we were in Sharjah in the UEA in 2011, we saw very many people from the Philippines living there to work on the building sites of Dubai and working in the service industries. In the second outing for the play at the mac as a rehearsed reading Nadi Kemp-Sayfi took on both roles and worked hard at producing different voices for the two characters. Unfortunately, Nadi was unavailable for the October 2016 full production so Toni Midlane took on the two roles. We revisited the characters and we felt that making them Eastern European would make their stories more topical at this time of turmoil in Europe. And so, Divine Grace became Divine Grace Dacla from Maramures, a rural area in Romania and her daughter became Maria a medical student from Bucharest.

DG had three daughters in Maramures all being brought up by her mother and extended family. She is Gracie's carer at The Comfort Of Sunset Nursing Home. She has worked in the UK since Romania joined the EU. Grace has had stomach pains. She is visiting the surgery to get her test results. She wants to return to Maramures. The results will show that she has pancreatic cancer. She will stay in the UK as she needs medical attention that she cannot easily get in Maramures.

Both Nadi and Toni were impressive in their preparation for playing the two roles: Nadi in producing an authentic filipino accent for DG, Toni in producing an authentic Romanian accent. In both cases, we decided that in both the Philippines and Romania young people learning English were most likely to learn American English, rather than English English. In both countries, they would watch American television, rather than British. So, in the interpretations of Amber/Maria, one of the main differences in that character to their mother DG was the use of an America accent, while the mother DG spoke English using her home country accent. Both Nadi Kemp-Sayfi and Toni Midlane were successful in the dual roles, not just with the language, but also in the different physicality of the two characters.

The inclusion of Maria was an important development of the play and not only in making it more financially viable. The two roles juxtaposed together, the mother DG in Act One and then the daughter. We hear in Act One that DG is able to be frank and open about leaving her children in Romania and her reasons for doing it. Maria in Act Two gives a different view of kinship care, as the cared for child. So we have two directions explored: the parent who leaves and the child that is left. I felt that it was important in a play about kinship care that we should get input from the perspective of the child who is left with grandparents. In the first draft, Eva, Barbara's daughter, Tia's mother and Gracie's granddaughter didn't appear. I thought, as pointed out in *The Secret Life Of Plays*, that the offstage character can be powerful. Steve Waters points out that Godot in *Waiting For Godot* is potent, his absence drives the narrative. But, it became obvious in reading in seminars that there was a huge omission in the *Holding Baby* jigsaw. We need to have the birth mother's side

of the story too. No one in all the feedback that we have collected has questioned the integrity of the writing of Eva. I am surprised by that in as much as it is a harsh representation of a sad and vulnerable young woman. Many of the audiences we have performed for have family members with serious drug and alcohol problems, but no one (so far) has questioned the authenticity of Eva and the way she behaves. At the rehearsed reading at the mac on 13th January 2016, Jennie Burns played the part of Eva. Her interpretation was based on someone she knew well with a serious heroin addiction. Through the process with Burns, Eva became more confrontational and more repetitive.

**‘Eva** Tia’s a baby. Don’t get funny with me.

Tia’s a baby girl. She’s only...She’s only...

(To Barbara) How old is she?

Mum, how old is Tia?’

Eva’s repetition links her to her grandmother Gracie. It is as if both Eva and Gracie have lost or are losing their realities. Burns in both her characterisation of Eva and in our discussions, crystallised the voice and character.

Between 2004 and 2006, I was a lecturer in Creative Writing at HMP Brockhill, a women’s remand prison. In 2007, we became a male Category B prison for a short time before closing. In theory, the women would be with us for a short time before going to court for sentencing. It was my favourite job ever. I edited the Costa Del Brookhill prison magazine. My favourite edition was the one which solely contained very sad stories that we stapled a strip of toilet paper to the front cover as a free gift (for nose blowing). I have also worked at HMP Hewell Grange and as I’ve stated previously, I was Writer in Residence at HMYOI Swinfen Hall, both being men’s prisons. I edited prison magazines in both establishments. For me, and it might be because I am a woman, the difference is stark. In my prison experience, men have stories that they won’t tell, but women have stories to tell and they will tell everybody who they can get to listen.

Working with women inmates at HMP Brookhill, opened my eyes to another world. The majority of women came into custody showing serious

signs of addiction and withdrawal. They would have to do literacy and numeracy tests on admission when they could barely see the paper that tests were printed on. After about a month on methadone, most would become pleasant, yet vulnerable young women. Very many inmates were mothers. The lucky ones would have partners or parents raising their children. Many did not know where their children were because drugs had robbed them of time, memory and the knowledge of who exactly their children were. On release, many would go straight back to their home ground and the cycle of abuse and narcotics would start again. Reoffending and returning to prison often happened, as did drug related deaths within days of release. I am a writer, not a sociologist or drugs worker, so these are observations from experience. Eva in *Holding Baby* is a composite, but real creation based on many that I met in Brockhill, then revised by input from Jennie Burns. In Eva, we see the birth mother who perhaps wants to be seen to be a mother, but is motivated by her addictions first and foremost.

The cast of characters, Barbara, Maeve, Gracie, DG, her daughter Amber/Maria and Eva are to be played by five actors. Each character has a first hand experience of kinship care. We are in a doctors' surgery. Do we need a doctor? Over the past three years, I have tried to avoid a seventh character, but within the structure of the play, it is very difficult to do that. Maeve has authority in the surgery, but in terms of the structure, it needed someone who could take overall control in both acts. Enter Doctor Zoe Abdullah. She is a mother of a young child and though her baby is not being looked after in a kinship care family, it is Zoe's mother who does most of the childcare. Without that support, Zoe would not be able to work. So, with this final character, we have someone who has authority, who can help move the story on, particularly in Act two and we also have a tiny sub plot of a grandparent supporting younger members of their own family. Now we had seven characters played by six actors.

The play is set in both acts in a doctors' surgery. When I was writing the first draft of the play, I wanted to bring the outside into the surgery. At about that time, The National Theatre's production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog*



*in the Night-Time* based on the novel by Mark Haddon adapted by Simon Stephens came to Birmingham Hippodrome. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* relies on pixel-mapping technology that offers the audience a 'magic box' that projects Christopher, the central character's, thoughts. The use of technology is ground breaking and gives the audience an insight into what might be the perceptions and interpretations found by a young person on the autistic spectrum. This gave me an idea.

