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Thesis: The Gift of Doubt (59,360 words)

Exegesis: Theory into Practice (5,702 words)

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ABSTRACT

The Gift of Doubt is a contemporary novel set in a rural coastal region of New Zealand, the far north. Two characters are juxtaposed in their concern for aspects of the community around them, most significantly in their concern for a young P addict. The novel is narrated in 3rd person (limited and subjective), present tense. It uses intertextuality, and ironic understatement as well a playful tone and construction, to explore an idealistic cast of mind that could easily seem outdated. The novel both aims to represent the world beyond the text as well as to construct a self-reflexive document in the form of inserted texts, allusions and conflicting world views ending with some devices that throw the whole narrative into question. The exegesis, placed intentionally at the end of the novel, will explore the link between my reading of postmodern theory and a possible new emphasis within my writing.

The Gift of Doubt

A novel by C M McNamara

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MARTIN

1. The Beach House

A man sits motionless on a white couch. Within a beach house, itself under a dome of peach beach sky, the man ponders his situation. For a moment it seems possible that Rodin's famous bronze statue, The Thinker has been recast once more and transported across the seas to settle in this beachside suburban development, on this couch. Martin Mason is a big man and he does the downward frown into oblivion perfectly.

And this man Martin is a person who would know that this sculpture of Rodin's was created to represent Dante Alighieri, poet and seer of 14th century Italy, sitting at the gates of hell. Dante observing the maelstrom for his major work *The Divine Comedy.* In this poem Dante has an observer, Virgil, proclaim: *The anguish of that race below with pity stains my cheek, which thou for fear mistakest.* Martin feels both the pity and the fear within himself and knows he is in hell.

His nephew beckons from the glass doors opening onto the upstairs deck. The boy offers him a cigarette and Martin accepts.

"Mum said you used to smoke, back in the day," Gabe says, giving a sidelong glance as his uncle's fingers encounter once more the familiar dryness of cigarette paper. The cylinder slides easily from its packet.

Gull screech and surf sounds sift through branches and blooms of ancient pohutukawa as the uncle inclines his head towards the flame of Gabe's lighter and the boy bows his own head towards Martin's.

"Back in the day," Martin agrees as he exhales into the universe. "This is heaven," he adds as he watches the twirl of smoke escape upwards.

Behind them, within the spacious living room, a large orange cat steps into a rectangle of sunlight to bathe its coat. As it licks a paw the cat swivels its eyes to keep the interesting visitor in view the whole time.

"Thought you didn't believe in all that stuff anymore," Gabe replies, after he takes his first puff.

Martin's gaze follows a silver thread of creek which embraces the property. Beyond the creek are rough hillocks, swampy grass and the lumpen coastal hills he remembers. He scans the area for movement within the scrubby grass and marshy weeds, looks for a lost childhood within the untouched spaces.

"There used to be a beaten path along the stream," he says. "From a campground up the back."

"Yup, gone now," Gabe responds. "But the last of the track still winds through the dunes over there. We use it to go down and swim. Mum and Dad got the best section," he adds, gesturing behind the house towards the black curves of tarmac outlining the extent of the developer's optimism.

Martin wants to go down the track through the dunes now but it is not yet time. People move in groups in this household and now is not the time to go swimming. He looks back inside the house only to encounter the cat's unwavering stare. Its coat rebels against the careful neutrals of the room. To hell with it, is the expression on the cat's face.

Martin thinks of Tina's house as one of one of those plastic maze games he had as a child, where the object was to tip steel balls around an enclosed maze of cardboard, the desired outcome being to assemble all the balls satisfactorily in a central scoop cut from the cardboard. Fiendishly difficult as Martin remembers. That was why they played it.

Gabe stubs his cigarette out against the deck rail. "Oops," he adds and flicks the butt in a joyous arc. Martin uses the ash tray shell that is there and makes a note to carry the residue inside for disposal. Another of Tina's systems for living. The house is a machine. And like the plastic game, predictable and contained.

He waves to his sister as she rounds the corner of the house below them, sweeping an old broom sideways across the exterior walls of the house. Colonies of tiny spiders have made their homes in the shelter of the cedar boards and their gauzy webs ruin the calculated severity of the architectural design. Tina waves back. She is preparing the beach house for sale.

This house at a renowned surf break, Onetari Beach, was supposed to be an escape for the family from the problems of the north. Shops in the nearby town now vacant, empty buildings mould-streaked and rotting in the subtropical heat and rain. Generational poverty within families, tagging and gang violence. Inadequacies of civic leaders, school teachers, idiotic infrastructure, suburban ghettos which bred criminals.

In the nearby town of Karatoa, and the modest city of Whangarei further south, high value properties jam up against party-time suburbs and the high schools deal with students from every social dimension, every school day, every period in all weather.

Of course the problems had followed the family out to the coast. Noisy cars racketing through the subdivision at night, attracted to the blonde flame of his niece who, appallingly, seemed to reciprocate the interest. Drinking on the beach, shouting of obscenities, fights between

different factions of youth and a dispute over land boundaries dividing the residents. The house had not been the answer that the family had sought.

It's time for lunch so all inhabitants assemble on the triangular upstairs deck. This deck swipes a corner from the second story of the house and is angled to the desirable north east sun, an inspired deviation from the rigidly rectangular.

Martin has told the family about his time in Rome but finds it hard to communicate beyond the barest details.

"It feels ancient," he says. "Things continue to work, for centuries. Community values. Public spaces…" His words falter and finally stop. Tina is the only one who knows the whole story. Any other conversation is futile. He stares at the slice of vehement blue sea within its shifting frame of sand dune and trees.

However the relentless music which they'd explained was zoned for the deck tethers him to the present. The daytime deck is desultory. At night it has the air of a party, a compulsory party. Martin's brother-in-law Steve is wielding a foam fabric-encased can of beer as he pushes steak around the barbecue hotplate. Like his wife, his movements are sure and purposeful. His eyes measure, assess value, admit or dismiss information as a matter of course, a habit from long years in the construction industry. His glance softens as it lights upon his daughter Faith, an indisputable teen beauty. Value of a different order.

Most of Steve's working life has been spent riding the crest of an economic boom. His talent has been to take full advantage of this, his name becoming a byword in the north for success and astuteness. Now it feels wrong when things don't fall into place. Noisy cars doing the circuit of the beachside streets. Beer bottles and cans littering the sands. Offers on the house not rising to expectations.

Described in the real estate brochure as *BEST HOUSE, BEST STREET, BEST BEACH,* their property had attracted large numbers to its open home afternoons. But the boom had been abruptly curtailed and the visitors turned out to be bargain hunters. Vultures. Dreamers. Although the couple want to leave they cannot sell at a loss. It is not in their experience to see others profit from their mistakes.

Martin watches as the cat threads its way through chair legs and over the collection of feet beneath the table. It is a tall cat, and proud, always acknowledged with a pat on the head or a comment directed towards it. Relief softens the air when the cat parades through, its lofty tail dispensing arbitrary blessings. Steve waves the barbecue tongs towards it.

"That cat always knows when there's a feed," he observes. The cat blinks in response before walking away. It never lingers long.

The couple had married young, in love with this coastline as Steve's parents had been before them. Up here builders had boats, it was a rule. Martin's mother had written, detailing the flourishing of businesses and trading up of launches. And the pair had finally arrived at this, the dream beach house. Now they have plans to move to the Gold Coast or to a more secluded peninsula nearby.

After lunch Tina decides to clean the salt stains off the windows. The stark beauty of this building comes at a price. Steve is to mow the lawn and the couple urge Martin to take a nap, get rid of the last vestiges of tiredness from his long flight. Down the stairs he goes, and along smooth polished-concrete floors towards his room at the back of the house.

His niece, Faith, smiles at him as she dips over the pool table which stands in the centre of the cool basement room. Her short shorts show tanned and clumsy teenage legs and along with her ragged blonde hair, bring something of the outside into the featureless room. Her bare feet

patter kindly against cool concrete as she circles the table, brandishing the pool cue before her. Martin reaches his room and ratchets the blinds down with relief.

And again the dream wakes him. A nightmare riven with the thatchings and scratchings of kikuyu grass. The same rugged grass that had welcomed him back when he'd taken his shoes off on his arrival. The grass that had cushioned his falls as a child first learning to ride a bike in the nearby town. Although it makes a hardy coastal lawn, the opportunistic strands of kikuyu can be hard to contain and Martin dreams that they are cracking the ancient walls of Roman buildings, rampantly raging, dark damaging, fracturing the good and the pure.

He hunches on the side of the bed at a loss, eyes resting on a pair of narrow and highly-polished leather shoes beside the bed, shoes he bought in Italy. How can such a simple item of footwear seem so wrong? Like underground twistings of the writhing grass, his thoughts are still nosing buds of memory within his mind, unearthing lurid teenage moments as well as the more recent catastrophe. Martin left this area trailing scandal at eighteen and now he has returned, after years of contemplation and prayer, it seems in no better state.

Italy, beautiful and dangerous. The monk Martin, urbane interface for a monastery print shop in Australia, he who could manage people and the details. The monks, manufacturers of piety in the form of holy pictures, calendars and prayer books. He'd been sent to Rome as a reward, a sabbatical where he could further his spiritual growth and learn from the systems and structures of Franciscan Friars over there. And he had learned.

The man hunches on the side of a narrow bed at the end of the world. He reminds himself, family, beach, Aotearoa, not that surreal combination of Rome, antiquities and kikuyu. He forces himself to consider the vast expanse of blankness left to live.

A sudden clunking sound prompts him to look up in alarm, afraid that it might be one of the birds Tina had told him about, *ruru*, the tiny owls that she said sometimes crash against the windows of the house. Small creatures that don't know any better. It doesn't seem to occur to anyone that the house has been built in their flight path. But, he reassures himself, the birds will be cloistered for the moment in their tree sanctuaries during daytime.

