

The Literary Benefits of Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity

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Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Leanne Radojkovich

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In her dissertation *Mulattas and Mestizas*, Suzanne Bost researched 'mixed identities – racial, cultural, gendered, linguistic, and national hybridity – because of the ways in which they challenge universalising notions of the individual and highlight the complexities of subjectivity. For writers of mixed identity, there is often no singular or fixed subjectivity...They retain the sites of friction where different racial, sexual, and national elements meet, forming sparks and sharp edges.'¹

Bosnian-born writer Sasa Stanisic who emigrated to Germany as a teenager, said: 'Moving without caution into a second language can lead to beautiful results, through direct translations of phrases and sayings, through structural transformations and rhythmical imitations and even neologisms inspired by the first language,'²

A Canadian of English and Protestant descent educated at French Catholic schools, Mavis Gallant said she left with 'two systems of behaviour, divided by syntax and tradition; two environments to consider...two codes of social behaviour...Somewhere in this duality may be the exact point of the beginning of writing.'³

The objective of this exegesis is to show how linguistic and cultural hybridity create a unique prose style, and how my stories sit within that style. I will use Grace Paley and Lucia Berlin to demonstrate the distinctive narrative techniques. These include the use of sensuous details (instead of descriptions) to make place and character palpable; dialogue that convincingly evokes living speech; plots which emanate from the characters, rather than the other way round; and open-ended resolutions,

¹ Bost, S.M. 1999. *Mulattas and Mestiza's: Mixed Identity in Women's Writing of the Americas, 1850-1996*. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, U.S.A., p.5.

² Stanisic, S. 2008. *Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany*. Words Without Borders – The online magazine for international literature. Retrieved 1 October 2009, [http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/...](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/)

³ Gallant, M. 2002. *Paris Stories*, New York Review Books, p.373.

as in real life. I will then show how I use these narrative techniques in my collection *Happiness and other stories*.

I was born in Frankton, Hamilton, in 1961. My father is from former-Yugoslavia and my mother is a New Zealander of Dalmatian descent. We had a fish shop in Frankton but travelled to Yugoslavia when I was a child. There I joined Tito's Young Pioneers. Then we returned to Hamilton and I started school when I was six years old. What an eerie experience - who were these Kiwi's? So calm, quiet, with no arguments. I was used to excitable, opinionated, political people.

My older sister was a book-addict. I read everything she brought into the house. By the time I was eleven, I was immersed in the world of Colette and Guy de Maupassant. Their fiction was so lively. I wanted to be in *their* world, but instead ended up in a local high school known as The Baby Factory, becoming a shorthand-typist, then a journalist. A wrist injury ended my career as a journalist. I became a tele-marketer, mailroom packer, teacher's aide, nanny.

A key step in finding my literary voice was reading Alice Thomas Ellis' novella *The 27th Kingdom*. I was struck by the story's vivid wit and melancholy, and by the socially mixed characters; a charwoman, a conman, and a middle-class bohemian. Like myself Ellis has a mixed identity - half-Finnish, half-Welsh, raised in England - yet writes about ordinary people in present-day England. However, origins have obliquely

conditioned her characters, as explained via her protagonist Aunt Irene whose ancestors:

'...were forced to leave their ancient estates and flee to the Ukraine. This had given them a taste for travel, and each generation had gone further and further away - to Lithuania and Austria and Turkey and Finland and places like that, or, as the story-tellers would have it, across 27 lands and 30 countries until they came to the 27th kingdom – and at last Aunt Irene had come to rest in Chelsea...[she] had no desire to visit the land of her fathers, which was now run by insensitive people in heavy overcoats and homburg hats, but she believed that her genes had somehow become imprinted with intangibles, that even her retina was designed to appreciate vast melancholy spaces and beautiful, strange artifacts.'⁴

Then I encountered Grace Paley and Lucia Berlin, also linguistic and cultural hybrids, whose story-telling model exactly matches my own writing aspirations. Their stories have the candour of memoir, they are emotionally resonant but not sentimental, there is little psychological comment. Yet their individual literary voices are so original.

August Kleinzahler writes: 'Berlin's literary model is Chekhov, but there are extra-literary models too, including the extended jazz solo, with its surges, convolutions, and asides.'⁵

Paley also writes in a kind of prickly conversational style. Best appreciated read aloud:

'I was popular in certain circles, says Aunt Rose. I wasn't no thinner then, only more stationary in the flesh, Lillie, don't be surprised – change is a fact of God. From this no one is excused. Only a person like your mama stands on one foot, she don't notice how big her behind is getting and sings in the canary's ear for thirty years.'⁶

⁴ Ellis, A.T. 1982. *The 27th Kingdom*, Penguin Books, p.7-8.

⁵ Kleinzahler, A. 2000. Put It Away Like A Good Girl, *The London Review of Books*, Vol 22, no 6.

⁶ Paley, G. 1980. *The Little Disturbances of Man*, Virago, p.7.

The youngest child of Russian immigrants to New York, Paley's perspective is refracted by three languages; Yiddish, Russian and English. She said: 'I've been surrounded by music for most of my life...But I think the most powerful sounds are those voices, those childhood voices. The tune of those voices. Other languages, Russian and Yiddish, coming up smack against the English.'⁷

Paley is also mixed in terms of class - her mother worked in sweatshops, and her father became a doctor. This complex linguistic, cultural and class background gives her an ability to present 'the swivelling light of truth'⁸ in her stories.

An American, Lucia Berlin grew up in mining camps, mostly in Chile, spending her adult years in Mexico and California. She spoke Spanish and English. She travelled up and down the 'class pole' - at different times being a Sears model, a switchboard operator, a nurse-aide, and a writing teacher at the University of Colorado. Her stories have a conversational improvised quality, similar to Paley's, as in this excerpt:

'Time stops when someone dies. Of course it stops for them, maybe, but for the mourners time runs amok. Death comes too soon. It forgets the tides, the days growing longer and shorter, the moon. It rips up the calendar. You aren't at your desk or on the subway or fixing dinner for the children. You're reading *People* in a surgery waiting room, or shivering outside on a balcony smoking all night long. You stare into space, sitting in your childhood bedroom with the globe on the desk. Persia, the Belgian Congo.'⁹

⁷ Paley, G. 1992. [Interview with Jonathan Dee, Barbara Jones and Larissa MacFarquhar] *The Paris Review*, The Art of Fiction No. 131, Issue 124. Retrieved October 2, 2008, from <http://www.theparisreview.org/media/2028PALEY.pdf>

⁸ Paley, G. 1979. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, Virago Press, p.135.

⁹ Berlin, L. 1991. *Where I Live Now*, Black Sparrow Press, p.211.

Her stories don't build to epiphanies in the way that, for example, James Joyce's do in *Dubliners*.¹⁰ Joyce's protagonists experience sudden life-changing revelations, whereas in Berlin's stories it's the *reader* who senses the climax. Her style corresponds with a narrative aesthetic Mike Johnson recently talked about at a NZSA meeting. In his view: 'It's the reader's shock and awareness that [should be] sought, rather than the awareness of the character - who cares about the character's revelations?'¹¹ I feel it's the reader's epiphany which helps create Berlin's lightness. As with Paley the reader is invited to imagine, or participate in the story.

Berlin and Paley's conversational stories, with their fragmented perspectives and resistance to closure, are invigorating. When asked what makes a story, Paley said:

'Well, you have to have movement, right? Some people call it plot. Plot is movement that is extremely deliberate. So I would say that I'm for movement, but I'm not for terribly deliberate movement. And at some point, you come to the end of what you have to say... Sometimes you like tying up the knot. Sometimes you leave it wide open, for people to imagine and to do what they want with it.'¹²

She didn't write stories with an end in mind, nor did Berlin. In a letter to August Kleinzahler, Berlin said: 'I have never given any thought to

¹⁰ Joyce, J. 1948. *The Essential James Joyce*, Alden Press, p.21-139.

¹¹ Johnson, M. 2008. New Zealand Society of Authors (Auckland Branch), Auckland University, February 1.

¹² Paley, G. 1998. [Interview with A.M. Homes]. *All My Habits Are Bad*, *Salon*. Retrieved February 2, 2009, from <http://www.salon/books/int/1998/10/26int>.

my writing. I get started, and then it's just like writing to you, only more legible.¹³

In *A Conversation with My Father*, Paley's character Faith (also a writer) is harangued by her old, sick father to write a story like Chekhov's:

'Just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next.' Faith thinks - I *would* like to try to tell such a story, if he means the kind that begins: "There was a woman..." followed by a plot, the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life.¹⁴

This buoyant sense of possibility gives her stories vitality. It avoids a key weakness in Ernest Hemingway's iceberg theory where, metaphorically, a story's power comes from what isn't said. Hemingway wrote: 'The dignity of movement of the iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.'¹⁵

However, I feel these secret drivers can deaden a character. A view also held by Kurt Vonnegut: 'Readers should have such a complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.'¹⁶

My first style decision for *Happiness and other stories* concerns quotation marks. Annoying as frills on a t-shirt. The world of grammar is

¹³ Kleinzahler, A. 2005. Love Lucia, *The London Review of Books*, Vol 27, no 15.

¹⁴ Paley, G. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p.159-167.

¹⁵ Hemingway, E. 1932. *Death In The Afternoon*, Scribner's, p.192.

¹⁶ Vonnegut, K. 1999. *Bagombo snuff box – uncollected short fiction*, J. Cape, p 10.

divided into 'berks and wankers', according to Kingsley Amis,¹⁷ those who are either careless or hidebound. I didn't want to be either of these, but I did want to get rid of those annoying marks. After all, David Peace has successfully cut ties with the full-stop, ending paragraphs with dashes. Author and reviewer James Meek calls this: 'A device that works surprisingly well to capture the arbitrariness of discourse, and lends more immediacy to narrative than the bogus now!-ness of the present tense.'¹⁸

In fact, Meek doesn't use quotation marks in his short story collection *The Museum of Doubt*, although they are used in his prize-winning novel *The People's Act of Love*.

Grace Paley sometimes dispenses with quotation marks, too. 'Who has the time and energy to type quotation marks?' she told an interviewer.¹⁹

Out they went. The resulting read was quicker, more intense.

The title story *Happiness* is about a waitress/warehouse stacker called April, and her eccentric friend Jarrod. Jarrod is a mentally unwell artist on a sickness benefit: 'he was shaky, slid away from attention. Holly had said he didn't smoke because everyone would see his hands trembling'.

¹⁷ Amis, K. 1998. *The King's English: a guide to modern usage*, St Martin's Press, p.23.

¹⁸ Meek, J. 2009. Polly the Bleeding Parrot, *London Review of Books*, Vol 31, no 15.

¹⁹ Silman, R. 2008. The swivelling light of truth, *American Scholar*, Autumn.

The draft was written 'blind' in 500-word spurts. Marguerite Duras has beautifully described this strange act of creation: 'It's a matter of deciphering something already there, something you've already done in the sleep of your life, in its organic rumination, unbeknown to you.'²⁰

Eager for adventure April moves to the city and works for a food importer, becoming his lover. When the affair ends, she returns up north and resumes her old job. She is a matter-of-fact person, as in this extract when she decides to: 'go back waitressing for Snapper Tom. She'd tell him about the champagne vinegar and pickled walnuts and he'd laugh out his arse because all anyone wanted at his place were steakchickenfish and chips. Salad as a side.'

This apparent casualness is poignant considering her meagre options; and is an attitude found in the stories of both Paley and Berlin. In Berlin's *The Adobe House with a Tin Roof*, Maya's neighbours:

'...played gin rummy and drank. When they finished a quart of beer, often, they would bang open the door and toss the empty bottles into Frances' shopping cart. When they had to pee, they just peed outside the door, then banged it shut again. Frances squatted outside and splashed, singing, "Pretty little fellow, everybody knows...Don't know what to call him but he's mighty lak a rose!" There was nowhere in the house Maya could go and not hear them.'²¹

After a night-shift at Snapper Tom's', April meets up with Jarrod again and they become close, even though:

'Jarrod wasn't someone you went out with, being jangly in the head. He was gentle, though. And he liked skin. Plus, April had a memory of her own. She'd once let him stroke her arm. He'd concentrated -

²⁰ Duras, M. 1990. *Practicalities*, Flamingo, p.25.

²¹ Berlin, L. 1990. *Homesick: New and Selected Stories*, Black Sparrow Press, p.130.

weird, intense – her arm had flashed with heat. Then he had looked up with perfect awe, and a particle of something she couldn't name had melted deep inside of her.'

Direct sensuous details make April's life and emotions palpable in the same way that Paley, in *A Subject of Childhood*, makes Faith's situation palpable. Faith's young son places his open hand across her chest:

'But the sun in its course emerged from among the water towers of downtown office buildings and suddenly shone white and bright on me. Then through the short fat fingers of my son, interred forever, like a black and white barred king in Alcatraz, my heart lit up in stripes.'²²

The narrator in my story *Roots* is the son of early Dalmatian immigrants. I read Amelia Batistich's short story collection *An Olive Tree in Dalmatia* in order to get a feel for the narrator's childhood. However, Yugo-stalgia kicked in. Hard to avoid when I have been marinated in the same ethnic background. There is a cult-like narcosis involved in looking back, with 'the gusla playing, and the singing of the songs of *Kraljevich Marko* and *Kosovo*²³ and the Turkish *Begs*.²⁴ I wanted to keep *Roots* free of the past's deadening influence, as shown in the following mother-daughter extract from Batistich's *The Gusla*:

' "Please don't smoke in front of the old lady. I would be ashamed. *Baba Manda*'s granddaughter smoking like a man – she is from our village."

²² Paley, G. *The Little Disturbances of Man*, p.145.

²³ Forty verses about the Ottoman defeat of the Serbs in 1389.

²⁴ Batistich, A. 1963. *An Olive Tree in Dalmatia*, Paul's Book Arcade, p.64.

Fifty years of New Zealand had not washed out [the village] Zaoztrog, Stella thought. And I don't want it washed out either! I want to keep it.²⁵

One Batistich story that resonated was *A Dalmatian Woman*. In this an immigrant, by analogy, plants *herself* in the new country as she goes along furrows of earth pressing in potato seeds. She is not looking back; she is firmly in the present moment.

Nevertheless, my narrator in *Roots* was not developing even though I continued to have feelings for him. I tried placing him in the Depression-era New Zealand of rural poverty and swagmen...and he burst into life. He escapes the farm, eventually becoming a car salesman in Invercargill. He says:

'Every penny was important back then. Clothes were patched, and patched again. Swaggers turned up wanting to work for a bit of food. They'd whistle up the path, swinging a billy can, scattering the mob of chooks hanging around for scraps.'

His voice was right, but I wondered if there was a lack of tension in the story. I created an extra character, his daughter. That didn't work. Then I created more front story via friendship with a nurse. That failed too. Stuck, I went to a talk C.K. Stead gave about the development of his writing. He spoke about economy of words: 'Use ten rather than 20 to convey content, or 20 rather than 40, and then those ten or 20 words work harder, and gain a kind of radioactivity.'²⁶

I applied this idea to *Roots* and realised the narrator is talking *directly* to the reader. There is no narrative mediation in that relationship. I

²⁵ Batistich, A. *An Olive Tree in Dalmatia*, p.147.

²⁶ Stead, C.K. 2009. Auckland Art Gallery, July 13.

stripped back the daughter and the nurse, and the ending fell into place.

The narrator unexpectedly meets his brother, who tells him of their mother's death years earlier:

'I just stood there. All my money and I'd never thought to help her.

I went back out and sat in the car. Bawled my eyes out. It was even worse than when Doris died. I'd been a good husband. No regrets there. But I'd been a shit of a son. Can't change it.

When Mum and I used to work amongst the silverbeet and tomatoes, it was so quiet. If a bird flew past you'd hear each wingbeat snip the air. After a while she'd start humming, and the sound would settle under my skin.'

This, the narrator's most vivid memory of his mother, gives *Roots* its open-ended resolution. Berlin's story *Panteon de Dolores* also concerns an unhappy childhood, and similarly resists closure. The narrator remembers her mother:

'...sobbing, sobbing, as if her heart would break. I patted her and she flinched. She hated to be touched. So I just watched her by the light of the street lamp through the window screen. Just watched her weep. She was totally alone.'²⁷

In my story *Renovate* recurring bouts of depression see Dan hit rock-bottom -jobless, carless, practically homeless. He:

'woke sweat-glued to his PVC blow-up mattress. The humid air was musty with mould and the chemical tang of last night's bug bomb. He'd got to bed late, waiting for it to dissolve.'

After these three sentences the story stopped growing - but it wouldn't go away, either. My mentor suggested this was a cerebral

²⁷ Berlin, L. 1993. *So Long*, Black Sparrow Press, p.198.

pregnancy, and it did feel like pregnancy, a beautiful becalmed sensation. Then angst came; deadlines loomed.

I tried writing the story in first person, and rejected it as being whingey. I watched the film *No Country For Old Men* with the sound off, and another idea grew - telling the story in third person, solely through action and dialogue, without any interior monologue. This didn't satisfy, either.

I took the 'pregnancy' for a walk around my neighbourhood. I was drawn to a bare, winter-wizened pear tree. A few days later I had a strange feeling that tiny people were waking up and moving around just under my skin. The story started again, with the pear tree weighted down by fruit and leaves. The title arrived in a dream. The next day further characters appeared - Coralie and Jono - and the first paragraph began:

'Dan dreamed he was sitting on a vinyl chair in a nuthouse. With one finger he picked a hole in the vinyl, exposing foam padding. He saw he was wearing brown slippers, and when he looked up Rose was standing in front of him. This filled him with pleasure.'

Renovate develops through a build-up of sensuous details - 'A puff of wind sent black sparks through the air; tiny peeping swallows. The pear tree shimmered. A leaf came loose, swivelling to the ground.'; and the use of dialogue which swerves, stalls, is seeded with comedy:

'Coralie came out onto her porch, eating an iceblock. She smiled at him, When's that pool going in?

You'll have to imagine one.

She laughed as if this was hilarious. You're funny, she said. Did you know that?

People tell me that.

Yeah, well, you are.

A sparrow ran past. As they watched, it stopped, and stared at them. Coralie forgot her iceblock. Drops splashed onto the concrete and vaporised. The bird hunched lower to the ground and ran a little further on toward the letterboxes.

I wish I was a bird, Coralie said sadly.

Why's that?

She thought for a moment. Because birds are freer than flowers.

This resembles Paley's dialogue in *An Interest in Life*. Virginia's new lover offers to wash the dishes and she refuses:

"Don't be silly, you're a guest in my house," I said. "I still regard you as a guest."

"I want to do something for you, Virginia."

"Tell me I'm the most gorgeous thing," I said, dipping my arm to the funny bone in dish soup.

He didn't answer. "I'm having a lot of trouble at work," was all he said. Then I heard him push the chair back. He came up behind me, put his arm around my waistline, and kissed my cheek. He whirled me around and took my hands. He said, "An old friend is better than rubies."²⁸

I heard a song on the radio - *Chord*, one of Sam Hunt's poems set to music by David Kilgour.²⁹ It has three guitar parts; a soft acoustic background guitar, another picked fast, and a third that lets chords ring out through a tremolo. Hunt's words also resonated: 'When you get God's attention, you just somehow know it, but try as you do not to, you can't help but show it.' The song helped create a mood, out of which Dan's situation evolves, until a flash of anger releases a chance of redemption.

²⁸ Paley, G. *The Little Disturbances of Man*, p.89.

²⁹ Kilgour, D., & Hunt, S. 2009. *Falling Debris*, Arch Hill Recordings New Zealand, track 2.

In *Happiness and other stories*, I have leveraged my linguistic and cultural hybridity to write visceral stories about contemporary ordinary New Zealanders - car salesmen, pensioners, cleaners, failed Dads, and pot-smoking twelve year olds.

All the techniques exemplified by Grace Paley and Lucia Berlin - the use of direct sensuous details to create place and character, living dialogue, character-driven narratives, and open-ended resolutions - are present in the stories in this collection.

It is no coincidence that the writers I find most inspiring have mixed identities like myself. The contradictions involved in deciding one's destiny when powerful conflicting forces are at work, seems to sharpen the eye for what is genuine and real.

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Creative Writing manuscript

Happiness and other stories

(32,500 words)

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Contents

Happiness.....	3
Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.....	15
Roots	25
Renovate	29
How's Your Glass?	47
Two Day Dad	65
Wheel of Fortune	90
Little	104
Faith.....	114
Cats and Dogs	134

Happiness

April moved out the day her brother Tony learned he had inherited the family farm. She got the hundred-year-old sharemilker's house half-way down a shingle road. No-one had lived there for years. It had so many layers of peeling paint it seemed to be shedding its skin. There was no phone.

The house smelled as if someone had pissed in the corners. She boiled up water and washed the floors with disinfectant. It was such a humid day they had to be towel-dried. So too the windows, because she wouldn't sleep with cobwebs and cobwebs had grown across the glass in dirty rags.

When the place was clean she went across the paddocks to Tony and Pam's. Dinner had been and gone but Pam had put aside some food for her. She was starving. She ate three chops, two sausages, two corn cobs, the leftover pasta salad and a stale bun.

You got worms? Tony laughed, cracking open another beer and moving out on the deck.

You an alcoholic? she didn't ask. As usual, he'd been boozing since milking time.

Be nice to see you put on a few pounds, Pam said. She had a peculiar way of tucking in her face and growing a double chin. April had to turn away so as not to laugh. She'd seen it a million times, it wasn't even funny, yet laughter kept brimming up inside of her. She chopped a banana into a bowl of Neapolitan ice-cream and ate it. Then she said, I'm moving to the city.

Since when? Pam asked.

Since now.

What about your job?

I'll get another one.

You're way too impulsive, Pam said. When you feel like that, *breathe* – and she demonstrated, her large chest majestically rose, rested, and fell - then think about the big picture.

I'll give it a try, April said. Pam could huff and puff all she liked, she'd do exactly as she wanted. April rinsed out her bowl and joined Tony on the deck. He sat on the swingseat, swaying back and forth.