In our doctors' surgery's waiting room, there is a very annoying screen that gives you health tips, using poor grammar and strange use of capital letters. I had this idea that the outside could come inside Dr Abdullah's surgery. A screen on stage and others placed in the auditorium could offer aggravating health tips (with mistakes) and every so often in Act One, the screen could flip into a grainy view of the phone box outside with Eva and later the arrival of Dr Abdullah and the ambulance. I planned to use the same technology to show DG and Gracie talking to each other in a sort of TV heaven in Act Two. This seemed a very good idea at the time. However, these special effects cost money to do properly. It was ditched as an idea after the rehearsed reading, because we tried to replicate screens, with people just being screens. It did not work on any level, so it was scrapped. I knew that it would be expensive to put the play on, because of the number of actors in the cast, added expensive technology would only exacerbate that expense. It was also pointed out to me that you did not need to go outside the waiting room. It could destroy the claustrophobic hot house feel created in a small space in real time.

I had my characters and I am conjuring up the narrative of the play, the main plot being how a grandparent gets to be *Holding Baby*. This is prime thinking time and time with large sheet of paper and felt tips recording drops of stories and teasing them into some sort of potential structure. While this goes on when I'm writing a play, I know that I must get to know these imagined women. They are part of me, but we have barely been introduced. So while my left hand is beginning to plot and scheme, my right hand is writing monologues. In a play, each character has to have a unique voice and that is

one of the starting points for the playwright, the director, the actor and then the audience to truly accept and know the imagined personality.

Steve Waters, again presents a helpful overview in *The Secret Life Of Plays*: 'While dialogue in plays can be considered as a kind of transaction between characters, it can also be looked at in terms of what it tells us about an individual character:

**'Idiolect** - the specific language of an individual character, formed out of the stew of influences that have shaped him or her. A useful example is Othello, whose grandiose rhetoric is a rich soup of exoticism, bombast and militarism.

**Sociolect** - A character's voice shaped by and representative of a class or profession or a way of life: culture (a religious sect, for example), or a rougher, looser one.

**Dialect**- The geographical context that shapes the character also dictates their language; and indeed dialect has often been so particular as to overwhelm other layers of language.' (p120)

It is the idiolect, the sociolect and the dialect and the transactions between characters that make up the words written in the script: transactions between characters or not made between characters. As a playwright you know that sometimes your characters are not communicating.

If we take the character of Gracie, her idiolect roots in her speech are based in her childhood and young adulthood in World War 2. Being a young carer during this time is reflected in her speech, even though she is old and suffering with dementia, she still speaks with authority. She has been primarily a carer and a home maker all her life. She has had to take control of a young family and that automotive voice is still there. The sociolect influence is reflected through her working class roots. She is a proud woman, humble, but proud of her place in society. Dialect is reflected by her being a Brummie through and through (though flexibility in dialect would be appropriate in productions to come.)

In writing the monologues, I particularly enjoyed writing in the voice of Gracie. I was brought up in the early 1950s in the East End of London as an

only child. But the influences in speech patterns that made my linguistic preference were not cockney. Both of my parents hailed from Wales and met in London during the Second World War. They lived and worked in London during the Blitz: my Dad as a police officer and my Mum as a nurse working mostly with burns victims, many of them were American airmen. I have never had a Welsh accent, but I believe that the rhythm and cadences that I use are very Welsh and the idioms my parents used are now mine and Gracie's too. We learn in the play that Gracie took on kinship caring for her siblings and I can hear her using the language and the rhythms of my childhood, tempered by listening to my Auntie Paddy who in later life succumbed to Alzheimers. The repetitions that I used in creating Gracie's speech are my Auntie Paddy's. I believed when writing *Holding Baby* that it was not our story, but when I break it down and ignore the imagined storylines, much of it is rooted in me. This is a poem I wrote about my Auntie Paddy when she was still trying to live independently.

#### Visiting Auntie Paddy in Rumney, Cardiff

Ring the bell,  
    ring again.  
        Again.  
Knock the door,  
    knock again.  
        Knock.  
            Knock.  
                Knock again.  
and fair dos  
        after a long delay...  
                ...using the safety chain...  
                        ...she opens the  
door.

Will she recognise me?

Will she?

Will she recognise me,  
her niece?

Her nice niece?

She has two.

She has two nieces.

She has two nice nieces.

Two.

Two.

Two nieces and they are nice.

Two nice nieces.

Will she look at me?

Will she recognise me?

Will she recognise me?

Will she recognise me today?

But she does.

She recognises me.

'I have a cold. Don't come too close.'

Cough, sneeze snuffle.

'I have a cold. Don't come too close.'

Sniff.

'I have a cold. Don't come too close.'

Symptoms vanish with each repetition

we smile.

'Undo the chain Auntie Paddy  
and then we can have a hug.'

Unchained, we embrace.

'I have a cold. Don't come too close.'

We hold each other,  
my bulk absorbs her frailty.

Aunty Paddy is not Gracie, but I have written poems about her and she had a profound effect on my attitudes towards children, old age and being present. Paddy was the catalyst for where Gracie came from. I was born in 1951, clearly born after the Second World War, but with parents who had recently lived through it in an area full of bomb sites. There was still rationing and I had to eat everything on my plate. Gracie raising her siblings seems very close to my childhood. The picture I have of Gracie's home life as a teenager is modelled on the illustrations by Janet Alhberg in the children's classic *Peepo!* with text by Allan Ahlberg. It's a cosy story, set in the 1940s of Dad on home leave, but the pictures echo my past. It helps me set the imagined Gracie in her own past.

Moving on from the characters in *Holding Baby*, the developing story line was becoming clearer. In the first draft Eva did not appear. She is the most explosive character in the play, but I decided that she should be excluded. In the earlier drafts of my MPhil play *Puccini's Little Women*, I decided that it should be only his women and not Puccini represented. In that case, deciding to set the play around Puccini's statue in the square in Lucca and then bringing the statue alive in the final act, brought sparks to the stage. Likewise in *Holding Baby* with Eva's arrival in Act Two, the stage sizzles. So why did I consider not allowing Eva in front of an audience in *Holding Baby*? I cannot answer that question. Perhaps by leaving her out in the first instance, I realised how important she was in the second draft and how having a great actor to interpret the role heightened the emotional tension. Jennie Burns was not available for the rehearsal period of the production at the University of Birmingham in October 2016, so it was taken by Ashleigh Aston who within a week of rehearsal time created a powerful impact, capturing the character in her interpretation. As Gary Longden noted in his *Behind the Arras* review:

'... for me, the defining performance comes from Ashleigh Aston as junkie mother Eva. She blasts in, supercharged, into the deceptively languid first scene of the second act. Frenetic, irrational and disruptive, she careers through the second half, spitting venom and lies everywhere, in thrall to her all-consuming drug addiction.'

I have seven characters that represent different kinship care relationships. I have a back story and a voice for each of them. I have the setting of a doctor's waiting room. I know that I want Barbara to be left holding her granddaughter at the end of Act One. Why would Barbara be left with Tia Marie? Because Eva had overdosed. My earliest experience of someone overdosing came from a trip to Hove.