With a repeat of the abrupt noise Martin opens a chink in the blinds to peer outside. He sees his nephew Gabe holding up the end of the boat trailer, moving it so that Steve can mow underneath and realises it was the jangling of the trailer mechanism which had startled him. He sees the cat blink jaundiced eyes and resettle itself in the bright shade of boat and trailer.

In the shower Martin's feet are charmed by the cobbled feel of pebbles set into the concrete shower floor. It is a roomy shower, like the rest of the house, and the force of the water feels compassionate. His sleep had not been refreshing. This, the beach of his childhood excursions, the family, the lucky family sheltering out here by the ocean, the town too close, the American banks collapsing, Obama, John Key, struggling families and delinquent kids. The house not selling for the price they wanted. The birds. The poor misguided birds.

He bravely attends dinner on the deck. As on the previous night, the sky quietly makes its successive steps into darkness and the conversation is staccato. He tries again to tell them. *Ancient, civilised,* are the words that he uses but the words have lost meaning for him. Broad avenues of plane trees and generous public spaces consigned to the past. Religiously tended house and garden replace cloister and fountain. Tina, Steve, his niece Faith and her brother Gabe, replacing the presence of God and certainty of saints.

He's not sure when he'll return to his home, the Australian monastery. He's not sure of anything. There is only this house, this family and his hometown festering nearby.

Outside, kikuyu rages on under starlight, showing no effects from the strips of weedkiller Steve applied around the section boundaries earlier in the day. If allowed to, this grass will invade the most careful of plantings, insert itself into bark mulches and native grasses, take over and destroy. Martin wonders how long it will take for the kikuyu to feel the poisonous restraints, how long it will be before the grass dries up and turns yellow.

Within the darkness of the dunes against an immaculate sky, he can just make out the shape of the orange cat, confidently lumbering into the distance.

2. Infinite Whiteness

Martin beholds the whiteness and it is good. Silica sand slips beneath his feet as he negotiates the last few bends of the track and descends beachwards. Under his arm he grips a tubular steel and canvas sand chair and in his hand is *Shipwrecks of the North*, a Christmas present from his sister. A wide-brimmed hat covers his large head, bright towel cast lightly about his neck. Martin's eyes scan the bare shore. It is low tide on this steaming afternoon and only a few figures are visible, silhouettes outlined by shining water which sucks and swirls around their knees.

Martin finds a place where big tides have shaped a miniature sand cliff part way up the dune and sits in splendour on his chair, an intimate and convivial party of spinifex stars quivering against the small bluff which blocks their progress behind him. The light breeze that animates the spinifex will be welcome as the afternoon progresses. He doesn't read but casts his eyes left and right, following the water line, then into the pale

blue of the horizon. He is being absorbed into the scene, bright sun absolving him of care. Martin is relaxing and it is good.

Eventually, he lurches, in the manner of a large man in his fifties, down to the waterline in borrowed swimming shorts, confronting the environment without the shield and protection of sunglasses and hat. He is feeling awkward again amongst the careening of gulls across the shallows before him. He scans the water for kahawai, aggressive fish that chase baitfish to the surface for the gulls to scoop and gulp down whole.

Everything fits into a finely balanced system here and Martin feels himself to be out of place. To his left, he can see figures still knee deep in the water and they are also scooping kai. Theirs takes the form of tua tua, the plentiful shellfish of the north. Martin swipes his legs against the currents of small surf in a familiar way, heading for the deep.

He can't stay with the family forever. The whole world has gone back to work. The holiday season is over and there is nowhere for Martin to go. A cavernous underwater sound booms when he puts his head beneath the waves, interspersed with the screaming of gulls as he turns his head for air. He hears the sound of his own persistent breath and the plash of his arms obediently propelling him forwards, always forwards, until now.

Out of breath, he treads water, flicking his hair into sunlight to dispel the sense of doom which threatens to swamp him again. In his university studies he read about the ancient Greek idea of the dolphin, a celebrated creature that could exist both beneath and above the waves. If he remembered rightly the dolphin was viewed as a creature who could straddle two worlds, the underworld of death and disaster and the bright world above water. He wonders if it is possible in this place, in this century, to exist in both worlds.

As he leaves the water Martin passes a Maori man of similar dimensions to himself. "Tuatua," he comments by way of greeting, since

the man is leaning against a car bumper, waiting for the group in the water.

The man lifts his eyebrows in agreement, “Plenty out there,” he replies.

Martin nods, narrowing his eyes to see the group gathering shellfish better. “You ever see dolphins round here?” he asks and the man gives him a steady look.

With the hesitation of someone reaching into a compendium of stories, the man begins to relate an incident from the area a year or so ago. A surf lifesaving group had been practising their skills 100 metres out when a pod of dolphins began to act strangely around them.

“The dolphins circled them quite aggressively”, the man said, “slapping the water with their tails and trying to herd the youngsters together.” He paused. “There was a great white out there,” he said. “The Aihi stayed with the group until the shark went away.” The man’s eye contact begins to discomfort Martin. “They come when you need them,” the man ends, surveying Martin dispassionately. Martin responds, inevitably inadequately, and farewells the man.

His damp and heavy form is nobly upheld by the sun-warmed canvas of his beach chair. His straw hat is jammed over his still dripping head as he settles to read. But the consistent rumble of waves distracts him, demands that he check their progress every few minutes.

He sees a faraway column of gannets spiralling upwards and plunging into the waves in a cacophony of movement. The birds narrowly miss each other in high speed symphonies of surges, soarings and sudden falls. But what Martin finds compelling is the absolute silence of this column of frenzied movement. He is drawn into this silence, an audience of one in a makeshift sand dune amphitheatre. So much activity, from this distance, no sound.

Since his flight from Rome, silence, which had been his greatest succour, had become an enemy. The silence of the monastery had been a communal silence which sang with harmony and good works. The silence of his prayer times, knowing that many others were also engaged in like pursuit, had been a joyous thing. But since his departure, silence has underlined his isolation, his disgrace. Prayer is a small thin thing within the clamour of the world. The gannets' wild movements set against the vastness of sky and sea sketch an ancient silence and present it to him as a gift.

Martin takes a walk, stumbling through swathes of sand in a determined manner, like a grimy and rust-stained icebreaker on its way to infinite whiteness.

3. The Deep

Later, when he emerges from his room, a cluster of white plastic chairs are gathered on the lawn. Bodies lean towards each other and converse on some of these, while other chairs wait, vacant. The chairs look marginally capable of containing his six foot bulk but none looks any more appealing than another and Martin is at a loss as to where to move next. A white shapely leg points its balletic big toe from a deep armchair positioned to face one of the groups of plastic chairs. It is his niece, holding court. The leg hovers while she strokes the downy hairs on her thigh, complaining of sunburn. Her audience is spellbound. In one athletic movement she springs from the armchair and offers it to Martin. And he accepts.

With Faith poised on one of the rolled and padded arms of the chair, Martin begins to engage with the visitors. Like the gannets he observed earlier in the afternoon the exchange of remarks is a smoothly

unpredictable work of art that is being built slowly, but without the blessing of silence. Also there are no conversational plunges similar to the gannets' dives to the depths. The gathering tonight will be too polite for that.

Someone adds music to the mix and Martin can smell the sizzle of the barbeque which has been shifted down to this patio and lawn area. A conversational buzz increases with each addition to the gathering and loud laughter punctuates the scene as darkness approaches. Martin looks for the cat but it seems that it is not attending.

He abandons the chair from which the decorative niece has long since departed. In a sudden search for meaning within the night he decides to find his sister. But a woman with dark and smooth hair places her hand on his arm. She is wearing a turquoise sequinned muslin top which shows nearly all her breasts.

"I'm learning Greek," she says.

Martin blinks. "I see," he replies, not able to see much at all through a blur of panic.

"My name is Sarinda," the woman laughs and offers him her hand, which he shakes. "A friend of Tina's. I just thought seeing as how you're religious," and she laughs again, "I'd share with you my latest educational coup. Nowadays it's not only priests that study the ancients!"

Martin blinks and replies that he was never actually a priest. He sounds apologetic and the woman laughs again.

"No matter," she says, and her eyes seem to be making some sort of survey of his clothes, perhaps trying to work out what kind of "religious" he may have been.

Martin had deliberately steered clear of the black trousers and white shirt that he would normally wear when at a social occasion. That would be far too clerical. But he couldn't venture into the oversized board

shorts and T shirt that his brother in law Steve, an ex-surfer, wore. He wondered what sort of signal his striped polo shirt with heavy drill trousers sent.

The woman is telling him about her studies, as though they are a decorative border which complement her image perfectly. Good heavens, she isn't after him is she? Martin begins to back away, his eyes entirely unable to leave her sumptuous cleavage. There is a glitter of triumph and something more in her eyes.

His skin crawls in consternation. His sister has confided in this woman? He looks wildly around the party – who else knows? And his eyes connect with Tina, who smiles benignly as she comes over.

"I see you two have found each other," she says.

He can't leave. Tina puts a drink in his hand and he sips from the red wine desperately. The music is a slight thread of sound in the background now, drowned by laughter and conversational sallies of the kind that you had to have been there, and many times, before. Martin settles himself as the two women take on the burden of furthering their conversation, a complicated and careful exchange of generalities.

He sees his nephew Gabe inside the house, framed by the large well-lit window. The collection of youth around the pool table is motionless, tableaux-like in the frame. Faith leans across the table to scoop up billiard balls proffering a further gleam of decolletage which Martin feels he could have done without. He takes a larger sip of wine and this warms him.

Sarinda puts her hand on his arm to indicate that they are being offered something to eat and he surveys the plate his brother-in-law holds out to him.

"Tuatua fritters," Steve says and Martin takes one along with a paper napkin, balancing them awkwardly with his glass. Sarinda laughs

and takes the glass from his hand so that he can eat. Her gestures signal an intimacy he doesn't feel and he looks towards his sister anxiously. Tina throws him a glance which he fails to interpret before leaving, following her husband through the crowd. Martin takes his glass back from Sarinda. He smiles. She smiles back.