I'm full, she plonked down beside him.

Hope you're not eating for two.

Don't be a dick. I'm the bloody Virgin Mary.

Tony snorted and his eyes shrank into dreamy slits. A minute later he was snoring.

April couldn't believe how she'd gorged herself, yet she was still hungry...restless. Dark seeds of happiness began bursting in her chest.

Holly called before, Pam said, coming out to join them.

When?

This afternoon.

April jumped up off the swingset and flew down the steps.

Where are you going? Pam called after her.

Out.

April ran across the paddocks until she reached the overgrown verge. A cow roared, spurring her on. She sped on down her friend's driveway.

Holly lay in the hammock listening to her iPod. She took off her headphones. Hey, she said.

April hardly dare speak – how could all this happiness have been set free?

Are you okay?

Yes! The word came out so hard it almost sent her spinning on the spot.

Look what bloody Jarrod did, Holly said.

Painted along the back of the caravan were three blue ovals separated out into the wings and body of a bird. It had dangling human feet and no beak. The caravan shimmered in the watery twilight and the bird seemed to slowly rise, like something bubbling up in a dream.

It's *beautiful*, April said.

It's got *feet*.

So?

He'll never get off the sickness, Holly said.

There was an awkward pause as they both remembered, and pretended not to, that Holly had recently fucked him because she'd been in an urgent mood and he was available, later saying it was almost normal except he had spent ages just breathing in her neck. Jarrod wasn't someone you went out with, being jangly in the head. He was gentle, though. And he liked skin. Plus, April had a memory of her own. She'd once let him stroke her arm. He'd concentrated - weird, intense – her arm had flashed with heat. Then he had looked up with perfect awe, and a particle of something she couldn't name had melted deep inside of her.

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A week later April walked down the steps of an Intercity bus. Cars drove past, stopping at the lights. Crowds of people swept across the road: beautiful women in summery dresses; men in suits carrying take-out coffees. A busker on the corner sang *Hotel California*. April felt grown-up. Free.

She quickly got a job thanks to a friend of Pam's, and took the first apartment the real estate agent showed her. It was a narrow room ending in a pocket-sized balcony. The balcony overlooked a reserve where a huge tree was loaded with screaming cicadas.

She walked to work past a building site, under the train overpass, through a foodhall that turned into a Chinese supermarket that opened onto a carpark that ended in a one-way alley. It was cold in the alley, the sun never touched the path. She reached Epicure's loading bay, went up the rattley metal ramp into the warehouse and stacked shelves with

fairytale foods – woodpigeon pate, champagne vinegar, cuttlefish ink. Then she wandered home, stopping off at the Chinese supermarket for smokes, noodles (twenty-seven cents a packet), chocolate raisins, spotty bananas and nectarines picked too soon.

April kept open the balcony's sliding door. In the evening the city crackled like kindling burning, and the cicadas were in a constant uproar.

She wasn't lonely, although she was totally on her own at work except for her supervisor, Iris, a tough single mum who'd told April she'd rather eat cat-sick than the crap they unpacked. Snails! *Black* pasta! A hundred-and-sixty-five dollars for a bottle of oil! *Fifty* dollars for a box of chocolates! It's not as if your stomach can tell the difference, Iris said.

#

April went outside one lunchtime, stood beneath the striped metal awning and lit up. The boss, Matt, came toward her. She couldn't help watching him through a gap in her fringe. He was tall and chunky, with big long bones, yet he walked as if his feet only just touched the ground.

Hot day, he said.

April blew out a puff of smoke, offered him a cigarette and was about to light it when the receptionist came out. She ignored April, stood close to Matt in high fragile sandals and hair bright as a lightbulb. April stared down at her own feet, her white Chucks gone grey, starting to fray.

The receptionist said, huffily, Tuscan House is wondering where their order is.

On its way tomorrow, Matt replied. Make sure you apologise.

Are you sure about tomorrow?

Totally.

The receptionist spun around and went back inside.

Drizzle plink-plinked onto the awning, enclosing Matt and April in the dry space underneath.

So you're the new stacker?

Yep. She held out the lighter and he bent towards it.

Iris says you're from up north. He looked in her eyes and smiled.

It was the kind of smile you drowned in. She stood as straight as she could, although her arms hung useless at her sides.

Haven't had a cigarette in a while, Matt said.

She couldn't think of a reply – took a last drag, flicked the butt into a widening puddle and watched it sizzle like a zapped fly.

#

If she could have, April would have run or jumped or started singing but Matt was sleeping in her bed, so she went out on the balcony with a bag of chocolate raisins. The Happy Wok's neon slanted onto the tree down below, making the leaves glimmer. Voices floated up from bums lounging underneath – cackles of laughter, mumbles, a low keening that lasted until a car swooshed by.

A freight train crossed the overpass, its kerchunking silencing the bums.

April felt the humming vibration of the vanishing train, of the cicadas...of life? No, that wasn't right, although she was inching closer to

an idea she couldn't quite express, and excitement came surging up. It was as if something magical were about to happen. She stepped back into the apartment, flung herself onto the bed and pressed against Matt.

#

She walked past the reserve in the dark, or almost dark, because it was never truly dark in the city. She'd never got used to the lack of stars. She crossed the road. The back streets were full of crazies who disappeared at daybreak. There were bars, whores and kebab shops. A group of strippers in silver wigs sat outside a club, smoking. A sagging P-freak mimed conversation with no-one. His upturned eyes sparkled under a blinking light.

She wished she'd enough money for a kebab. She'd had instant noodles after work, and a juiceless nectarine. She stopped outside a window plastered in photos of Korean meals. She closed her eyes and her stomach buzzed with upset. Gorgeous Matt, with perfect teeth, had told her it had been a mistake. They couldn't go on. Hard as a punch - although he didn't touch her, didn't even look at her, just picked up her smokes.

Back on the main road, April sat in a bus shelter. A bum lay on the other end of the bench. His bare feet were cracked, black. She turned away and caught her face in the glass, ghostly, barely there.

A bus rolled by with an ad for air freshener along its side - plastic petals spilling onto fake grass.

The bum groaned then whistled out his nose. His wet dog smell made her want to puke. The sea was a few streets away, she could smell that too. A pathetic sea, dingy and syrypy, nudging against the wharves.

Another bus went past and exhaust fumes shot out; she held her breath...*breathe*, Pam had said. Her chest rose, rested, fell. Again. Again.

She'd go back waitressing for Snapper Tom. She'd tell him about the champagne vinegar and pickled walnuts and he'd laugh out his arse because all anyone wanted at his place were steakchickenfish and chips. Salad as a side.

#

Table six, Snapper Tom shouted and put down on the counter two plates of steak and chips.

April promptly picked up the plates and delivered them.

I'll have garlic bread, too, the customer said.

Are your drinks okay?

Another beer thanks.

Same again?

Sure.

April took the bread order to Tom, then went behind the bar. She put a glass to the tap and glanced up; her heart snapped when she saw him. Beer spewed over the glass. She wiped it down, put it on her tray. Looked again.

He must have felt something because he turned around – the likeness was freaky. She smiled anyway and his face lit up as if they were old friends. Then he walked toward her with the same light step.

#

April came to and the bed moved...she was on a boat! Water slapped against the hull. She propped herself up on an elbow and, in the grey light, looked down on Matt's double, a German yachtie. Disappointment washed over her.

Careful not to wake him, she eased herself off the bottom bunk, pulled on her knickers and jeans, grabbed her jacket and crept up the ladder.

Outside there was a hot breeze, it scattered spray off shallow waves and flicked her hair over her face. No-one was around. That much was lucky. She hopped onto the pontoon. She couldn't get away fast enough. Below her the water was green and dazzled with tiny fish. Then oystercatchers pecked rocks bared by the outgoing tide. They flew up when she jumped off the pontoon onto the sand. She strode along, head down until she reached the end of the bay. Fuck. She lit up, exhaled, and watched the smoke swim away.

It was going to be another sunny day, but April was cold. An oystercatcher scurried past, caught a crab in its long red bill and bashed it against a rock.

#

April came out of Snapper Tom's and went far enough along the road for the jukebox noise to fade. It was lovely to be out of his swampy greasepot. She leant against the craft shop's window and looked across the bay. Beneath the stars and a moon eaten down to its rind, the water wrinkled like a black plastic sheet.

Along the boardwalk came Jarrod, his eyes on the ground, hands plunged deep in his pockets.

She hesitated, he hadn't seen her, then she called out and waved.

He came over and smiled at her. The craft shop's soft light glinted on his piercings.

How's it going? April asked.

He shrugged.

I'm stuffed, she said. Want to walk me home?

They ambled along to the end of the shops, spray cans rattled in his pack. When the road swung up around paddocks, she took off her Chucks. Cows grunted as they passed. Birds, waking, whistled in inky trees.

By the time they reached her place the sky had paled. They stopped in front of the fence, the old wood grey as rain. Grass had grown wild in the yard, thigh-high, sunbleached. The house seemed to float upon it.

This yours? he asked.

Yep. Could do with a paint. At least I don't pay rent. In the city, rent took nearly all my pay.

Inside, it was really quiet. Not even a clock to nibble the hours. The piss smell hadn't totally gone. April opened all the windows and they stood

side by side looking out. The clouds were turning pink. Cicadas were drumming in the long grass, and crickets had joined in. Autumn was coming.

Jarrold put down his pack and looked around the room. She didn't know his actual problem, just that he was shaky, slid away from attention. Holly had said he didn't smoke because everyone would see his hands trembling.

I'm out of milk, she said.

Black's good.

She made mugs of tea and took them into the lounge. As you can see, she said, I haven't redecorated yet.

Jarrold stepped closer to the wall, staring. Then he took a hand out of his pocket and touched the wall as tenderly as if it was skin.

#

When April woke, the lounge was ablaze in sunshine. Split-shifts wrecked her nights, she was so tired, she needed more sleep. She curled up on the couch even tighter, and shut her eyes. The intense red of the sun was so unbearable she quickly opened them again.

An ant colony was swarming across the wall.

Disgusting old house. Piss in the corners, gross stains on the ceiling. There'd been a dead rat in the safe, mice in the cupboards. Every morning, slug trails criss-crossed the kitchen floor. With a sigh, she got up and had a look.

It wasn't ants. It was a mural crammed with tiny animals – a cow with a lion's mane, a lion with a girl's face and a monkey's tail curling upwards into sparks. The sparks morphed into miniature flowers, then into stars, then shrank and changed into eyes, not staring, possibly blind.

Jarrold's pack was on the floor. She found him on top of her bed, asleep. She lay down facing him and gently held his trembling hands. Gradually his hands became still, and she slept.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps

What a lovely relationship, Kim thought, watching the man push his mother's wheelchair across the carpark. He bent his head towards his mother, handing her fresh tissues, smoothing the rug over her knees. He was careful not to jolt the wheelchair as they went up the path to the orange poppies blazing in the morning light. Sitting on a bench beside her, he opened a book and they peered at it, talking, writing. Crossword puzzles? Sudoku?

Last week, in the lift, Kim and the man had smiled at each other. Then the lift had filled with a noisy family armed with flowers and fruit and bobbing heart-shaped balloons.

Kim let the net curtain fall back across the window. The room became gloomy, claustrophobic as a submarine, with the machines connected to her mother humming and bleeping.

At last, her mother was asleep; eyebrows raised, a dozy grin - morphine dreams. Kim sat close, listening to her breathing softly, as softly as her kids when they were newborns and Kim had hovered over the bassinet too anxious to sleep fearing cot deaths, holding a mirror to their mouths until it clouded. Jesus Christ! her husband would hiss, they're fine, get into bed.

Her mother had had a bad night. Thinking to soothe her, Kim had brought in an MP3 player, put the headphones on her mother's wizened bald head, and switched on some music. She'd stared at Kim, then her hand had shot up from the covers, Your hair, she'd yelled, fix it! And she'd almost fallen out of the bed. Kim had buzzed the nurse and together they'd rolled her mother back into position after changing the soiled sheets. Try not to upset her, the nurse had said. She'd upped the morphine and dimmed the light until the white anemones on the bedside table had glowed like puffballs.

A trolley squeaked down the corridor. Soon it would be time for morning tea. Kim leafed through one of her sister Donna's *Vogue* magazines. Models wore pale lacy dresses, their hair teased into candyfloss buns.

Her mother moaned quietly. Kim went to the basin and soaked a flannel in cold water, squeezing it out and laying it across her mother's forehead. It seemed to help, the dozy grin returned.

Kim sat down again, her back ached from spending the night folded-in-half in the chair. She wished she'd slept at home. But it was silent and eerie at home. Her kids weren't there. They'd gone on holiday with their Dad. It was the first time they'd seen him since he'd moved out and gone to Melbourne. At Christmas he'd sent them a photo of his new girlfriend. Very pretty.

Their daughter, Lauren, glanced at the photo.

Gross! she'd said, and threw it in the bin.

Her younger brother, Zach, waited for her to leave the room, then rescued it, keeping it with other treasures hidden inside the globe on top of his bookcase.

Kim wanted to talk to her mother about Jeff going. The cold, nauseating shock. She'd lost six kilos. Zach had stopped speaking, and if he absolutely had to say something - phone top-up, weetbix - it came out with a stutter. Her daughter had come home with love-bites! However, it wasn't the same as losing your life to cancer. Her mother had been diagnosed the week Jeff left. There'd been a long wait until the tumour was removed, followed by weeks of radiotherapy; trips to and fro, the kids home alone, or sitting with Kim in waiting rooms, eyes glued to televisions set high up on wall-brackets, watching advertisements for face creams and exercise machines. A second tumour. Dementia. Chemo. Half a year of takeaways, staying at her mother's because it was handy to the hospital. Lauren and Zach sleeping in the childhood bedroom Kim had shared with Donna. Donna, who'd once collected scabs and nail clippings in matchboxes. Then, almost overnight, Donna's boobs had grown and she'd been out the window on private prowling expeditions. Lauren was at that age, too - fifteen, and Zach thirteen. Kim had been so busy with her sick mother, and work, and sole-parenting, that they'd become teenagers almost without her noticing.

It was Donna who'd first seen Lauren's love-bites.

Your daughter's got a more exciting love-life than you! she'd laughed. Don't wait for your kids to leave home. They'll stay until they're 30. You'll be an old prune.

Where the hell was Donna? It was nine o'clock. Kim wanted a shower. Clean clothes. She'd worn the same things for twenty four hours: faded jeans and one of Donna's hand-me-down blouses.

The smell! It floated across to Kim. Her mother remained sleeping, thankfully, although her eyelids fluttered briefly. The indignity of incontinence!

#

Kim scanned the *El Toro* cafe. Donna was sitting at a window table, wearing glamorous Paris Hilton sunglasses. Even with a hangover - glamorous, well-groomed, with new red shoes that tied with a ribbon.

I waited all night, Kim said. You could have called.

Donna took off her sunglasses. Craig turned up, she said. Life's short.

A waiter asked if they were ready to order.

Donna pointed at the menu. He nodded and melted away. Very tasty, she said to Kim.

There was a huge copper counter with a vase of orchids and trailing rosemary, and bullfight posters on the walls; fan-filled arenas, snorting bulls, carnations falling through the air to land at the feet of matadors in embroidered suits.

Yes, it's nice, Kim said.

Not the *café*. The waiter.

The waiter returned with glasses of white wine. He gave Donna a sexy look, which she held, pushing her shoulders back a little, just enough to make her cleavage more pronounced.

The mezze plate for two, she said.

When the waiter left, Kim asked, Wine? It's not even lunchtime.

To brunch, Donna raised her glass for a toast.

The wine *did* taste crisp, Kim took another sip. The sun had reached the counter, which gleamed, and the scent of rosemary wafted through the room.

Donna leant toward her, Maybe you have a *secret* lover?

Kim shook her head.

Are you sure?

The waiter brought over hummus, grilled capsicum, roasted almonds, feta, watermelon and flat bread.

That's lovely, Donna said, looking up at him. It's all lovely, and her face opened like a flower.

How did she do that? Kim wondered. Donna was separated, too - but when Donna's husband had left, she'd come alive. Took up smoking, sun-beds, wearing high heels. She'd gone on dates she'd made on the internet; a lawyer, an artist, an aerobics instructor. Her ex couldn't believe it - Donna used to be his shadow; now *he* was the shadow. Kim hadn't recognized him one Sunday at the supermarket; haggard, hair-line receding, his voice gone whispery.

Kim picked up a piece of watermelon with a toothpick.

Keep up or you'll miss out! Donna said, scooping hummus onto bread.

A voice full of romantic longing floated out of the speakers - Ibrahim Ferrer, their mother's favourite...*tu siempre me respondes, quizas, quizas, quizas...*

Are you missing the kids? Donna asked.

Terribly.

You should try and have some fun while they're gone.

It's a bit hard to do that with Mum in the hospice.

I know, but... I'll be back in a minute. Donna scraped back her chair and crossed the floor, greeting a small dark man with kisses, both cheeks, Continental-style. They murmured to one another, flirting in an easy old-flame way.

Kim glanced around the cafe, her gaze landing on a couple who were picking at their food. The man suddenly looked up and their eyes met. Then she realized he wasn't looking at her, but through her. A blush started and she was grateful for her uncut hair which slid forward when she stared down at her glass. Was it the wine? Was it a hot flush? Was she old enough for that? A surprising number of silver hairs had shown up lately. She checked Donna, who'd once had the same dark brown hair. Now it was a honey-blond bob. They no longer looked related.

Donna came back, and ate more hummus. She said, What about that guy from soccer?

Adam?

He's attractive. Single.

It's not that simple, Kim said. Unlike Donna, she'd regressed. If Adam stood next to her at Lauren's games, she'd go red, laugh at the wrong time, feel dizzy if he gave her a sidelong look - those eyelashes! Once, after soccer, he'd invited them back to his place. Zach and Lauren had rushed in ahead of her. It was raining, Kim had paused on the porch to lean her umbrella against the wall. Then she'd stepped inside as Adam rose from untying his daughter's laces. The children had raced around the house not noticing them at either end of the hall, still as bookends. The atmosphere was so powerful she wondered that the children did not bounce off it. The moment had subsided. She hadn't been able to make a move.

#

Kim pushed open her front door and Boots padded toward her with a questioning miaow. She picked him up. He patted her face with a soft paw. Her heart leapt to have him warm and purring in her arms. Then he wriggled out and jumped down, trotting into the kitchen. Kim followed and poured biscuits into his bowl.

Out the window, glossy red flax spikes caught the sun, while the old spikes on the same bush were grey husks. She should lop them. And mow the lawn. And pull convolvulus off the hibiscus bush whose unpruned canes were poking through like knitting needles.

Starlings bawled in the feijoa tree. Boots dashed out the cat door, stopped, and stared. Then he lowered his tail and crept towards them. The starlings panicked, rising up in a dark line against the blue sky.

Right then, Kim missed the kids so much she felt sick.

Only last week, Lauren had said, I'm not going on holiday with Dad and that slut. Zach, tongue-tied as usual, had stared at his sister while she'd made a show of emptying her schoolbag, throwing out exercise books, muddy socks, and empty *KitKat* wrappers; until Kim, making an effort almost beyond her strength, said, Go on, there'll be horse-back riding. Kayaking, snorkelling.

Oh, alright, Lauren had grumped, switching on the tele for *Home and Away*.

Kim had seen Zach's face change - utterly relieved. Only *she* knew how he cried at night, alone in his bed. If Kim went in to comfort him he pretended to be asleep. If she touched him he rolled away. I love you, she'd say, I *love* you. What did that matter? She wasn't his Dad.

#

Kim had almost reached the lift when the doors began to close. She couldn't run because she carried Lauren's stereo in one hand, and a case of CDs in the other.

Just before the doors shut; they slid open. Kim stepped in and there was the wheelchair man, pressing the button.

We meet again, he said. Your Mum's next door to mine, isn't she?

Yes.

The doors shut and Kim's stomach lurched as the lift started to rise.

Having a party?

Pardon?

The stereo.

My mother doesn't like headphones.

The lift stopped at the first floor. No-one was there. They waited silently, and the doors closed with a soft click.

What music is she into? he asked.

Cuban.

Ah. A Buena Vista fan?

Yes!

Second floor. They walked out together, stopping outside Kim's mother's door.

I'm really pleased to meet you, she said in a rush.

We're bound to cross paths again.

Kim turned red.

He smiled, walking on.

Kim opened the door. Her mother was sitting propped up by pillows, her eyes wild, her face radiant, a bright scarf coiled into a rosette above one ear. Donna sat beside her, painting her nails.

Mum, you look beautiful.

I'm giving her a makeover, Donna said.

Their mother held up her nails. Kingfisher blue! The same shade as the ballgown I wore when I met your father. I had matching stretch-satin

gloves that went right up past my elbows. It's in the closet, Kim. Bring it over.

Donna looked over at Kim with a 'she's bonkers' face. The ballgown, worn 43 years before, was long gone, only a dressing-gown hung in the closet.

I'll just put on some music, Kim said, plugging in the stereo.

Ibrahim Ferrer's creamy voice filled the room...*Siempre que te pregunto...*

Late afternoon light dazzled on the machines, and the pole holding the drip. The anemones had the silvery brilliance of pearls.

Their mother said, I'll dance the samba when I get to Havana.

...quizas, quizas, quizas.

Roots

Last week my daughter Janice visited, showed me a travel brochure and said she was going to stay in my village. I almost fell out of bed.

What village?

Your roots, Dad, look. She turned a page. White stone houses grew from stony mountains. There was the brightest blue sea.

Love, I told her, *my* roots are mud and scrub.

She laughed and left the brochure on the bedside table.

We only had the one chick, Doris and I. Practically middle-aged when we married and lucky to get her. I had forty three happy years with Doris. That's what counts, that's what's important.

Then this morning, the nurse opened the window and in came a whiff of lavender. Sent me straight back to when I was a kid up north. Mum had brought out lavender seeds from her village and planted them in front of the porch. On rainy days you could smell it in the house – then she'd sing sad songs in the old language. I hated that. I wanted her to laugh. Tell jokes.