As a child, we sometimes went to Hove near Brighton for a couple of days holiday. We stayed in a Bed and Breakfast, a short walk from the seafront. On one of these days away, my Dad and I were going down to the sea and there was a man in a telephone box shooting up. I must have been less than ten years old. My father walked me past very quickly and I have no memory of any discussion or explanation later. However, I can still see the grey shaking skeleton of that man today. Later in the 1970s as a student in London, I had opportunities to dabble in illegal drugs and I never did, but my imagined Eva became the person in that phone box.

I knew I wanted to show that grandparents can believe that their caring responsibilities to their grandchildren are going to be short term, but very often they are not. So Act Two is set two years on. I know from our own experience that kinship care self-help groups seem a good idea, but they are difficult to get people to attend. The obvious development was to show a self-help group where no one turns up.

At this point, I have back stories, a phone box, a waiting room where a grandparent gets given a baby and she still has a baby two years later. The problem now is how to show a baby and then a toddler on stage. Obviously to have the real thing was not a possibility. Then you think of puppets perhaps. As someone who ran a puppet theatre company for a short time in the 1970s

(J&J Puppets produced personalised performances for children's parties) I know how difficult it is to do this convincingly without special expertise and puppets made for the purpose. I would like to say here that I had a clear idea about performance style, but I didn't. The clarity in production values came with the first full production that I directed after I was puzzled by some of the decisions that were made before by director Tina Hoffman at the mac rehearsed reading. We decided from the beginning that mime should be used as a way of communicating and that there would be no props. I was puzzled that phones were not mimed (pretending to hold one to the ear), but the lines were just said. Little shoe boxes appeared with baby clothes that did not make sense to me in terms of the production values. Mime should mean mime or there should be props. This was a rehearsed reading, not a full production, but I felt that there needed to be some consistency.

Afterwards, I was talking to one of my daughters about my concerns and she said that if I was not happy, then I would need to direct the play myself, which I did, both for the 14th/15th October 2016 production in the University Chaplaincy, part of the Book To The Future Festival and the Conference production on 12th May, 2017. More on the productions later in this thesis.

Mime can be convincing in the right hands and in my undergraduate days at Wolverhampton we often worked using literal mime. Mime is remarkably cheap - no props to buy, though it needs expert actors. My first inclination was not to have any representation of the baby and toddler at all. I discussed this at great length with actor Bharti Patel. She pointed out that without a physical presence on stage, the audience would only be aware of the character when someone was miming cuddling, changing a nappy or was in contact with the child in some way. Around this time, I realised that there could be a pram that connected all three generations of mothers. Barbara could have a Silver Cross pram for her children that Gracie pushed when helping out and that same pram could have been passed on to Eva for baby Tia. Two years later the Silver Cross could be replaced by a modern buggy for a toddler. We had a buggy for our grandson and this could be for Tia the toddler. I found an old and

crumbling Silver Cross on eBay and we had a jolly day going from Birmingham to rural Sussex to pick it up.

The pram and the buggy, I believe, become the iconic images of the play. They initiate the action and drive the narrative on. These wheels cocoon Tia, our principal character, whose safety is the key driving force of the action throughout.

But what to put in the pram and the buggy was the next big decision. Bharti Patel said we need the child to be ever present and she was right. The play was going to be performed at some point, I was determined that was going to happen before I wrote it. From years of producing and directing school productions and teaching A Level Performing Arts, I know that less is more, so the baby and the toddler were born out of two rolled up black bath mats for the October 2016 performance (referred to by Gary Longden in his review as 'rolls of carpet'), but in the May 2017 production we used padded red towels. So in both full performances we had a baby in a Silver Cross pram and a Toddler in a buggy. This completed the casting. The only negative comment from an audience member came after the October 2016 production suggesting we should buy some dollies to play the parts.

Then came the months of writing the script. By the production in May 2017, the script had seen nine drafts. This is the draft that is presented here, because a play is only a play when it is produced and though earlier editions might make a better read (though I doubt that they do) a script that has seen the vigour of being produced must be the one that is judged. The nuance of changes made and the reasons for each change are numerous. Decisions have been made from moment to moment. I will address some of them in an appraisal of *Holding Baby's* four outings and exposure to an audience: the reading at the P Cafe, the rehearsed reading at the mac and then the two productions. I managed to gather a cast of professional actors for a day in January 2016. Jenny Stokes took on the role of Gracie and has done it ever since in each of the performances. We had a small invited audience. We read through the play in the morning to clear up any ambiguity that the actors might highlight, then sandwiches and cake, before the read through in the



afternoon. It went well, the small audience were appreciative, but more importantly for me, it was a learning curve with copious notes. There had been an early reading of the opening of the play in a seminar session and one of my PhD colleagues said that Barbara had been too complacent with the arrival of a Silver Cross pram, a Silver Cross pram that she realises was her own, then the realisation that one of the women was her mother and the baby, her granddaughter. She needed to be very confused, upset and angry. More emotion needed to be present in the script. She was right, so I had worked on that before the reading.

For the rehearsed reading we had two days rehearsal with a performance in the evening at the Hexagon Theatre at the Mac. I asked Tina Hoffman to direct. She directed my successful *Messy Jessie* children's play at the The Blue Orange two Christmas's earlier. Tina has a background as a director and performer in performance art and I knew that she would bring something original to the work. She did and I just was not ready for it. In the draft that was produced in Act Two, we had a dead Gracie and DG in the audience discussing the action on the stage. This was supposed to be on video, but we did not have the resources for that, so sitting in the audience it had to be. At the last minute it occurred to us that one actor was playing the parts of both DG and Maria (the daughter was Amber at this time, before that character's name was changed to the more Catholic name of Maria), but one actor could not play Maria on stage, but DG in the audience. So it happened that at the rehearsed reading, we had the dead Gracie in the audience talking to herself without DG, because the actor was playing her daughter on stage. Doubling up did not work without the use of video. In the performance, something also went wrong with the sound and the dead Gracie was much louder than the actors on stage. So, the Act Two was rather odd, because of these strange noisy pronouncements from the audience from a dead character who appeared to be talking to herself. As I pointed out earlier, it was clear that having action on screen was not going to happen and by trying to replicate that without technology was farcical. In the full performances, I wrote a short monologue for Gracie to start the second act. By that time the T shirt costumes had

become a part of the design style. Each character had a black T shirt that suited their character. For instance, Eva had a long sleeved T Shirt so that she could use the sleeves to cover tramlines on her arms. Each character had their name printed in white across their chest in comic sans (a font used in schools - the child link seemed appropriate). In the full productions, in the speech where Gracie decides that it is time to die, she takes off the black T shirt to reveal a white one. Young drama students from Solihull College came to the October 2016 production and were very moved by Gracie's death and the removal of the T shirt. After the rehearsed reading, sadly the conversation between the dead Gracie and DG was binned along with any idea of having video input.