She's a single mother – that's one of her boys, Jesse, inside by the pool table. Martin soon realises that Sarinda's done everything right. She's left her partner because he was brutal and uncaring. She got the house because she had the kids to look after but then had to sell it when she moved up here to be with her parents. She's pursuing an education now because she didn't have a chance when she was younger.

Sarinda is assuming the aspect of a much maligned Madonna and Martin can only hope that her Greek studies will go well. He drinks further and is pleased to be interrupted by a wiry, well-muscled man of his own age. He recognises the air of consequence which accompanies this man from long days and shared dramas back at primary school. The pair shake hands and clap shoulders in an ecstasy of remembered youth. The Aiden O'Neill who stands before him now is a doughty fisherman, famous in these parts for an outstandingly bitter marriage breakup. The Madonna dematerialises.

"Don't go there," Aiden mutters.

Martin responds disingenuously, "I've got nothing to offer," causing both men to collapse into unmanly giggles.

Martin takes leave from the gathering. He is engaged to meet with fisherman Aiden and his mates at 4 am Tuesday morning. They will search for blue water and whatever they can get. Marlin has been suggested, but tuna would also be very satisfactory. Aiden has shares with his friends in a heavy aluminium boat, an ex –commercial fishing vessel, a little rough and ready but serviceable.

Martin finds that life is moving forward after all. Stroke by stroke he is swimming through uncertainty, his vision moving seamlessly through liquid and light. Martin is swimming on his own but constructs the fantasy that now there are dolphins to encircle him. In this way he enters the deep.

4. The Agony and the Ecstasy

Martin is seated on the couch in the same spot as he was two days ago, but now he is barefoot with salty skin and hair. Beside him sprawls Gabe, who has stacked a pile of cushions into the corner of the L-shaped couch. In this way the boy can lie with a tanned foot braced against the weave of the couch holding one hairy knee aloft, and trailing his other leg along the floor.

Martin holds the remote, however. He is watching *Grand Designs*, a programme about architecture, peoples' dreams and their aspirations for beauty. At least he supposes that's what it's about. Tina clop clops with her highest shoes around the marble kitchen which takes up the other end of the living area. She alternately instructs and questions her son who seems loath to expand on his replies. His parents are going out for the evening.

Martin tries to focus on the programme, which he's seen before. The people on it are searching for some ideal of beauty or comfort or utility – preferably all of the above. The presenter follows their journey with an earnest glee, both at the things that go right and those that invariably go wrong. There are so many ways to go wrong, Martin divines.

Gabe, his prone body advertising his boredom, begins to make derisory comments about the programme in between those appeasing his mother, who is just now leaving, thank the Lord.

Martin can't understand why the huge TV, plasma-planted on the wall, is so far away from the couch. The dimensions of this room resemble a movie theatre but it's one where people can call across the space, walk in front of the screen and feel free to talk through the programme. As his nephew is doing now.

Martin continues his focus on the programme until the advertisements, when he attempts to show some interest in Gabe's day. But Gabe responds with attack, as he often seems to.

"Why do you watch that crap?" he asks. Martin, relationship-building, replies with some reason or another. Gabe responds with a request to change to the music channel or any other channel but Martin holds the remote.

The two sit on the couch through the advertisements, mutually dissatisfied. Another problem with this room is the light. Really the television is only suitable for music videos playing in the background and possibly motor-racing.

Martin tries not to let his lip curl. Gabe is something of a boy racer. Martin embarks again on his programme viewing, however with little pleasure at this point. The building site onscreen is flooded with rain, causing delays in construction. The owners plod through English clay stoically. The couple, dewy eyed, continue to admire the ancient oak, a heritage tree, even when it costs them $30,000 to build around it. Martin likes the fable-like quality of the stories unfolding and the sheer niceness of the people.

"How did they make all that money that they're throwing around?" his nephew scoffs. "They must have inherited it."

Martin is uncomfortably aware that the people on screen, his people, must have gained their riches from somewhere. Maybe they are the wealthy and indulged children of tycoons. Or maybe one of the pair made lots of money in communications technology or the finance sector. The usual sordid and murky channels that money courses through.

But he is irritated by the way his nephew casts aspersions on these patently harmless, idealistic creatures. "You don't know where they got their money from," he is moved to answer. An architect explains to the couple onscreen why he would not clutter the curved wall with pictures and Martin silently agrees. His nephew contents himself with an eyeroll and attends to his cellphone which lies beside him on the couch.

"If they had to earn it they'd be more careful with it," Gabe begins when he's finished texting. Martin doesn't respond. He doesn't know whether this is just normal conversation for Gabe or whether the boy is needling him purposefully. Gabe has been working in a quarry, operating and maintaining machinery. It's hard work but he apparently has a talent for the mechanical and keeps the place running. It's likely that he doesn't earn much though, Martin reflects, trying to be charitable. He hears Gabe's Hilux departing in the very early morning and on his return the boy is visibly worn, clay dust etching new facial lines over his surfer tan. Gabe's father tells him to *harden up*. But Martin thinks he'd be better off softer.

Martin watches Gabe heave himself up and go to the front deck. The light is fading now and Martin can see the screen more easily. He likes the development of the featured building and he likes the presenter's ironic asides to camera. Kevin McLeod jeers kindly, as opposed to the cruelty and ignorance of youth, Martin decides. He cannot like his nephew. He hears Gabe talking with someone below and is relieved when the boy returns for his keys and goes. Moments later the truck takes off, leaving palpable silence and, strangely, a sense of abandonment.

Martin watches on. His first memory of television was of Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* programme, which had inspired him with images of the Renaissance and stories of the artists of the time. The twelve year old Martin found in the library and read *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. While he read, he lived it intensely. He *was* Michelangelo.

Their family had rented an old villa in the seventies after a failed attempt on his father's part to emigrate to Australia. The youthful Martin sat on the paint-cracked steps to a neglected back yard chipping away at a lump of aggregate concrete with one of his father's chisels. He hoped for a nymph or a saint to emerge. But the concrete remained a broken piece of pathway. The couples even now before him still had hopes for the sublime, Martin thinks. And maybe he does too.

Gabe returns. "That was quick," Martin comments without looking at him. The boy flops on the couch without response.

Martin switches the channel back to music videos and leaves the prone figure behind as he forages in the pristine kitchen for some hot chocolate. Tina and Steve did not expect to return before midnight. Faith was away at her course in Auckland. And the cat? Where was the cat? Martin goes to the deck and sees that it has leapt onto the truck's warm bonnet. The cat will not turn its head in response to Martin's call but remains still, intent on some vision in the darkness.

Martin takes the hot chocolate over to Gabe stretched out facing the back of the couch.

"Gabe, do you want a drink?" Martin repeats twice and sees his nephew turn in slow motion, empty eyes meeting his uncle's in a blur of confusion and chemicals.

Martin leaves him there.

5. Fishing trip

The stuttering sound of a 200 horsepower outboard-motor shreds the 4 am darkness and seems to summon the dawn into the more crowded, original end of the beachside community. This warming up of the motors also summons a neighbour who calls a plaintive protest from his upstairs window. Aiden bellows a cheery good morning and is pleased to hear further highly voluble responses emerge from other bedroom windows. He greets them all by name and extensively, before expertly manouvering boat and tractor out onto the road then down to the beach access. He does this in the kingly manner that a horizontal steering wheel imposes, leaving the clutter of houses at this more exposed and utilitarian end of the beach to resettle into darkness.

Martin hunkers down within the cabin of the heavy aluminium boat as it skis on its trailer over the sand moguls of the access road. As the boat trailer is reversed into inky waves the sky pales perceptibly. The driver, Brian, guns the engines as the boat finds some depth in the breakers. He keeps it in to shore so that Aiden can park the tractor up the beach and the third fisherman, farmer Gary, now occupied with pointing the nose seawards, can also leap aboard.

"Brian's in charge," Aiden had explained in a resigned manner. "It's just easier that way."

They are a practised team whose smooth action doesn't need any interchange beyond the odd curt instruction or outbreak of genial abuse.

Martin's wearing one of his brother-in-law's long sleeved fishing shirts and his own broad brimmed hat. His hands he has covered with sunscreen and he's packed a rough lunch. He's wishing he hadn't agreed to this. The boat broaches the waves, timing its run carefully. The men are all on high alert, comments at a minimum. The mood lightens,

however, as the shore break is left behind them and the boat heads away from the dark hills of land towards a growing expanse of pearly sky.

Brian is a science teacher at the local high school. Martin is wary of him, awed by the fact that Aiden defers to this man. Aiden is telling them now that his latest girlfriend insists on scheduled moments of communication.

"Communication's overrated," Brian offers and the others nod wisely, in an age-old alliance against women with their strange requirements.

The third fisherman is a local farmer who likes to make conversation and keeps Martin occupied satisfying his curiosity on various points about life in general. Gary throws a conversational lure and then pounces on any interesting answer with further genial demands for explanation. He restlessly sieves the conversation for ideas which he adds to and expands until he draws a response from one of the others.

This is how the day goes. The boat bravely holds its line, the sun intensifies and the fish don't make an appearance. The expedition stops for lunch. Gary's got inheritance issues with the farm. He and his wife have managed her family's farm for 25 years but her father, who inherited the farm in the first place, has just died, leaving instructions that the Public Trust is to sell it.

Martin hears careful sympathy in the men's voices as they sift through the finer points of the situation with disbelief. The farm has to be sold and divided equally between the three descendants. It is the old man's last jab at the couple as he had known full well that they were counting on negotiating for the bottom piece of the farm, to add to an adjoining piece they had purchased some years before. Now the farm may be sold as a package, leaving them unable to access any part of it even if they could afford to. They hadn't been getting on as the old man headed

into his nineties. He hadn't agreed with some of the day to day decisions made. Now they've basically lost their job.

"What a waste of money apart from anything else," Gary fumes. "Each call from the Public Trust is charged out at lawyer's rates."