She must have been lonely on the farm. A mail-order bride, she'd married a bald stranger who stank of plonk. They had five boys in four years.

Dad was no help. Maybe he was sick of being poor, sick of being cooped up on a clay bog. On sober nights he'd sit in our one upholstered armchair and carefully oil his axes, knives, shovels. Mum sat to one side knitting socks. Neither of them spoke.

The armchair was Dad's throne. If he was out, my brothers and I fought over it. Bare-knuckle fights. *War*. My heart beating fit to bust.

Always had the shits as a kid – nerves, rage - scared I'd die of it. My brother Luka did. Died from diarrhoea when he was five, laid out on the table like a skinny blue doll. I was the angriest, smallest; although I did grow years later, when all that was behind me.

If Dad wasn't oiling his tools at night, he'd be on the porch drinking. Then we had to watch out. He thrashed us for next to nothing. He'd start pulling out his belt and I'd run. If I got away fast enough I could dodge a blow. Otherwise, BANG, he'd knock me down! Or send me sprawling across the ground. I was just a kid, with legs as thin as twigs. I'd go to bed sore as hell, trying not to blub, thinking up ways to kill him.

Mum was no match for Dad. I used to help her in the vege garden. I was happiest then. She wasn't much of a talker. We'd quietly move along the rows of silverbeet, potatoes, tomatoes. We grew everything.

Our farm was four hundred acres of worked-out gumfields covered in tea tree, puriri and flax lumps. Me and my brothers worked like men turning it into grass, fences, sheds. School be buggered. The headmaster came to our house and told Dad that in this country, children went to

school. It was the law. Dad couldn't have cared less. He'd never been to school.

I wanted to go. That's where other kids went. Boys played rugby, too. I wanted to play rugby. So I did. My brothers bashed me if I got home late for milking, after practice, and made Dad angry.

Even Mum hit me once, when I dropped a slab of dates in the mud. She smacked me over the head then sat where she stood and wept. Nearly broke my heart. I picked up the dates and washed them one by one.

Every penny was important back then. Clothes were patched, and patched again. Swaggers turned up wanting to work for a bit of food. They'd whistle up the path, swinging a billy can, scattering the mob of chooks hanging around for scraps. Something I liked about the swaggers – they weren't angrily stuck to the land. They were wanderers, free.

There were good times when my brothers and I filled kerosene tins with cherries and humped them round the neighbourhood trying to make a sale. Or threw stones at birds to see who could kill the most.

Ivo was the eldest, and the meanest. Thought he was the boss, used to thrash us as often as we gave him an excuse. One day I was getting off a cow's leg rope when she startled and backed into me, I knocked over the bucket of milk. Got the hiding of my life from Ivo. Something snapped inside of me; I didn't fight back. When he finished, I went up to the orchard and hid under a fig tree. I was fourteen. I didn't have

to stay, I could be a swagman. That thought made me calm as a stone.
The next day I hitched a ride on the cream truck, and never went back.

Found work in a boarding house. Emptied chamberpots, chopped wood, fired up the copper. Then I went further down the line and washed dishes in a hotel. I wrote home five or six times, never got anything back. Ended up selling cars in Invercargill.

Twenty years ago, in Wellington, I remember Ivo suddenly walking up to me in a hotel lobby. He stopped in front of me and said Mum had died. That she'd wanted to see me.

I didn't know, I told him.

You never *cared*.

He glared at me, and stepped into the lift. The doors closed. I just stood there. All my money and I'd never thought to help her.

I went back out and sat in the car. Bawled my eyes out. It was even worse than when Doris died. I'd been a good husband. No regrets there. But I'd been a shit of a son. Can't change it.

When Mum and I used to work amongst the silverbeet and tomatoes, it was so quiet. If a bird flew past you'd hear each wingbeat snip the air. After a while she'd start humming, and the sound would settle under my skin.

Renovate

Dan dreamed he was sitting on a vinyl chair in a nuthouse. With one finger he picked a hole in the vinyl, exposing foam padding. He saw he was wearing brown slippers, and when he looked up Rose was standing in front of him. This filled him with pleasure.

What's going on? he asked her.

You live here, she said.

Rose, Rose, he wanted her to come closer.

I'm visiting, she said in a flat voice.

Her eyes moved strangely, like eyes looking through peepholes.

Was it really her?

Rose opened her mouth, and cackled.

Dan sprang up. A bottle of pills fell out of his lap bursting on the floor. He got down on his knees, gathering them, embarrassed - he had to do it, while she stood there watching.

The white pills latched onto the palm of his hand, suckling.

Jesus! he cried out.

His phone started ringing. He pulled it from his pocket.

You up yet? It was his brother, Richard.

Yes.

What's going on?

Dan woke to find himself sweat-glued to his PVC blow-up mattress. His heart beat furiously. He had dreamed of Rose. He tried to recapture the pleasure-filled moment when he'd looked up and seen her. The moment faded.

Traffic roared along the motorway across the road. Even though he was in a second floor flat, when a truck went by it sent shudders through the floorboards. He'd got to bed late, waiting for a bug bomb to dissolve, and the humid room was musty with the bug bomb's chemical after-tang.

Dan was staying in Richard's flats - a rundown brick-and-tile block of four, which Richard wanted done up and sold.

A home-based hooker had lived in this particular flat till a client bashed her. Down below were Coralie and Jono, whose pimped-out car had flames painted down the side. Next to them was a single Mum. Richard said she was a stand-out tenant who Dan Must Not Bang when she returned from holiday. As if! Dan was still recovering from a string of recent disasters. His car had broken down. His hot water cylinder blew. A debt collector came knocking in the middle of the night, knocks fast and hard as machine-gun fire: his rates were months overdue. \$2,300 right there. \$1,100 for the cylinder. Forget the car, wrapped in a tarpaulin and left on the side of the road. Then he lost the best job he'd had in years – part-time teaching in a Decile Ten primary school.

Okay, I'll help, Richard had said after his job went. Here's how we'll make it square...Two months as a builder's mate on my flats. Plus, I'll pay

you rent for *your* place. I've got an Aussie mate who needs a place to stay while he finishes a deal.

Richard wanted Dan to start by putting in a hedge. Twenty-five camellias in planter bags were jammed against the shed. Also sacks of peat moss and fertiliser pellets.

Plant them a metre apart, he'd written on Dan's job list. Mulch peat moss around the dripline. If you need me, call me on my mobile, I'll be at the beach with the family.

Thirsty, hungry, Dan finally got up. There was orange juice in the fridge. He stood at the kitchen bench drinking it from the carton. The kitchen looked out over the neighbour's back yard. A climbing rose had grown across a rickety garage. The garage was overburdened, as if it might collapse beneath the countless pink blooms. They looked unreal; mass-produced, plastic - yet their scent seeped in the window. It ran through Dan like a skewer. He tried to pull shut the window. The hinges had rusted. Using all his strength he pulled again, shaking the whole frame, the window's timber liners were rotten. He wished the roses would drop off and rot, too.

At the same time, he began to feel the shape of a creature, long asleep, that lived deep inside of him. It was slippery, eager, wanting to escape, to explore, to dart from branch to branch, a bird, and not a bird.

Dan stood stock-still at the bench, listening. He heard the creature's breath separate out from the motorway noise; pulsing, rhyming with the ticking wall clock.

He crossed over to his bag, taking out the pill box. It was taped shut. He should have chucked it. His hand tightened around the box. He'd stopped taking medication once before, then forgotten he'd stopped and started again. Only to lose his job after falling asleep, with his head on the table, during a staff meeting - the last chance. He thrust the box back into his bag, went outside and stood in a narrow strip of shade beneath the paint-flaking eaves.

Across the road was a hurricane wire fence with ghostly supermarket bags blown into it. Behind the fence lay a bank of motley flaxes, then an eight-lane motorway.

Dan went down the steps and along the drive, stopping at the bank of letterboxes. They'd been dinged into a seventy degree lean and had yellowing advertising fliers jammed into them. He pulled out the fliers and threw them in the miniskip parked on the verge. The day before, he'd cleared the flat filling the miniskip with porno DVDs, clattery bead curtains and a litter tray covered in strange pea-sized dog poo. When he'd lifted up the damp carpet cockroaches had ricocheted across the floor. After the bug bomb, he'd swept them up, half-filling a bread bag.

Heading for the dairy, Dan passed shabby bungalows. Yet Richard said the area was being gentrified, that he'd make a killing when he sold the flats. A letterbox, propped on top of a barstool, had *arsehole* scrawled across it. Turning, Dan saw a pitbull watching him from a doorway. The dog bared its teeth, growling. Dan lowered his eyes to the worn blood-coloured asphalt and the dog stayed put.

Just inside the dairy was a stand of bread trays containing only a few loaves and some crumpets. Dan took the last wholegrain loaf, got a litre of milk and waited for a man in socks and jandals to count out enough coins for a packet of smokes.

Emerging into sunlight, Dan saw the pitbull had moved from the doorway and was now standing by the arsehole-letterbox. He crossed the road. Every house had a UHF aerial bristling on the roof. Doors were open, windows too, and net curtains were tied in knots.

Back at the flats, Dan picked empty beer bottles off the grass verge, throwing them on top of the fliers in the miniskip.

Right then, yelling started.

Fuck you, bitch! Jono shouted.

Fuck you right back! Coralie returned fire. Somewhere nearby, dogs began barking.

Dan had almost reached the steps when Coralie and Jono's door slammed open and Jono lurched out. Freckled with acne, stinking of pot, he said, What you looking at? Then got into his flame-painted car and gunned it down the drive. Dan jumped out of the way.

He saw Coralie in her underwear, calmly watching telly, and smoking. She caught his eye and smiled.

Dan took the steps two at a time, shutting his door behind him, even though the flat was stifling. He went over to the bench, made a peanut butter sandwich, and sat on his beanbag googling dripline... *The outermost*

leaves on a tree...planting camellias...best done in autumn...keep well watered during summer.

He stared out at the cartoon sky - bright blue, with marshmallow clouds - something a child might draw. Reminding him of a Year Two pupil who'd written a poem called One Thousand Cloud. The absence of that one letter 's' had utterly endeared life to Dan; yet the next day he'd been incapable of work.

Selfish. Dangerous. How often had he been told that? As if depression was within his control. It was not. It was like crashing through trapdoors into smaller and smaller rooms until he was hunched in a box.

Hauling himself out of the beanbag, Dan went outside. It was even hotter than before. Too hot to dig twenty-five hedge holes. Still, he had to keep moving. He went down the steps, passing Coralie pegging knickers and bras on a portable clothesline.

Afternoon, Dan said.

It's boiling!

Sure is.

Tell your brother to put in a pool.

See what I can do.

Dan ducked into the shed, where Richard had left gardening tools. It smelt of dust, and a whiff of butcher shop. He crouched down. Whining flies crawled over a dead mouse; its teeth and feet perfect, body an oozing ballsack. A throw of white beads rolled along the ground. The beads lengthened into maggots. Dan thought he might throw up. He grabbed a

plastic bag, emptied its nuts and nails into a broken flowerpot, and used it to scoop up the mouse. He went down the drive and flung it in the miniskip.

Back in the shed he noticed hedge clippers hung on a hook. Also a weedeater. Even a flymo lawnmower. No spade. He'd have to call his brother.

Hello? Richard sounded puffed.

Where's the spade?

The what?

The spade for the hedge! Dan heard a scrabbling sound, then a door shut. Where's the spade? he asked again.

Bloody well buy one. Richard hung up.

Unfuckenbelievable! It made him so angry, both at Richard who was at that moment lounging around his beach mansion, and at himself. He had a degree, a teaching diploma, and had had decent jobs, the last one in a school with warm carpeted classrooms and a staffroom surrounded by enormous oaks. Yet here he was scrabbling around a filthy shed clearing away a rotting mouse.

He'd have to walk to Plant Barn and buy a spade. He went outside. Coralie had disappeared. Her lacy scraps of lingerie trembled on the clothesline.

Dan strode down a cycle path alongside the motorway. Over the fence, traffic was steady. A police car sat in the scraggly triangle where the off-ramp and the motorway connected. A truck rattled past, its tray filled with crates of cabbages. Revving wildly, a huge motorbike overtook a

refrigerated lorry. The police siren roared into life. Fed up with the racket, Dan escaped up a side street.

Cicadas sizzled in hedges. A shipping container, covered in tagging and kikuyu grass, sat rusting in someone's yard.

Dan's phone beeped and he stopped to read Richard's text: I'll fix you up for the spade.

Too right, he replied.

He was in front of an old stucco bungalow that was more plant than house. A clinging shrub had spread from the foundations to the guttering, where it shot straight up into the air.

What caught his eye was a tree at the end of the section. Taller than the bungalow, the ancient pear tree was weighted down by emerald-green fruit, making Dan think of the Grimm Brothers' story in which a man cut off his daughter's hands. Unable to pick pears without hands, she'd stood close to where the fruit hung down, stretching up until she could eat one.

A puff of wind sent black sparks through the air; tiny peeping swallows. The pear tree shimmered. A leaf came loose, swivelling to the ground.

Dan turned away. His heart ached. It had nothing to do with the fairy tale, eventually the daughter's hands grew back. The falling leaf had focussed something that had long bothered him, the sense that he might come adrift one day, as his Mum had. Sadness worked its way through all her veins until it had nowhere else to go.

She'd been more custodial than maternal. Other mothers, friends' mothers, had laughed until they'd dabbed their eyes with the corner of their aprons. They'd run the school canteen, smoked cigarettes out the back and wafted away the smoke with embarrassed smiles. His mother had been poised, watchful; then the sadness would come and they'd visit her in hospital. She'd sit in the dayroom, zonked-out, staring at dangling mobiles.

A hobo shuffled by, unshaven, trousers belted with string.

Hi, said Dan. The hobo didn't react. Yet Dan *had* to acknowledge him because one day he too might be reduced to shuffling along in balding corduroys and a string belt.

At least he'd lost the Alzheimer's shuffle. And it no longer took an hour to tie his laces, or get from the bed to the loo. It had been a month since he'd taped-up the pill box - he hated his jellied medicated world

There was a dairy on the corner. Feeling more cheerful, Dan went in and and bought cigarettes, sitting under the verandah outside. The first drag was exquisite. He held the smoke in his chest, releasing it in a long plume.

A woman holding a boy by the hand, walked out of the dairy. The boy carried a toy lion. He shook the lion at Dan, and opened his mouth in a mock roar.

Maybe next term he'd be well enough to teach full-time? That was the part of life he enjoyed most - school kids, their crayon-bright sense of truth and fun.

#

Dan walked back from Plant Barn carrying a stainless steel spade. The round-trip had taken an hour-and-a-half in humidity that weighed on him like a headache. In fact, a headache had started coming on as he reached the cycle path. Every footfall had sent a hot flare through his brain. If he could, he'd have run back to the flat. As it was, he'd walked as lightly as possible, gone up the steps and quietly closed the door. Pushing the mattress to where the sun couldn't reach it, he'd lain down waiting for sleep.

The motorway's zooming became a distant hum. As he'd slowly dropped off, his optimism dissolved, his last thoughts were tinged with shame; jobless, carless, practically homeless. An unshaven hobo whose beard turned into wind-tossed leaves.

Thumping gangsta rap woke him. For a moment he didn't know where he was...the room was a powdery gold. Dusk. The music was coming from Jono's car, idling outside. With a cat-on-heat screech, the car took off.

Dan sat up. His head felt pumpkin-huge and tender. He went to the kitchen and switched on the jug. He took the jug into the bathroom and used the hot water to shave. Then he got into the fizzling lukewarm shower.

By the time he'd changed, night had fallen. He heated up a pizza and took it on the porch, sitting with his back against the sun-warmed wall, balancing his laptop on his knees, wandering around the *WoW* game world.

Mechanically, he bit into the pizza, chewed, swallowed; lack of appetite being the last side-effect to wear off.

Kar kar! - two seagulls circled above a sodium lamp. Dan watched them spiralling higher, and one after another they peeled away into darkness.

For some reason, the gulls made him think of him and Richard. Until the age of twelve, they'd shared a seamless ferocious energy playing football, cricket, go-karts. Then one day he'd woken at dawn, the sky at its softest grey. As he'd watched it turn blue, despair had formed. Something rubbing away at his heart had finally found a way in. His mother asked if he was sick. He couldn't speak. She'd watched him with careful, hooded eyes. Then firmly tucked in the blankets, tighter, tighter. He hadn't gone on medication until after she'd died...the melting sensation was so seductive; encircling pain, panic, anxiety - so they couldn't stick. But nor could he fuck! Or think!

Jono drove up, stopped in the middle of the drive. Coralie got out too, and the pair of them leaned against the car, honking with laughter.

Then Coralie stepped away and began spinning around on tip-toes. Her blouse rose up, rippling as she turned in the pearly light streaming down from the sodium lamp. Jono reached for her. She spun out of view, under the porch, with Jono close behind.

Dan tried to continue his game.

Sounds of fighting came from down below. Something thumped against a wall. Coralie let out a short scream. He was just about to get up,

when everything fell quiet. After a few listening minutes, Dan flew a gryphon through a luminous green forest.

Next, loud groaning sex.

He went inside, put on earphones and turned up the volume for *Nagrand's* haunting, sorrowful music. Thought about his last time - another teacher - there'd been no zest in it, although she'd had a fantastic body, and all her parts worked; a wank would have been easier.

#

In the morning Dan went out on the porch. No more excuses, he had to dig those damned camellia holes. Best to do it early on, if only to justify playing some PvP before his sub died. He went down the steps passing empty beer boxes on Coralie and Jono's porch.

He got the spade and walked to the letterboxes. Heat radiated off the drive. Cicadas were going nuts. He started the first hole. Or tried to. The ground was hard as stone. He'd need a pickaxe to crack it open!

Up the drive he went, looking for a hose. He found a tap leaking onto a cluster of ferns. Drips shivered the fronds. There was no hose, only a silverbeet plant gone to seed, and a plastic bucket slit from top to bottom.

He passed the camellias and realised he hadn't watered them. He got the jug and ferried a sloshing load down the steps. It took a further twenty-four trips to complete the job. When all the camellias had been watered, Dan stood back and admired them. Their leaves were a sleek greeny-black in the shade, although the shade was shrinking fast.

As for watering the stony ground, a jug was a joke. Even a bucket would be close to useless. He'd have to go back to Plant Barn and buy a hose.

Dan said Hello to Coralie who was standing on her porch, eating an iceblock. She smiled at him, When's that pool going in?

You'll have to imagine one.

She laughed as if this was hilarious. You're funny, she said. Did you know that?

People tell me that.

Yeah, well, you are.

A sparrow ran down the drive. As they watched, it stopped, and stared at them. Coralie forgot her iceblock. Drops splashed onto the porch and vaporised. The bird hunched lower to the ground and ran a little further on toward the letterboxes.

I wish I was a sparrow, Coralie said sadly.

Why's that?

She thought for a moment. Because sparrows are freer than flowers.

Dan wondered if he'd heard wrong. Or if she were stoned. She was watching the sparrow, and he was watching her, her long dyed blonde hair was the colour of cream. Despite himself, he began to feel drawn to her. Then the sparrow flew up onto the dented letterboxes.

Coralie grinned at him.

It made Dan light-headed. See you round, he said.

#

That evening it was so humid, Dan thought of bringing out his mattress and sleeping under the stars. In the end, he stayed where he was on the porch, with his laptop on his knees.

Coralie appeared on the top step. This is for you, she said.

I'm off in for the night, Dan said closing his laptop. She just stood there holding out a can of beer, and he took it. The beer was ice-cold. Delicious.

She sat down beside him, cross-legged, with a beercan jammed against her crotch. She wore a man's singlet as a dress. It didn't cover the top of her bra which was a white gleam in the dim light.

Dan concentrated on his beer.

You're not much of a gardener - you're meant to use the hose at night. Otherwise you're just watering the sun.

Dan thought she was a bit mad, and also very sweet. I'll wait for the rain, he said.

She took a sip, returned the can to her crotch.

Where's Jono?

At a tangi, back Tuesday. She looked at him, You got a girlfriend?

No.

He started remembering Rose...the way she held on tight to him when she slept, her stomach stuck to his back. Times they barely made it through the front door before they were half-undressed and...

You'll have to stake those camellias, Coralie said. There was a sharp hiss as she pulled the tab off another beer. She offered it to Dan, who shook his head.

Coralie stretched up and touched his cheek with the tip of her nose, then drew back slightly. Dan felt her breath on his face. She kissed his neck, just beneath his ear. He ran a finger across her soft mouth: she bit it.

A clapped-out car came up the drive. Coralie shrank against the wall. The driver got out and knocked on her door. Jono? Jono? he called out. Then he got back in his car, reversing away.

Coralie moved in close to Dan. He'd come to his senses. You better go, he said.

She watched him as intently as a cat. Why?

He didn't answer.

Coralie had a few more sips as if he were no longer there, then got up and padded down the steps.

He went inside and locked the door, leaning back against it, his heart beating hard, thinking of Rose. How they'd sit on the sand dunes, high on dope and beer, waiting for the sun to go down. Her sweat and perfume burnt deep into the fabric of him.

Dan found the cigarettes. Blew out smoke rings. They floated in the stagnant air.

Rose had visited him as he had lain in bed, depressed again, unable to speak. Then he'd been outside his body, somehow, perched upside-down in a fold of the curtains like a bat. From that vantage point

he'd watched them both; himself, her. She was half-on, half-off the bed. Repulsed but polite. Hadn't seen her since.

Fear of life, he thought suddenly. Depression was bound to it. Devouring. Insatiable. Then gone. In its absence, like a pebble at the bottom of a pond, was the instinct for survival - to go on.

#

Fuck! He'd forgotten to bring the phone's charger, leaving it behind in his unit. Fuck it! A long bus ride, followed by a long walk from the stop to his place. He got up with a groan, went into the kitchen and switched on the jug.