The keenest influences on my approach to theatre has been coloured by sitting in many audiences. Seeing the iconic 1970 version of Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a young Ben Kingsley and Frances de la Tour and Peter Hall's production of Pinter's *Homecoming* in 1973 with Vivien Merchant gave me an understanding of the power of theatre. As did an ensemble production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at the Young Vic where I stood next to Vanessa Redgrave who was drinking milk in the coffee bar. *Endgame* at the Royal Court was a revelation, confirmed by appearing as a character in Becket's *Act Without Words* in someone's back garden in St David's in Pembrokeshire. The list covers fifty years and I remember *Frida Kahlo* and *The Singing Butcher of Koblenz* at the Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton; David Eldridge's *Festen* and Bryony Lavery's *Frozen*, Douglas Maxwell's *Mothership* at Birmingham Rep and anything that uses Comedy del Arte to tell a story.

As regard the development of my script, it could be argued that the rehearsed reading draft could have been presented for the PhD, because it does not need to be produced. However, this denies the journey of *Holding Baby* and the profound influence that the productions have had on its development.

After the rehearsed reading I returned to the script and edited it removing some odd repetition, particularly from Gracie's speeches. With Alzheimers sufferers often repeating and repeating and repeating themselves, I had to be careful to be seen to this recognise it as a piece of fiction; I had to make sure that repetition was used, but not to exhaust it.

The opportunity came for a full production earlier than I thought. Each year the University of Birmingham's Alumni Department run the Book To The Future Festival. I have been involved running workshops and talks about various topics. Just after the rehearsed reading I was approached about the Festival in October 2016. What would I like to offer for this event? There was only one thing and that was a full production of *Holding Baby*.

I had to decide about who should direct the play and I decided that I knew the script well, that I was an experienced director and that I should do it. Steve Waters writes about the playwright as an outsider in *The Secret Life Of Plays*

'Picture the first day of rehearsals. The actors slope in, reacquaint themselves with each other. The director works the room, armed with anecdotes. The stage manager gets the coffees in. The lighting designer sits impassively during the read-through, doodling and anticipating problems. The set designer tinkers with a box model and gossips about the show that's going tits-up down the road. And there, sitting in the corner with manuscript, thermos flask and pencil, is the playwright, seemingly entirely superfluous.' (p182)

I felt like the outsider during the rehearsed reading. On each of the play's outings I have demanded of myself to have a professional cast. This play does not have an amateur script. The terms professional and amateur are arbitrary, but I mean that I want trained and experienced actors to interpret it. I believe that *Holding Baby* is a complex story. It could very well be performed by experienced amateur actors, but it needs a professional attitude to the work.

I am not a professional director as I have only directed young people in large groups and I have not directed for some years. I have never directed professional actors. However, I did teach A Level Performing Arts (for instance, *Waters Rising* an opera based on improvisation for a non-Eurocentric performance at the Centre For Alternative Technology) and I did direct many large scale school productions (*Our Day Out*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Grease* and many more). I have good communication skills and I know what I want.

Remembering my history in schools' productions, I realise that I did everything. I made set, costumes and marketing. I made rehearsal schedules and organised a few reluctant teachers to do front of house. And I directed, sometimes using material devised by the young people.

Steve Waters refers to David Mamet's contempt at being asked if playwriting is a collaborative endeavour. He replied that actors might work on his plays, he might work with others, but in the end play-making is the job of the playwright alone. So, I had decided that I would definitely have a cast of professional actors, but that I would direct. I also realised that with all the school productions I took responsibility for everything and that I would do so for *Holding Baby* too. I had already come up with the black named T shirt costume idea and that mime should be the considered acting style.

Finding a space for the October 2016 performances was very difficult for the Alumni office. I wanted two performances, one on Friday night for local people and one on Saturday afternoon for those coming some distance. We also needed rehearsal space from the previous Friday, with some of that time in the performance venue. The cost of the production was met by us, out of savings. The subject of the play is very dear to us, we felt sure it was a good investment. Eventually, the University Chaplaincy agreed to having us in St Francis Hall. We had to compete with the other demands on the space, but it proved to be just workable.

The hall is almost an inverted T shape. It is used for religious services and other events. Looking at the space, it suggested a performance in the round. The intimacy, with the action of the play so close to the audience, was spot on for our script. The space, a doctor's waiting room is an open and public space for everyone to wait to see the doctor, but in both acts it is a private space when the outside invades, making elements of a potboiler. We tried chairs around the edge of the performance space to denote that space, but also to represent a doctor's waiting room. However, the backs of the chairs formed a rigid barrier between the audience and the actors, dismissing the advantages of theatre in the round. We needed stools. The Ikea sale provided eight red stools for £3 each. They were ideal. A borrowed card table with a red

cloth provided a place for changing Tia's nappy and for the imagined magazines. A table that is usually used as an altar for Christian services became our receptionist's desk.

The colours for this production became red and black with touches of white. This was probably an unconscious decision that had its birth watching the productions of Debbie Isitt's Snarly Beasties' productions. The colours are evocative of the company's Punch and Judy production (1989) about domestic violence. I saw it at a very unhappy personal time and it moved me to action. It was entertaining, but so poignant. I knew the power of theatre, but this strengthened my resolve to use my writing to tell stories that need to be told. Debbie's further productions of *Femme Fatale* (1990) and *The Woman Who Cooked Her Husband* (1992) were also part of the small venue theatre tours and I watched mesmerised, as I was front of house at the old black box theatre at Wolverhampton Polytechnic. Snarling Beasties were heavily influenced by the dynamic work of Steven Berkoff. Their productions seemed like theatre meets film. The performances used physical theatre techniques. In *Punch and Judy*, the two characters became puppets using jerky movements with their fingers held together. They used a black and red deckchair to mimic a punch and Judy booth. It was a puppet show that sprang to life with violence. I suspect the design decision of using black and white came from the Snarling Beasties' use of colour.

Our intern Adaya Henry produced a sound track and acted as stage manager. Lighting was provided by kind friends as the University Drama Department was unable to provide suitable lighting because of an Open Day. Some recasting had to be organised, because of problems with actors' availability. Toni Midlane took on DG as a Romanian, making the daughter Maria, rather than Amber. Toni learnt some Romanian and perfected the accent. I was very impressed by her consummate mime skills. Barbara and Eva were also recast.