"And it's dishonest of Vic," Aiden adds. "He could have told you face to face." The men stare into the distance as if answers lie there.

Aiden gets a text from his ex-wife. *You need to take care of your son,* she instructs. He rolls his eyes. "She's still trying to remote-control me," he says bitterly. She'd abandoned their family in a misty dream of love and good fortune at the age of 54. Their then teenaged son had not responded well and now, six years later, despite an aptitude for mechanics and some papers to prove it, was unemployed and living, since a bust-up with his girlfriend, alone in the family home. The house looked more decrepit every time Aiden stopped by.

Martin gathers that the love affair that provoked the family breakup had not endured and that the hapless wife now worked in the United Emirates and sent increasingly vitriolic texts. It was particularly irritating to her that the house where their son was self-combusting was her own part of the family property division.

With these men Martin could set his own tale within a context of dismal manoeuvres on the part of a malicious fate. But he isn't able to bring his own present situation into the light. These men are the heroes in their stories. Martin can only be seen as villain. At present he appears harmless and even noble in his calling, Martin knows. Why should anyone know otherwise? The boat criss-crossing the ocean now feels like his thoughts, churning through heavy liquid to no avail, leaving bitter saltiness and the stench of diesel behind them. Martin begins to vomit. It keeps him busy.

The men cheer and thank him for the burley. They start to catch tuna and their stories of personal disaster are left far behind as all movement takes on a rhythm and purpose. The abrupt action on the boat blots out the world's incomprehensibilities and the men's thoughts are swept into the blue currents where the fish work and play.

Brian had not been forthcoming in the previous discussions and Martin conjectures that this man possibly has his own demons to be endured. He can't look at Brian directly once this thought has struck him and he fancies that Brian avoids eye contact as well. The men gut the fish at sea and then head the boat towards land.

They return to the houses in the wind-scoured huddle at this exposed end of the beach. Brian backs the boat and tractor into a gap in the fence between his house and Aiden's rented sleepout, alongside a smokehouse and stainless steel filleting bench. Rioting over the filleting bench and supported by the fence, is a lithe and extravagant bougainvillea vine, and this shades the men who begin to work intently on processing their catch.

Further along in this fence is a gate to yet another property which opens now to disclose a neighbour holding a beer can in a pincer grip to avoid the icy condensation.

"Any luck?" he asks. Brian gestures towards the 130 litre blue bin with its icy cargo of shimmering steel-grey torpedo shaped fish. The neighbour raises his eyebrows.

"I've gotta give it to ya…" he says as he takes a swig of his drink.

Martin, following instructions from Gary, hoses the boat down and begins on the fishing rods. A benevolent sun finishes the job and burnishes proceedings in the backyard with early evening intensity.

The catch goes seamlessly from bin to ziplock bags to freezers. Brian wields his knife like the scientist that he is, feeling along the

backbone of the fish to detach the fillet then levering its skin from the succulent rose flesh. Each man has a beer at the ready which they avail themselves of at judicious intervals. Aiden takes his Landcruiser down the beach to get fresh salt water for rinsing the fillets.

Brian's wife Rita stands in the middle of what has grown to a small gathering. She whisks wasabi into a dipping sauce she has created in her kitchen upstairs. She doesn't indulge in the idle conversation around her and her greeting to Martin is cursory. However, her quick humour with those she knows and her vigorous work habits are met with respect obviously gained over many years. She is tangatawhenua. In this situation why would she waste words?

Martin places himself on the bench seat of a long wooden picnic table which borders one side of the yard. Gary's wife Linda sits beside him, trading comments with the men, sending volleys of laughter which are returned back to her in force. She had pulled up in the back yard straddling a quad bike and wearing shorts and dusty white top. Her light tan doesn't hide the freckles and wrinkles she has gained from decades of working outside. She is gorgeous. A photograph of her arrival, including the grinning teenage boy leaning sideways on the back of the bike, would explain everything about far north coastal New Zealand, Martin decides, mellowing nicely with the afternoon sun and white wine in front of him.

Rita passes around slices of pink tuna with the dipping sauce. This is received with a pleasure bordering on reverence from those in the backyard. Filleting over and fish packed away, a pleasant lethargy has begun to descend and Martin hopes his sister won't rush to pick him up.

The young boy who jokes with the adults about getting a beer himself had come along with Linda to see if he could help Gary check the possum traps later on. A friend of the boy's arrives and they respond with alacrity to the platters of fish circulating.

Solitary dogs punctuate the early evening, wandering in from one direction or another then leaving without ceremony or fuss. Tina brings her own bottle of wine with her and plonks herself down next to her brother. Martin sees his brother-in-law confidently accost Gary. It is never too late or too early to talk about money.

Then, encased in a long yellow dress and framed by late sunbeams, Sarinda shimmers down from some planet of resplendence. Linda greets her with a warmth that it seems to be her habit to spread around and Tina pours her a drink. Martin allows himself to drift in and out of the conversation in a haze of well-being.

Squares of light from upstairs windows brighten the shadows gathering in the backyard and a brazier has been lit beside the barbecue. Martin blinks salt-stiffened eyelids and accepts a piece of chocolate cake someone hands him. Its comforting sweetness is welcome. The last thing he registers clearly is the excitement of the teenage boys as they return for a second piece of the cake.

He is in a parade of indigents, a scene from Dante. He doesn't recognise anyone in a vision that is scratchy black and white, etched by Gustav Dore into the sudden night. He eventually spots his sister dancing in an abandoned way in the garage and he squints sideways at her while he tries to make sense of it. He takes shelter beside a man he was talking to earlier, a seventy year old diminutive Maori man, whose gentle manner of speaking is reassuring.

Martin is trying to keep his focus but the chiaroscuro night is fascinating him, drawing him into its patchy light patterns. He drinks automatically and doesn't know where his next one comes from. Some people decide to go and watch the cricket and this seems the sanest thing for him to do. He trails after them as Sarinda leads the group to cable TV at her house over the road. As it turns out, this is Martin's farewell to monasticism.

"For it is in giving that we receive," is his last thought as he crests the waves of Sarinda's encompassing pleasure, and then it is tomorrow.

Morning. Martin lifts his head from the pillow and finds the colours and textures around him appealing. Light pours through a chink in the bedroom curtains as Sarinda brings him a satisfactorily large mug of crisp, black tea. Martin feels only well-being.

A teenage voice calls up to his mother and she throws the car keys down the stairs, wishing her boy a good day at his holiday job. She perches prettily in some silky wrap of Asian provenance on the side of the bed, texting he does not know what to he did not know whom. Martin rests his hand on her thigh. Despite his headache the world seems kind.

As she showers he lets his eyes drift along the seams of the wooden floor, hesitating at each smoky nailhole and irregularity of construction. The bare walls and floor of the room please him. The house must have been cleared, ready for its temporary resident, the housesitter, his host. Her study texts two bulkheads against the far wall. There are chunky art books as well as smaller, denser tomes of ancient history. Another jagged and lovely pile beckons to him from the bedside table and he longs to devour them.

Something not quite so satisfactory, however, is the line-up of photographs along the shelf above the bed. These grinning people have nothing to do with the day. Martin imagines the snapshots replaced with a photo of himself, placed in a jointed frame with Sarinda in the other part, a diptych within a frame of ornate gold.

They would be serious, like the Byzantine figures of Justinian and his Theodora, an artwork he'd seen in Ravenna during his Italian sojourn, but instead of 6th century mosaic tiles defining their head and shoulders, there would be the glint of blue sea behind them. They would not directly face each other but nor would they face the world directly. There would be none of the pomp and ceremony of that Emperor and his Empress, but

he and Sarinda would meet the viewers' eyes with the same conviction, the conviction that their lives were important, that they could do some good in the world.

His sister is the only one at home when Martin is returned to the beach house in the early afternoon. Sarinda makes love as he imagines she studies, with a careful diligence, and she is very generous with her time.

"You enjoyed yourself," Tina says with a sidelong glance at her brother.

"I can't remember the cricket," he replies, "but the fishing was good."

They laugh and he rumples his hair in an absent -minded way. Tina is peering at him in a disconcerting manner.

"Take some clothes next time," she says. "That fishing outfit is not your best look." Martin excuses himself to change but turns in disbelief as Tina adds, "The cake had marijuana in it."

Without allowing time for him to fully register the implications, she continues. "Sarinda always makes them, they're famous."

"But what about the kids?" he stutters, remembering the way the two boys had returned for seconds.

"It's alright," Tina replies. "There wasn't that much in it."

There is an impatient sound to her voice now and Martin retreats, unsure of what he is feeling, what he should think about this information. He only knows how strange the shadowy mixed-up world had felt last night and how sensuous the morning had been.

He remembers how the boys had stood waiting for the cake, tall and graceful in their youth, like ancient boy athletes or heroes painted on

the side of an ancient Greek vase, and like those Greek sketched figures inaccessible and mysterious.

He sleeps in the afternoon and once again finds that his sleep is not refreshing.

SARINDA

1 .Escape

A woman drives a white stationwagon through dawn mists which steam up from the valleys of *Tai Tokerau*. The road, which she has driven many times before, is narrow and winding and every so often she hits a patch of shingle. Morning reveals shadowy shapes. Sarinda slows down with a sudden wariness. Perhaps stock have breached their rickety fence barriers.

But she sees only the silhouette of an angular branch reaching an awkward arm towards the car from its damp enclosure of fog. The succession of dry periods with thundering rain in this part of the country has been too much for this particular tree. It stretches out like a supplication, dried out and lifeless, probably ready to drop. Around the next corner huddles a homestead isolated in a dense blanket of fog.

They're all asleep here in Hobbitland. Thick mist wraps the sharpness of hills. It rises from low grassy fields, from the creek beds and marshes. Far, far away she can see a patch of eggshell sky. She is glad she doesn't belong here. Sarinda is beginning her second year of university studies down in Auckland, and her grip on the wheel is firm.

