

Sophia's Wounding

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Despite the turmoil, father uncharacteristically asked his five children to return and celebrate his eightieth birthday.

"If the only time you all gather is at my funeral, I won't enjoy it."

We assumed we would go to the beach house, built by grandfather and shared with cousins, and that his intention was to bring together my brother William and cousin Sophia to behave civilly at his birthday dinner, even if they chose to be at either end of the long kauri table.

There was general concern that father showed signs of deterioration, for which my sister, Phoebe, blamed William's book. Father avoided emotional matters where he could and we siblings were used to protecting him from unpleasant scenes. Sophia, however, insisted on dragging all the extended family into her fight with William.

So I was heading back home. 'Home'? That word slips out but 'home' once felt solid, before any comprehension that I would grow up and leave. If 'home' is now necessarily fractured, it is no longer the same thing.

And there was no prospect of my partner and children going with me to New Zealand, despite an aunt's unexpected help with my ticket. I wondered if Aunt Julia's assistance was for my having put up with a visit from her wounded and furious daughter, Sophia, but didn't ask. I took for granted Sophia and Aunt Julia would be included in father's birthday plans.

Even before that second novel, which created such a furore, my brother's writing made complicated reading for family.

Our childhood seemed not to include ways to speak directly about ourselves but William, my eldest brother, began publishing words and more words, drawing on that early era. At first it was entrancing to read something of what I recognised, yet those well polished sentences gagged my splutters of how it was for me. My sense of things was not formed in William's way and the structure he imposed became like bright and shaped stained glass put across an opening to a once hazy view. He drew on events we siblings shared, but in his telling of them the rest of us were excluded. All the same, some stories were a surprising gift, showing me what I'd not understood. And there was pride in my brother's skill. His work reflected well on us, until that second novel.

Although occasionally it's startlingly obvious memory has played a trick, what else can one do but trust it, especially if it's vivid?

As a child I once saw William bowling over arm with a stone, and hitting a distant tractor frame. He only threw that one.

When William aimed his stone, Sophia flung several in a frenzy and, while the others missed completely, one stone caught the tractor driver's head.

Our bewilderment over the uncomfortable mood between Sophia and William that evening was immediately eclipsed by fear. "Keep together," mother had said, and "William and Sophia are in charge until I come." Having hit a big Maori man on the head, we turned for home and ran. We knew about concussion. One boy at school failed to recover from rough play and mother was insistent we be careful of each other's heads.

William gave fierce instructions as we went in the gate, on what to say about our rushed return from the beach. Apart from that and further hissed orders in the night, we didn't discuss the incident, though tension remained high. Thinking back, surely it was obvious a plot had been cooked. We never agreed on one version.

Toby, the youngest, was not with us on the beach. It was because of his earache that we were out with Sophia and William in charge.

We were supposed to be gathering wood for a fire and keeping together – that was what mother said and repeated, only William and Sophia ran off together as soon as we got to the dunes.

"Don't dare follow us," Sophia shouted over her shoulder.

William used the incident in his second novel. It was altered, the consequences far worse.

By this stage pride in William's early fiction had become coloured by unease that he kept too close to what he knew.

“None of it’s proper fiction,” my sister Phoebe said, “he just feeds off lives around him. How is that imagination?” And that was before the second novel, and Sophia’s accusation of blood sucking. Could you say it was us, or that particular night, William was describing? In his version the older boy does not throw a single stone, only two girls are guilty. The outcome is different, never-the-less some details are based on Sophia. In the novel ‘Sarah’, who is a year older than the protagonist, seduces him. She is precocious and keeps on and on at the young man to play sexual games, to act out rituals of punishment and submission. One day he spansks her with her father’s slipper, as requested, then penetrates her. He is fourteen and Sarah, a neighbour in the novel, rather than a cousin, turns on him in hatred.

Sophia felt hideously exposed, exploited and outraged. Phoebe, eagerly and promptly drew me into the ferment.

Phoebe, who has taken on some of mother’s role as co-ordinator, was initially proud of William being a published author. For years, though she never had anything to say about the work itself, she let me know when his stories were appearing. His first novel was a different matter – we all heard of that. His second did not raise advance interest and none of my siblings attended the launch. I had to look hard in London bookshops, but in New Zealand his work was in any bookstore.

I hadn’t begun reading the book before Phoebe rang.

“How could William do this? It was all very well for you, presumably no one you know reads his books.” Though Phoebe couldn’t understand why, various reviews were largely favourable for a book likely to destroy the family. Sophia spoke of suing, she said.

Phoebe seemed more upset than I’d known her – even mother’s death provoked less.

It soon became difficult to think back to what I’d thought of my brother’s work before the commotion.

It wasn’t the first time he retrieved a forgotten incident. I wanted to be as free as William to create a history but his words put an indelible stamp on events, drawing out what I only sensed. Memories carried in smells and sounds became overridden by his version.

My younger brother, Toby, had little sympathy if I felt my past was stolen. “You don’t have verbal skill, Lizzy. Will has a real way with words. At least he can tell a story straight. You go sideways into any anecdote, with too many convolutions. And he is the one with power to get work published.”