We had full houses for both the Friday evening performance and the Saturday afternoon one. We had 16 social workers from Birmingham Children's Services attend on the Friday. My partner had given a talk about kinship care

to them on the Wednesday before and he had persuaded them to attend. On Saturday, we had people coming from as far afield as Tunbridge Wells, London and North Yorkshire. Kim X. Smith, Assistant Head of Service, Fostering, PF, SGO and Connected Persons Assessment and Support Team had been in the audience on the Friday night and returned on the Saturday with her husband and son to see the play. She also asked if it was available for a performance as the keynote event for a social worker conference. I said yes it was.

Before moving on, let's have a quick look at the feedback given anonymously by the audiences over those two performances. The audience on the Friday night had 16 professional social workers. They came of their own free will outside work hours. The rest of the audience were a mix of kinship carers, drama students, theatre professionals, Book To The Future Festival supporters and the general public.

'A snapshot of family life - I loved the humanity.' 'So much resonance with my own experience.' 'Constant shifts towards the end - one never knew what might happen next.' 'Strong, powerful, changes of pace and emotion, impressive - I feel as though I've been through a wringer.' 'Love in abundance.' 'Excellent - an up to date production.' 'A true drama that illustrates a side of life that a lot of us never see.' 'The casting was great - really impressed with the acting.' 'It touched my heart.' 'You drew us into the characters with warmth and humour which supported us as an audience, the dramatic tension builds emotionally and has such resonance with everybody's experience as mother, daughter, grandchild, parent, professional.' 'It's very good to see a play about women's caring responsibilities - a rare experience - it brought tears to my eyes.' 'Would really like to see a touring production.' 'A Rollercoaster of a Play.' 'Well made Jan'. 'Some bits were painfully close to home.' 'Loved the richness of each character - everyone has had problems, but mostly we just see the facade.' 'An accurate observation of each person and the humour in sad situations were very true to life and one's vivid involvement in

the play.' 'A tour de force - well done. I completely forgot it wasn't real. I hope you get it on television. Deserves to be seen by a wider audience.'

The initial date for the conference was the end of January or the beginning of February, 2017, but it took until May 12th for it to happen. We had two offers of performance at the Space Theatre in London in February, but that did not give us enough time to gain funding, so we regretfully said no.

I recast three of the acting team. Many actors today are experienced at screen work, where a script can be learned in chunks. *Holding Baby* is a hefty script and actors need to be able to learn lines accurately. One actor had particular difficulty learning her lines and one of the others told her to just say anything. I was appalled to hear myself say, yes, just say anything. I am ashamed to admit that, but the 'show must go on' and that seemed to be the only way of getting a performance. I was able to give our intern Adaya Henry the part of Dr Abdullah, because of her eligibility and acting skill. The Stage Manager position was taken over by the highly experienced Vicki MacWinyers. I discovered in rehearsal that Vicki, in addition to many other things including knitter, is a professional drummer. Before each of the performances in October we had musicians to welcome the audience before the opening of the play. So I asked Vicki if she could play a bongo rhythm before Act One and then before the start of Act Two. The audience of over a hundred Birmingham social workers and social work students did not know they were watching a play. They were expecting the usual format for a conference. Tea, coffee and biscuits were there for their arrival and Vicki's rhythms called them to take their seats. It focused both audience and actors and sent a shiver down my spine of anticipation. It proved to be an efficient medium for training and professional development.

The performance was set for May 2017 and I had my dream cast. Jenny Stokes had joined the crew at the beginning with the original reading at the P Cafe. Over the life of the play, Jenny was discovering more layers in the character of Gracie. I wrote two monologues for the character. The first was for me to 'hear' Gracie's voice, but that one Jenny took and performed it at

monologue slams. The other newer one was for the opening of Act Two. This was very important for us to explore new depths of the character as she was before dementia struck. It helped us place Gracie at different stages of her life, though she is right at the end.

` I know I'm gaga. I know it. But I woke up this morning and I thought, not anymore. I think it's time, to go. They'll eventually remember me as I was. You know - with me marbles fully rolling. 'Cos I wasn't always a stupid old cow. You become invisible, except to those paid to put me in a chair. `

Ashleigh Aston returned to the team as Eva and Ellie Darrell joined as a Maeve. Ellie started our rehearsal week as a very exuberant Irish woman with an accent straight from Waterford. This was terrific, but by the time of the performance that had been tempered by not just passion, but a huge sensitivity. I watched in a supportive role as director. Dawn Butler was cast as Barbara. We were very taken with her at the auditions. She showed that she can act the ordinary woman on the bus, but she has amazing versatility too. As the protagonist, we have to see her journey from the shocked woman who has just popped into the doctors for a flu jab, to the confused grandmother-maybe-kinship-carer through to the second act of self-confidence, anger, control and inner knowledge (she understands her daughter's motivations).

Birmingham City University offered tremendous support. We had a drama studio for all our rehearsals. Baker Hall was a bright spacious venue for the performance in the round space with an excellent sound system. We all had free parking all week as did the audience and excellent facilities including a great canteen with fresh food at reasonable prices. But more importantly, everyone greeted us with interest and wanted to know about our work.

The performance at the conference was a joy from our point of view. We had our target audience of people who can make a real difference to children's lives and it went like a dream, performances were excellent and the timing spot on. Kim X Smith said of the day in an email to staff:

`The morning consisted of the dramatic theatre production "Holding Baby" and the afternoon a reflective discussion and a presentation of



Family and Friends guidance and the Birmingham story so far. There were just over 100 attendees including area social workers, adoption and fostering, early help, final year students, panel chairs and advisers to name but a few. It was a well-received day, people stayed behind to ask questions on a Friday afternoon! Hopefully it has helped raise the profile of family and friends carers and our work with them.'

There were 72 anonymous hand written post it note comments, all complimentary except one. Here are a few brief extracts.

'Sadness, sympathy, guilt.empathy.' 'Realistic.' 'Common situation that our connected carers/SGO have. I do feel it is important to consider this when making judgements.' 'Grandmother was emotionally torn, divided loyalties between love of her daughter and her granddaughter.' 'Carers need support, someone to babysit and to share feelings.' 'Stigma of Social Workers, communication links with all agencies, support networks essential.' 'Very realistic and relevant and made me reflect about my work with families and put myself in their position. Very clear about each persons' voice and action. Really good!' 'Very moving play. Shows the struggle that kinship carers face.' 'All safeguarding teams show have access to this production.' 'Reminder of the volume of things that happen that we professional don't see or would make assumptions about.'

Feedback was excellent, from praise for the story to the production values. but Rosemary Cherrington's on Facebook were particularly pleasing.

'Hello, I watched the production at BCU yesterday and I have to thank and congratulate you. As an Adoptee, Adopter, Foster Carer and Panel member I have attended many training and information events. None has ever got the point across like this did. Very thought provoking, emotional and honest. Well done!'