Nothing will stop Sarinda now. Her oldest son Jesse is staying with his father in Dunedin while he begins his first year of Health Science studies. Her second son Tai lives with her parents in her own childhood home and has begun his last years of schooling. She has left the complicated Martin in her wake.

He had been a pleasant diversion, an unusual man with an intriguing past which she still didn't know that much about. He was not in her plan but then nor was any other man, unless he happened to come with a house in Ponsonby and no vicious ex-wives. Sarinda understood enough about the world to know that this was not likely so had set her sights on an intellectual life.

As long as she had enough money to support herself flatting with others, boarding or housesitting she would be happy. She would daydream through cluttered and noisy university streets in Auckland, a mysterious woman with flowing garments and her mind on higher things. It will be as though she herself is living a life of contemplation, she decides, full of beauty and solitude and learning. Though without the strict routines Martin had described, because there really was no point in getting up that early in the morning.

Sarinda longs for beauty. She can see it in this disturbing landscape beyond the car windscreen, where the cattle look up from the paddocks as she passes, looking as though they needed something from her. Sarinda doesn't eat meat generally but if someone prepares food for her it is not in her nature to quibble. Thus, at her parents' house her rules are relaxed. She also isn't a fan of dairy products which she feels slow her down. But if they are used in baked goods, such as scones or pastries she wouldn't refuse to eat them. That would be dumb.

Sarinda's long fingers slide around the steering wheel as she negotiates the corners with style. She doesn't owe these cattle anything. She will stop in Kawakawa for a long black, a read of the morning paper and perhaps a piece of the delicious strudel they sometimes make there.

Sarinda is like no one else. She feels strongly about things. She has been a victim of circumstance many, many times and this has resulted in a refined and complex soul, misunderstood by the world at large. She feels

that now is the stage of life where she will shape the world to meet her own requirements.

Having managed to give her children the opportunity to get the future they deserved, now it is her turn. Perhaps there will be a book-loving man who resides in a Ponsonby villa (renovated) and has no ties or attachments. If so, she will be there for him.

Sarinda recalls the intense look of concentration Martin would get as he flicked through her art books. She thinks about their long afternoon debates as they leafed through art books featuring reproductions of sublime beauty. It had given beach life an extra dimension and she would miss it.

He'd told her about his short explorations of the tourist trails from Rome to Arrezo, Assisi, Florence and Ravenna. As the white noise of surf rattled the curtains of her friends' beach house and further down the road visitors to the area churned their wheels fruitlessly on the sandy hillocks of the access road to the beach, Sarinda and Martin sat within the cool decorum of her upstairs bedroom.

Alone, her study would have been boring. But with Martin, it could erupt at any time into playful and satisfying sex. She dressed for this possibility in the long afternoons and was pleased with the way Martin invariably responded to the challenges her body language sent out.

The mosaics in Ravenna's *Basilica of San Vitale* were a current obsession of his and she loved to think she was Theodora, a wise and beautiful consort, whose brilliant marriage would be commemorated and celebrated forever. Sarinda had never been married. She didn't know what it took to get to that enormous decision.

Martin had described to her the relentless heat of the day he'd seen the Emperor and Empress in their glory, the city's dust mixing with a slick of white sunscreen on his face. He'd been sunburned in the

preceding days, still jetlagged from the flight from Australia and unsure of what his role in Rome was to be.

Grimy and exhausted, he walked into the church with no particular expectations of the magnificence which lay within. Sarinda likes to think it was like the way he'd entered their relationship, by chance perhaps, with no knowledge of the riches he would experience. And herself, too, she thought with sudden regret. She hadn't expected it.

Martin had entered the building slowly, giving his eyes time to adjust to the dimness, then he moved towards the bands of light filtering through stained- glass windows in the apse of the church. The central mosaic of Christ drew him, but it wasn't until he found Justinian and his attendants first, then Theodora on the opposite wall, that he stopped to savour the experience.

The mosaics glowed and glinted from high walls with sullen gold magnificence. The figures depicted met his eyes with dignity and restraint, with the same enigmatic gaze he'd encountered when studying the archaic period of Greek statuary at university in the eighties. He'd felt fear and inadequacy, was overcome with shifting light storming through the stained glass onto the floor around him. He sat on a nearby bench seat. It felt as though he'd been thrown down.

The figures on the wall did not waver in their regard. They both held something in their hands, a jug, a bowl. Martin licked his lips and sweat carried the acrid taste of sunscreen into his mouth. Perfectly robed in flowing garments, the figures created from glass set into plaster were cool and serene. The Basilica was temperature controlled of course, and the overheated air of dusty vehicles and blaring noise was far behind him.

Justinian and Theodora, he'd learned later. Temperate and educated leader and his impressive wife. The man who had had to be persuaded to be brutal in the defence of Constantinople, and who had secured this centre of civilisation for his long and just reign.

Martin contemplated the large almond-shaped eyes depicted on this central figure of Justinian and the satisfying way the military and spiritual leaders flanked him, bulwarks against the world and its dilemmas. Those eyes would only have to change direction only slightly to encounter Theodora, unmoving and beautiful on the opposite wall. She also had her attendants and was secure in her place in the centre of them, decorative and solemn.

He'd read more about them later, and again with Sarinda he'd contemplated their history. Many times as he'd encouraged Sarinda to seduce him in the afternoons, he'd experienced her femininity as part of Theodora's magnificence, her hold on Justinian, her murky past within the ancient walls of Ravenna.

Sarinda had liked it when he'd shared this with her, and played up the decorative and decadent aspects of herself, overlaying it all with an air of nobility and some luminously draped fabric. She sips her coffee judiciously at the train station café in Kawakawa. Who else can she find that would treat her like that? She loves being an Empress.

Sarinda and Martin had discovered a mutual belief in the importance of beauty in life and they wallowed in it. The stark glare of the beach, white light probing through wind riffled gaps in the upstairs bedroom curtains. Shattering light when you went outside, requiring the darkest of sunglasses to handle, sand whirlwinds in the afternoon glittering their bare legs. Pale undiscovered skin, fresh from swimming, gleaming within the darkness of their sanctified retreat from the world. Sarinda's housesitting paradise.

Up north this light could not be sustained, it was guarded against and feared, demanding sunscreens and peaked hats with trailing fabric to cover the neck. Discomfort and damage, plastic chairs brittled by sunlight and swimming suits having to be hung in the shade to dry. Big light on the

horizon, light moulding clouds, haloing their dark moods and occasionally stretching in fingers to touch earth.

Sarinda becomes absorbed in the memory of the soft red glow from three Chinese lanterns which had juddered along soft air currents on New Year's Eve and she frowns. Each lantern wavered within its separate air current towards them, visible in their progress for at least an hour from the far mountain to the skies above Aiden's section overlooking the beach. The lanterns moved enigmatically, in slow majesty from their mysterious origin, to fan over the group of friends with their deckchairs as though scanning this party below, who raised full glasses to salute them. Scanning and quite possibly finding the revellers wanting.

Well, it wasn't their best night. Aiden, that tireless and indefatigable worker was breaking sticks and feeding them into a tall brazier in homage to fire's beauty, even if he didn't know it. His new girlfriend sat isolated at one end of their semi-circle of deckchairs facing the beach. Waiting beside his empty chair as he laboured on. Aiden had fashioned the brazier himself. He called it "Graham" in a hackneyed old New Zealand in-joke which the others responded to with jeers and laughs. But his girlfriend didn't seem to get the joke.

Linda and her husband Gary were making a good attempt at jollity but the small matter of impending valuations of their farm, their home, was written in their body language. Sarinda herself was looking forward to the year ahead, her imagination not compendious enough to comprehend the full range of possibilities, the many avenues of error ahead.

Sarinda watched Aiden and interpreted his dismal mood as a reaction to her own new relationship. She drew nearer her new man, wrapping a sinuous arm through Martin's as the thought occurred to her and aimed her most charming smile at Aiden at the same time. She was that sort of woman. Just look at what you could have had, she signalled, smiling generously at the pitiful new girlfriend because Sarinda was really

an okay person. She'd known Aiden when he bought this land years ago to build on with his wife, before his plans had been stymied by Jackie's sudden defection from the marriage. There is resignation in Aiden's fire stoking tonight. Scraps of squealing pure fake joy drifted up from the beach where boyfriends dipped girls in the surf to celebrate the passing of the year, car horns blurring the air along with smatters of gunpowder-scented trails and bursts of light above them.

"I don't think Aiden approves of you," Martin murmured and Sarinda took the opportunity to give him a lingering kiss in the semi-darkness. When she looked up from her ministrations the lanterns loomed enormously above them, riding hidden peaks and troughs in the sky. And there was a strange switch in the mood of the gathering.

Aiden's new girlfriend pushed herself up from her faraway chair and negotiated her way carefully across the clumpy grass towards them. Sarinda drew nearer to Martin as the strangely silent woman advanced, zombie-like in her awkwardness and unfamiliarity, wild curls seen in silhouette against a lively sky. Aiden looked up from his fire-tending in an attitude of concern, as though recognising that he had unleashed this demon into the night.

"There's a bird under your chair," the girlfriend intoned, gesturing towards Linda, who hesitating, craned her head forward to see into the blackness beneath low-slung canvas. Linda then shoved her glass at Sarinda, scooping from the dank grass a snowy headed seabird, motionless and glowing, a gatherer of light from stars and moon and the embers of the fire. All noise faded into surf sound and the blare of the last cars to leave the beach below. The bird did not struggle. It pointed its perfectly crafted black bill neatly downwards. Only the flickering of its black eyes betrayed a terrified sentience.

"I thought I saw something from the corner of my eye," Sarinda marvelled. She cannot make sense of this. What could it mean? "From

above and behind us," she added. The dark bulk of Aiden's new girlfriend still loomed disconcertingly over her.

The girlfriend offered to get a grocery box that she had in the tent she and Aiden were sharing so that the bird can be contained until it comes around. Linda gentled it with capable hands. She's made an artform over the years of soothing animal hurts, diagnosing and divining, listening and observing. "It's some kind of tern," she murmured, "It's probably been trying to get to its roost."