As far back as I can recall, William's words mattered. Long before he wrote, we lived alongside, and having him to rely on became part of who I was. As did being replaced, when baby Toby came along. I tried to reach ahead and join the twins, but they didn't want me, except intermittently to play out matters between themselves. Time after time I was taken in, delighted for a day as one of them brushed my hair and put in her own clip, or took me on a bike to school before I had my own. I remained gullible, hopeful the attention wouldn't vanish overnight. It always did. I was a pawn only for brief skirmishes – the twins stayed close and shut me out of their shared bedroom. Mother was busy and father rarely at home before bedtime, so William's task was to read. I was a 'difficult sleeper' mother said, but I sank into the night with Will's words – it was the rhythm of his voice rolling over me – someone was there – it was safe to slip into shifting pictures. My big brother's stories, far from shaping consciousness back then, allowed me to flow, give up being alert and ease down to sleep.

It was only as an adult that William's words became a threat. Although it was the second novel which generated so much response, his earlier work had also affected us. We had ways of gathering to share pleasures and special occasions, which minimised differences, while Will's work emphasised them. If past harmony depended on restraint and keeping off certain subjects, William made a virtue of articulating the difficulties.

For me, living overseas, the family tended to remain a potential, distant cocoon, and belief in there being something to return to buoyed me before William stripped it and exposed it as self deception.

The first of his stories to challenge my illusions came out ten years ago. Once his ambivalence towards me was in print, I had to consider it.

The story drew on an event I can't remember, although I'd long been attached to a picture of it. I liked to hear how William ran away with me, before Toby's birth. In the photo, taken as father found us, I am sitting in a pram smiling at William. The camera captured the moment he realised he was caught. It was an honour that William, aged seven, chose me when he ran away after a fight with mother. He had put his finger in the twins' still warm birthday cake, leaving a big hole. Her anger was considerable and William decided to "show her". He ran away with me for company as he braved the world. Or so I thought for thirty years.

Mother told how she was too busy preparing the party to realise we'd vanished. She'd asked William to look after the baby and assumed that, in disgrace, he was behaving well. By the time she discovered we were missing, and not just walking around the block, mother had a houseful of girls,

and Father was summoned from work – an extremely rare event. William’s route was predictable and wasn’t hard to follow. “Lizzy hasn’t cried once,” William said quickly, and mother always put that in her account – it mattered that only she got a fright, while I sat unconcerned. Of course I wouldn’t cry, I thought as a child; I felt lucky to be included. I never doubted he was big enough to take good care of me.

In William’s story the boy, having read ‘Hansel and Gretel’, knew how to get even with a mother who favoured girls. He’d take the smallest and dump her. He’d had enough of his mother’s preoccupation with bows and frocks, she only wanted him quiet and clean, not disturbing doll playing sisters in party dresses. He knew how to get his revenge on her for hitting him – he knew what would hurt. His going wouldn’t upset her, but he’d take that silly baby in pink and leave her in the wood for wolves or witches. He’d drop pebbles and find his own way out but wouldn’t go home – not ever – not to live with sisters. He’d camp the night at the cub hut, then maybe move in with his friend. The boy in the story has nothing but contempt for the baby, who wouldn’t go to sleep and was easily knocked over; he was blamed for being too rough, when the stupid thing was feeble on her feet. Why did his mother expect gallantry of him? That is what she called it, when she meant looking after three younger ones, all girls. Everyone would have a better time without that wakeful baby who kept his mother busy and short tempered.

The story then goes on very differently. There is no rescuing father – no family joke with photo – the boy relents too late and goes back searching for the abandoned sister, only to find she’s gone. He has to live with his mother’s despair.

When I told William my understanding of that event he laughed. “Possibly your pretty picture has some truth. I quite liked your admiration and probably didn’t want to be all alone. I don’t remember much except getting back at mother.”

It was a Sunday, a year ago, when Sophia rang some weeks after Will’s second book was published. This was a first. We’d drifted apart, not that we had ever been close. We were just brought up together during holidays. However, she was central in the family scene back home. She liked to dominate and as the eldest grandchild, became queen of the old, colonial beach house grandfather left. He had collected all the wood for the building, although only as adults did we appreciate its fine rimu panelling and high kauri ceilings. When alive, mother took a central role in maintaining family holidays in that place. Sophia, unlike her, was not a quiet, self-effacing worker, although she still gathered family energetically. Now she was wounded, and stampeding towards all who should be loyal. That included me.

There was yet another special phone deal, not necessarily kind to those on the other end, and Sophia could speak for as long as she liked at a set rate. We were leaving to meet friends when she called, but there was no stopping her. How could William, whom she'd loved as a brother, mercilessly exploit her? Being an only child, who spent her time at home with intermittently over-adoring adults, she always had grand notions of the siblings she'd had if her mother had been less selfish. While Sophia was in full flood, I couldn't get in to say that brothers and sisters can be the cruellest – they know where to aim the blow.

Never-the-less it was embarrassing for her. We had all witnessed Sophia's titillation with punishment. It wasn't hard to recognise the excitement of her interest in boys being caned at school. She wanted details and asked too many questions, which obviously embarrassed William. When she could, Sophia used her power as eldest to smack younger cousins. That William, in his novel, made her prurient fascination explicitly sexual was uncomfortable, having myself been hauled over Sophia's knee for a spanking. Mostly she chose Toby. He was less likely to squeal, as that was the price he had to pay to be included with the "big ones". Sophia preferred bare buttocks but, back then, we wore almost no clothes through the summer.

I could not blame Sophia feeling exposed. All that was a long, long time ago and best left far behind and didn't stick to us as adult perversion. Undoubtedly there was general sexual interest in some of our games and in watching one another pee, but none of it was explicitly sexy. We weren't shaped up to recognise the specifically erotic. At least I wasn't; I hadn't much of a clue, and none of us knew if anything was going on between Sophia and William, until the novel opened up speculation.