As one might expect, looking at the feedback from the October 2016 and the May 2017 performances, the audiences responses have concentrated on different things. For those who came in May 2017, they were there for work. They were not expecting a play at their conference, but generally they

responded as professionals viewing the plight of clients. Whereas in October 2016, however, the emotional response was greater. The play was about people like them.

## Chapter Six - Writing the Poems

As someone who has spent a life writing to help make sense of life, the play was not proving to be a cathartic process by mid-2016. I deny that I wrote the play for that reason, but I was expecting to feel some relief from angst by writing a play based on information gathered and reworked from the experience of others. I thought that by sharing, it would dissipate my anger at least and help us to move on. I believed, at the time, that the narratives in the play, had little or no pertinence to us as a family. As a poet, I, like the artist Ai Weiwei, 'use my art to feel the world'. Concentrating on playwriting meant that I had not written any poetry for some time and I missed it. I missed connecting and exploring my life situation through poetry. So I decided to write *Holding*. The collection was called *Refusal Of Form* initially, because when I write poetry, I have an idea that I will write a sonnet, but it always ends up without a recognised form at all. Many poets find that the structure of a recognised form can aid the creative process. I believe that this might happen, but in reality, I find it a hinderance. The original title *Refusal of Form*, though largely accurate (with the exception of the halibut structure), did not connect with the play and I felt that the two creative elements of the thesis should be seen to be related. Hence the change of title to *Holding*. This was more important than a reflection on how the poems were written.

The plan, at this point, was to write the play for public scrutiny and the poetry just for an audience that started with me, that then would be shared with others, but acknowledging both being part of this thesis. I perform my poetry as a matter of course as a former Birmingham Poet Laureate and I had an expectation that I would perform these poems at open mic spoken word nights in Birmingham. However, by performing the *Holding* poems, I would be laying my emotional home life open to an audience. This has proved to be difficult. In theory, I am happy to share my words both in performance as well as on the page, but to present my work in person (for some of the poems) needs nerves of steel. One such poem is 'Myth of Mummy.' As well as being a

difficult poem for me to read, it also shows how an emotional response can overturn structural intent.

The poets who have influenced my poetry the most have been the contemporary poets based in the West Midlands, who are regulars on the performance poet circuit. Here in Birmingham there are many poetry nights, notably, Apple and Snakes' *'Hit the Ode, 'Poetry Bites', 'Stirchley Speaks'* and *'Spoken Trend'*. Birmingham poets do publish their poetry in collections and pamphlets, but they reach their audience usually by performance. These performances can sometimes be accessed through YouTube. Pixievic, otherwise known as Vicki MacWinyer's has a print collection *Pixiekisses - a Journey through Love, Lust and Relationship*. The raw truth of her writing is one that I want to emulate. I want to use my narratives in a similar way, in both my poetry and my playwriting. Other notable poets whose approach to spoken word poetry I admire are Nina Lewis, Sean Colletti, Tian Sewell-Morgan, Kathy Gee, Jasmine Gardosi and Bohdan Piasecki. These poets move from the personal into a wider universal truth. We, the audience, recognise ourselves in their work. The poems in *Holding*, I believe can be understood generally by audiences. But that can only happen if they are shared. Currently, that jump from the page to performance to share our story, is still too raw.

Issues around motherhood are important to any exploration that I have of our circumstances. Being a mother and a grandmother are a profound part of my life. We spend time promoting the idea of 'mummy' to a small boy who misses his mother to his core. I wrote the double pantoum 'The Myth of Mummy' through anger. It has proved to be too painful to share in public performance. It started life as two pantoums, the first in the first person, and followed by the next one in the second person, both with ten line repetition, four lines in each of the five stanzas.

The first stanza uses the A, B, C, D pattern. The refusal of form or breakdown of the pantoum starts in the second stanza with the addition of a question mark after 'she loves me more than chocolate?' And then again in the third stanza with the addition of another question mark after 'she wants to be here?' Both imply that the writer does not believe the statements. In the fourth

stanza the pantoum pattern returns, but in the final stanza of the first pantoum, there is corruption again. Line H goes from 'doesn't turn up' to 'can come, but doesn't turn up' and line J from 'don't tell me she's coming...' to 'don't tell me she's close...'

In the second pantoum of the 'The Myth of Mummy', the first person 'I' is replaced by the third person 'he'. It mimics the first stanza of the first pantoum with the omission of 'chocolate' in the last line, line D. This pantoum then breaks out of the pattern, and the anger of the third person, the poet, lets rip accusations. The poem stutters to an end. The last line, standing alone, 'not the life she wants to lead', repeats a line from the seventh stanza (second in the second pantoum) finally emphasising and reflecting the tragedy of the birth mother. So the original form of the poem has been refused, because there has been more to say from the poet about what she sees as the myth of mummy. The Myth Of Mummy could be a performance minefield. Therefore it stays on the page.

A play, for me, is composed of many voices, but my poetry reflects a personal view point in just one voice. The characters in my plays though must reflect me, because I am the creator. Poetry and playwriting sit together as part of a similar process, even if they are very different in outcome. Again, in *The Secret Life Of Plays*, Steve Waters acknowledges the playwright as poet. He also connects the writing with illuminating the personal. He believes that

'yielding the poetic charge of a scene remains in the memory long after it has played out and seems as vividly real as experiences in our own lives.' (p200)

This is an acknowledgement that my motivation in writing plays and poetry may seem different to me, but they use a similar energy and creativity .

Everything I write I believe has a rhythm and I hear it in my head with an intonation that reminds me (when I think about it) of the Welsh Valleys or of my Mother and her sisters' speaking together. This reflects my spoken voice, too. I may not have a Welsh accent, but rather a London one with a cadence.

My mother's mother tongue was Welsh, not the guttural Welsh of North Wales, but the more lyrical cadences of South Wales, very like the Welsh

Valleys. When my Mother got together with her sister, they would gossip in Welsh and my cousin who learnt Welsh in school would quietly translate the scandal to us. As I spent my first 12 years in London, I have no Welsh accent, unfortunately. But, living with my mother and then in Merthyr Tydfil makes my spoken language rhythmic with Welsh speech patterns. I am aware of my voice and not just what I say, but how I say it. I don't knowingly roll Rs, or soften 'h' and 'f', but I have been known to lengthen vowels and 'sing song' spoken language. The prosody may be my own or a remembered rhythm, but I certainly do it knowingly in performance of my poetry. A poem I am happy to share in performance from *Holding* is *Anger* and the opening lines are an example of my English interpretation of Welsh when I perform it.

### Anger

Learning contained anger.

This is the whole poem.

I'll write it again.

Learning contained anger.

A slow burn.'