Aiden conjectures that the seabird must have been stunned by a loud aerial bang, smashed from the sky by the bursts of fire. Probably been trying to get home for some time.

"It's a sign," Linda said, bundling the creature into the box and smiling her thanks at Maggie as she sees that the dry grass lining it. "This is a sign that things are going to come right."

Aiden put a warm arm around his girlfriend's back.

"Weird," Sarinda notes. "Very weird and unnecessary." She would edit the event out if she could.

She shrugs now, folding the newspaper and drinking the rest of her coffee. There is just no way to fit that night into her world view. Maggie had reported that the bird had revived at first light and began to shuffle around the tent where they slept, having pushed aside the weighted box lid.

She said that when she lifted it to the sky it had immediately soared away straight out to sea, wings beating the air as though it had somewhere urgent to go, destination the horizon. Sarinda wonders if it ever caught up to its friends. The lucky bird, she thinks grimly as she finishes her long black. And that Maggie is going to need all the luck she can get if she's going to stay with Aiden.

Sarinda's thoughts remain dark all the way to her first glimpse of the Skytower which pops out of nowhere on the northern motorway. By the time she gets a closer view of the Auckland skyline spread before her like a mirage, she is fully restored.

2: House and Garden

Sarinda places the last of her objects of beauty around the small and somewhat dismal city room. All of her treasures are blue. There is a glass vase which sits on the floor until she gets a desk, the painting that Tai had given her last year, layers of dye washes of various strengths which built up a representation of lines of breakers. The painting has a satisfyingly abrupt indigo horizon at the top contrasting with a small strip of grainy white paper sky. She believes he may become an artist.

A length of turquoise fabric with silver thread woven through it is ceremoniously placed over the back of a chunky armchair. A thick blue blanket pulled up on the narrow bed.

Her books are piled around the margins of the floor until she gets some bookcases. She sighs, remembering what a precious commodity solid bookshelves are in this city and sandwiches herself between bed and blanket, feeling something horribly like homesickness. This hadn't happened last year. But last year she'd been on a mission with Richard, she recalled. That hadn't ended well.

As Sarinda contemplates the rectangle of sky through her window she thinks about her parents' home. Just yesterday, she'd been there, stretching and groping around with her hands to find the dog's leash on the high shelf in the wash house. Her father was tall and skinny and never thought about what it was like for others, like herself, though she was quite tall actually, she probably got that from him.

All the while, as she debated the merits of fetching a stepladder or not, the mutt that she had bestowed upon her elderly parents for the time being sat up straight, like an exceptional student, ears pricked and eyes riveted to her movements within the house. Sarinda's outstretched fingers finally struck metal.

"Here, pup," she said attaching the lead to its collar. The dog trotted and slavered beside her like the jackal her father has deemed it. It ranges to the limits of the extendable lead, drifting beside its equally exotic looking owner.

Sarinda had found out from the vet that it was part Basenji dog, along with some Terrier. Basenji, she had discovered from the internet, was an African hunting dog, bred to accompany tribesmen on their forays into the bush. They were strangely silent these dogs, useful for sneaking up on prey, and they were very swift through trees when chasing.

Before she knew about the breed she had admired the dog's sinuous movements through the forest and its speed and agility. But of course the breed also accounted for its propensity to lurch after any mammalian movements and its lack of regard for boundaries like fences, ditches or rivers.

It was not obedient. Sarinda had learned the hard way not to follow her instinct and let it roam free. There was the pleasant afternoon walk that had turned into a chase through a river, over an electric fence, with a frantic zigzagging pursuit of the dog, calling all the while, as it chased young heifers over rough and unstable ground. Sarinda knew that this kind of behaviour could cost money ultimately and this is why the dog wafts along in its sidelong, shifty manner, eyes flicking this way and that, firmly restrained.

Her parents' house is on a long valley road with a pleasantly rural aspect, despite being only three kilometres from the town centre. The

houses on the upper side of the road have commanding views over the city towards the western hills and the sunset, the beach only 40 minutes away.

Twenty years ago, as the resurgence of interest in native plants in towns became fashionable, her father had replaced the large apron of lawn at the front of the house with flaxes, cabbage trees and other native specimens like the eco-warrior he was. Sarinda smiles beneath her blue blanket insulation. The trees had grown high, but the house, perched at the upper end of the section was still able to overlook the fringes of green with their attendant bird and bug activities. This had been quite an original thing to do at the time and she loved her father for it.

And the neighbours didn't object. Although they kept their own impeccably mown lawns intact, they made a point of admiring the flourishing growth on their respective boundaries. Sarinda frowns.

But the next people, the ones who were attracted by the ambience of *tui* which perched photogenically on flax flowers against the dark bush backdrop of hills and her father's own flourishing contribution, did what Sarinda considers to be a strange thing. First, on one side a recent purchaser of the property razed the line of feijoa trees which sheltered the bush plants of her father. Not only that, but he did it when the fruits were just about ready to be eaten, depriving his own toddler and Sarinda's boys of the fresh and fraGary fruit they'd enjoyed for years past. Sarinda herself had grown up eating those feijoas.

Next, the neighbour bulldozed a new driveway up the boundary of the bush, with reckless disregard for the roots of the puriri tree on the boundary. Flaxes were pushed aside and some half buried in heavy clay and rocks. When Sarinda's father went to talk to him about it he simply pointed to the power pole, the boundary marker for the properties and Sarinda's father returned home.

Over time, Sarinda's father's bush became a dumping ground for this particular neighbour, its bark and leaf litter floor being added to by lawn clippings and trimmed branches from the neighbour's property.

Not only that, Sarinda fumed, but the woman who bought the house on the other side had redirected her excess roof water, which used to splash and soak into her own front section, into a dip that ran between the two sections for rainwater.

Then she had dumped a large amount of metal to make a driveway on her side bordering the shallow drain. The next rain showed the effect of this when a torrent ran down from the neighbour's roof into the dip, hit the raised metal driveway and carved out a deep channel of clay, scouring away Sarinda's parents' land as it hit rock obstacles. The water then dispersed itself into the forest at the front of Sarinda's parents' house.

Some manuka were ailing and a ponga, which had leaned gracefully over the drain, gave up and died, possibly from the leachate from metals or maybe just from the damp. Sarinda was steamy heating up under the blanket but knew that her anger was mistimed and could only damage herself. The neighbours were ignorant. There was an end to it.

Sarinda sees ignorance everywhere. On the last dogwalk before her departure, for example. She is relaxed and enjoying the vista on the downhill side of the road. But where years ago someone had taken the time and trouble to plant rosemary and waving fronds of unidentifiable ferns there has been some sort of disaster. Sprayed and left, the roadside is a rusty and jagged mishmash of dead trees and grass.

Surely she hadn't been able to see the entire roof of that dismal house before? Its mouldy and ill-maintained grooves and patchwork joins are only revealed because of the absence of once graceful trees on the property. She can see their ragged and painfully bare stumps now. Although the trees cannot live it is obvious that the hackers and wreckers

will just leave the debris there alongside their grimy and cracked concrete driveway turnaround which is strewn with cars in various states of repair.

Sarinda cannot control her impatience. Why would people do this? Every time she walks down this road there is some new horror to confront. All that is needed to live well is an architecture of reason, contrasts of light and shadow within rooms, a balance of colour and natural hues and foliage, treescapes that can be seen from within, extending the rooms beyond the actual physical enclosures. She knows this for sure. She's read *The Architecture of Happiness.*

Decks where clouds can be seen by day and stars by night, Sarinda expands upon her theme. Large chairs upon which to sit and reflect. She'd had all that at the beach and she had Auckland city itself down here, cafes, libraries, an art gallery of substance…

She'd let the dog off down the end of the road. There aren't any kiwi in the bush this close to town and she knows the ducks can make a lazy lift-off at the very moment when the dog seems sure to reach them. Both ducks and dog seem to find this arrangement very satisfactory.

Sarinda threw a stick into a river current and watched as the dog paddled furiously upriver, gaining no ground but with the stick firmly in view, eddying in a backwater just out of reach, strands of willow wafting down to touch the ripples. Such beauty. The dog brought the stick back but, typically, won't drop it for Sarinda to throw again.

She sighed as she laboriously wrestled it from the dog's stretched grin. "Why can't you be more amenable?" she scolded the dog. Sarinda has been spoilt.

Not only does she have devoted and nurturing parents, but her two boys are punctilious in their attentions, naturally driven to make her life as easy and convenient as possible. They've always been like that. Sarinda has been allowed to range and roam and experiment through the days and

years, limited only by the flow of money available, which has not responded particularly well to her faith in the world's natural abundance.

Sarinda sat in a numinous haze amongst carrot weed in a field near the river and watches the dog try to scare out game. The dog utilises an unusual bouncing motion which allows it to see over the tops of the grass as it runs. She admired its motion and began to plan her year in Auckland, redeploying her resources deftly, as secure in her ability to survive as the dog is in its strong and lithe body.

Sarinda begins to feel sleepy as the square of sky in the window gathers darkness. Her name is Sara, really. But as Sara, she found that she was having to conform far too much to others' expectations. Attending upon her two small boys at Playcentre and with a partner who worked all day long and was becoming increasingly offhand, she felt like every other Sara in the world.

Her libido suffered. She experimented with her sexuality. She left her second partner. When the boys were school age she worked part time in the office at their school. And then she gave up that job and changed her name to Sarinda. It changed everything.

Sarinda falls asleep beneath the blue blanket, high in a building just off the main street of Auckland, with the sound of strangers beyond her bedroom door and a helpless wish to be Sara again, small and cherished child of a pair of perfectly good, ordinary New Zealand parents.

3. Majesty

Sarinda breathes the rarifed atmosphere on the 10th floor of the Galbraith Building with pleasure, four mornings a week. She loves the sense of exclusivity in the Greek class, which only has five participants who are all terribly interesting people. It is a fabulous start to her day.