Shrieking birds were scrapping over bread flung across the neighbour's lawn. An old man came out of the house, knocking against some windchimes making them tinkle. The birds flew up onto the rose-smothered garage, then wafted down and resumed scrapping.

Stuff the bus. He'd get a cab. Make Richard pay for it. Should have got one to Plant Barn.

#

Dan stared at Richard's new Volkswagon Passat, parked behind his tarp-wrapped Subaru Impreza. Then he went up the path. Should he use his key? Or knock? He knocked as hard as he could.

Richard opened the door.

I thought you were at the beach?

Richard looked like he hadn't slept in a week. On the carpet, high-heeled sandals were askew on their sides. Dan pointed at them. What the hell? he said.

Stepping outside, Richard closed the door behind him. Listen, he began, then stopped.

I'm all ears.

Well, I think you can guess.

You bastard.

Don't cry about it. I'm saving your arse here.

Oh, that makes it better.

Sucks to be me, Richard smiled sleepily.

Sucks to be your wife.

Shut up about it; or find someone else to pay your bills.

A rubbish truck growled up the street, lifting and clanking down wheelie bins.

Get my charger, Dan said. It's next to the bed. When Richard returned, he walked off without saying goodbye, passing his sad tarp-wrapped car, and Richard's shiny VW. He thought of his sister-in-law, a tight-lipped stringy ex-model who worshipped money as much as Richard did.

Rain sifted down, warm as bathwater. The asphalt steamed, and smelt like wet nails. He walked on thinking of his Mum. How he and Richard had not once talked about her suicide.

The rain intensified. His runners became waterlogged. He had to put a real swing in his stride in order to keep moving.

Back at the flat, he stripped off his wet clothes and wrapped a towel around his waist. The walk had made him ravenous. He wanted to order in lasagne, salad, garlic bread - but first he got a beer from the fridge.

There was a knock on the door. It'd be Richard. Let him wait. He took his time crossing over to open it.

Thanks, you owe me a beer, Coralie said, taking the bottle out of his hand

Jesus!

What?

Nothing. Come on in.

How's Your Glass?

I walked slowly out of the doctor's surgery. A man in a bucket-hat started a lawnmower and sparrows hopped up the flax spikes.

The light changed and I crossed over to the Mall.

What on earth would I say to my kids? I've got four, plus two grandsons allowed to live in London because their grandad's Irish. The granddad they've never met. He could be alive or dead, I wouldn't know. He left me when Denise was seven and Gary was five.

No amount of Latin or French or stiff-backed dancing lessons had prepared me for that great long streak of a man with a voice that came directly from the gods. Jim Payne. Well named for the grief he caused, though at the beginning it was all joy. *My darling girl*, he'd murmur, *What a darling girl*, in his velvety enclosing brogue, and any brains I might have had dissolved.

The Mall's automatic doors swept apart. I was in a blaze of fluorescent light. I dropped onto a chair in the foodhall. It was early, a few people rattled about like loose change in a big box.

A two-year-old girl in gumboots stamped toward me. She was wearing the sort of home-made cardi that you don't often see these days. Her mother bought her an ice-cream with sprinkles on top.

The little girl reminded me of my youngest, Lisa, when she was that age; fairy-floss ponytails, and pink woollies knitted by my sister, who'd only had sons. It had taken her years to knit the pink out of her system.

It wasn't until I went to blow my nose that I realised I was still gripping the doctor's note. I shoved it, unread, into my handbag.

Lisa and her horrible boyfriends! How many times had I seen what they'd done, shut my mouth, and gone home seething?

The little girl stamped into the department store. I saw a banner above the entrance – *3 Day Spring Sale*. That got me back on my feet.

#

A bus arrived as soon as I came out of the Mall. I climbed inside and sat my parcel on my lap. I'd start by talking to my eldest, Denise.

The bus bowled along past blocks of flats with old beds, stoves and rusty driers piled outside for the inorganic collection. Beyond the intersection lay a rolling green curve of park, the band rotunda's roof was carpeted in restless gulls. Their high-pitched shrieks were loud enough to be heard above the roar of the bus. Then came renovated villas and geraniums winding up telegraph poles. I pressed the bell.

The bus stopped. I got off and it slid away. I'd spent the whole trip *not* thinking about what I was going to say to Denise.

When it comes to love and money, Denise is the most successful of my offspring. Born with a quick, discerning mind. She used to compare our house to the neighbour's, unfavourably. In our house, the dirty washing would edge toward the machine in big piles, going out on the line

whenever. Not like Mrs Next-door who had hers out first thing every morning, all the pegs in straight lines.

Come on with you, come on my beauty... oh Jim, who are you charming now? I picked up my parcel and walked past trees brimming with scarlet blossoms. There was a whoosh of black wings as tuis flew by. They landed on a branch singing to one another.

I leaned against the wooden gate and looked at Denise's villa. I had grown up in one with the same wrap-around verandah; the same pergola covered in a climbing rose. Even the colour matched – butterscotch, with a burgundy trim. Then Denise's fluff-pot cat padded up and rubbed against my leg. I pushed open the gate and followed the cat past weed-free borders. There were pert newly-risen crocuses and shrubs clipped into balls. The cat slipped away, her miaow growing fainter after she disappeared around the corner.

As I walked up the steps, the garage door creaked open and Denise drove out - her hair short, styled, smooth as chopped butter.

Hey, there, I waved. She stopped and the window went down.

Mum!

Is this a bad time?

I'm off to a meeting.

Not to worry, I was only passing.

Hop in and I'll drop you somewhere.

I sat on the heated leather passenger seat. Instantly I wanted to sleep.

Where do you want to go?

Elvis'. My eyes closed.

Mum, Denise touched my arm. Are you alright?

Now, I had her attention...and absolutely no energy.

Yes, I'm alright, I smiled - too brightly?

She hadn't noticed.

I looked up at an oak tree's new leaves. Sunlight shone right through them as if they were made from cellophane. We whooshed past more renovated villas then crossed over the motorway.

Why don't you come for dinner tomorrow? Denise asked.

Lovely.

She drew up behind Elvis' car. It had a black rubbish sack taped across the smashed rear window, and the boot was tied shut with a piece of rope.

What a dump, Denise said.

See you tomorrow, I said, getting out.

Sure.

I watched until she had swung round and driven down the hill.

Elvis was my third child, and the most difficult to visit with his endless moans. I tried to breathe calmly, deeply, though that taken-for-granted ability was long gone. These days there were only the quick shallow breaths that left me woozy.

Coming up to the house, I smelt soiled disposable nappies. The lid had broken off the wheelie bin and the contents were stewing in the sun.

Shut up, the baby's asleep, Janine yelled inside the house.

Then everything went quiet. Janine was the latest of Elvis' de facto's. They got younger and younger, all with a brood of kids, none of them his.

The front door was open a crack. I gave it a push and saw Janine's boys standing in the hallway. The oldest stared at me with round eyes, reminding me of a dreadful movie I'd watched with Elvis about a delinquent who'd gassed a cat and wrapped it in gladwrap.

You-know-who's here, Janine said, leaning against the lounge door with her arms folded.

I walked into the musty smell of damp cupboards, and the dark green tang of dope - poor wee kids. They flattened themselves against the wall as I passed.

I caught a whiff of Janine's armpits when I squeezed by her. Could you have a wash? I wanted to ask. We hadn't clicked. I once overheard her calling me Lard Arse.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the gloomy lounge. They never opened the curtains or switched off the telly.

Nice day outside, I said. I always say that, even if it's pelting down.

I'm making a coffee, Janine said. Want some?

That would be very nice, thanks.

I sat beside a rubber plant that had withered into a brown stump. The dog padded in and ate up all the crusts left on a plate, then settled on

the sports news spread out at Elvis' feet. A rugby match was on and the volume was so low it sounded as if it were being broadcast through water.

How are you? I asked.

Same old.

His face was all pinched and blurry; dope and booze and laziness. He's a conman like his father. Except Darcy had had tons of energy. He had crackled with life, and temper, too. He was the worst of my children's fathers. He had raged at me, the empty fridge, the kids and the dogs, while I had cuddled and kissed and toted baby Elvis around everywhere – because the baby, at least, would gaze at me with blue wonder.

It ended the day Darcy said, Because of you my life is fucked.

Janine came in with a tray. Out of milk, she said, handing me a mug.

Leave mine to cool, Elvis told her.

The youngest boy sidled up to Janine.

Isiah got my gun, he cried, burying his head in her lap. Mu-um, Mu-um, Mu-um.

Finally, she got up to investigate.

Elvis lit a cigarette, then coughed. It broke the silence, if you could call it that with the kids and the telly and the dog snuffling in its sleep.

We're behind in the rent, he said.

I felt the usual reflex to rummage in my purse, even though he'd probably blown his rent on the pokies. My life has been a succession of

gamblers poring over Best Bets, skiving off to the TAB and watching the big race down at the pub.

Oh, yes, I said, to give myself time, because after the stalled reflex I'd had an unexpected idea – it's not *my* problem. Isn't that what Denise always said?

Got till Tuesday, he added, turning his pale cagey eyes on me. I prickled. They were the same icy blue that had made me a bit scared, and yet thrilled, when I'd met his father at the Tivoli nightclub. At that time I was a husbandless mother-of-two, and managing. A telephonist at the power board. I wore tan court shoes to work, and blouses buttoned up to my throat. But when I went to the Tivoli everything changed: my shoulders dropped; my eyes went sultry; I'd light a cigarette and blow smoke from my nostrils. Del Shannon blared from the jukebox singing *Do You Wanna Dance*...I heard that song again when John Lennon sang it. Except Lennon's voice sounded like an old rag being dragged through a wringer.

I'd swivelled my bar stool around to face Darcy, on an evening that seems light years away, and said, Rum and coke.

Of course, he replied, ordering one each.

The next day, we were in the room he rented above a fruit shop.

It's a form of mental illness, this getting swept off your feet to have sex in a room that stinks of potato sacks. No attention paid to the fact that it shouldn't be, or wouldn't last. Just the tension of waiting for the next chance to get up those rickety steps, while down below Mr Lee

methodically weighed produce, filling string bags with oranges and tomatoes.

How about it, then? Elvis asked, stubbing out his smoke in a saucer they used for an ashtray.

I couldn't say a word.

Janine returned, flopping down onto the sofa. A moment later, the baby started crying.

Won't get in your way, love, I said, getting up and making for the hallway.

I clicked shut the front door and set off for the bus stop down by the dairy.

Navy boilersuits swayed on the neighbour's washing line. I watched a butterfly sailing through the air. Then the view hit me.

The street overlooked a huge park. Acres of grass and huddles of glimmering trees. It reminded me of my childhood. I had loathed growing up on the farm; dumb-eyed cows, silage, flies, and the eerie country silence with a thrum in the middle of it – the sound of utter shrivelling boredom. I'd craved people, picture theatres, shops.

I thought of Mum. When I'd told her I was pregnant, she'd called me a disgusting tramp! Pushed me out of the house. I'd banged on the door. She wouldn't let me back in. My sister was locked in with her, I knew she'd be scared.

I banged again, shouting, I am *not* disgusting.

You're a whore! Mum yelled back.

But sex was amazing. Surprising.

My sister bundled up my things in a sheet and dropped it out the window. I carried the bundle down the path, under the pergola, down the road, and waited for the bus to town. I'd been sent to Girls' Grammar in order to marry a doctor-lawyer-banker. Not a dirt-poor Irishman.

I picked up my Spring Sale parcel, which was light considering the size of it, and turned back onto the footpath. A rambling rose curled over a fence. One of the flowers gave way. White petals floated to the dark tarseal.

I plodded on, carefully planting one foot after another. It was a steep slope and I didn't want to fall.

#

When I arrived at my eldest son's flat, he was in the kitchenette, humming along to the radio.

Want some lunch? Gary asked.

Please, I said, sitting at the small table. No extras in this place, bar the flat-screen television and a wall clock with Roman numerals.

Gary brought over the sandwiches and a pot of tea. He put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. How've you been, Mum?

I gave him the doctor's note.

Hospice?

The word chilled me to the bone.

He put his arm around me.

I need to lie down, I said, getting up and going over to his bed.

He laid a blanket over me. I rolled away from him and put an arm across my eyes; tears never came. It could always be worse - I'd said *that* a million times.

I seemed to fall into a trance, lulled by the steady tick of the clock, and the radio's whispery music.

Time for a new recording of Strauss' final work, the announcer said, *Four Last Songs*. A silvery soprano voice wound me into an even deeper zone where Lisa's father, Spruce Bruce, stood in all his brylcreamed glory. He winked at me, then turned and pranced away, growing smaller with each prancing step until he was a six-legged ant wearing three pairs of tiny black shoes. I knew he wasn't real, I knew I was dozing, yet seeing him stirred me up all over again and I felt myself glowing. I pushed off the blanket and sat up.

Gary went to make a fresh pot of tea.

You and I are quite similar, I said. Minimum wage. Few prospects. True.

I'm not knocking it. I just worry that you need someone to keep you warm at night.

He sighed and said, No point looking for something you can't have, Mum. Who would want to live with a barrow pusher at the market? Christ, I'm in bed by seven, up at four in the morning. I have to warm my own heart, and he smiled.

I was taking in what he said, how he looked. Gary was happy, he was a success. To think I'd worried because some idiots said he was

simple. He knew how many smokes he could afford each week, how many beers. He bet so much pay to pay, no more, no less, saved any winnings. Self-supporting, sure, although going nowhere. That's a hard truth for a mother, my good and true Gary getting by on next to nothing.

My life's honest, Mum. No-one can creep up behind and blow it all down.

Not like when your Dads were around?

He replied, without any bitterness, Today is all that matters.

Gary pulled a tobacco pouch out of his pocket and carefully rolled a smoke.

Have you told the others?

I shook my head.

Shall I come and stay with you?

Maybe, I said, picking up my tea and drinking a little more.

Anything, Mum.

We sat quietly for a while, I'd meant to visit Lisa but it would have to wait. Telling Gary had worn me out.

Would you call me a cab, love? I need to go to Pak N Save.

He reached for the phone, then went outside with it. I watched him through the window as he paced the tiny flowerless courtyard; my heart ached.

When the cab arrived, I almost didn't get in. I felt so safe with Gary. He held open the cab door and kindly pushed my parcel along the seat.

The driver turned around and said, Come on, missus.

I couldn't look back to wave.

Mind if I listen to the news? The driver asked.

Of course not.

Want to hear what happened in the resthome case.

Is that where the old lady's mouth was taped shut?

That's the one, he said, turning up the volume.

My Mum had ended up in a resthome. My sister begged me to visit.

We sat in the TV room, all the seats had washable covers – not washed often enough, the place reeked of stale wee. We watched reruns of *I Love Lucy*, Mum's eyes fixed on the screen. Lucy and Ethel were wrapping candy delivered on a conveyor belt. The conveyor belt moved faster and faster. They couldn't keep up. Stuffed candy down the top of their smocks. In their hats.

I think we're fighting a losing game, Lucy said, cramming candy into her mouth.

I'd squeezed Mum's hand, surprised at how tense it was. My heart had felt so strange, as if someone had slowly cut around the edge of it.

Here we are, the cab driver said, pulling up outside Pak N Save.

Could you take me to Liquor King instead? I asked.

#

The next morning was sunny and warm. I carried my Spring Sale parcel past Nana's Roasts, the copy shop, the Chinese takeaways and the laundromat and sat down in the bus shelter.

There was a beautiful perfume in the air. I looked around thinking there must be a daphne bush nearby. Couldn't see one. Then I saw the magnolia tree across the road had come into flower. Its perfume was so strong my head began to swim.

A moment later, a rat staggered down the alley by the laundromat. It stopped on the footpath and trembled, letting out a horrible gasp.

The laundromat owner ran out of his shop with a baseball bat.

THWACK

The rat dropped.

Vermin, the owner said to me. Vermin!

The bus arrived. I got on, sat by the window with the parcel on my lap, and looked back. The owner was prodding the rat into a bin with the end of the bat.

I realized the rat had already been dying and the man was putting it out of its misery. Nevertheless, I felt shaken and a bit sick.

A scruffy teenager got on at the next stop. He wore earphones. A metallic thumping leaked out. Not very musical, in my book. When I think back – the cha cha! The bossa nova with its sidesteps and hip sways...Spruce Bruce and his patent leather dance shoes. Heaven forbid if he scuffed them! We'd only have split pea soup and tinned spaghetti to eat until he'd paid off a new pair.

I was waitressing when I met him. He'd ordered a shrimp cocktail, filet mignon and pineapple fritters. He was as handsome as one of those

clean-cut, pipe-holding men on knitting pattern covers. Yet when I bent forward to pick up his empty dessert dish, he'd said, Nice pair of tits!

My sister saw him a few years back. Said he'd dyed his hair. What was left of it. I hate that, she'd said. Old people with black hair and white regrowth.

The bus pulled up outside the library and I got off. Lisa only lived a few doors away. As I neared, I saw Craig get into his car. I waited at the gate as he reversed down the driveway. He smirked at me, then sped off.

To think weedy Craig, slender as a length of bamboo, had given Lisa all those bruises. I'd have left him if it was me – although I'd never said that to her.

Lisa was soft-natured. An easy forgiver. What a blessing, I'd thought when she was a child. Then the blessing turned, her men were awful; she forgave them.

This time I *would* say something.

I pushed open the rusty gate and strode up the path. When Lisa opened the door I was pleased the shaved sides of her head had grown a bit more. Another month or so and the tattoo would disappear under hair.

The place was always a mess of pizza boxes, empties and DVDs. This time the floor was clear. Everything was neatly stacked in cardboard boxes.

What's going on? I asked.

The removal van'll be here shortly.

I thought Craig loved this place?

He does.

I don't understand.

I'm going, Mum. He's got...someone else.

She leant back against the wall.

I was struck by the fatigue that suddenly aged her. A pain shot across my chest and I froze. Neither Lisa, nor I, had ever been any man's one-and-only.

I mutely handed her the parcel.

She undid the wrapping paper, lifting out the luxuriously soft pink dressing gown.

Oh my God! she said. How did you afford this?

#

I banged down the brass knocker and Denise let me in.

What a fabulous day, summer's on its way, she said.

I followed her into the kitchen. It's as big as my whole flat.

I'm making a gin and tonic. Don't suppose you want one?

No, thanks.

Glass of wine?

I shook my head and sat on one of the wicker chairs arranged to overlook the pool. A few leaves straggled on the water.

John still in Singapore? I asked.

He'll be home tomorrow.

The lid came off the tonic with a hiss.

Do you have any coke?

Of course.

What about a drop of rum?

She rattled things in the walk-in pantry, emerging with a bottle.

The noise woke the cat who'd been asleep on the chair next to me.

She began cleaning herself – arsehole first, as Elvis had once observed. I burst out laughing.

What's so funny? Denise asked, coming across with the drinks.

Nothing. Memories.

I was so tired, the drink didn't taste of anything. The coke sizzled on the way down, then there was a hot spike from the rum. I gulped the lot.

Mum! Denise frowned.

How about another one?

Do you really think you should?

I do.

She took a ladylike sip from her gin - a drink, in my view, only good for pickling cabbages.

What's got into you? she asked.

The cat rose up and stretched her spine into a coathanger, then she jumped down and waltzed away. Oddly enough, her absence left a gap in the atmosphere. There was just me and Denise, and the sound of ice tinkling in her glass.

We looked out at the pool, lit from within, it shone more brightly as the sky dimmed.

Lisa's Dad used to work at the Tepid Baths, I said. Do you remember how he used to sneak you kids in for free?

I can barely remember my own father.

A stinging shame burned my face. None of them ever really knew their Dads.

I thought of Elvis asking his kindy teacher, Have *you* seen my father?

And later that same day, while I'd been peeling potatoes for tea and Denise had been setting the table, Elvis had looked up at me with innocent eyes, Mum, have *you* seen my father?

Before I could think of an answer, Denise had shouted, He's never coming back!

Elvis howled as if he'd been slapped.

Denise, I really need that drink, I said. I'm not joking.

She made it straightaway, bringing over cheese and crackers too.

You've lost weight, she said.

I stared into my glass.

What's wrong, Mum?

A pang went through me. The words came out in a rush, I'll be gone by Christmas.

I didn't look at her. She's not a crier, but I couldn't take the chance.

#

It was a great effort to walk to the front door. I wouldn't let Denise help me, although I felt her eyes on me every step of the way. It wasn't until I was inside that I heard her car rolling away.

The kitchen light was on. A slice fell on Lisa, asleep on the sofa. I admired her feet, dainty as her father's, poking out of the pink dressing gown.

I remembered when she had toddled up to me with an astonished look on her face, the day Spruce Bruce had left.

There'd never been time to cry. Not after him, not after Darcy, or Jim.

So that's that, then, Denise had announced after Spruce Bruce slammed the door.

Oh, probably, I'd sighed. Probably. Yes.

Two Day Dad

Ruben was on an intercity bus travelling from his home in the city - where he lived with Mum - to Dad's place in the country. He'd hardly ever seen Dad. Until he was six, Ruben could barely describe him to friends, except to say he was tall and skinny, with hair the colour of a ten cent coin.

It was Ruben's first visit on his own. He'd asked Mum if he could go heaps of times. Begged.

For a weekend, Mum had finally agreed.

Yes!

I could do some overtime, she'd added, cheering up.

On their one and only visit, Dad had given Ruben a man's watch.

Don't you feed him? he'd growled Mum, when the watch had slipped off Ruben's wrist.

Mum had rolled her eyes. Said under her breath, *Idiot*.

A bright sky flashed in and out of view as the bus roared through a tunnel of trees lining the highway. The bus emerged into a squinty glare. Bleached tree-stumps were huddled in a group like dinosaur bones.

The bus ground its way up to the top of a hill, then headed down towards flat farmland which spread out as far as Ruben could see. Farms gave way to a row of shops with boarded-over windows and garage roller

doors. Ruben recognized the pub with a red rooster painted on it. A superette. Takeaways. Doctor. A line of sad-looking houses with scraggly lawns, lemon trees, rusty swing-sets.