That year of the stone, when William was fourteen, was the last time the five of us, plus cousins, spent the whole summer in the beach house. Although I didn't know it at the time, mother's cancer was diagnosed and, the following year, we were dispatched to various camps while she had treatment – none of it discussed.

My sympathy was with Sophia that William never once talked with her about what happened between the two of them. Suddenly, there for her to face, was William's completed version of events. She was involved – yet not included in any dialogue – just written up for all the world to see. And what if she didn't want to think about her past?

By this stage, she was refusing to speak to William ever again though sending angry letters – monologues. One of Sophia's reasons for ringing me was that she wanted William barred from our shared holiday house. I was one of eight owners, though I lived away. Sophia had greatly improved

its value by doubling the size of the orchard and getting in good gardeners; under her care, she insisted, the place was being properly maintained. But how could she find any peace there, if William could turn up as he pleased? Apparently he'd agreed to abide by a rota and wouldn't arrive without warning but, as he had little money, couldn't afford holidays elsewhere. "Sophia is wealthy enough to go anywhere, if she can't face going to the house after I've been in it," William apparently said to Phoebe. Sophia was livid – she'd done all the work for years and deserved support in banning William.

"Would she be satisfied if William removed the book from circulation and was publicly contrite?" my brother Toby asked. "She is the one insisting that Sarah character is herself." Toby was cross over my being absorbed in Sophia's outrage. Not that I was as entangled as Phoebe. Phoebe could speak of little else.

Both brothers were entirely unreliable at keeping contact, though I sometimes saw Toby. Father sent formal notes once a month, with a chronicle of events. Although as children the twins, Emma and Phoebe, tended to ignore me and liked pretending I didn't exist, after I moved away, Phoebe proved a faithful correspondent. I barely heard from Emma, who is something of a recluse, designing gardens for a living. She had a crisis after mother died. Sophia, in the special tone she and Phoebe often used for Emma, said, "it's all too much for poor Emma. She can't take any of this at all."

Phoebe took up what mother might have done and kept me in touch with news. She had done everything that was laid out before her – a debutante at eighteen, a diamond by nineteen and a husband on her twentieth birthday. "I want all the trimmings," Phoebe said, as tiny pearls were stitched onto her bridal train. A week before the wedding a coat was added to cover mother's flimsy floaty dress in case ooze from the suppurating breast showed through. She was dead three months later.

Phoebe soon said "it's all very well for you," in one of her repeated gripes that I could do as I pleased. "Someone had to give mother one proper wedding before she died."

When Phoebe began sending letters the pair of us managed well until Sophia introduced a major blip in our exchanges.

Though caught up I could not meet Phoebe's obsession. Why was she so set on having me as ally? Why did I have to fully agree with her over it, when we'd never truly been in agreement over anything much? Phoebe pushed me, demanding I be a full player in Sophia's supporting cast – and, once nothing less was acceptable, I could only disappoint.

Phoebe turned bitter. It wasn't just family who could see 'Sarah' was Sophia. Also it was mortifying if readers assumed the fictitious part was also true; it left Sophia subject to nasty speculation. I said it was a bit cool of William to make his hero innocent of throwing a stone and leaving the fatal deed entirely over to the females. Phoebe made no reply to that; perhaps she considered it too trivial.

Sophia, driven to clear her impeccable, good name, was writing "the truth" about herself and William.

"She can write the full truth can she?" Toby muttered, "Is that what she thinks Will tried to do? That Will claims the truth and yet told lies? Is she quite ignorant of all traditions of story telling?" Toby remained convinced novelists had the right to use any material in creating a story. "Just wait till he uses you as a character," I replied. "I wouldn't want to be in Sophia's position."

"But it wouldn't be you, Lizzy. Phoebe and Sophia, having taken up battle lines, expect you to join them; because they are dogmatic you shouldn't stop thinking for yourself. Don't lose sight of the actual novel – it's worth a re-read."

I felt torn. Phoebe could be mesmerising with certainties and severe with defection. To her I lacked principle and over-estimated my brothers, as I'd always done.

Occasionally I'd feel cross with William at home but at school was delighted to be associated with him. I was proud of his big feet and his inches over his classmates. By the time of the stone-throwing incident, although I had credit as his sister, William was no longer at my school. I still shared a bedroom with Toby and it was to his bed I crept when I had bad dreams, or a wet sheet.

Toby didn't usually make a fuss, so it was a disconcerting start to that evening when he began crying and holding his ears.

As father wasn't on holiday, he had the car to join us at weekends. We were at the beach with mother and were to have a barbeque for Phoebe and Emma's twelfth birthday. Mother didn't worry much over our bodies, an early night cured most things, but Toby rarely howled. There was no telephone at the beach house – "keep it a place to get away," father used to say, though he never stayed for long. There was no doctor at the beach, unless he was down on holiday, and the nearest small town was five miles away.

The twins were whining and William and Sophia impatient to be off so, finally, mother told us to gather wood as planned, even though the fire might have to be postponed if she couldn't get someone to be with Toby. In an unexpected yearning to stay home I offered to read to Toby, but

mother shooed me out. Sophia was given mother's watch and told to make sure we returned by seven-thirty, if she hadn't come to fetch us. In her solemn 'now-this-is-how-it-must-be-done' voice, she told us that William and Sophia were in charge and we must stay together. We didn't of course.

We were rolling down dunes when suddenly Sophia re-appeared, shrieking at us for not collecting wood.