As she works on transcription and exegesis, she fancies she is a modern day monk, a scribe of some sort, bent over God's work, a saint too, since there is no man in her bed currently, Ponsonby or other. Sarinda also studies Renaissance art, Modern Architecture and the Hellenistic period, this last a mystery to her as yet because it doesn't start until the second semester.

Sarinda has changed her style. She'd been aware for some time that flowing hippie garments were now for the young. And here she was still wearing them from the first time around. It had suited her too, but there was no denying that she was older now. Flower power was for the sinuous young girls who wore it ironically, with high shorts and shoes, and anything else that could show their coltish limbs to advantage.

From her recent studies of Aristotle, Sarinda recalls that *Magnificence* is ruled by decorum and finds what she needs in a vintage clothing shop just off Queen Street. She now wears a sleeveless black polo neck sweater made of a soft knit that sits perfectly on her waist. She has pulled her dark hair into a twist and outlined her lips in red. Her legs, once outlined sensuously within flowing skirts, now stride confidently in heavy cotton, narrow legged jeans of blue denim or cream or white.

For a finishing touch she swoops eyeliner behind her lashes and dispels the fresh faced look of yore. She will further develop her inner self as well. While the aristocracy of 15th century Italy may have wished for splendour in their wall frescos and furnishings they also extolled the traditional virtues of piety, justice, fortitude, prudence, temperance, magnanimity and liberality.

Interestingly, the outer rooms of their domains often concentrated on the virtues while private inner sanctums depicted representations of hedonism and sensuality, Gods notwithstanding. But Sarinda agrees with the words of Aristotle which the Italian patrons obviously did too, splendour must be balanced with decorum, and this was defined in her

textbooks as a sense of fitness for purpose or a regard for the value of restraint.

Splendour, like magnificence, had its deficiencies and excesses, Sarinda read and determined to avoid these in her dress. Although in her private life, of course, she would do as she liked.

'*Maiestate* (majesty)," she reads in a text on the Renaissance by Alison Cole. *The ultimate expression of a prince's dignity and authority, maiestate endowed his speech with eloquence; his dress and bearing with becoming modesty and gravity*.

Someone called Pontano advises the prince *neither to drink intemperately, eat gluttonously, walk jerkily, guffaw with laughter, nor toss his head nervously like a whinnying horse.*

Certainly, Sarinda thought, and read on. *Speech should be neither rash nor impulsive, but carefully adapted to the situation at hand. An understanding of the fifteenth century notion of maiestate – in essence the outward display of inner dignity – is central to the study of courtly art in which the presence of the prince, his consort, and entourage (comprising courtiers in the earthly sphere, angels and patron saints in the sacred sphere) is so pervasive a feature.*

Sarinda yawns and stretches. *Dignity is reflected not only in the dress, gestures, and poses of the painted figures, but also in the temperate manner in which the painter composes his pictures and deploys his colours.* That was enough. Temperance has taken hold of Sarinda.

Sarinda finds it easy to practise *Maiestate* in the Auckland Art Gallery. She glides beautifully from one great work to another and the airy rooms show her figure off to perfection.

She is eating in a very restrained manner at present (not just because of the injunctions of the textbook but also because of her chronic

lack of funds) and she looks very lean, Audrey Hepburn in a more mature phase.

There is no entourage and that is a pity. No saints or Gods accompany her. She slides a languid hand into her bag and checks her phone. Nothing. She wishes she hadn't been so firm with Martin, insisting on her absolute freedom and distance from all that was up north while she was studying.

He has a cell phone now as he'd taken a temporary job up there in Kiaroa. But he's never contacted her. She thinks that Martin has it – he has *Maiestate*. But what is up with him?? He lapses into most intemperate troughs of gloom. And he is a little judgemental too, she muses as she remembers some of his antiquated ideas. God, one has to enjoy one's life however one can.

Sarinda minces into the café next door where she has a job interview. She is on a roll and secures the hours that suit her, flashing her red lipped smile like a film star. It may be that she won't get away at Easter after all, she reflects. She had considered going up north. Catch 22, if she takes the job she can't go, if she doesn't, she can't afford the petrol.

Sarinda finds majesty hard to sustain under the pressure of lack of funds. She texts her boys and her parents, *Gotta job. All going well. XX.* As happens when one texts on a busy street, Sarinda is bumped by a man pursuing his own arbitrary path through the cone of possibilities (she'd got that concept from Martin at some stage). He's from her Greek class she realises as they both steady themselves, his hand on her upper arm. It's the engineer with the heavy glasses, who is exploring the ancient world for the pure joy of it. In his thirties, maybe. An idealist.

Sarinda feels a new area of possibility opening and the implications are dazzling. They agree to have coffee, right now, right here in one of the multitude of small establishments clustered around the university buildings. Sarinda loops a long strand of hair behind her ear as she sips her

soy latte, wide eyes meeting his over the brim of the latte bowl, listening, smiling, listening.

What had Aiden meant when he'd cautioned Martin, *Don't go there?* After all, Sarinda wasn't out to hurt anyone and as it happened she'd reminded Martin of a different way of celebrating life, beyond the thankless striving to be good. Who cared about his twenty-five year renunciation of the world, really?

Sarinda is a chameleon and Auckland is a different branch of the existential tree. The fact that Hugh is ten years younger than her is in fact an asset. His marriage is something for him to worry about and is not Sarinda's business at all. For the moment, he will complement her lifestyle and add to the vast and beautiful web which comprises her sensual landscape. Sarinda is quite content.

Her job is not quite right for an empress, but it would do. She makes sandwiches in the same intent and meticulous manner that she had once shown when she prepared food for her boys, though at that time it would have been good to have even some of these premium ingredients, she must admit.

Whoever did the shopping for the café had high standards. The avocados always slice cleanly to reveal slick and beautiful flesh. Salmon, salami, pastrami, rare roast beef. It is a feast for the gods, corporate gods mostly, who visit like beings from another more important, more vital and interesting planet.

The gods descend at midday and so this is when Sarinda generally takes over counter duties. And she is standing there, not at all Theodora-like, when Martin appears before her. She recovers quickly, greets him with a jovial "Justinian!" and feels a shudder of delight as she notes his embarrassed confusion. They arrange to meet at the art gallery after her shift.

Sarinda puts the full force of her attention on Martin as they make use of the grandly upholstered bench seats in the art gallery lobby for a catch-up. She knows he is unnerved by her eyeliner and it makes her feel splendid. She adjusts her posture, shoulders squared and her new thin figure arched forward a little, the concave lean of her body silhouetted in black.

Martin has an appointment with someone from his religious order in Auckland, she gathers. This anonymous clerical figure is passing through and Martin has something big to discuss with him. Sarinda nods wisely, wondering how to fit this visitation from the past into her Auckland scenario.

Martin is labouring to get his words out. He stutters and Sarinda compassionately contains her impatience. It appears that Martin had got into some difficulty in Rome. He'd been accused of stealing something from some Catholic institution. More than one thing?

She watches as Martin takes gulps of air and she lays her hand on his arm. Such a pretty white hand. They both look at it. Then Martin leans over his knees and divides one hand into thumb and fingers pressing across the bridge of his nose to his eyes, scraping at tears she imagines. His other arm hangs loosely. He had stolen something. He still had something. He takes something from his pocket.

Sarinda picks it up and turns it over thoughtfully. A thick bronze disk, it screams antiquity to her. It is heavy and its images are in pleasing relief as she runs her fingers across it. An emperor of some sort perhaps, on the other side a lion with a woman. Latin inscribed around the images. Beautiful. She raises her eyes to Martin.

"I couldn't return it at the time," he said. I found it or it found me."

"Beautiful," she murmurs.

"Beautiful," he agrees. They look at each other. "It's a long story," he adds. "It was a picture that was the real problem." She waits but it seems he his confession has ended and she is not sorry.

He tells her he is leaving the monastery, a decision has been made. They would have kept him, accommodated him, but the world outside has captured him. The resignation of Pope Benedict played a part. He'd struggled to understand how the Pope could possibly become fallible again if he had once been infallible. And his time with her had also been life changing, he noted, and Sarinda recoils visibly as she feels the weight of expectation descend upon her.

"Our discussions about art," he says. "They showed me that grace does not only lie in monasteries and churches but in man's works and nature and in society."

Sarinda nods cautiously.

"It isn't necessary to get up at 4 am, pray and study the scriptures to be a part of the ineffable," he declares. "And besides, I'm not a good enough person, it seems," he adds bitterly.

Sarinda nods again. She's never heard him talk so much. He is generally a listener. Ineffable?

"And the new Pope," he says. "Pope Francis. His emphasis on poverty and humility. I think I can be poorer and more humble outside the community of prayer. I can be where the people are struggling, like yourself," he adds blithely and Sarinda raises her arched eyebrows.

She lifts herself ineffably from the seat. "That sounds great Martin," Then she adds as an aside, "You're certainly in the right place up there!" True, and thank goodness she is able to get her boys out of there.

They tour the artworks in one gallery, this being all there is time for, and Sarinda feels small and ornate beside his bulk, because despite her new emphasis on decorum in dress, her cheekbones are finely wrought

and her hair carefully structured, showing a small collection of studs and precious stones in one of her ears.

He hasn't commented on her new look and just treats her like his old mate, she thinks. Some fella from the beach up north, thanks very much. She guides the usual strand back behind her ear and sees him follow the movement carefully. Good.

Martin is composed as they farewell. He expects to see her up north sometime. No indication that he is pining for her romantically. He seems to have got over the emotion of his earlier disclosures and Sarinda is glad. It's not that dire, she thinks. In fact, he could probably have kept quiet about the coin or medallion or whatever it was and no-one would know the difference.

There was more to it, he'd indicated. Auction rooms and an accomplice, some woman from the parish. She shows him to his bus stop and they embrace like old friends, which they are. She waves and watches him respond, before turning back to the business at hand. Auckland.