The bus slowed, turning into a layby. Dad's little grey hatchback was parked up on the verge.

Ruben hopped down the steps of the bus. The door closed behind him with a whoosh. He rushed to the car: it was empty.

A motorbike tore past. Ruben watched it shrink to a shimmering dot. A bead of sweat rolled down Ruben's back - where was Dad?

Ruben's eighth birthday had been and gone and he hadn't turned up for that. Hadn't even rung.

For his seventh birthday, Dad had arrived with a pocket knife that fell to bits as soon as Ruben opened it.

Two-dollar shop rubbish, Mum had said, afterwards.

It's *not* rubbish! Ruben had shouted. He'd run down to the end of the driveway, his heart beating fast enough to burst.

Across the road, a few cows sat in the shade of a big twisted tree. The cows could have been carved out of rock - not even a tail twitched. Heat quivered off the baking tarseal. Cicadas droned scritch-scratch-scratch.

A ute swept by, planks strapped to its tray, a rag tied to the longest plank waving a crazy goodbye.

Ruben's damp hair clung to his forehead. He pushed it out of his eyes. Brown hair, same as Mum's. Ruben got his height from Dad. People mistook him for being eleven or twelve. He was the tallest kid in class.

There was power in being tall. He hadn't worked it out exactly. But when he'd stood looking down on Eli - who'd said Ruben's Dad didn't want him because Ruben was a dumb arse, and his Mum was a ho - Eli backed off without another mean word.

A cattle truck loomed. Clattered by spitting gravel.

Ruben spotted someone in the distance. The heat haze made the person wobble like an insect in jelly. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Ruben held his breath - *please* be Dad...it was Dad, barefoot, wearing jeans and a singlet. His hair fiery in the sun. He came closer, kicking up gingery dust from the clay verge.

Hey there, stranger, Dad said.

Where were you? Ruben blurted.

Up at the shops. He threw a chocolate bar to Ruben.

I've been waiting ages.

Jump in, Dad said, slinging a bag of groceries onto the back seat. He half-crouched to get in the little car, and sat hunched over the steering wheel. A cricket in a matchbox, Ruben thought. He licked chocolate off his hand - the bar had squished out of the wrapper.

It took Dad five goes to get the engine started. The car bumped over a pothole. All the windows rattled in their frames. They drove past more cows, crossed over a stream, and swung onto a narrow road that had four houses on it. Dad pulled into the driveway of the blue one. It was made of knobbly concrete. He parked beside a cabbage tree. The tree's dried-out leaves rattled when he slammed shut his door.

Ruben followed him up the gravel path beside the house. Dad was even skinnier than before. And he was bent over as if he were really old. If he ever came to school, the kids would think he was Ruben's *Granddad*.

The backyard was a jumble of wood-piles, bricks and tyres, and overgrown weeds. A creek ran along the end of the section. It was shaded by weeping willows.

Sad time for Homer, Dad sighed. He walked over to where the black labrador lay on a blanket. A tarpaulin had been rigged up to shelter both the dog, and a sofa which had stuffing oozing out its armrests. Lots of squashed beer cans glinted in the long grass.

Homer rolled his eyes up to Dad, and groaned.

What's wrong with him? Ruben asked.

Old...no cure for it. Least none I know of.

Ruben had never seen a sick animal before. When his guinea pig died, it simply fell asleep one night.

Dad went into the wash-house. A moment later he came out carrying a car door. He leant it against the sofa so that Homer had more shade.

You can pat him, if you want.

Ruben's hands felt cold and tingly. He stuffed them in his pockets. Suddenly he started humming.

What's that song?

Mum sings it when I'm sick.

Dad's eyes softened. His face stayed hard, though. Whenever he smiled, Ruben thought it looked as if Dad's face had cracked.

A pair of hawks sailed overhead, their wings tipped upwards.

Looking for road kill, Dad said, following Ruben's gaze. Rabbits, hedgehogs, dumb possums. If something's dead on the road, pull it over to the verge so a hawk doesn't end up road kill, too.

Ruben nodded, and continued humming.

Might as well put your bag in the front room, Dad said.

Ruben pushed past the fig tree. It had grown up through the washing line, and was covered in fruit. Nibbled figs showed bright pink insides. Birds. The tree needed netting over it. That's what Mum put over their peach tree at home.

He smelt the loo from five feet away. It was in the lean-to bathroom, along with a shower and a sink. You pulled a long chain to flush the loo. Water shot into the bowl. The loo hee-hawed loud as a donkey. He'd nearly jumped out of his skin when him and Mum had visited.

Ruben went inside the house. There was a kitchen to the left. A lounge. Two bedrooms on the right. The smallest bedroom was at the end of the hall where a broken computer and two tele's were stacked against the front door.

The bedroom was dusty. The wallpaper was old and flowery and curling around the edges. Ruben dumped his backpack on the bed. There was only just enough space for the bed and a dressing table with its mirror missing.

#

Dad sat across from Ruben at the kitchen table, drinking beer.

Although the sun still shone outside, shrubs had grown across the window and the room had an underwater feel.

A fly landed on the table, it gave a whiny buzz, and walked towards the tomato sauce bottle. Dad shooed it off.

The chops were tough, the mash had grey lumps in it.

How's your tea? Dad asked.

Yum as.

Ruben noticed Dad had drunk two beers. Eaten nothing.

I'll cut it, Dad said. He leant forward, slicing Ruben's chop into pea-sized pieces. What'd you do in the holidays? he asked.

Not much...got a Nintendo for Christmas. My friend Sam got a Playstation 3 *and* a Wii. Mum said I might get a Wii now she's working til five. I go to after-school care with Sam and Eli. There's a swimming pool. The intermediate kids won't let us in the deep end.

Dad burped, crushed his empty beer can.

What's your favourite subject at school?

Art. I won a drawing competition.

True?

Yep. Mum took me out for pizza at a restaurant.

That's great, Dad answered in a flat voice.

I won a thirty dollar book voucher, Ruben added. But something had gone wrong.

Better check on Homer, Dad said, pushing back his chair and going outside.

Ruben spat out the mouthful of chop that he'd been politely chewing. The room was stifling. He got up and tried to open the window. The shrubs were so tightly pressed against it, he couldn't. A couple of flies lifted off the bench, perching on the sill. Ruben stood there, unsure what to do. The flies buzzed back down again.

Ruben went to the doorway. Up ahead, past the washing line and the fig tree, he saw Dad sitting on the sofa. The sun was behind the willows at the end of the section. Everything in the yard glimmered as if wrapped in tin-foil. Homer whined and Dad bent down to comfort him. Something chimed in Ruben. As if drawn along by a string, he moved towards Dad.

Dad held a sipper bottle close to Homer's mouth. Homer slurped some water, and whimpered.

Ruben tried hard not to cry. Poor Homer, he said. I wish we could help him.

I'd offer you one, but, Dad opened a can; beer hissed.

Ruben sat on the sofa. The sofa stank of dog. Cigarettes. Beer.

We'll just keep the old fulla company, Dad said.

It was so quiet, even the birds had stopped calling. Ruben felt self-conscious in the quiet. He badly wanted to say something, but couldn't think of anything.

Finally, footsteps sounded on the gravel path beside the house. Ruben turned and saw a teenaged boy walking towards them, carrying a box of beer. The boy ducked under the tarpaulin. Dad said, Hey, Brodie, this is Ruben. Ruben, Brodie's from next door.

Brodie cocked his head to one side. How do you know Big Red?

He's my Dad,

Huh.

Homer's tail shook.

You're pleased to see me, boy, Brodie said. He squatted down and stroked Homer from his head to his tail. Good boy, good boy.

Breaks my heart, Dad said.

Do something about it, then. Brodie pulled a rollie out of his pocket and lit up.

Ruben watched, amazed, as Brodie inhaled, put his mouth close to Homer's nose, and breathed out softly. The rollie smelt funny - like the rotting hay Mum got for their new worm farm.

Three more puffs, and Homer lay still.

Is he all right? Ruben whispered.

Course, just calmed him down. Sad old mutt. Brodie stood up. He pulled off his beanie. A bushy ball of black hair sprang out. Man, you gotta get rid of your rubbish. It's bringing rats.

Dad shrugged.

You said you would last week. It's really pissing off my folks.

Okay, okay. Tomorrow.

Brodie opened his box of beers. He held out one for Dad. Sitting next to Ruben, Brodie said, Hey little buddy, how do you put up with this guy?

Ruben liked Brodie's big smile and friendly eyes. Easy, he said proudly.

Why haven't I seen you before?

I live in the city.

You should come down more often - might make Red less grumpy.

Just had tea, Dad said. Some left if you want.

Brodie shook his head.

What can we offer him? Dad asked Ruben.

A warm feeling sparked in Ruben. Coco Pops? he suggested.

Don't worry about it, Brodie sculled his beer. I've already had a feed.

Can I have Coco Pops for pudding?

Knock yourself out, Dad said.

As Ruben walked away, Brodie said to Dad, Since when did you have a kid?

Didn't see that coming, did you? Dad laughed.

Yet all Ruben could think of was Dad saying, What else can we offer him? The warm feeling grew bigger. He had the idea that the world, though immense, was light as a feather, and could change utterly - wonderfully - in a split second. He filled a bowl with Coco Pops. Sat on the back step, eating. There was a fingernail moon, and millions of stars - like Guy Fawkes, without all the crack-crackle-booms.

Brodie lit a cigarette. Ruben watched the smoke gather around his hair, the bushy ball looked like an enormous ghostly dandelion.

You still on for tonight? he heard him say.

Better not. Got the kid.

It's Friday night, bro. He'll be all right, it's just next door.

Ruben noticed a dark shape sliding through the fig tree. A branch dipped. He saw a rat eating a fig. Moments later, the rat melted back into a dark shape and slipped away.

Ruben hopped up and went inside, closing the door behind him. He felt hot and cold and sick.

#

Ruben woke to the sound of thumping music. Laughter. Wolf whistles. The party noise was coming from next door.

Dad? he called out. Dad?

He turned on his torch, and got out of bed. The light was on in Dad's room. Dad wasn't there. Not in the lounge or the kitchen, either.

Even though he was scared of rats, Ruben creaked open the door and went to where the hedge thinned. He could see Brodie's carport. People were standing around under a yellow light, drinking. Wolf-whistles, foot-stomping...Venus, Venus.

An old lady came out of the house, wearing trackpants and a long cardi.

Give us a song, Venus, Ruben heard Dad call out.

Crack! went Ruben's heart. Right then he missed Mum so badly he thought he might puke. She never left him alone at night. She'd watch tele on her own. He'd fall asleep hearing it through the wall.

Come on, Brodie yelled.

Nah, I'm not pissed enough, the old lady said.

Fuckin' hell. Get on with it.

Shut your ugly face! she said.

Ruben ran back into the house and slammed the door.

#

A rooster crowed and Ruben realised it was this sound that had woken him. Birds tweeted outside, cicada's whirred. At home, he lived a few doors away from the train station, carriages rumbled by day and night...Dad had left him alone in the house.

Daylight seeped in beneath the curtains. He'd dreamt of the gold lounge curtains back home. In the dream, a rat had been scuffling around behind them. Ruben had put his foot out to squash the rat. He'd pressed down, and a fluffy ginger kitten squirmed out. The kitten was so small it had fitted in one hand.

The rooster gave another crow. Ruben hauled himself out of bed and opened the curtains. The rooster was in Brodie's yard, standing on a wrecked car propped-up on blocks. The rooster clucked a few times and hopped down disappearing underneath the car.

Ruben put on a clean tee shirt and went out to Homer. The dog was so thin his ribcage showed. If only he could hold Homer in one hand and

pat him in the same way he'd patted the dream kitten. He gently placed the palm of his hand on Homer's chest. Homer's heart shivered in its bony hutch.

The words to Mum's song came to him. He softly sang, *I got you, that's all I want. I won't forget, that's a whole lot... You can see my eyes, you can tell that I'm not ly-y-ing.*

Homer gave a few scrappy yawns and fell asleep.

Hungry, Ruben got up and went back inside. The milk smelt funny so he only used a little on his Coco Pops.

Dad came in with puffy eyes and a glittering day-old beard. He switched on the jug. You want a cuppa? he asked.

No, thanks.

The jug came to a boil.

Hope next door didn't wake you up last night, Dad said.

Ruben kept eating.

Dad scratched his beard. Have you seen the eels?

#

Jittery sparrows pecked about on top of a pile of bricks. They scattered when Dad walked by. Ruben followed him past swordlike flax, and a bush with leaves sharp as teeth. The creek twinkled where daylight shone through a gap in the trees. Dad pointed to where a fern bowed low over the bank. Can you see it? It's having a snooze.

A muddy-grey eel flicked its tail. Ruben jumped back as if bitten. The eel lazily stretched out, sliding away.

Want to catch it? Dad asked.

Yes, please!

There's a bucket in the wash-house, we'll need that.

A wild joy swept through Ruben as he rushed to the wash-house.

Get some bread and a knife, Dad yelled. A sharp knife.

Ruben zigzagged past the flax and the pile of bricks. The wash-house was filled to the gills with junk. He stopped in the doorway and found a bucket sitting on some car parts. Ruben skip-ran to the house. Bread. Knife. He opened the fridge, thrusting the bag of bread into the bucket. The only knife on the bench was a small vegetable peeler. He rummaged around in a drawer that was full of kitchen things. He found a bigger knife, put this in the bucket and dashed out the door.

Dad had stripped off a length of flax and was making a noose out of it. I'll fish them out, he said. You put them in the bucket quick as you can.

There it is! Ruben shouted.

Ssh...ssh...

The eel swam towards them with the wavy motion of a cat's tail.

Dad baited a stick with balled-up bread, slipping the noose and the stick into the water.

More eels approached - their side fins fluttering. One of them moved closer to the baited stick. Dad edged the stick around the other side of the noose. The eel put its head through. He yanked the noose. The eel thrashed in the air as he pulled it out. Ruben screamed.

Get it! Dad yelled.

I can't. I can't.

The eel hooked backwards on the grass.

Quick.

Ruben made a grab for the eel, Ahh! It's slimy!

The eel curved towards the water. Dad reached across, whacking its head with a piece of wood. The eel went slack.

You k-k-killed it, Ruben said in a squeaky voice.

Dad rebaited the stick. Quiet now, he said, this is lunch.

#

Dad pushed away his plate, saying, That's enough for me.

It's weird that eels are fish, Ruben said.

Better than trout.

Ruben pushed together the last pieces of eel on his plate. He thought they tasted like slugs. He said, I haven't had trout.

Prefer eels.

Mmm...I liked catching them, though.

Outside, Homer let out a long, low-pitched howl, followed by a moaning cry.

Dad opened his tobacco pouch, and rolled a smoke very slowly, carefully nipping stray threads off each end.

A wasp flew into the kitchen, zzz-ing around the frying pan.

Homer howled again. It gave Ruben goosebumps.

Dad stood, and Ruben looked up. Dad's eyes had gone dark and blank.

How about you do the dishes? he said.

Sure. I do them at home sometimes.

Think I'll go have a smoke.

Ruben scraped all the leftover eel onto one plate. Mum always covered food with gladwrap; there wasn't any in the cupboards, so he put the eel, uncovered, into the fridge. The wasp was hanging around him. Ruben picked up a tea-towel, flapping the wasp out the doorway.

#

Ruben went down the side of the house and saw Dad lifting up one of the black rubbish sacks that were leaning against the hedge. Give us a hand, he said.

White butterflies trembled where purple flowers grew across the hedge, but untold flies zoomed around the sacks. The stink was terrible.

Giddy at the thought of rats, Ruben stayed put.

Dad dropped the sack in the car's boot. Come on, he said. We need to get to the dump before it shuts.

Okay, okay.

Dad picked up another sack. Lizards squirted out from under it. Egg shells and mouldy lumps fell from a hole in the sack. Shit! More rotten scraps fell out as Dad took it over to the car.

Ruben carefully picked up a sack.

Look out, Dad said. It's moving.

Ruben shrieked. Dropped the sack. Slime oozed out of it.

Dad laughed. Pulling your leg, he said. I'll do it. You wait in the car.

Ruben sat in the car, pinching his nose, and breathing through his mouth.

Dad got in and drove down to the main road. He drummed on the steering wheel.

How far to the dump?

Just outta town. Dad slowed down as a group of hooded boys wandered across the road. Stoners, he said.

They passed the takeaways, the superette. Dad turned at the red rooster pub. More sad-looking houses. A trampoline. A strange cactus like a chain of prickly dinner plates.

They stopped outside a high iron fence. The fence had loops of barbed wire strung along the top.

Might as well drop in on Mozzie, Dad said. He's got the most amazing car you'll ever see. Built it himself.

Dad got out and opened a side gate. A ute was parked in the driveway. There was a wooden house on the right. A garden full of weeds. A fat dog came out of the garage at the end of the driveway. Ruben moved closer to Dad, who continued on past the ute. The dog waddled up to Dad, sniffed his feet, and slunk along beside him.

It was the same sort of dog who, if it clamped down, would lock its jaws and never let go. Ruben had seen one on *Police Ten*.

Dad and Ruben went into the garage. It was as if a dirty cloud had been stuffed into it. It took a moment for Ruben's eyes to adjust to the haze of dust and smoke. In the midst of greasy car parts, sat a shiny orange car.

Its hood was raised and the engine gaped open. A beam of light was trained into it.

Behind the car, a big bald man sat on an upturned beer crate. He wore shorts as small as undies. He said, Yo, Red. Puffed on a cigarette and blew smoke out his nose.

My boy, Ruben, Dad said. Ruben, Mozzie.

Mozzie had bulging eyes and tattoos on his neck. There's a surprise, he said, without surprise.

Ruben saw Mozzie had no front teeth.

Mozzie squashed his cigarette on the concrete. This bloody heat, man. Can't think in it. He reached round and opened a fridge. Took out two beers, threw one at Dad. Maybe in couple year's time, eh Ruben? Off you go and play outside.

I'll only be a few minutes, Dad said.

Too much thinking, not enough drinking, Mozzie laughed.

Ruben went out into the sunshine. From behind, came the dog. The dog's claws sounded like marbles rolling along the concrete floor.

She won't bite, Mozzie called. She's too full of pups.

The dog emerged and stood beside Ruben. She watched him with droopy eyes. Ruben scratched her chest. Her heart bounced like a tennis ball. She gulped some air, lay on her side, and stared at the backyard. Her stomach had two rows of titties.

The iron fence continued all around the yard. The grass had dried out. Brown leaves dangled on a plum tree. Dark purplish plums lay rotting

on the ground and clouds of wasps zzz'd around them. What creatures ate wasps? Ruben wondered. He'd google it when he got home. He watched ants trickling along the concrete. Drowsy, he rested his head on his knees and closed his eyes.

#

Time to go, Dad said, waking Ruben. Above Dad's head, the sky had filled with clouds. Mozzie's dog gruffed and resettled herself.

See you've made a friend.

Ruben patted the dog, who nuzzled his hand. She's nice, he said.

This heat can't be fun for her. She'll be happier when she offloads her pups.

Ruben and Dad walked past the ute, out the gate.

The bloody dump shut five minutes ago, Dad said.

What about the rubbish?

Plan B, Dad said, opening the door for Ruben.

Dad drove to the end of Mozzie's road, where there was a yellow signpost saying, *Lookout, 400m*.

What's at the Lookout? Ruben asked.

The river.

The tarseal turned into bumpy shingle. The windows rattled. Ruben saw huge dark-green trees up ahead. The road ended in a dusty carpark. Dad parked next to a picnic table and a bin.

There's too much rubbish for that bin, Ruben said.

Well, I can't take it home. Brodie's old man'll kill me.

Dad got a sack out of the boot, stuffing it into the bin. Picked up another sack.

Ruben followed him as he went down a track through the trees. It was cool and smudgy under the trees. Pencils of light poked through gaps in the branches. A compost smell came up from the track as Ruben scuffed through fallen leaves. The river could be heard gurgling. Birds sang kiddee-kiddee-kiddee.

Ruben saw Dad drop a sack beside a tree-trunk. At home, there was a blue recycling bin; a compost bin for grass clippings; the worm farm for vegetable and fruit scraps; and a red wheelie bin for everything else. It was Ruben's job to feed the worms...his head began to swim.

Dad pushed past saying, Three more. Dad's hair flashed as he walked through a pencil of light.

There was a racket among the trees. Birds exploded up through the highest leaves.

Ruben walked back to the car. He saw an empty chip bag on the ground. He picked it up, mashed it down inside the bin.

Kiddee-kiddee-kiddee. Birds flew fast overhead.

It was wrong to leave rubbish in the trees. Ruben's stomach tied into a knot as he sat in the car. A far-off dog barked.

Dad came back, said, All done. Home time. He got in the car and revved the engine. Tore out of the carpark. Dust rose behind them.

They drove back in silence. Dad drummed the steering wheel.

Ruben knew he had to make up for the rubbish.

Dad parked under the cabbage tree. Homer's whining could be heard before they'd opened the car doors.

Go inside and have a drink, Dad said. He got out and strode up the path.

Would a drawing help? Ruben wondered as he went into the house. Yes, a drawing for Mum. He went into the bedroom, got his sketchbook and pencils, and took them into the kitchen. He sat at the table, thinking about what to draw...and started sketching an eel with side fins the same shape as fans. Ruben loved the eel's curving tail. Its seed-black eyes. He'd show Dad. He got up and stood on the doorstep. Drizzle was falling. Steam rose from the warm ground. The backyard looked magical. Homer was quiet. Maybe he'd fallen asleep? Ruben went down past the washing line and looked under the tarpaulin.

He saw Dad kneeling beside Homer, with a brick in his hand. Homer's legs were twitching.

Ruben began screaming, No. No. No - the words stuck in his head. Nothing came out of his mouth.

Dad took a deep shivery breath, and bashed Homer on the head. Homer went still. Dad threw away the brick. It hit the wash-house. There was a heavy thump as it landed in a clump of weeds.