She and William had brought none at all, and Sophia was "in one of her states". She'd always been temperamental but this summer was particularly volatile.

When William also went high pitched and bossy, I was scared. He could be organising but usually had the air of rock solid conviction. His commands did not rear up into querulous tones – something must be wrong. I wanted to go home!

As we moved uneasily along the darkening cliff top, to descend to our wood pile, we saw a man in a tractor drive up to our supply.

"Sneaking to steal our driftwood," Sophia hissed. "Stop him!" She picked up rocks, hurled wildly and missed.

"Aren't you supposed to be a man," she jeered at William, "can't you even do this?"

William stood awkwardly. I hated seeing him reduced.

Then he picked up one stone and tossed it uncertainly from hand to hand. Sophia grabbed another fist full and flung them with violent strength as William bowled his one stone at the tractor frame. One of Sophia's hit the man. She screamed at William, "Now you've killed him!"

In William's novel the protagonist feebly protests against any stone throwing. It is one of the girls who joins in taunting male weakness and bowls the wounding stone.

Two Maori men, previously out of sight at the cliff face, hurried back to the tractor. "Down," William whispered and we all dropped to our bellies behind sharp marram grass. I got cut, as usual.

The man hit on the head wasn't yet dead, but might be soon – "concussion is delayed" Sophia whispered, as if we didn't know already. The boy at school said he was fine, before sliding into oblivion which consumed him. Sophia knew of a girl who fell off a horse and never recovered. Sophia would always out do any of our news. Her horse riding 'friend' had been in a coma for five years. "Brain dead," Sophia declared emphatically, "so she wets her bed like Lizzy."

One of the men hurried to help the injured driver, the other looked up towards our hiding place and started running. We had a good start – it was a hard climb up. “Run!” yelled William, the moment the man could no longer have us in his sight if we stood up. We ran our fastest, which meant I was last.

I was the one who would be caught and blamed. And even though I'd be in jail, I could never ever tell on the others; I knew the code.

Tears of woe didn't help my speed but gave William his idea when we returned. “Lizzy's got earache too. She started crying like Toby and we all had to bring her back – you said to keep together.” “Quite right – good boy,” mother said, not asking why we were all breathless.

“We should stay here,” William said, “there are big boys on the dunes, using our firewood as target and throwing stones.”

“I wasn't scared of them,” Sophia added, “but we had to bring Lizzy back. She made a fuss.”

I was quickly put to bed and given medicine a neighbour had produced for Toby. The two of us were not allowed up for the bonfire the following night and kept from swimming for three days. We were later asked how many boys we'd seen, their ages, and whether they were local. “It is important to remember,” mother said, “a man was injured.”

During the night William had crept inside, where Toby and I were put in a room together next to mother, although usually we all slept out on the veranda, to tell me I'd seen four teenagers. We saw bikes against the fence – they must have come from town.

“It's not fair having the shortest legs,” I whispered. “Don't worry,” William replied, “you'll catch up and beat the twins.”

The beach house and all the children became mother's sole responsibility. The other adults disappeared, although they turned up, along with grandfather for a few days every Christmas. As far back as I could recall, cousins slept by age along the veranda. But the year of the stone we arrived to a partition. No one forewarned us, we just arrived and found it done. One end, we were told, was for us girls. I had to sleep with Sophia and the twins, like it or not. No more sleeping beside boy cousins and Toby, though they continued to be the ones I played with. For years we had run together into the river without clothes, now, suddenly, the boys were making a peephole through the partition.

The new division seemed to titillate the others but made me feel as if being born one sex had become a burden.

If mother seemed to be marking me to follow her, I began to look at her differently and with disgust. Why didn't she cover herself, I asked in irritation at her nakedness, though it was me who had climbed into her dry, big bed one night.

I was miserable in my new sleeping place. While Phoebe and Emma, stepping into puberty, were taking renewed interest in Sophia. It is possible that those three were grateful for separation and Sophia must have been menstruating. Though excluded from their talk, I could recognise they were beginning to speak as if all males were an entirely different and unpleasant species.

Unsurprisingly no one said anything about the stone throwing.

Perhaps William writes to make something of that unspoken life we lived.

There is no answer as to whether William would have tried to capture childhood had mother not died, but her absence from our lives marked out, as a lost era, that time when our days circled her. He says he wrote poetry through his teens, though no one knew. The short stories began the year after her death and the first novel came out twelve years later. He then gave up teaching to write full time, except for gardening to earn. By then his children were in their teens and his wife back working. They lived simply and didn't need much, William claimed. His wife sometimes told a different story. She often says how much she'd love to travel, but how would she ever get to London unless William managed a best seller?

Sophia was divorcing and wished to stay with me. I couldn't say no.

She rang saying she needed to get away. As if William driving her almost mad wasn't enough, now there was this divorce. I'd be a good person to visit since I was the only one in the family "who didn't believe in marriage". Hardly my position, but what could I do? She was in a state and making trouble. Her husband had little sympathy with the feud, although I knew Sophia implying William's persecution destroyed her marriage was not true, for she and her husband were living apart before the book came out. Never-the-less, the grievance against William was growing, egged on, it seemed, by Phoebe. "William should never have put Sophia in a book, not after what he'd done." According to Phoebe William had virtually raped Sophia on the beach that night. Sophia had made contact with a friend of a friend and intended to print her account of William's "sexual abuse". She blamed him for difficulties in her subsequent sex life, as well as for the divorce. She couldn't get William out of her head, she claimed.