I do not roll Rs knowingly, but the R at the end of 'anger' is pronounced. The O in 'contained', 'whole', 'poem' and 'slow' will all be lengthened. It is also a poem that is open to a 'sing song' rhythm of speaking.

And there's the rub, I thought that I would be able to perform all the poems from the *Holding* collection. I often perform 'Circus', the first poem. This poem is safe to perform, because it is a declaration of life four years ago when I was determined not to allow abuse in my family. I have performed 'Play Centre' and I find I can perform this one, because it is my observations at a play centre. I always write poetry on subjects that are personal, but many of the other poems in the collection have repercussions, not for just me, but for the family and the ongoing disputes that rage.

There are four haibun in the collection: 'Chickenpox', 'The Visit', 'Square Eyes' and 'Inflatables'. The haibun is Japanese prosimetric form that combines prose and haiku. Matsuo Basho created this form in the 17th Century and his poems were often about his journeys in China. The subjects are often autobiographical and make a useful tool for my life writing. Often written in the first person, they offer a personal view. Haibun is now considered a recognised form in contemporary world literature. Its general opening of prose and the essence of a haiku to finish is not always strictly observed. Poets find freedom in its use. In *Stallion's Crag* by Ken Jones, the two styles of writing are revised through his Welsh journey. Here is the opening prose and haiku.

'The black tarmac strip comes to an end. The motor disappears back into the mountain silence. Down by the stream is a reception committee.

Three crows in a bare tree  
proclaim the meaning of life as usual  
I give them a wave.'

The prose section of the thesis offers the writer freedom to gather thoughts without restrictions on ideas, though tightly constructed. The haiku ending can put the prose into a context. For instance, 'Square Eyes' only makes sense if you watch *CBEEBIES* children's television and you are only likely to do that if you have a child to watch it with. The opening prose section tries to illuminate that experience to the reader or audience. The haiku acts as a follow on thought or summing up.

Most of the poems in *Holding* are in a free, open form. Usually this is not a decision by me, the writer, but one that comes out of the blue, out of the ether. This does not mean, however, that decisions about the words used are made casually. In 'Flapjack', a poem about our death and what happens to our charge when we go if he is still a child, I refer to ashes left after cremation as 'the' ashes, not 'our' ashes. This is not an omission or mistake. It is to confirm my belief that the ashes left after burning are just that, ashes. We lose our ownership after death.

How words appear on a page can be important in terms of understanding and to the aesthetic of presentation. Enjambment is helpful in the performance of poetry, in particular giving me cues of emphasis. In 'With Us', there is one line and then the first stanza proper with enjambment of five lines to give the impression of a stream of consciousness. There is a link to be made here with the monologues in *Holding Baby*. The last two lines of that stanza are

'She couldn't have given birth  
recently.'

On reading this in performance, a pause after 'birth', gives real emphasis to 'recently.'

In 'After Alan' lines are staggered and enjambed. Again this reflects a stream of consciousness (it was written quickly as a response to the awful news of Alan's sudden passing) and the shifting realisation of his death. It goes from acknowledging that we will die sometime and the need to sort things out because 'a boy can't be (carved up)'. The way the poem is written down reflects how it was written in waves of thought and it also makes it easy to perform. The rhythm is emphasised through enjambment. On the page there is a statement in the first stanza, that spreads to the second stanza and the tighter placement of lines until the final spread.

I returned to writing poetry when the play *Holding Baby* was near its final draft and it was making its way into a fully formed performance piece. The personal need to record our own journey was compulsive. The resulting seventy one poems were written over a period of twelve months, and were originally collected in the order they were written. Everyone of them reflects the complexity of our home situation. The final revised collection sorted into sections recognises the best, but all of the original seventy one were relevant to me, the poet. The original order of all seventy one poems was important to me, the poet, because I could track our personal history. For instance 'The Myth of Mummy' is followed by 'Childhood'. When I wrote 'Myth of Mummy' I realised that our grandson wanted to have his mother in his life and his mother wanted to be there for him, but was not able to take that role. My anger at this mismatch lead directly to 'Childhood', where I recognise every child's right to a



childhood. The new structure, however, has improved the accessibility for the reader and offers a more coherent journey through the collection. The poems speak for themselves and the personal history of their development is only important to me. Further explanation would have been needed for readers to have that insight. Using the poem 'We are home' as a framework to hang the collection on, emphasises the core truth for the myself, my partner and my grandson; we are home.

The poem 'Puerta Del Mogan' is an example of a poem excluded from the final cut that may seem out of context with the kinship care theme, but its exclusion has left me with some regret.

### **Puerta Del Mogan**

The harbour half hearted fortress,  
iced Viennetta blocks,  
wafer windows,  
dinky balconies  
and roof terraces  
hinted at by shades visible from the beach.  
The bougainvillaea and the purple  
jacaranda blossom  
from the tree  
on tree and ground  
and then the palms.  
Learn a new word irrigation.

The poem, written on holiday in Gran Canaria, describes the harbour at Puerta Del Mogan from a child's perspective. Our small grandson asked continuous questions. The buildings looked like a toy castle, reminiscent of the ice cream he sometimes has on visits to one of his other grandmothers. The toy town appeared 'dinky' like 'Playmobil'. The poem reflects how as kinship carers we revert to seeing, discussing and appreciating the world through a child's eyes.

On close inspection of the planting, we saw a suspicion of hose pipe shapes. We adults know the word 'irrigation', but the garden watering system was new to our small boy. The poem is about his perception of the same. I could have written down verbatim our conversation as in 'Jetpack'. This would have been difficult, because we were concentrating on discovering this area, so different from home. 'Puerta Del Mogan' became an aide memoir for me, taking me back to a great holiday, but also to the constant learning that goes on for carer and cared for in a kinship care relationship. 'Puerta Del Mogan' is a snap shot and the context could have been described differently, but my intention was met by its brevity. This poem is about good parenting. We, as kinship carers, aim to be good parents. Our role is not just as 'babysitter'. We are committed fully both at home and on holiday to support our grandson in all areas of his development as good parents.

The extent to which the poet adds detail and explanation to their poems is a constant internal dialogue for them. Performance poets often use their open mic time talking about a poem, putting it in context. This may lead to giving so much information there is no point in performing it. Knowing where a poem 'sits' can be helpful to understanding, but the essence of the words should stand on their own. Every poem on the page and in performance will evoke different understanding and interpretation for each reader and/or member of the audience.

'Puerta Del Mogan' will have a future. It will be a poem that works well in performance without the difficulties of some of the more personal poems. Some of it may also be used, with the words from other poems written as part of the *Holding* project, as lyrics when developing a musical version of *Holding Baby*.