Ruben gasped.

Dad caught sight of him. What are you looking at? he roared.

The vet, Ruben burst out.

The vet costs a bloody fortune!

Mum would help.

Two weeks child support - that's how much a vet costs. Dad got up quickly, hitting his head on the tarpaulin. Fuck!

Ruben stumbled over some beer cans, and ran back inside. He darted down the hall to the bedroom. Shut the door, thudding back against it, trembling with shock. It had never occurred to Ruben that Dad paid for him...it was *his* fault Homer had been killed.

He heard Dad moving around in the kitchen. A pot lid fell onto the floor, clattering. Ruben barely breathed. Silence.

Dad crunched across the gravel alongside the house.

Ruben crossed to the window and watched Dad going along the road, head down, shoulders hunched against the drizzle. Dad turned into Brodie's driveway. The view blurred. Tears. Ruben blinked them back. He felt crushed; then anger boiled up. He wanted a real Dad, not a Big Red.

Ruben put on his hoodie; soft, smelling of Mum. He couldn't wait to see her in the morning. He'd never visit Red again. Poor Homer. He opened the bedroom door and trudged outside.

Red had pulled the rug up over Homer's head. The dog's legs poked out like four puny sticks. He shuffled the rug around so that all of Homer was covered.

Ruben went down to the creek. The bread bag was in a bush, he fished out the last slices, throwing them in the water. Eels gathered, gobbled, and moved away.

Raindrops plinked down making ripples.

Ruben remembered how Red hadn't turned up last Christmas, even though he'd promised to. His shoulders shook. He started crying. Couldn't help himself. Even though it made him feel small, small and stupid. He tried hard to stop the tears. The effort made him shudder. He splashed water on his face, then stood up as tall as he could. Dad was useless. But Dad *had* taken him eeling. Ruben pulled his hood up, and turned back.

A spider web hung between the fig tree and the washing line. Raindrops clung to the web. Ruben saw the web shake when a drop landed on it. He counted twenty seven drops. The deep gray sky made them as shiny as mirrors. He looked more closely, catching the reflection of his face in the twenty seven drops.

He grabbed the web and squashed it, wiping the sticky mess onto the grass.

By the time Ruben neared the house, it was almost dark. He was about to go inside when a round of laughter floated over from Brodie's place. He went across to the gap in the hedge. He saw Red and another man drinking in Brodie's carport.

Ruben went inside. Looked in the fridge for something to eat. There was only off-milk, the stinky shrivelled-up eel, and two boxes of beer. He banged shut the fridge door. His heart had shrunk into a peanut.

Footsteps up the gravel: Ruben froze.

Knock on the door. Hey, little buddy? came Brodie's voice.

Ruben opened the door. Brodie looked down on him with kind eyes, Are you okay?

Uhuh.

Brodie walked in and sat down. Noticing the sketchpad, he pulled it close, whistling admiringly. Did you do this?

Yep.

Awesome.

It's for Mum.

She'll love it.

Hope so.

Brodie sighed, and said, I know about Homer.

Ruben stared down at the drawing of the eel.

My old man was gonna finish him off if Red didn't do it. He had to do it, Ruben. And it must have been hard - he loved that dog.

Silence grew.

Ah well, Red takes his time, but he gets there in the end, Brodie said. Even got rid of the rubbish.

Ruben bit his lip.

Look, I gotta go. Will you be all right? Your Dad won't be long.

Brodie stood up and squeezed Ruben's shoulder.

Thanks, Brodie.

Ruben did feel a bit better. Maybe Dad had sent over Brodie? He got up, rummaged in the cupboards, found a packet of two-minute noodles. Boiled the jug and stirred water through the noodles. He sat at the table, dragging his fork around the bowl, making sure he ate every last scrap.

They were all there was to eat, apart from the Coco Pops, and he'd need those for breakfast.

Still hungry, Ruben thought he might try the beer. He got a can from the fridge, ripped off the tab, and had a go. Yuk! It tasted like old socks. He took another sip, the bubbles tickling his nose.

Car tyres squealed outside, skidding to a stop. There came a loud whoop from next door...rowdy singing...*Nah nah nah, nahnah, nah nah nah, nahnah. Hey beauty when the moon gets you down...*rumbling laughter... *Blah blah blah, blahblah...*

Ruben went into the lounge. He turned on the tele; boring current events, boring cricket, Dancing With Stars - Mum's favourite. Ruben's breath caught - Mum.

The sparkly dancers swirled around as he sipped the beer, rocking in Red's peeling Lazy Boy. His head spun. Was he drunk? Somehow it no longer mattered that he was hungry and lonely. His eyes closed. The universe would grant him one wish, one simple wish...

#

Ruben tried to roll over but he was caught in a huge hand and the harder he tried to break free, the tighter it gripped. Panicked, he gave one last heave - and woke. He had sunk deep into the Lazy Boy. Someone had put a blanket over him. Dad?

He saw the beer can and remembered last night: Dad storming off, the empty cupboards, the men next door laughing. Anger flared. Red had blamed *him* for Homer dying.

Ruben smelt bacon. He got up and went into the kitchen.

Brodie stood at the stove breaking eggs into the fat-spitting frying pan. Morning, Brodie said. Hope you like fry-ups. Best thing for a hangover.

Ruben blushed. Did you go to the shops?

Someone had to. Buddy, this place needs a woman. It's a tip.

There was a stack of toast on the table. Orange juice. Jam.

Where's Dad?

Outside.

Ruben went to the doorway. Dad was digging a big hole under the fig tree. Ruben watched him brace his knee against the spade, work it out, and drop the load onto a growing heap.

His heart beating rapidly, Ruben walked over to Dad. I buried my guinea pig in the garden, he said in a rush.

Dad paused and glanced up. Shocked at how sad Dad looked, Ruben stepped closer.

Spare shovel in the wash-house, Dad said.

Wheel of Fortune

Joy lit a cigarette and handed it to Vic. He lay back, with his head on the pillow, and slowly exhaled. The Bangkok heat made him want to fuck or sleep, with nothing much in between. She opened a notebook and picked up a pen.

What are you doing? he asked.

Many things.

He watched her write a list. Not that he understood it, it was all in Thai.

After a while, Vic stroked her hair. She stopped writing and showed him another page with numbers printed under English headings; Rent, Bribes, Tradesmen.

Numbers, he understood.

Joy laid her hand over his. He was happy to let silence lie between them. He sensed this pleased her. No more straining to speak English, able to have long conversations, uninterrupted, in her own head.

He had no idea why he had taken off with Peter's wife - an ex-bargirl - and gone into business with her. It sounded terrible when you put it that way. Yet it felt so different, moving from one life to another on a sweet whim.

#

Vic and Joy walked down a footpath crowded with food vendors. She pointed at the Kool Bar. They crossed the road and went inside.

Locals sat around playing Connect Four. Yellow and red checkers were rapidly slotted into the stand. Aha! someone said. Then the stand was opened and the checkers clattered onto the table. The group broke into excited conversation, and money changed hands as another game was set up.

Joy walked to a table by the far wall, and Vic pulled out a chair for her.

Here is Gavin, she said.

Vic turned and saw a tall man, thin and faded, almost colourless, with the honey-yellow eyes of a cat.

Still beautiful, Joy, Gavin said, and kissed her on the cheek. You must be Vic, good to meet you.

A bargirl brought across a jug of iced water and glasses.

So, you're going to give us a hand? Vic said.

Well, I know a few people.

I have awesome costumes, Joy said.

You need your girls first, love. Then it'll all fall into place.

Her mobile rang, she pulled it out of her bag and turned away.

How are you finding Bangkok? Gavin asked Vic.

Like landing on the bloody moon.

Gavin laughed, It's nice to hear the accent. Although it's not as if we don't get a ton of your lot coming through.

How long have you been here?

Seventeen years. Gavin drained his glass, and said, You been in bars before?

Drinking in them all my life. Joy seems to have it sussed.

Fair enough. How'd you prise her off that old lech, Peter?

What can I say...Doesn't pay to keep a girl on too tight a leash.

That's true, Gavin smiled.

We've started looking for a place.

Uhuh.

Joy thinks it might take a while. Do you know of anywhere?

Maybe. Let me have a think.

A bargirl came over and whispered to Gavin.

Got to go, Vic.

Sure.

We should meet up again. How about Friday? About five?

Done.

Bye, Joy, Gavin said, and she gave him a wave.

Vic poured another glass of water. Good news? he asked, when she closed her phone.

I'm so happy.

Her smile was dazzling, it made his head spin.

She checked her watch and said, Oh, oh, the bank closes soon.

Out on the street, he slipped his arm through hers. They hurried through a huddle of pigeons. The birds flew up in a burst of grey and white wingbeats.

#

Vic walked past a legless beggar with opaque eyes. He threw coins into his can and was given a courtly wai.

Thunder crackled. Suddenly rain poured down. He glanced back at the beggar and saw him haul a plastic sheet over himself.

A European man stood in the middle of the road with a small Thai child. A truck almost flattened them, swerved around at the last moment and sent up a soaking splash.

The rain grew heavier. Bounced like popcorn. Then quick as it came, it was over. Vic watched a busload of old men glide up the street in the wavey light.

He reached the Kool Bar and squelched across to where the window opened onto the street. He sat down and ordered a beer from a bargirl with short boyish hair. She promptly brought it over and rubbed a tiny breast against his shoulder. Gave him a silky smile. A man could get used to this, Vic thought. However, the fact that she looked thirteen made his dick shrink. He concentrated on his beer and she wandered off.

A group of tourists passed by wearing bright Hawaiian shirts. They argued with the doorman at Pussy Galore across the street. An agreement was reached, and the door swung open letting out a loud blast of retro disco. The men vanished inside.

The 'cold' beer was already warm. Should have ordered a scotch, at least there'd be ice in it. He glanced at the punter at the end of the bar. He could see the crease of the old man's flabby arse sagging below his shorts.

He imagined him back home in a suit and tie in the air-conditioned grey of an office.

Gavin plonked himself down beside Vic. The bargirl appeared and dangled off Gavin's shoulder. Get us a drink, Meh, he gave her a pat on the behind and she giggled.

I hear you've found a place, Gavin said to Vic.

Yeah, can't wait to get started. Joy wants mirrors and suede, doormen in uniform.

As if anyone would notice. As if they'd remotely begin to care. See that one next to Pussy Galore? That's mine, Vic, Girls Girls Girls - straight to the point. I get that Joy wants to go high class. Less of the tits on the posters. No dork standing at the door calling out Pussy Show. She's mad, mate. Waste of money.

Gavin's water arrived, he said something in Thai and Meh giggled again.

Why do you think Joy wants all that? Vic asked.

Maybe that fat bastard, Peter, corrupted her? To tell the truth, all you need are some girls and you're in business.

Gavin lowered his voice, Though well you know the old Illusionist employs for his whole repertoire only two simple properties – a rod, a ring.

What the hell?

Can't think of the guy's name, he said and took a long swig. I used to know all his stuff.

How come?

I've got an MA in English Literature.

I'll be buggered, Vic said.

This is Bangkok man, you can get whatever you want here, anything.

Fuck off.

You sound like the wife. Fuck off you mad cunt, she said to me when I wanted to move here.

Vic laughed.

Gavin had gone glum.

After a bit, Vic asked, Why did you come here?

Got a great offer. Came on holiday and met a local looking to recruit an Aussie. He told me Thai men used hookers about twice a month, business was steady but he wanted to expand with foreigners. I run three bars these days. The missus couldn't cope.

Gavin looked at Vic, Though there's no cure, no making whole, no fusion, Live while you can the merciful illusion. There was a strange glint in his eyes.

He's cracked, Vic thought, then said, That's your best advice?

It is, and I'm off for a piss.

The rain started again. Moths formed a fast-moving glitter outside the window. Gavin returned and another wave of tourists moved down the street.

Plenty of punters, tonight, Vic said.

Course. No bastard boss, Gavin replied. No pitiful wage. Here they're moneyed gods. It's the heat and cheap opportunity, Vic. Where else can you get a gorgeous girl to suck your dick and fuck you senseless for twenty bucks?

Certainly not New Zealand.

Be a hundred and twenty and she'd have saggy tits and a bum full of cellulite.

Vic laughed, Why don't you have a real drink? I've heard it improves the memory.

You want more of that bloody poem?

Actually, yes.

Meh, Gavin called out, get me a double scotch. Two of them. No ice.

Two double scotch?

He answered in Thai and she poked out her tongue.

You know what? I'm in the mood, Vic. Can't think of a single person here who'd listen. Except, to my amazement, you.

Don't hold back.

Meh arrived with the drinks. Gavin downed them one after the other, stared at his hands and appeared to be meditating. His voice emerged in a low growl, Better a brutal twitching of the reins and off, than this devouring pious whore who in a soft regret will twine you fast, where thigh-bones mope along the tainted shore.

Fuckin awesome.

Gavin sighed, said, C. Day Lewis, that's him. Now I'm happy.

#

Vic woke and glanced at the bedside clock, seven a.m. He had dreamt of snow. It must mean something to dream of snow while living in a hot swamp. The city, to him, was a squalid mulch of mud, rain and teeming people out of which emerged, like an improbable flower, an ornate gold temple or a giant smiling Buddha.

He thought of his wife, Kay. She was so steady. So normal. For a moment he was back in their bed with his hand on her. But his hand was on Joy, moving over her hip and waist and breast, which he bent to kiss.

Vic, she said sleepily, and glanced over her shoulder at him. He pulled her close and parted her legs with his thigh. Her neck smelt of talcum powder, his teeth grazed her skin. She angled herself to take him. When he entered she said something he couldn't quite hear. Her breath caught and she moved against him.

When Vic next woke, he was alone. He realised he didn't know what day it was.

Joy came into the room with her hair wrapped in a towel. She looked impossibly beautiful, Vic thought. She had eel-smooth curves and such a light step it seemed she was afloat.

I'm going to my village, she said. Remember?

I'll come, too, Vic said.

The builder's today.

I want to meet your family, sometime.

Soon.

He watched her dry her hair and comb it out. She put on a t-shirt and a new pair of jeans, inky blue and loose-fitting. They made her look even thinner.

What day is it? he asked.

Tuesday.

What about the painters?

Tomorrow. You let them in, don't give them any money.

Yeah, yeah. When will you be back?

Thursday.

I'll be waiting, Vic said. She blew him a kiss and left.

Vic got up and went to the window. More rain. Down below, crowds of people carried umbrellas painted turquoise, orange, pink, blue. He turned to go to the bathroom, and caught sight of Joy's white satin slippers. He remembered when he first saw her.

He and Peter had been boozing all night and ended up, shitfaced, at Peter's place. Next morning, in came his wife wearing those satin slippers – so white it hurt to look at them. She had opened the curtains and sun fell straight onto a black painting split by a white arc.

That's by one of youse Kiwi's, Peter had drawled. Matches the sofas.

The wife had smiled at Vic, her eyes as bright as a bird's.

Hello, she said softly. I'm Joy.

That was it. Cuntstruck.

#

Vic fumbled for the light switch. The bar was like a large cupboard, stuffy and smelly, whose shelves had been stripped by busy rats. He thought he heard the patter of tiny feet and cocked his head. The sound didn't repeat. Instead came the image of rats crouching out of sight, waiting for him to leave.

He crossed the room crunching dead cockroaches beneath his feet. The place had been fumigated, but then a live one began clicking past. Vic stamped on it.

The door opened and in came the painters, father and son. The father nodded to Vic and sorted through a stack of paint-stained sheets. The son began taping round the alcoves.

Gavin walked in and yawned.

Late night? Vic asked.

And a good one.

What can I do for you?

Just passing. When's Joy back?

Tomorrow.

Good. I've found a girl you two might be interested in.

I'll tell her.

Gavin looked around and shook his head. You can't condition more respect out of the punters, he said. It's a lost cause.

Don't be so negative.

A bargirl's a bargirl, that's all. There are no distinctions in this part of town. A rod, a ring, remember? Even a poet laureate understands that much.

You know that poem? Was that all of it?

Nah. Originally I memorised the whole damn thing. Over the years it's kind of drifted away.

You'd have to apply yourself.

You would. Sadly, I'm applying myself to other interests.

Dreams change, Vic said.

Uhuh.

What's your dream these days?

I'm living it.

The painter opened the door to go outside. In came the sound of a busker playing an out-of-tune guitar. A dog put its head in the door.

Oi, Gavin yelled, and the dog whined and cringed backwards onto the street. Gavin turned to Vic, Let's go back to my place.

#

A cold sting. A surge of nausea. Suddenly it is night. The whirling giddiness subsides. Vic's face feels hot and tight. As if in slow motion, he slides the belt off his arm then rolls down his shirtsleeve.

Out of nowhere comes a drift of stars. He hears them sigh, then they coalesce into the white arc on Peter's black painting. Surprised, he touches it, opening out the image as if it were made of coloured blocks. He

had thought the painting was headlights turning a corner. Now he sees it differently, it is a waterfall moving with such a fast roar it appears static.

Cup of tea? Gavin asks, his voice thinning out into a delicate thread.

Yes, please, he replies, and hears another's voice, bright and distant. Perhaps it is an echo? He doesn't care. He has no cares, only this brilliant shining concentrate of bliss beyond compare.

Vic hears a scrape and turns his head and dust fills the air. Though he knows it is dust, he knows, too, that this dust is at the heart of stars. And all the while he is smiling with a deepening joy, the most wonderful release.

The wall is really a sail. A taut sail allowing only the slightest movement to show the air stirring all around. Slowly, the sail gives a little, sinks at the top corner. The air lingers at the softened corner and the sail sinks further still. Beyond the growing gap, Vic sees another growing gap and another, giving him a wistful sense of regret that is unbearably beautiful. He tries to hold onto this beauty, but it is a bittersweet seduction and too powerful. His body is gradually coming apart, like that strange little painting – blocks of colour separating. He is not afraid. He is letting go untold tension and, when all is done, the body will reassemble.

#

The dressing-room was hot and smelt of mice. Vic opened the tiny window set high in the wall, no fresh air came in only the crashing of cymbals and a dreary chanting as a beggar passed. He turned back to his task. The mirror was edged in light sockets. He screwed in fresh bulbs,

flicked the switch and they all came on. A clothes rack stretched down the length of one wall, it bowed in the middle. He'd replace it. He'd get cupboards, too, so the girls had somewhere to store their things. He picked up the box of lampshades Joy had sent for, and went downstairs.

Gavin sat at a table in the bar. Joy on one side of him, on the other side sat Meh and a girl Vic hadn't seen before.

Didn't hear you arrive, Vic said as he walked over.

Meh's brought her sister, Gavin said.

Oh?

Thought she might work here.

No way, he laughed. She's too young.

Daisy, this is Vic. Vic, Daisy.

Meh nudged Daisy, the girl didn't smile.

Does she know what the job is?

Course.

How old is she?

Eighteen, Gavin replied.

Bullshit!

She is fourteen years old, Joy said.

Christ! Is that legal?

Gavin turned to Joy, You weren't much more than that when your Dad brought you down.

Fourteen and a half.

That's right. You were always ambitious, though.

Your father sold you?

Joy put a hand on Vic's thigh; he flinched.

How much did you pay for Daisy? Vic asked.

The deal's done, Gavin said. You can't change it.

Not even for more money?

Sorry, mate. The system's in place - parents, punters, us, it's a win all round. Joy was Daisy once. Look at her. A businesswoman. Vic, I've seen it all. The wheel goes round and round.

Joy reached up and kissed his cheek. The kiss held no melting warmth, it was the positioning tap of a spider's foot.

Daisy looked at him with her schoolgirl face.

Don't go soft on us, Gavin said.

Vic shrugged. Found a cigarette. Lit up. Everything normal and deeply abnormal all at once. He waited until the two girls had got up and Gavin had herded them out the door. Need to clear my head, he said to Joy. Back in five.

There was a gleam to her, Vic noticed, a pleased gleam playing out in her eyes which touched lightly on him, then she checked her texts. He was amazed at how intact and comfortable she was.

Vic closed the door behind him. He put his hands in his pockets and trudged up the road past clusters of eager boozed-up tourists and nodding locals. He wanted to sleep, and wake up somewhere else.

Little

Remember the cake, Eddie Potter told himself as he closed the gate. Ian was coming at three. His son! Yet they met by appointment, rattling around in Eddie's flat like broken biscuits in a tin.

A wave of warm air rolled off the top of the hill, and billowed past him, breaking into a flurry of fallen leaves down at the bus stop. It took Eddie back to his childhood, when every morning seemed marvellous. He'd run out the back door, hopped on his trike and with rhythmic squeaks peddled past the grapefruit tree and the chook house. Hens pecking all around. Gran's great knickers on the washing line, towels, sheets, his own small grey shorts and shirts, dancing on the warm breeze brushing against his bare legs, stirring the grapefruit tree so it trembled and flashed. The rooster would come flaunting, crowing himself raw, until Gran came outside, yelling, *I'll wring your bloody neck*. The rooster had shut up and marched off past the silverbeets.

Eddie put a hand to the picket fence surrounding the pensioner flats, and rested a moment.

A bus thundered by. He'd missed the 9:45. Blast!

What am I doing? thought Eddie. Oh yes. The cake. He was going to the German bakery for Ian's favourite - nothing creamy, no glacé cherries - a plain cake with velvety-smooth icing.

He walked along thinking of his trike, and the washing dancing on the line. Even though he'd been *abandoned*, as he'd heard Gran say to a friend in the parlour (*poor little pet*), Eddie had had Gran. Every morning he'd held her hand, checking under the hedge and beside the cabbages and cauliflowers looking for still-warm eggs.

The 10 o'clock bus arrived. He found a seat next to a man who spread out his newspaper, reading...with his lips moving.

The two girls in front of him giggled. A cellphone rang and one of them answered it in Chinese. In the window's reflection, Eddie watched her close her phone, then turn to her friend, the pair of them canaries, their voices sliding up and down.