Thankfully father didn't use a computer, as Sophia sent emails to all she could, including Williams's two children at University, accusing him of "sexual abuse". To me she called it rape. It was

impossible to get over what he'd done to her, she said. This was sticky muck. I, too, kept thinking of it. It held me taut and kept me sleepless.

I got into impotent rage on wakeful nights. At five in the morning, I would sort Sophia and William and return the family to peace.

Could this fight be worth half the energy it consumed in each of us?

Family rang for my birthday. First it was Toby's wife and I mentioned that Sophia was soon due, "Lucky you," was her reply. "Her mother's had a bellyful. Sophia's been staying with Aunt Julia for months."

It hadn't occurred to me to wonder how my aunt responded to her daughter's hurt and Phoebe had been surprisingly silent about it. However Toby's wife knew Aunt Julia's initial response – she read it in proof – this being William's concession to his greatest fan. This was news to me. "Come on, Julia's a cultural snob and adores having a successful nephew. She was raving over William's genius when she passed on her own signed copy to Sophia the day the book came out. Was she totally obtuse, or did she not begin to see any of the connection others recognise between the character and Sophia?"

"I never knew William and Julia saw anything of each other?"

"Why would you? You live away. Besides, even Sophia hadn't realised her mother was a regular reader of William's unpublished works and assumed he just used Julia's house as an occasional city base for meeting publishers."

Emma rang as soon as Toby's wife hung up. She had not read William's book, but I tried to draw her on Julia.

"I always found Julia cold despite her enthusiasms," I said.

"Me too, although she made an effort to be an aunt after mother died."

"She bought me my first shop dress, having decided my tomboy clothes were unsuitable for a funeral. She wanted me half way decent, not letting down the family. Otherwise she was pretty useless."

"Appearance is still important to Julia," Emma added, before shifting to her favourite topic of her four sons and I'd lost an opening to draw her on Julia marching her off to a psychiatrist, who outrageously recommended an institution. Emma ran away to an island instead, and never spoke of that episode, soon after Phoebe's marriage and mother's death.

When Phoebe rang an hour later, I wanted a friendly chat but Phoebe was conscripting – demanding full allegiance in a war I hadn't joined.

"Can't we discuss something else today?" I asked. For nearly twenty years the pair of us had been able to rely on a veneer of good will. Hurts had sunk like rocks beneath the ocean at full tide and we could move in surface water, keeping away from stony dangers to be there for each other.

Now she wanted what I couldn't give, we were back to hitting rocks.

"Sophia undoubtedly believes in her own rightness, but are her claims true?" I asked.

"How can you?" she shouted down the phone. "How many raped women have to be put on trial for their credibility before women stand together over this?"

"And when did you grow so ready to believe the worst of William without a fair hearing?" I yelled back.

"He simply says it's not Sophia in that damn book – that it's just a novel – but we can see it's her. Why do it? He'll lose everyone if he carries on doing this to people. And what about concern for father and Sophia's mother? They are old – it must be vile – this washing dirty linen in print. Wait till he tries exposing you, and selling copies to all your friends!" At that, she slammed down the phone!

"And have a happy birthday," I said to the dead receiver. But Phoebe was right: I wouldn't like anyone writing of my life. I would hate being looked at without the eyes of love. My adult life doesn't bear easy scrutiny, even for myself. I live with trepidation at being assessed and found wanting.

Unlike Emma and Phoebe I did not marry my first love. My current partner and father to our two children knew my brothers in New Zealand and arrived to stay with me on Will's recommendation.

He'd also met Sophia in New Zealand and did not think much of her supposedly good character, which she now asserts must be cleared. "This dubious claim of his 'sexual abuse' comes up nearly thirty years later. Will was also a minor. Hasn't she talked to a lawyer?"

And I had to agree with him Sophia was not one of the better people I knew. She was friendly only if I did exactly as she wanted. She wasn't used to being thwarted and, if opposed, any vestige of being a benevolent dictator evaporated.

I was uneasy at the prospect of her stay. Nevertheless she had a point. Why should writers claim absolute freedom, as if their words were only for human enlightenment? Surely they, if anyone, should know words have power and consequence?

After being on his best behaviour for four days, my partner interrupted Sophia's incessant talk. "That has to be enough on this subject. Will is also my friend and Lizzy's brother, you should consider that."

Sophia, silenced and flustered, turned to me for support. I blushed but hesitated to speak and she got up, leaving my carefully prepared meal.

I started to follow when my partner caught my hand, "Don't let her divide us so easily. She's managed to divide too many of your family already."

"How could you?" I muttered, "She is our guest."

"If you rush up, she'll have me added to the evil list. If you leave her, it's just conceivable she may be able to consider what I said."

"Of course she won't. You've put barricades across her relentless pursuit. She has nowhere to go but over you."

"She probably won't think about what I said, damn her. She can't think of anything except that she is right. But you have to realise my words were not unreasonable."

"She can't let her obsession go because you tell her to, anymore than I can go to sleep by telling myself to stop thinking."

"I can say I want another topic of conversation in my own house."

"Our house! And when did you become a conversation censor?"

I was still standing and he had me by the wrist, "are you going up?" he asked.

I was no longer sure.

"At least uncertainty is an improvement on being in her whirlwind. She is a powerful lady. Don't lose your own judgement or your love for William."

"If she is weeping upstairs, I should comfort her."

"The only comfort that will do is your complete agreement. Will writes fiction and never claims to have the whole truth – beware of those who do."