## Chapter Seven - The Relationship Between the Script of *Holding Baby* and the Poetry Collection *Holding*

Taking over directing the play in October 2016, I really began to realise how much of our personal story it contains. The storylines are imagined, but there are odd snippets of dialogue that throw me back in time to a situation at home. In Act Two of *Holding Baby*, Maeve tells Barbara how her niece asks Maeve if she was in her tummy and that she has to tell her niece that she wasn't. This is directly related to a home situation. Our cared for grandson stated that he had been in my tummy. I had not realised that I had stolen it from our lives, but I had. That scenario is in both in the play and in the poem.

There is a very clear relationship between the play and the poems for me, echoes that ricochet from one to the other and now for me, though they are separate, they sit together as two halves of the same five years of being a kinship carer.

The rhythms in the language I write in and that Welsh lilt that I detect in how I use language is common to both the play and the poetry writing. This has been discussed in the journey of the play, but here a two small examples of that close tone used in both the play and the poetry.

**'Barbara** Well, hello to you, too.' (*Holding Baby*, p4)

'No, to not much.

No to dirty football shirt.' (*Holding*, p 115)

The 'voice' used in *Holding Baby* and *Holding*, I now recognise as being primarily my own.

This relationship may get closer. Working with actors who are trained in musical theatre, has made me consider rewriting *Holding Baby* as a musical. It is interesting to consider the recent development of *Calendar Girls* to *Calendar Girls the Musical*. One audience member for both productions said that having seen both, he would only go to a performance of the musical version again, because the music heightened the emotional impact. Audience members for

*Holding Baby* have had an emotional response. What if the impact could be even stronger with songs? And what if some of the libretto could use phrases from the poetry collection *Holding*, including 'Puerta Del Mogan'.

Work on the next stage of my project has already started. Danielle Saxon Reeves is an expert fretted instrument performer and teacher and a member of Dodici Corde. She is a fine musician and composer and we are collaborating on *Holding Baby the Musical*. Our first song together is 'Flu Jab Blues'. One of our ideas for development is taking 'The Myth of Mummy' poem from the collection and using that as the lyric for a heavy rock aria, maybe with a call and response motif.

I envisage that the poetry and the play will come together in providing material for this third, musical response to the kinship care theme. Working co-operatively has started confidently with shared attitudes to our subject and working practice. This is an exciting development for Danielle, myself and the *Holding Baby/Holding* story.

On reflection, *Holding Baby* and *Holding* are a hybrid text. They are two parts of the same thing. They exist together as part of the same whole piece of work. When I started work on the poetry collection, I realised that they were part of the same thing. But I believed they were quite separate responses to the kinship care challenge. It is only now that I can see that they fit together and, from the writer's point of view, quite seamlessly. The two elements of prose in script form and poetry combined together to make two sides of kinship care. They work together in both themes and the way they are written.

## Chapter Eight - Conclusion

The decision to develop the creative writing which formed the basis for the play, *Holding Baby* and the poetry collection *Holding* into a PhD was, I believe, the right one. What became a hybrid text of two pieces of related work and the critical commentary would not have been written as they have, without academic rigour.

Without the support of the University, it would have taken longer to get the play in production and the poetry into publication. The offer of taking part in the Book to the Future Festival in 2015 and the inclusion of senior social workers in the audience lead to *Holding Baby* being the keynote event of the Social Work Conference on 12th May 2017. Rosemary Sherrington's comment on Facebook

'...I have attended many training and information events. None has ever got the point across like this did.'

made all the work on this whole project worthwhile, because as well as reaching kinship carers, it also reached social workers and social work students. Reaching the targeted audience and for them to have appreciated and learnt from watching the play was extraordinary. The worth of the play will continue with further funding.

*Holding* will find an audience both on the page and also in performance. Currently attending evening performance poetry events is difficult because of health issues, but that will become an option with improvement in health and further consideration of the material. I do want to share this work in performance, but it will take time and distance for this to happen. Another way of taking the poems into performance, without confronting an audience, may be to video them for YouTube or other media site.

The processes that have been part of this PhD will lead the development of *Holding Baby the Musical*. We will be looking for development funding for this work. The Other Palace in Westminster, London, specialise in supporting fledgling musicals and we hope to get them on board. The play could also be adapted for television, film and/or radio.

Writing the story of *Holding Baby* as a novel could have had advantages for me as a kinship carer. The health issues that have proved difficult with the physicality of producing and directing the play would have been fewer and coping with home commitments with a partner who has health problems too may have been easier to cope with. A novel could have given wider and more complex narratives and may have reached a wider public. The writing of a novel may of course still be an option for the future.

At the beginning of the PhD process, my partner and I were active members of Grandparents Plus, the kinship care charity. Meeting kinship carers from around the UK was a sobering experience. We realised that we were very lucky in so many ways: financial security, fair health and family support. We heard many histories from others and I now wish that I had formalised their stories with permission to use them in publication or performance. I have had previous regrets from an earlier experience that I should have learnt from. As Writer in Residence at HMPYOI (now HMP) Swinfen Hall, I made a collection of young offenders' autobiographical writing, *My Life in 50 Words*. Some of them were dictated to me, because the inmate could not read or write. I did not ask for written permission from the young men. They were emotional and quite astounding in their clarity and the variety of ways they chose to use their 50 words. I collected a couple and realised I should get permissions, but the prison service is such that it is very difficult to keep track of people in the system, so I was never able to share their words.

However, if I had asked for permission to use kinship carers' stories, there may have been pressure to write a play verbatim. This would have given me less freedom and control of the material, and ultimately changed the story I wanted, urgently, to tell.

In the introduction, I mentioned *Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities* with its framework of support for the implementation of the Children Act 1989. This guidance is still not mandatory in the UK. In the West Midlands, there are some authorities, such as Wolverhampton, four time winner of the MJ Awards, who follow the guidance, but this is not the case throughout the West Midlands, nor the rest of the UK. I

hope that my work can help authorities to consider more support for kinship carers. I believe that will only come when the Government makes the Statutory Guidance mandatory. I hope that we have shone a light on kinship care for some social workers working in children's services. I hope this is the start for further audiences to enjoy the play and poetry whilst being entertained, and to learn more about grandparents like us who are raising grandchildren.

The journey of this hybrid text; *Holding Baby* the play and *Holding* the poetry collection; has been a profound and surprising one, as both continue to develop. I have no regrets in starting the PhD and the writing has benefitted from the rigour of the process. Thank you to The University of Birmingham.

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Over the past four years we have meet and listened to the stories of many grandparents who have become kinship carers. Thank you to all of them for doing a very difficult job. Sometimes we feel isolated and challenged by our lives, but when we hear other peoples' stories, we know that we are OK. I would like to say thank you to Sarah and David Dewey and their granddaughters for their support and friendship over the last four years.

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