When the bus pulled up to the kerb, Eddie got off after everyone else. Thank you driver, he said. You're welcome, she replied. Which sent a tremor of delight through Eddie. He'd been noticed. Have a nice day, he added. The driver smiled and maybe, Eddie thought, the same tremor went through her.

Fewer and fewer people noticed Eddie. He always had been hard to spot, a small man, a small boy, little feet, little hands. *Tuppence-ha'penny*, Gran called him; she who'd had a behind as wide as she was tall.

Eddie reached the intersection, waiting with other pedestrians. The lights changed and he crossed, part of the anonymous group, comforted by

the sense of togetherness. The group dispersed on the other side and he followed a joined-at-the-hip couple. Ambling giants, to Eddie. He walked in their shadow until they disappeared through the doors of the TAB. He passed the two-dollar shop, strung with tinsel, with boxes of Christmas crackers, and rolls of candy-cane wrapping paper in the window. Chickens hung off a rail in the Chinese takeaway's, making him think of the enormous menacing rooster that hadn't run when Gran yelled, but stalked away full of pride.

He pushed open the door to the German bakery. The shop was full of girls in striped blazers, clustering around the display case, admiring chocolate chalets with tufts of cotton wool for snow. Eddie patiently waited at the counter, breathing in the delicious sugary-sweet smell of fresh baking.

I'll have a chocolate cake please, he said to the shop assistant.

Ah yes, she said. The sacher.

That's right.

Sorry, they're still being iced.

When will they be ready?

In an hour. I can put one aside for you.

I'll be back.

He'd be home for Ian in plenty of time, Eddie thought. He paused outside the Army Surplus store. It used to be a tailor's. The owner, Mr Edelman, had made him a suit. He remembered Mr Edelman's face was always bright red, and shiny as an apple.

Eddie strolled into the nearby arcade, which had been grand in its day; elegant dress shops, tearooms, a florist on the corner where he'd bought bunches of lilac for Gran. Now the arcade was filled with opportunity shops, bric-a-brac, second-hand books. Dozens of pigeons waddled along the tiled floor, and sparrows darted about light as leaves.

A surge of sunlight filled the atrium. The glass roof was so far away Eddie felt light-headed, exactly how he'd felt in the vast station hall when Ian and his mother had left - Ian's gabardine coat buttoned up tight, matching woollen mittens tied around his wrist on a plaited string. The tiny mite waved one last time. One last look from Pat, a glint of hard fire in her eyes. Eddie's fault. Never denied it.

Eddie went out onto the footpath. He found a bench, and sat down. A young mother stopped in front of him, her hair had purple streaks, smoke rose off her cigarette, which she puffed while gazing at a shop mannequin that was dressed in a moth-eaten fur coat. She pushed her pram back and forth, back and forth...He closed his eyes. The murmuring passersby and the humming traffic merged into a single background sound

He dreamed of Pat smoking in the middle of the night, alone, sitting on the porch steps with her back toward him. He stood behind her, watching the smoke rise in a thin line, like chalk up a blackboard. The line curved, turning into words that dissolved before he could read them.

A beeping horn woke him.

What was he doing? Eddie wondered. Chocolate cake!

On the way to the bakery, he ducked into the superette to buy a chip of strawberries for afternoon tea.

What a lovely day, he said to the checkout operator, who shrugged.

Summer at last, he tried again.

Flybuys? she asked.

Eddie shook his head and took the strawberries with a sigh. At least it was fine outside. He stood in the sun's warmth, his spirits lifting, until he thought of Pat. Pat had long since died. Gran, too. Friends he'd had at school. Two workmates from the railways were around, in resthomes. Clarry had dementia and didn't recognize Eddie anymore. Bill had gone blind. Never lost his spark though, teaching the resthome's cockatiel to squawk *Lucky to be alive!*

Eddie pushed open the bakery's door. The shop assistant was sliding strudel into the display case. The smell was intoxicating.

I'm sorry, she said, your sacher will be a few more minutes. How about a coffee on the house?

That's very kind, Eddie said, do you think I could have a cup of tea?

No problem. Find a seat, I'll bring it out.

The tables were littered with dirty crockery and spilled sugar. The shop assistant came over, wiping Eddie's table. You like our sacher? she asked.

Yes, I'm getting it for my son. He's coming for afternoon tea.

You spoil him.

Well, I try.

Eddie picked up a magazine that had fallen on the floor. Some film star was on the cover. In big orange print were the titles of the articles inside: *I Sell My Body to Pay My Debts*, *Hollywood's Yummiest Mummy*, and *Are you in a Sexless Marriage?*

My god, Eddie said out loud, remembering his wedding night. Pat with her huge wanting eyes, to which he had responded in an embarrassment of fear and revulsion. He'd felt ill, afterwards, feigning sleep until he had, in fact, slept. Dreamt he was in a large empty room. In the dream he was so short that even on tip-toes he could not reach the handle to open the door.

There had been no logic to it because Pat was so pretty, and he'd loved her company. Yet he'd had a lizard-like fear of her body, not much bigger than a doll. The relief when she fell pregnant! The hope that maybe *that* side of things was over?

Eddie saw the shop assistant returning with the tea things. He quickly slid the magazine into the rack.

Thanks very much, he said. She'd put a tiny cinnamon biscuit on his teaspoon. He sipped his tea, which had cooled nicely.

A cuckoo clock on the far wall struck the hour, the bird popped out of its box crying *Cuckoo Cuckoo*. Two little doors opened and a man and woman came out on the balcony, and bowed, sliding backwards into the clock - an A-frame chalet with stairs leading down to flower-filled pots. Eddie watched the pendulum swing left, right, left, right...*their* cuckoo clock, their little flat, him and Pat's, with red geraniums growing out of

treacle tins. Tiny Eddie, tinier still Pat. The perfect size, as if elves had made her especially for him. When he met her, she had been filled to the brim with a joyous vitality sparkling her eyes, making her hair shine as if every strand existed only to be admired.

Here is your cake, sir, the shop assistant said.

That was a beautiful cup of tea.

Come again.

I will, replied Eddie, I will.

He carefully placed the cake box at the bottom of the string bag he kept in his jacket.

The bus drifted up to the kerb and Eddie climbed the steps. The bus passed the Army Surplus store, whose flags fluttered gaily in the breeze, then went through an orange light and rushed past the library, the church and the pensioner flats. Eddie pressed the bell, getting off outside the hospice shop. Glancing in the window he saw baby clothes hung on a length of string. Eddie moved on thinking about the booties and jackets Pat had grown from steadily clicking knitting needles. She had given the impression that motherhood was a task which required no more thought than that given to growing fingernails or hair.

The wind freshened as Eddie reached the flats. His neighbour, Elsie, parted the curtains on her side of their duplex. The carnations and roses growing on her porch quivered, sending out the sweetest perfumes; spicy, fresh as apples - while Eddie stood there with leaves blowing over his shoes and the cake box swinging in the string bag.

Elsie tapped her window, smiling at Eddie. He wanted to sink into that smile as if it were the last ember of a beautiful fire.

His life had not been successful. And now Ian was coming, whom he'd hardly seen after Pat left, until Ian came of age, visiting under his own set of rules...setting off all these bells and whistles inside Eddie which he endured in his own way, for Ian.

However, he had the cake, he had his flat, he had Elsie Smith's warm smile, and he felt rich suddenly. With a little start of joy he walked on into their shared driveway.

Elsie came out and said, Isn't your son coming today?

That's right.

You have a nice time, Eddie Potter, she said, and they went into their matching flats, closing their matching doors.

Eddie put his shopping on the bench and his jacket in the cupboard.

A siren sounded in the distance. He stood at the window as it drew nearer. With a rush of flashing lights a police car swept by, leaving a peculiar ringing silence.

Sad memories returned to Eddie. How he'd never known his father. Hardly knew his mother. She'd turned up once, when he was six, with a man who'd had white-blond hair and a face as pale as the moon. The man had pulled a cigarette from a silver case, lighting it with a silver lighter. He'd bent down to Eddie, winked, and given him a watch.

We'll be back soon, his mother had said, hugging him. Her face powder left orangey-pink streaks on his shirt.

But she never came back.

Gran found the silver cigarette case down the back of the sofa, then bashed the case with the rolling pin.

Eddie sat on his lazyboy. He could smell the sea as if it lay just outside the door. In fact it was two miles away, a harbour that rarely raised waves more than a few inches high. Rain was on the way. He dozed.

Pat told him the wrongness between them had come out in the child: it was still-born.

Gripping the arms of the chair, Eddie forced his eyes open. It was an hallucination grown in the shifty gap between wakefulness and sleep. His heart thumped. An old stored shock shivered free.

One day, after Ian was born, he'd come home early from work. There, in the light of the sun shining through the kitchen window, stood Pat; her blouse undone, in the arms of their neighbour, Jonty.

In the silence, the baby had cried out. Pat had turned and seen Eddie. One hand flew to her mouth, the other clutched at her blouse. Jonty didn't even look embarrassed; pulling up his braces, grabbing his jacket and stepping through the door.

Eddie had gone to Ian, picking him up, rocking him back to sleep. Back in the kitchen, Pat was on her knees scrubbing the floor, crying, sobbing actually. She'd looked up at him, her pretty face gone grey - because of *him*; what he couldn't do.

When she went to nurse her sick father they both knew, once she got on the train, she wouldn't come back.

There was a knock at the door. Eddie got up. He was very nervous, very shaky. He opened the door and there was Elsie holding a bunch of white carnations.

I thought you were Ian!

Sorry to disappoint you, she laughed. Now put these in a vase, they'll brighten up the place. I'm off to get something for puss's tea, and she gave him a smile, for which he was ridiculously grateful. She seemed to understand him so well. He had loved this about Pat too, how she understood things. Although it didn't matter a bean in the end, didn't change a thing.

Thank you, Elsie, Eddie burst out, feeling himself redden.

Rain clouds had gathered overhead. He was pleased to see Elsie's umbrella tucked beneath her arm as she rounded the corner out of sight.

Eddie left the door open, then went inside. The carnations were star-bright in the gloom, their scent filling the kitchen. He took the cake out of the box. Found the knife. Made the first cut. The icing immediately cracked, splinters fanned out so it looked as if the cake had been dropped. It was amazing how Ian's visits put him into such a state.

Rain came bucketing down; just as quickly stopping. Fat drops trickled down the window. The sky was silvery-green and glowed.

Hello?

Eddie turned. Ian's smile was tight but genuine, and Eddie seemed to miraculously float, his heart suddenly sprung: there was his son.

Faith

Tank's a prick, Saxon said.

I ripped off a piece of liquorice and chomped on it.

Shame you haven't got a real Dad.

Have so.

Do not.

Shut up you fat albino!

He grabbed my shoulder. I spun away. He held on, dragged me closer and then pushed me against a tree.

Anyone touches you, I heard Nan's voice, kick them in the privates and run away fast as you can.

I kned him and took off. Air rushed into my lungs, great gobs of it. It was like being on fire. I almost reached the bushes on the other side when he caught me. He pushed me backwards. He was on top, pinning me down.

Loser, he said.

I spat straight in his face.

You crazy fuckin retard!

He rolled away wiping off the spit with the bottom of his shirt.

I sat up. There was a strange hungry feeling; I half-wanted to fight him again.

What the fuck's wrong with you? he asked.

I don't know...I'm sorry.

Oh, what the hell, let's go to the hut.

We headed into the bushes and Saxon was first up the footholds his Dad had nailed into the puriri tree. At the top there was a platform hidden by branches. His Dad lived on a farm and came to town every other weekend. He sometimes took the boys pig-hunting.

Saxon sat with his back against the trunk, pulled the tobacco pouch out of his schoolbag and rolled a smoke. I picked some berries from a branch and threw them down into a fern. I could see right into the fern's crown where shoots opened in bright green questionmarks. They trembled when I pinged them.

What are you doing these holidays? he asked.

Dunno.

Dad says we need to stay round the house, Kahn's getting a puppy.

Is he? God how lucky.

Yep, always the lucky one.

THWACK

A shot slammed into the trunk. Saxon ducked. Fuckwit, he yelled and I burst out laughing.

The next shot hit a high branch sending dry leaves rocketting down.

There was a flicker of ginger along the edge of the platform, then a curly mass of hair and Kahn's grinning face. Just jokes, he said, slinging his air rifle over his shoulder.

Dick!

Mum's made a chocolate cake. You guys want some?

We climbed down and walked along the track. If I had to, I could easily knock over Kahn. He was skinny as a string doll, so skinny he'd probably lift up off the ground if that giant ginger afro wasn't there to hold him down.

We came out of the bushes and Saxon kept to the shade of their corrugated iron fence. It was shot through with sparkly pellet holes.

I'll get it, Kahn said when we got to the back of their house.

Saxon's white face had gone bright red in the heat, and it was no cooler under the beach umbrella. Apart from the target-practice fence, there was nothing broken or rotten in their yard. They had a proper lawn, a matching set of outdoor furniture and flowers growing in orange pots.

Kahn brought out Coke and slices of cake.

Well? Saxon asked him.

No trouble at all.

Kahn pulled a joint out of his shorts. He lit up, took a drag and handed it over.

Saxon had a turn then offered it to me.

I shook my head.

It's good stuff, Mum's the best gardener.

Kahn pointed at ants marching along carrying cake crumbs. He broke off a piece and threw it. The ants scattered, regrouped and carried crumbs again. Fuckin insane, he said, it's like I'm dreaming.

What if we *are* asleep, and only *dreaming* that we're awake? I said.

Saxon stared at me.

That's buzzy, bro, Kahn said.

I laughed at their dumb faces.

Faith!

I turned around very slowly.

Tank was standing behind me, his eyes glittering. Get home, he growled.

Why? I asked even though I was scared – he'd never yelled at me before.

Go on, get.

We're just having afternoon tea, Mr Tank, Kahn said.

I loved him for saying that.

Tank rocked back on his heels, his face gone hard. He smelt of beer.

I thought I might puke, but I got up and followed him down the driveway.

Hurry up.

I don't feel well, I said, putting my hand on the boys' letterbox.

It's that bloody pot. You better not smoke that again. Christ – not even cigarettes.

I didn't smoke anything.

You kids stunk of it.

It wasn't me.

Cut the crap. Twelve years old!

I'm eleven.

Tank pointed to our place and said, We've got visitors.

I straggled behind him kicking stones. Mum wasn't home yet. Maybe I should wait for her? Probably make things worse.

The front yard had three cars sitting on the driveway. Tank called them cashies. He was meant to be fixing them. Mum had to park our car out on the street.

I went up the side of the house. A few men were standing around holding beers. I heard a yelp from the kitchen and my heart sank. Aunty Mo. I walked in and she boomed out, Those boys looking after you, girl?

Tank leant against the bench. Little shits, he said, smoking up large. They're a bad influence.

Smoking?

Bloody pot!

True? Good thing you went over then.

I heard Mum's car pull up.

Now you're for it, Mo said.

I didn't shout, Bitch! But I wanted to. My mouth had gone dry.

Mum came in.

I couldn't look at her.

Hello, love, she said. I hope you're hungry?

She's got the munchies, haven't you Faith? Mo laughed.

That's good, Mum said, putting a jumbo box of KFC on the table.

Tank practically had steam coming out of his head.

Mo said, Lover-boy caught *someone* smoking.

Fuck that! Smoking fuckin drugs.

I looked up at Mum - surely she knew I wouldn't do that?

Really? she lifted an eyebrow.

I couldn't speak with Tank and that cow Mo staring at me, I could only shake my head.

They're playing silly buggers, aren't they? Mum said gently.

Benefit of the doubt, eh sis? Mo said, winking at Mum.

Tank banged the door on his way out.

What the hell was wrong with him? He normally never noticed me, if he did - by accident - he'd jingle coins in his pocket and look the other way.

You and Tank been drinking already? Mum asked Mo, who laughed out her nose.

I got some plates out of the cupboard for Mum.

You don't feed Faith enough, Mo said. She's skin and bone.

Don't start, Mum said.

Outside, a car squealed to a stop, doors slammed and dogs started barking.

Shut up youse, someone shouted.

I went into the lounge and watched a man walk up the path, three dogs whined and trotted along behind him. He wore wraparound shades and a leather vest with no tee shirt underneath.

Laughter roared from the back of the section. Bottles clinked. Another car pulled up and more people walked past.

I switched on the telly and turned up the volume. It was a repeat of *New Zealand's Got Talent*.

I thought Mum believed me, although I didn't know. She'd hit me once before for telling lies - then straightaway said she was sorry, and burst into tears. Which was way worse than being hit.

A tiny girl in leotards came onto the show and waved. Someone threw hula hoops over her upstretched arms and she spun the hoops round her waist then edged them down her leg, one at a time, dropping each hoop off the end of her shiny slipper.

Through the gaps in the clapping, I heard mumbling from the kitchen.

The last hoop slipped off and the girl stepped forward smiling. The camera swung onto the judges, the clapping ended.

I heard Mum say to Mo, You shouldn't wind up Tank.

Everything was different when Mo was around. Mum had called her a Bloody Nuisance Drama Queen tons of times.

Three blind guys were on the telly singing without a band.

That's a Stevie Wonder song, Mum said, coming in with a plate of KFC.

A huge moan came rolling out of me.

Mum, I didn't smoke anything.

I know, she said. She pulled me close and I held on tight. Her heart was beating fast and hard.

I hate Mo, I said.

You don't mean that.

Yes I do.

Mum let out a big sigh. Do you want to stay at Nan's for a bit? she asked.

Yes, please!

Let's go first thing tomorrow, then? We can get MacDonald's on the way.

She got up and went back to the kitchen.

The dogs were going off again and Mo yelled, Oi! No dogs inside! Including you, Romeo. There was a deep down laugh and the Romeo asked, You still alive? Mo squealed. Then he said, You sound like a chook on crack. I laughed out loud.

#

At nine o'clock Mum came in and said it was time for bed. She looked so tired I hopped up without a fuss.

How's the party going? I asked as we went up the stairs.

Not bad so far, although the night is young.

I went to the toilet and brushed my teeth. When I walked into my bedroom she'd already started packing a bag for Nan's.

She held up my cut-off jeans. Do you want these? she asked. What about this hoodie? You haven't worn this tee shirt for a while. Better get some wear out of it.

Are you staying too, Mum?

Sorry, Faith. I'm on double shifts next week. Another time, though. She folded some knickers in half and laid them on top of my clothes. That's done, she said. I'll be back soon to turn off the light.

I felt sad as her footsteps went down the stairs. It was better before Tank had moved in and there was only her and me. I wished I knew my real Dad. I'd googled his name at school. Darren Walker. None of the matches were him. It made my heart hurt. Hurt like a Chinese burn.

Men started talking down on the front yard, their voices were low and thick and their words slithered together. I looked out the window but they had disappeared around the corner.

It was a cloudy night, there were huge tufty clouds with stars in between. I remembered a picture I'd once made at school. It had cotton wool and glitter stuck to a piece of black card, and a grey pastel smear for the sea. Perfect. Beautiful. The teacher came over and asked, Where's the moon? There should be a moon.

BANG

Something hit the glass. I jumped. The boys! I pushed open the window and something whizzed in and landed on the floor. I knelt down and picked up one of Kahn's ammo tins. Inside was a joint and a lighter. *Bloody hell.* I was about to throw it back out again when I saw Auntie Mo

wobbling down the driveway in her high heels. She was holding onto a man, kissing his ugly bald head. They had a big slurping pash, got into one of Tank's cashies and slammed the door. A bird flew out of a nearby tree and floated around pale as a ghost.

I shut the window.

Are you alright, Faith? Mum was outside.

I'm putting on my pyjamas, I said. I quickly stuffed the tin under the folded knickers and grabbed my PJs off the bed.

Mum popped her head in. Lights off, love, she said. Big drive tomorrow. She closed the door, and I breathed out.

#

In the morning, Mum said not to bother making the bed as she wanted to wash the sheets. I pulled on some clothes and followed her down the stairs.

Be quiet, she said, people are sleeping.

We practically tiptoed through the hallway.

Tank was sitting at the kitchen table wearing a hole in the lino with his stare.

I heard Mum swallow, then she said, I'm just taking Faith down to Nan's.

Nothing. He didn't even blink.

I was almost out the door when he said, *Faith*, sharp as a bite. You're a good kid.

Mum and I hung on a moment, but that's all there was. I walked out without answering.

You should have said thank you, Mum hissed, that was an apology. It wasn't easy for him.

She looked all shrunken-in and worried. I turned back, stood on the doorstep and said, Thanks, Tank.

He grunted and pulled his mouth into a smile.

Mum smiled too.

We went down the side of the house. Flies crawled over chicken bones and chips that had fallen onto the grass. We passed the leather-vest man sleeping on a plastic chair with his dogs in a three-headed clump next to him. Bare feet poked out of the door of one of the cashies. Whoever they belonged to was snoring.

#

Nan opened the door. Hello my darlings, she said. She leant on her stick and put her other arm around me.

She's always smaller than I remember, and wears tartan slippers, even to the shops, because of bunions.

Let me look at you, she said, and gave me a kiss. I hugged her back.

How have you been? Mum asked.

Fine, really good.

Didn't you go to the doctor this morning?

Just a check-up.

I carried my bag into Nan's spare bedroom. The room smelt of mothballs and old dust. There were two beds with faded yellow bedspreads and a table in-between.

Three framed photos sat on the table. One was of Nan as a chubby baby in a long lace dress, one was of her and Pop cutting their wedding cake. The last one was of her 50th birthday, she was chunky and dark – now she's white-haired and thin as twigs - and beside her were Mum and Mo, who were about my age, then. I look a bit like Mo. We both have freckles and 'no-noses', as Mum says, because *her* nose is big and ours are small and pointy.

The grandfather clock donged in the hallway, then tick-tock-tick-tocked. No noisy booze-ups here. No revving cars or 'atmospheres'.

I opened the window and the curtain moved in the breeze. Outside sounds came in; birds, the neighbour's talkback radio.

Nan's pensioner flat is one of twelve. Old whispery ladies and grumbly men live in them, and deaf Mr Doyle who is very tall and shouts Halloo Halloo then stands back to see if you've heard.