When I went to her room, Sophia was packing her bags. We talked and I tentatively suggested that at meals we keep off the subject of William. She stayed another six weeks, and attempted to restrict her focus on William for when we were alone. On one occasion she showed me letters from him. She'd written plenty but he'd deigned to make only two replies.

Dear Sophia,

I am sorry you are upset but this is not a story of your life and you are not 'Sarah'. As we both know there are certain, limited parallels and maybe that is more problematic than I foresaw. My difficulty

is that I have to keep close to what I know. I've tried writing more fanciful stuff and it doesn't ring true. I have only a small field to plough. I intend to keep writing and, as far as I know, will be reworking my own patch.

You are free to write stories but telling me my fiction is untrue does not make sense.

Although I drew on two incidents – perhaps expecting to explore something of them – so much is different.

I hope you are well and that any distress over this novel will pass.

The second letter was a tougher response.

When you wrote that you would never trust me or see me again I minded, but not very much.

However, I do care that you are set on taking as many of the family as you can to your side.

Emailing my children with your unbelievable assertions was cruel.

If you felt criticised by me through the 'Sarah' character, perhaps I should have been better prepared for that. But never for one moment did I think you were 'Sarah'.

I don't think of the past as yours or mine, though obviously I felt entitled to draw on aspects of it.

You claim it isn't fiction – then what is it? It certainly isn't biography.

I am sorry for your sake, as well as my own, that you can't let go whatever I unwittingly inflicted. I was not, as you insist, seeking to punish you. I was not interested to capture whatever there has been between us. If I was insufficiently careful, you have escalated the ill will and lost all sense of what actually went on when I was fourteen. Your emails show that you care only to attack me. Even when you aren't reinventing the truth entirely (yet not naming it fiction) you seem driven by a need to have everyone sympathise with you. I drew on experiences but the novel has rules of its own and, once started, moved beyond my deliberate direction. Furthermore, I leave readers to make of it what they will. Fortunately their thought is not under my control. Only the righteous want a seductive spell for others simply to 'believe' them.

I am not sure what you read into the novel. No two family members seem to have responded the same way; each picks out something different they recognise as 'real'. I accept there are problems for the rest of you, by my keeping close to what my senses and instincts know. If my work is doing anything, it's attempting to show richness in the everyday, which can be woven though not grabbed. It is your insisting you have hold of 'the truth' that I will not accept.

“William has it in for women,” Sophia declared, before I had half way digested his letters. “He has no feeling for them, no respect. Everyone says his female characters are weak. Fiona agrees with me.” I had no wish to reveal my shock: I assumed William’s wife to be supportive of his being a writer, despite the cost to herself.

Although I couldn’t quite make out what Sophia was telling me, I wouldn’t ask. She carried on with some anecdote of meeting his wife for lunch. Fiona arrived harassed and Sophia thought she’d aged. Over starters Fiona took the predictable line, Sophia should be moderate, and did the book really matter that much? Didn’t she, with her busy life, have better things to do than let William’s book preoccupy her? However, half way through her grilled fish, Fiona became upset: giving vent to anger at how she’d tolerated too much, for too long. At the end of the lunch Sophia said “we women must support each other,” and Fiona, bursting into tears, hugged her before rushing off to an appointment with a gynaecologist.

Perhaps Sophia had played her seductive victim role with such conviction that Fiona became spellbound, capable of forgetting it was her own husband being judged. This made me feel better about my own waverings.

No doubt Fiona came to herself later, shedding Sophia’s view to remember that William was a decent man and father to her children. I could not imagine she supported Sophia sending accusing emails to their children. Fiona was the mother I’d most enjoyed watching with her offspring: she made time for them and didn’t keep herself over busy, as our mother had done. William and Fiona saw a bit of Emma, who provided William with a generous income by overpaying him when he helped in her successful gardening business. If Will was between ideas, or in debt, he’d work for Emma, and Fiona never patronised her odd sister-in-law.

Sophia was on a crusade for my mind. However polite our exchanges, they were a battleground. She was set to find flaws in my ‘muddled’ position. Assault was not all done with a shriek, she was master of the choked voice and watery eyes. I was, too easily, moved by Sophia’s belief that a lesser person would, undoubtedly, have gone quite mad under such persecution. It took me weeks to register how readily tears would stop if she saw an opening for a verbal kick. She was the faster fighter and half defeated me with her utter certainty.

Toby was the family member I saw most. He lived for four years in Europe, and I liked his short, fierce wife. He still passes through London on occasions. I can hardly curl with him through troubled nights now, besides Toby has grown intimidatingly sharp, with a fine wit.

Just before I returned for father's birthday Toby, over for a conference, gave me his response to the book. Toby can be highly critical or pedantic over detail hiding an inability to grant his brother success. Not this time. "Sophia is a menace. She truly believes she is capable of writing a reply worth publishing. She always did have blunted sensibilities, along with arrogance to judge everything. Why doesn't she keep to her choir? At least there she can almost accept she isn't quite diva material."

For fifteen years we'd passed through the topic of William's short stories and first novel – backwards and forwards, exchanging sentences, passing the time. Toby and I could move over the subject without snarling but late into the night, I began to comprehend he got far more from William's work than I did. "He was writing of things I might recognise, never-the-less it seemed his fiction was making us aliens, not kin. I hear accurately enough to get by, but Will's tales began drawing me into attending to the workings of his very different understanding." As Toby moved on to the book's sentence constructions and shifts in tempo I'd never noticed I felt lost.

Father might want us all back for his birthday, but what was he making of William's work and our preoccupation with it? We were familiar with his disapproval of the trend towards 'spilling one's guts', which almost made him wish the Catholic Church had been able to keep confession in its restricted place.

He was little use to any of us when mother died and that remained a subject he could barely discuss. We grew used to protecting him from our troubles.

Sophia did not share our sibling view that father should be spared. "After all," Sophia said, "he was the head of the household when these events took place, he has some responsibility," although it was not obvious that he took up much authority at the time. Probably family life was important to him, even if his wife did all the cooking and cleaning for gatherings. He mostly was not around but warned us to value our connection to one another. Having seen bitter divorces and legal battles over estates at work, he knew good will dismantled fast and that mending proved far harder than the breaking of ties. On mother's death one of the few things he said was, "I hope you honour her by staying loyal to one another. She set great store by our getting on as a family."

What did he make of his only niece declaring war? And what had he made of some lurid content in the book which revisited an incident where his children lied? The man hit must have recovered, or we would have heard; bad news did well in that beach community. Guilt for that, along with much else, might be written in my bones but no details of the aftermath of the event remained. Our

story was accepted that youths on bikes had come down from town. Possibly back then the fact of the injured man being Maori reduced interest in finding the culprit.

Emma agreed to meet me and take me off to her mountain hut for a long weekend while I recovered from my flight.

"Is William feeding off us, or just feeding off his own history?" I asked. "Does it make sense to you that he keeps close to what he knows?"

"Not you too!" Emma said. "I brought you here for a restful interlude. Let's get one thing straight: I am glad he has done well, as that's what he wants to do, but I made a decision not to read him." Later as she sat with coffee and a cigarette watching the sun go down on the mountain she said, "There is nothing special in one's own limited vision, even so I chose self-protection. I prefer my memories kick started by the smell of sun on the mandarin trees. And sometimes that smell of mother's breath before she got too sick wafts by me. Let's leave Sophia and Will entirely out of it for a few days."

Since I wasn't especially fit, it was impossible to keep up with Emma, but our quiet evenings were magical. It seemed barely possible Phoebe and Emma were twins. Perhaps, as adults, they divided everything between them: Phoebe becoming twitchy and taking up airy gossip, Emma turning to solid earth.

I had felt I couldn't face being enclosed in family without my partner, but father was surprisingly insistent. He wanted me for a decent visit: "The others pass by all too quickly, or come with their new family padded about them. I hardly get to talk." It was news to me that he wanted to talk to any of his children; talking to us wasn't something he'd done.

By the time I arrived at his house, to everyone's astonishment, father had made his own arrangements for this celebration. He felt flush enough for a fling, he said, and was taking his five children to a favourite hotel. Sophia having organised the usual marquee for the beach house, didn't for a moment doubt the party included herself.

As I left London there had been a brief spell of frenzied emails, with Phoebe refusing to attend if William was there.

Father made the decision about a hotel while I was off the email circuit. Extravagance was out of character, he'd not taken any of us to a hotel before, and Sophia was distraught. Father had divided the family to leave her out, and Phoebe was letting her down by agreeing to come. Father rang Phoebe and said he wanted all his children, please, as there were family decisions to make.

This seemed too like a farewell. I had little idea what his dying might mean but was afraid I couldn't take a repeat of mother's death.

On my first day with him, father brought up the subject I'd decided not to introduce: "Unfortunate business, this, with Sophia. Not that I especially liked the novel. Still it's subtle, which is hardly Sophia's stance. She seems to have no inkling of our great capacity for self-deception. I've seen it all too often in nasty divorces and with religious bigots. The wrath of the righteous should never be inflamed – yet people flock to fuel it. Phoebe hasn't been a true friend to her cousin."

"Have you spoken to Sophia?"

"You can't talk with her over this. She's totally committed to being right and has forgotten how to listen. It wasn't ever her forte."

"But do you believe she has some right on her side?"

"All of us usually have a bit of right on our side."

"What does Aunt Julia say?"

"That her daughter is being very silly, though I doubt she says it clearly to Sophia's face. You have Julia to thank for sending Sophia to you – export the problem. Anyway, she thought London would give Sophia more to think about."

"It didn't work."

"I never had hopes it would. Sophia's not distracted once she's fixed her purpose. Julia calls in regularly. Occasionally she gets maudlin, wondering what she did wrong, convinced that if Sophia had had a sibling she'd have learnt she couldn't control everyone. Too late. Trouble is, a fight energises Sophia. She can keep up battles endlessly, unlike poor William. Determination may be Sophia's gift, but it's a dangerous asset."

Up at the hotel, father became more the patriarch than I'd ever known him. Physically he might be frail yet he presided. We'd usually seen him in family situations which the women ran. The men hovered at the edges, or went off in the boat.

The first evening, at dinner, he announced that we better give this dispute its due.

"Maybe you all have things to say. But I hope this won't stay our only topic of conversation. William's work might be interesting and, hopefully, going to get more so, however it is not masterpiece status, such that we could do no better than keep to it."

None of us had seen father like this – perhaps he didn't want us arguing over his corpse and would rather we did so now. It was unnerving.

"All I ask is that we share a civilised meal each evening. Politeness over a meal is possibly all we can manage but it's quite a lot. I'm sure, by day, you have energetic activities in mind which I can't join.

"You've all heard my dislike of this fashionable confessional literature – most of it is indulgent – but William has shown me some point in it. If he'd used his considerable talent writing the kind of book I prefer, no one would be publishing him. Whatever else, he has excelled and that invites envy. A pity his work has stirred upheaval, it might have generated a little reflected glory."