I sat on a bed and the opening music of Nan's telly show floated into the room. Soft and dreamy, it made me yawn. I lay back on the yellow bedspread and opened my arms and legs into a star.

The curtains gently blew in and out as if they were breathing. There was laughter from the telly, then a hush where I imagined the actors were staring at each other in a fancy restaurant. I couldn't understand those

grownup silences where a lot seemed to be said, yet no one actually spoke.

I closed my eyes and the curtains made a bright red square on my eyelids that faded away.

#

Nan put four tiles onto the scrabble board and scored seven points. She said, I'm going to catch up with you very soon my girl.

You'll have to get some double words, or a Q or Z.

What's wrong with FREE?

Not as good as this. I added D, O and M, the M landed on a triple letter score.

She sucked her gums and considered the tiles on her word rack. After a while she asked, How's that hairy baboon?

Tank?

Her eyes zoomed in on me and I fiddled with my tiles.

Is he being good to your Mum?

Think so.

Is he good to you?

I shrugged and said, Hardly notice him.

Uhuh.

Except, he calls me 'Faif'!

She tried not to laugh and said, Ah well, as long as that's all he does to get your goat.

Mmm...I couldn't make a decent word with my letters. The highest scoring one was a three-point G, and worst of all, I had four O's. Maybe I should throw in and start again?

Faith, Nan said.

I'm thinking.

Faith.

I looked over and Nan had sunk down into her chair. Barley sugar, she said in a spidery voice, and I rushed into the kitchen for the lolly jar. *Don't die don't die don't die* thumped in my head. I put a barley sugar in Nan's hand and she ever so slowly lifted it up and put it into her mouth.

Eventually she coughed and said, Thank you dear, it's just my blood sugar again.

I'd had a horrible fright, but I kept it to myself. I said, Shall I make a cup of tea?

Think we need some fresh air, Nan said. If you fetch my teeth we can go up to the shops for afternoon tea.

I went into her bedroom and got the glass of water with her teeth sitting on the bottom. They were huge, as if they were meant for a man, or a pony, not for little Nan. I tried not to notice when she put them in. They can't have been comfortable, they made her whistle when she talked.

Right, I'm ready, she said getting up.

We went out into a sunny day. A shaggy tabby strolled along the footpath. Then a lady drove up the street on an old people's scooter. She waved at us. There was a box of beer in the scooter's front basket.

Jean's such a lush, Nan whispered.

Drunk driver, I joked.

Nan said, Ssh ssh, then laughed.

Suddenly, I was starving.

The coffee lounge was six doors up from the corner. Nan said I could have anything I wanted. I picked a sausage roll, a custard square and an egg sandwich. Nan put a lamington on her plate, ordered tea for herself, a milkshake for me, pointed to the table she wanted to sit at and let me carry over the tray.

I'll bring the drinks, the girl at the counter said.

Thank you, Sandra, Nan replied, tapping across the carpet as if she was the Queen.

Once settled in her seat, Nan cut her lamington into squares, then popped out her teeth and slipped them into her bag. Not worth the bloody bother, she said.

I was all summery on the inside. Nan was better. Christmas was ten sleeps away. I'd get presents. I'd be able to play with Kahn's puppy – maybe I could even get my *own* puppy? That thought nearly took the top off my head. When it was time to go, I skipped in circles all the way up the street.

You mad thing, Nan said.

I could tell that she was extra happy too.

#

It was incredibly hot that night. We had to lock all the windows and doors, though, in case of burglars. Then Nan and I went to bed. I was allowed to keep my light on and read the magazine she'd bought me.

I lay on my stomach and turned the pages. There was a fashion quiz, a pony adventure story and a competition where you could win movie tickets by answering ten questions about whales.

The grandfather clock tick-tocked making me sleepy. I heard Nan's bedside lamp click off. Then I must have gone to sleep, because next thing there was loud knocking on the front door and I was still lying on top of the bed with all my clothes on.

Nan and I came out and stared at each other.

KNOCKKNOCKKNOCK

Who is it? Nan asked.

It's me, Mo said in her whiniest voice. Can I come in?

Nan sighed really deep and opened the door a crack. Are by yourself?

Course.

She peered past Mo, shut the door, undid the safety chain, and let her in.

Hello darling, Mo said to me in that awful whine of hers.

I stepped back hoping to avoid a hug.

Nan said, Just the one night, Maureen. Got that?

Mo laughed and went through the place flicking on all the light switches. It's a wonder you don't break your bloody neck in the dark, she said. Christ!

The flat was blazing bright in the seconds it took her to stagger to my bedroom and shut the door.

Nan was so angry it took her a few moments to steady herself, then she was down the hallway after Mo. You be off tomorrow, she said, or I'll call the blimmin police.

We heard her strike a match.

Nan banged her stick on the door. Get outside if you're going to smoke!

The door opened. Where's the fuckin ashtray, then?

There isn't one, as you well know.

Mo stabbed her cigarette out on the wall, gave a sickly sweet smile.

You're not treating my house that way. I'm not having it, no, you get - Mo slammed the door in Nan's face – you'll bloody clean it up!

Nan sighed. Don't worry, Faith, she said. We'll sort it out tomorrow.

Let's have a Milo.

Yes, dear, that'll help.

She moved along at a snail's pace. The stuffing had come out of her.

A giant, hard lump grew in my chest. I wanted Mum.

#

It was after lunch and Mo still hadn't got up. My magazine and clothes were stuck in the bedroom. I moaned to Nan about it.

Do you want me to get your things? she asked. I'd rather do it before my show starts.

The soft dreamy music began.

It's okay, I said, as grinning faces crossed the screen – snow white teeth and long straight hair. I thought they all looked the same; Nan knew all their names.

That Angela's no good, she said, up and left her husband for the gardener. Sandy'll come a cropper one day. Maybe Mitch will help her out? He owes her a favour.

I went and listened outside the bedroom. Silence. I creaked open the door and looked in. Mo had pulled the sheet right up to her chin.

Then I saw that she'd tipped out my bag, all my things were scattered across the floor. Where was Kahn's ammo tin? I crept in and carefully searched underneath my clothes, and inside the bag. I was starting to freak out. Then I saw it under the bed.

Lost something? Mo asked, and my stomach almost jumped out of my mouth.

My magazine.

Here it is, she pulled it from under the pillow.

And my tee shirt, I said, picking up a tee shirt and the ammo tin in one go.

Mo held out the magazine. I took it, wandering off as if everything was fine. She called after me, I'd kill for a cuppa.

Cup of tea, Nan? I asked as I went through to the kitchen.

Lovely, she answered without taking her eyes off the screen.

I slid the tin into my pocket. Had Mo opened it? I'd be dead if she had.

I heard Mo go into the lounge. Nan said, Morning, in a stern voice.

The jug came to a boil. I made the tea and took it out on a tray. I had to concentrate because I was trembling so much. Why did Mo have to turn up when I'd been having a nice time with Nan? I handed Mo a mug and accidentally met her eyes head-on, then wished I hadn't. She smirked and said, You packed a lot of gear, didn't you?

Quiet now, I'm watching, Nan said.

Mind if I go to the dairy? I asked.

Off you go, then.

I went outside and walked straight to Mr Doyle's hydrangeas. I crouched down and crawled into where the branches thinned and made a kind of cave. Sunshine dazzled in the gaps between the leaves, letting in a lime-green light that wobbled on the ground.

Massive wild feelings came out of nowhere – I hated the boys for getting me into trouble, and for giving me pot. I hated Mo for upsetting Nan. Love surged up, too – for Nan, for Mum, for my real Dad. I couldn't stop all the love and hate twisting inside me like snakes.

I pulled out the tin and bloody well lit up, breathed in just as I'd seen the boys do it, then fought to hold back a cough. My chest burned. The cough came out in a rush of smoke. I gulped in some fresh air, then tried a smaller puff. Much better.

A sparkling lightness grew in my head. I watched a worm come out of the leaves and slide along into the grass.

After a while, I crawled out and walked back to Nan's. I stopped on the porch, I thought Mo would have been causing more trouble, yet the flat was really quiet.

Worried, and a little dizzy, I sat around the corner in the shade, and heard Nan say, You always niggle at Faith. Leave the poor girl alone.

Can't help it, Mo sniffed. You know why.

There was a long pause.

It's too late Maureen. Let things be. For *her* sake.

Mo blew her nose loudly.

Get your life back on track, Nan said, then maybe you could try for another baby?

I wanted to get up and run away as fast as I could, but my legs wouldn't work. The ammo tin was poking into my hip-bone. I couldn't do anything about it. Stuck to the cold concrete, barely breathing, I heard a seagull cry out. Its shadow swept across the lawn

Cats and Dogs

I used to clean offices with my husband. Then we broke up, and I started cleaning houses. Most people only need me for a few hours, but Mrs Shaw has me two days a week because I also keep her company. Mrs Shaw is 78, wears mascara and pink acrylic fingernails. When Terry the gardener comes, her eyes follow him across the lawn and her face goes soft. I can't remember when I last looked at a man like that, and I'm only 52.

Mrs Shaw's had lots of lovers, and is proud of it. Her daughter's had husbands – four of them. Diana takes after her father, Mrs Shaw says. Perfectly groomed, with very little sex appeal.

Diana's my age, a psychiatrist. No children. Very prickly. Communicates with her ex-husbands via lawyer's letters.

Mrs Shaw teases her about her fourth ex who she says is the image of Omar Sharif. She'll ask, How's Boris Yashmak?

You're thinking of Boris *Pasternak*, Mum.

No. Your Boris, the Latvian.

For God's sake, his name is Poliatnioff (I never quite catch it), his father's *Lithuanian*.

They bicker until Diana leaves, striding past me while I'm cleaning the windows or vacuuming the rugs in the hall.

Everything alright? she asks me in a voice that says No Need To Reply.

Mrs Shaw has a beautiful home, especially the lounge, which is always warm and smells of pot pourri. The walls are papered in a coarse kind of silk. There's a huge gilt-edged mirror, a velvet sofa, and armchairs covered in a print of peonies. She has a cat too, Cleo, a yellowing Persian who sits on the sofa like a puff of winter fog. Cleo's so old she can hardly walk. I've piled cushions on the floor so she can get down off the sofa in stages.

Mrs Shaw and I spend a lot of time playing cards or piecing together giant jigsaws. I like the way time slows.

One day I asked her if Yashmak was Boris' middle name, or an actual word.

No idea, she said. Why don't you look it up in the dictionary?

I did, The double veil worn by Muslim women in public.

Oh dear, I can't picture Boris in a veil, she laughed.

What about this word – Yarpha? What do you think that means?

Say it again, Susie.

Yarpha. Y a r p h a.

Sounds Russian, doesn't it?

It *is* from Europe.

Latvia?

Scotland. Means peaty bog.

Well I never. Give me another.

Y a w s. Yaws.

Some kind of builder's tool?

Button scurvy.

And so on. Once we spent an afternoon trying to agree on the colour of the silky wallpaper. She thought it was citrine, and I thought it was amber. We finally settled on golden, as in golden syrup.

All the while Cleo was sinking her claws into the velvet sofa, gazing at the garden where petunias spill from tall urns and sparrows chirp on the lawn.

Cleo's bird-catching days are long gone. She twitches and nickers, so you know she remembers. Then she closes her eyes, as though disappointed, and carefully curls into a ball.

I finish each day making 'soup off the bone'. Mrs Shaw believes in it. A bacon hock on Mondays, a chicken on Thursdays. Then I rush off to catch the bus. Usually I'm the only person who gets on. When it reaches the city students pile in, crowd the aisle, argue in foreign languages, and take phone calls.

My stop's a few doors along from a boarding house. Musty wino's live there. They hang around the dairy asking for a spare dollar. As do people with mental health problems. I can't imagine Diana, the psychiatrist, being able to help them. One in particular, I see him a lot, has huge

shocked eyes and whispers to himself. No disrespect, but I'm glad I don't clean the boarding house.

Last week, I was in Mrs Shaw's downstairs bathroom, when the front door opened and Diana's spiky heels struck the drying floor – they'd leave marks. *Blast*. I'd have to mop it again.

Morning Mrs Yashmak, I heard Mrs Shaw say.

For goodness sake, Mum. Is Susie in?

I gave the toilet seat a last wipe, and went into the lounge.

Ah, Susie, Diana gave me a stare. I hope you're free tomorrow? I'd like you to go to Sydney and clear out my house.

You're kidding, right?

Susie only does favours for the ancient and infirm, her mother said.

I'm working tomorrow, I said.

You could take the day off. I was going over myself, it's all booked – flights, hotel. Then at the last minute a colleague asked me to a conference.

Can't face Boris, eh? Mrs Shaw said.

It's *nothing* like that.

Why do you have to marry them? Save yourself a lot of bother if you just took what was on offer and left it at that.

Diana ignored her mother, and said to me, I want you to sort through everything and give the place a good clean. Boris will pick up his items, as agreed, on this list. He's a hermit, he won't bother you.

He's got lovely high cheekbones, Mrs Shaw piped up, and such dark eyes. I can see him in a fur hat and a horse-drawn sled.

He's *hardly* Yuri Zhivago.

A real ladies' man, Susie. Wear that green top you look so lovely in.

#

The cab bowled along dirty busy city roads. We passed jackhammers cracking up asphalt, the vibrations shaking the cab. The driver swung into a narrow street of terraced houses that were very old, yet looked new, and pulled up in front of a shiny iron-lace fence.

I got out and stood on the footpath. The stillness, the heat, and the lulling perfume of a flowering frangipani tree made me feel like I was in a dream.

Snap out of it, I said to myself. The goodwill truck was coming at four. I went up the steps and opened the door.

In the lounge were oriental rugs on black painted floorboards. Large abstract paintings. A flash of wings in the tree outside. A rainbow lorikeet joined its mate, they shrieked and made the branch shake.

Bookshelves lined the hallway. There was a formal dining room, and a kitchen with slate floors, stainless steel everything, and a row of dead potted violets on the sill. The windows looked out onto a walled courtyard with white deckchairs and a hazy blue-green eucalyptus tree.

I got out Diana's list, three pages long, countersigned by Boris. It had tick boxes for everything from sheets on the beds to the dining table and the shell-shaped vase on top of it. On Saturday, the carriers would

come for the furniture, books and breakables. After that, there'd be a thorough clean.

I went upstairs and stripped the double bed, out fell a card with flowers on it. Inside was written, *I didn't mean what I said, I love you.* I closed it with a pang in my chest.

I dropped the card in the bin, folded the sheets, pulled off the mattress protector, folded it. Stacked all the bedding in boxes, taped them shut. Went into the en-suite and packed towels and toilet rolls and soap. Picked up the boxes and left them on the porch.

In the kitchen, I threw away anything past its use-by, apart from some crackers and teabags for myself. Then boxed up tins of tomatoes; jars of anchovies, artichoke hearts, jam; bottles of oil, vinegar, tonic water; packets of pasta, rice, lentils.

The goodwill truck arrived right on time. I helped the driver with the linen boxes, and he loaded up the heavy kitchen ones. Fifteen minutes later he was gone.

I was hungry and opened the crackers. They'd gone soft. I tossed them into the courtyard. I'd found a brandy bottle with a few inches left in it, and took a swig. A flush spread from my face to my chest. The sun had worked its way around the house and shone right into the kitchen. Birds were going crazy over the crackers.

I went out into the courtyard and sat on a deckchair. Hair had escaped from my bun, it felt like insects were tiptoeing across my skin.

The afternoon was incredibly hot and humid. Earlier, when I'd shaken out the rugs, dust had clouded the air and stayed there.

I wondered if I should have kept the *I didn't mean what I said* card for Diana? Maybe she wasn't as together as she seemed? Afterall, I never knew how to show my own grief. I'd kept on good terms with my ex for the kids' sake, even though they were old enough to vote, to get pissed!

The last time he came up for a family Christmas, the kids went off to a party, and we laughed through *Bad Santa*, drank a little too much wine. The next day he went back down to his girlfriend as if nothing had happened.

I just worked harder. Tried to forget the years we'd slept in the same bed, cleaned offices, chased bills, loved the Warriors, and planned a second honeymoon in Queensland.

I had another swig of brandy, then another.

Flies floated in drowsy circles around the rubbish bin. Children played in the neighbouring courtyard where frangipani flowers drifted down like slow falling flakes of snow.

Something wet was pressing against my hand. For a second I didn't know where I was. I sat up, pushed the hair off my face, and saw a huge feathery dog, its head on one side, staring at me.

A man in an elegant suit, with chocolate-coloured eyes, said, He won't bite you, he used to live here.

The dog's tail began wagging, and it rushed about the courtyard sniffing.

You must be Susie.

I said, You have lovely eyes. Then couldn't believe I'd said it. Was I drunk? God – I was hugging a brandy bottle.

He smiled a warm easy smile and replied, So do you.

But I'm old!

No older than me.

I asked him if he'd like a cup of tea, went inside to make it, and put the brandy bottle in a rubbish sack.

There was only one cup left, which I hadn't sent to goodwill because it was chipped. It would have to do.

Boris leant forward to take the mug. There were silvery sparkles in his hair. I thought of my bun, half undone.

Have you come to collect your things?

He looked at the house, sadly, and shook his head.

I wasn't sure whether to stay where I was or start on the bookshelves, when he said, There's a nice restaurant up the road. Would you like to join me? I'll drop Abe off on the way, we're just around the corner.

As he spoke he got to his feet and put out his hand, pulling me up. It was so unexpected I didn't think it was really happening. We went out onto the footpath and walked down the road, with Abe trotting between us.

A crowd of fruit bats swirled overhead. I watched them swoop into a tree, squabbling. Then we moved on, the footpath thick with fallen flowers crushed beneath our feet.

Is this your first time in Sydney? Boris asked.

Yes. My husband and I had planned to travel when the kids left home. Instead, we broke up.

It's never too late, Boris said. He pushed open a gate and left Abe in another courtyard.

We crossed the road and continued on, dogless. His phone beeped and he stopped to read the text.

I leant against an iron-lace fence. Roses wound through it; heavy blooms, more scent. He glanced up and caught me staring at him. I felt a tremor of excitement, and looked away.

Kids! Boris said. My daughter's going to drop by for a moment.

The sun was setting at our backs, throwing our shadows forward, elongating arms and legs. It went as suddenly as a candle put out by a draft.

I was faint with hunger having eaten nothing but a mouthful of crackers since the rubbery omelette on the plane. We neared a pizzeria. There was a mouthwatering smell of garlic.

This looks nice, I said.

It's dirty.

We could get take-out, sit down by the water.

You'll like where we're going, he said in Diana's no-nonsense voice.

I followed him up a flight of stairs and we were shown a table on a roof terrace, paper lanterns overhead, white oleanders growing in tubs. A

waiter went past carrying plates of squid rings...lovely cooking smells; olive oil, red wine, rosemary.

Boris asked for the menu, and ordered champagne.

I sank back into the cushiony seat. The champagne was creamy and foamy, and I drank it quickly. I no longer cared that I wore old cleaning jeans and a grubby top, and had hair thick with rug-dust.

I loved that house, Boris said. That's why I couldn't go inside. Would have been worth a fortune if we'd held onto it.

It's just money, I said lightly – me, who has none.

His mouth went thin. He turned his glass round and round without taking a sip.

A toast? I asked. To new beginnings?

His daughter, Emily, arrived. Her face was heavily made-up, and she wore black short-shorts, fishnets and platform boots.

I got the job, she said, flung her arms around Boris' neck and gave him a kiss. Her happiness was magical.

Emily's an actor, Boris said, removing her arms.

I blew my rent on these boots for the audition, she said. Do you like them?

He sighed, pulled out his wallet and gave her some money. Then he gave her more for a phone top-up.

Hello, she said to me.

This is Susie, Boris said, Diana's friend.

Diana has a *friend*?

Emily!

I laughed and said, I don't know if Diana has a friend. I'm just doing her a favour.

Well, nice to meet you, but I'm late for a party. She accepted another \$20 off Boris for cabfare, blew him a kiss, and included me in her radiant smile.

Men at the next table watched her go. She was stunning.

Boris mock-groaned, Do they *ever* grow up?

We both laughed, and I told him about my boys and their pierced tongues and tattoo sleeves. One works at Burger King, I said. The other's part-owner of a bar. Bought it on Visa. It's terrifying.

He's an entrepreneur, Boris said. Good for him.

What was Emily auditioning for?

A TV commercial...for pantyliners.

Which gave me the giggles, ridiculous unstoppable giggles. And Boris didn't mind, in fact he seemed relieved.

A waiter brought across more champagne. My hand shook when I picked up my glass. I put it down and tried a deep breath. I was tired, disorientated, yet how *good* everything felt.

After dinner, he flagged a cab, and gave the driver his address.

It's up to you, he said, but wouldn't it be nicer to stay at my place? And, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he held my hand.

#

This morning I went to Mrs Shaw's. She welcomed me in wanting to hear all about Boris.

Is he still handsome?

Yes.

Charming?

Very.

Did he ask after me?

Of course.

I sat on the sofa and brushed off the ever-accumulating cat hair. For some reason Cleo put out a paw, as if she were about to make a move, and started purring.

Mrs Shaw sighed and said, You're prettier than Diana. You just don't know it.

Fortunately, the lawnmower started up and she gazed at Terry. He'd taken out the petunias and a bright fuzz of new seedlings topped the urns.

When the lawn was done, he came over and Mrs Shaw opened the French doors. In rushed the smell of cut grass warming in the sun.

Just wanted a word about the hedge, he said.

Yes, yes, you must have a coffee first. Susie, would you mind?

As I went to the kitchen I caught a glimpse of her, dazzled and happy, watching Terry remove his gumboots.

I heard them talking about the best way to trim the hedge, and whether to plant daffodil bulbs under the magnolia. Mrs Shaw laughed a high girlish laugh, and said, How *lovely*, Terry.

Sunlight reached the cups on the bench and sparkled on the sugar cubes.