Family, he said, where he was broken in, remained important to him and he hoped the same for us.

"All that enthusiastic sexual bonding doesn't last long. People are damned difficult to stay beside. I disliked the utter loneliness after your mother died but my inability to adjust to anyone else proved I'd lost whatever flexibility I'd managed in my youth."

There was silence. We had never heard him use the word 'sexual'.

"It's a relief to splurge and have you here, to escape that family place. Of course, we couldn't afford anything else when you were small. Your mother, set on being part of the extended family, was pleasing herself and pleasing my father in maintaining the place. I'm grateful she outwitted my wishes for a small family, but after a day's work, you plus cousins were too much. Your mother claimed she never minded my absences – she had the big brood she wanted. She kept returning to her satisfaction that you had each other and when she was dying was pleased to have given you that."

"William started the divisiveness," burst out Phoebe.

"Whoever started it, Sophia, having unleashed her fury, can't get the satisfaction she is after. I can't accept William had no right to publish."

Emma, rather to everyone's amazement, muttered that Sophia should control herself, then turned on Phoebe to ask why she hadn't helped Sophia accept things. "No doubt it's your guilt for getting that guy on the head."

"But it was Sophia," I said.

"No, Phoebe bowled and hit; Sophia was a hopeless shot," William put in.

"I saw you bowl!" I said to William. But all the others, including Toby who wasn't even there, insisted it was Phoebe. William, they agreed, tried to stop them throwing stones.

"Phoebe picked up one saying 'since when were you king,' to William and sent off her good shot," Emma said.

I did remember Phoebe was better at bowling than William and quick to join Sophia that summer in jeering at the male species, yet I'd definitely seen William bowl that stone! I'd have sworn on oath.

Since the book came out Sophia had insisted she didn't throw a single stone, though we were all in agreement at her flinging fistfuls.

Phoebe started to cry, shrieking at Toby that that he was the reason we were out with no adults, how had he seen anything?

"Well I know Sophia was set on seducing William. She kept creeping in at night to the boys' end of the veranda. It's obscene this insistence that Will raped her."

Sex coming up a second time at a meal was less startling.

The lawyer in father intervened – "All that was thirty years ago – Sophia had recourse then to her mother, or the courts, if it was a serious matter. To bring it up as an accusation now is disreputable, especially after Julia tells me Sophia used to brag over having seduced four virgin males before she was sixteen."

If he discussed such matters with his sister, why had he never done so with us?

Phoebe carried on her defence, "William tried to stop us but did it stupidly, it simply encouraged us."

"Is it my fault for being fourteen?" William demanded.

"What happened to the guy? How long was he in hospital?"

"No, no," father said. "He went there just in case, but he was fine. I saw him before I joined you that weekend."

All five of us looked astonished. "You knew?"

"Did you expect to be invisible, rushing home in fear? Everyone at the beach knew you!

Neighbours spotted you dashing. Besides you were all far too well behaved next day. Your mother rang me from the store."

"Why the hell didn't you say?" burst from a furious Phoebe. "Why didn't you shout and punish? You were usually good at shouting. Do you have any idea how bad I felt?"

"I assumed you felt quite guilty enough, not that we knew which of you hit the jackpot. I spoke to the man and told him I'd bring you all to apologise. He said you must have thought he was taking your wood and were only aiming to warn him off. He believed it was entirely an accident that one got him. 'They got a fright,' he said, 'drop it.' When I came to the beach you were still being excessively good and the man was fine. I'd worked all week, why give myself another case for a verdict?"

"But you left us squirming!" I shouted. "And I was kept in bed with earache!" It was surprising how easily it slipped out, when it had been inconceivable before that I'd shout at father.

"Was I to be your conscience all your life? Perhaps I made a foolish decision and left too much to you, but my style was never to be an interfering father. I didn't realise half the sexual tension, though no one could miss that Sophia had grown uncomfortably over seductive with all men on the beach that year. I hadn't known that included William."

Emma said, "She made us promise to keep a secret, extracting endless favours before agreeing to tell that she'd had sex, with an uncle on her father's side."

"Now you've broken your word," Phoebe said tartly.

"Why not? Sophia was in a mess and who can blame her, but she is putting all her trouble at William's door. That can't be right."

William cut in, "Poor Sophia, I didn't know. I wouldn't have sex with her. I wasn't ready, or scared. She kept on and on and then started jeering at me."

"You slept with her!" Phoebe accused.

"How exactly would you know? Were you there? Whose word do you believe? Not mine obviously."

"Your words are not true. Why did you have to make the repercussions of that stone so terrible? I literally vomited when I read that bit. I didn't know if perhaps you'd written the truth. I never knew what happened to him and dared not ask. I can't believe you didn't let us know he wasn't damaged," she added to father. "It was the cruellest thing you could have done, leaving me in ignorance and silence. I wasn't just driven to be good just for one weekend. It was all very well for you, Lizzy, you didn't stay stuck in a dreary marriage. You didn't even try to do what was expected."

Then, with a final, "your silence has tortured me!" yelled at father, Phoebe fled the dining room.

There was an uncomfortably long pause before Emma got up to go to her twin and father spoke.

"Adults, convinced of their reasonableness, are too eager to shape what children should make of things. I thought you better left to make what sense you could of your own experience.

Probably reticence was unhelpful. Yet look how William's attempt to put words to something stirs such trouble between you."