4. The Furies

Despite having a large family and living some distance from the university, the Greek professor is in his office an hour before he needs to be each morning. By reading the ancient texts and commentaries regularly at this time, he is able to keep up his level of skill and engagement with the language. Sarinda can't imagine that sort of commitment, which reminds her of Martin's old lifestyle in the monastery. However her marks in the topic are not where she would like them to be and her glamorous relationship with Hugh has slipped to a similarly mediocre level of barely functioning. She plans to reverse this later tonight as there is a social

gathering at the professor's house which overlooks the sea at Takapuna Beach.

A further trip to the vintage clothes shop is necessary as she finds that the Audrey Hepburn look is not working for her any more. Her face is still finely chiselled but the clothes now seem to hang upon her. She chooses a silk sheath dress of burnt orange and picks up a couple of simple shift dresses in print fabrics which will do for the day time. Her mother has been instructed to knit some fine wool cardigans in interesting cable and lace patterns.

Sarinda finishes off the current look with turquoise court shoes which look elegantly oversized at the end of her fashionably wiry legs. She spends the afternoon constructing a vegetarian moussaka dish to contribute to the meal and feels, for the first time in ages, that she cuts an important and interesting figure in her world.

She hadn't realised that partners were invited and the presence of Hugh's wife is the first blow. Although Sarinda smiles and smiles, she feels herself fading into the background of the large house, becoming just one of the lesser elements of a glittering assembly. After contributing a few lively comments and finding that they disappeared without trace in the braided river of a larger, more compelling conversation, she lapses into a composed and dignified silence, looking out over an expanse of lawn to giant *pohutukawa* which signal the cliff edge to the sea.

Next, she examines some pictures and artefacts within the room and finds them mildly interesting. All the while she listens from a careful distance to Hugh's wife, who seems to be attended upon by the others, though she isn't even part of their class. Hugh's wife is Theodora and has her attendants, and Sarinda isn't even in the picture. Sarinda's coral coloured lips compress slightly as she darts glances towards the central group. The professor's wife, a rather simple looking creature called Judy, calls the group through to the dining area. The couple have eight children,

the youngest two of whom are in attendance and get far more attention than they warrant.

Sarinda wields her eating implements with firm control. Hugh is seated next to her but his broad shoulder is turned away most of the time and blocks her view of the rest of the table. Sarinda can see Judy before her and Austin, the oldest in their class, to her left. She finds it very annoying and resorts to drinking the rather good sparkling wine provided in desperation.

The outcome is inevitable. Her heart is clay crumbled and star shattered. The evening sinks like a stone to her stomach. She stumbles, she trips, she falls. She screams at Hugh to not touch her, to leave her alone as he tries to help her up. Casting venomous looks at hjs wife she hauls herself up with the help of the nearby deck balustrade then cloud angers her way to the door. Holding her moussaka dish tightly with both hands she exits stage left to the taxi the professor has summoned. She knows the ride back to her city flat will cost her a full day's work at the café. Sarinda has been outclassed by her class. She's been outmanoeuvred by a maneuverer. She's been outraged and is out of energy to fight.

She turns out her light, taking small consolation in the fact that she hasn't eaten much, that she's kept her focus on honing and sculpting her appearance. She is down, but she will rise again.

When the rectangle of her window slowly brightens the next morning, Sarinda stares dully at the strips of paper pinned on the wall by her bed, purposely positioned where she can see them at every opportunity. There are lists of Greek verbs to help her negotiate the texts, the most tortuous and complicated system of language imaginable, loaded with participles and relative clauses. *γηράσκω δ' αἰεὶ πολλὰ διδασκόμενος*, she reads. There is also an assembly of the differentiated Greek words for love – *agape*, *eros*, *philia* and *storge*, one of the insights

into the ancient culture that is a bonus of the study for her. It makes sense of her life, to divide and categorise the sorts of love she is able to deliver to the people around her. It reinforces to her that her boys are her priority and she sends them both a text to commemorate the thought. It languishes unanswered by either of them.

As she reclines in her bed, covered by her blue blanket of happiness, she listens to National Radio which today features the poet Brian Turner. Although he sounds kind of grumpy, she is in the mood to persist, feeling that this is the kind of thing that Hugh's wife probably listens to and that maybe it is the way forward.

The pantheist God in the universe and God in nature are one, she hears. There is *plenitude* out there. *We must be kind and loving to the world around us*. This she can agree with. He recommends *reverence and attentiveness to nature*, and she looks about her room for some evidence of nature but there is only the blue of the window and beyond.

Blue is the colour of interior life, Turner intones and Sarinda loses herself in the windowscape, her thoughts peeling away into infinity.

She sleeps. She wakes, resolving to borrow some of Turner's books from the library. Poetry is an area she has neglected. It is quite possible that she will turn out to be a poet – and then people will listen to her.

Sarinda heads out into the streets, wrapping an imitation Chanel jacket around her bony shoulders and wearing her current skin-tight denims with the turquoise court shoes. Despite her Paris thin figure and the careful clothes, Sarinda looks ill.

She walks as though the Furies, those ancient Greek demon witches are pursuing her down Queen Street. If she were to list them she could call the Furies, anorexia, fear of old age, manic depression (which she's suffered before), and the hatred and loathing of winter, that hag who

tears at her jacket with grasping and bony fingers. Sarinda struggles to make it to the library and feels the glass doors slide closed behind her with relief.

5. Mortality

She had never really considered the possibility of her father dying. Sarinda sits at the front of the crematorium chapel with her mother, their hands linked tightly. Her boys are beside her and her brother supports their mother from the other side. Sarinda considers her own and her mother's hands that wind so tightly around each other. Her own hand is as thin and bony as her mother's and this shocks her.

Maeve has always been a tiny woman and the events of the past week seem to have further reduced her stature. When she'd seen Sarinda, she'd cried. Her grief upon seeing her daughter's condition had joined with her grieving as a widow to render herself inconsolable. Each time she met her daughter's eyes she dissolved into further tears and lamentations. Sarinda finds it very wearing and just the sort of thing her father used to deal with so well.

There is a montage of photographs being shown now, along with some of her father's favourite music, mercifully not religious. He would like this ceremony, Sarinda decides, in the small building guarded by totara trees and silence. Her father's lean face flashes before her in a number of guises. 1970s dad in luridly coloured square photographs – she remembered how strict he'd tried to be. 1950s new husband, grasping his wife firmly by the shoulders, their relationship always a mystery to their children. 1980s wielder of shovel and spade as he returned his small part of the hill to native bush, making a visual link with the backdrop of bush clad hills behind.

People had remembered his gentle humour, his humility, his readiness to think the best of others. Sarinda had privately reflected on his gullibility, his ineffectivenss at dealing with those who did wrong, and his lack of assertiveness. It was a reminder not to be like that, she resolved. She must get what she needed.

Sarinda stands, dwarfed by her boys, as she meets and greets the people she knows from the beach. They are punctilious in their attentions to her but lapse into jovial asides which erupt into hilarity at times. Her father wouldn't mind, Sarinda knows. But she is tired by the day and her mother's ministrations, and she worries about her younger son Tai, who seems to have changed his friends markedly from when she last spent time with him. She feels ineffectual, her hands fluttering ineffectually, much like her mother's hands had done all her life and were now doing across the room with her own friends.

"Don't go out tonight, Tai," she says firmly.

"I have to," he replies and Jesse adds that he'll go along too and make sure Tai returns in good time.

Sarinda gives up and watches as they move through the crowd to talk to someone their own age. Martin and Aiden join her and she feels their careful concern, not just for her bereavement but apparently for herself and her current condition. She wishes whatever she has was not so visible to everyone. Anorexia, a perversion of perfectionism.

Aiden offers to get her a cup of tea and she agrees to a black tea, no sugar. She is left with Martin whose presence is beneficent. She rests within the quietness of his proximity for moments before venturing forth.

"You seem to have become very close to Aiden," she begins.

Martin agrees but does not expand upon this comment. "You are too thin," he says eventually, and she nods.

"Linda and Garyie had to get back to the farm," he adds, 'but they asked me to convey their sympathy to you. "

Sarinda nods, looking at the ground.

"They are having a dinner on Friday," he adds. "Aiden can pick us both up if you want to come."

Sarinda looks up and nods again. She remembers the last time she'd been to their house with pleasure, though the idea of actual dinner was a challenge she could do without.

"When will you go back to Auckland?" he asks.

"Aren't you a man of few words?" she attacks back. "Since when have you been so verbose?" and Martin waits with a complicated mix of emotions playing over his usually stolid expression. And chief amongst the mixture was a deep concern.

"I don't really need the tea, thanks," Sarinda says as she brushes past Aiden and his offering and begins a highly social circuit that ends in her departure with mother, brother and sister-in-law for home.

Tai doesn't come home early that night. Sarinda listens to her mother's stories and reads the school report and wonders. The place where Aiden's son is living has long been a party house and that is not where Sarinda wants Tai to be. She decides to find out from Jesse tomorrow what the situation is.

Full of care, she retires to bed before dinner, rejecting firmly any indications of concern from her family. With her she takes an apple, making the promise that she will eat it when she is hungry. "Which will be never," she resolves to herself.

Sarinda barely sleeps and in the morning cannot get up. There is no talking to Jesse or Tai as it happens because Sarinda is hospitalised. Her boys watch as her thin arms scrape at the air while her stretcher is loaded

into the ambulance. Tai thinks they his mother's arms are just like crayfish limbs struggling to exit boiling water.

Sarinda stares through the small wire squares threaded through the hospital window. The world beyond is grey, vast cloudscapes which only allow fleeting glimpses of the blue that is her interior world.

RESTORATION

1. New Start

A man stoops to look over the shoulder of a teenage boy who, in turn, peers into a computer screen. The boy swivels an old office chair around and back, around and back, while all the time a computer mouse clicks and shifts within his fist. The boy is assembling images and colours on screen with a speed and dexterity that the man feels he must salute and so he does, "Good work Benz," he offers. The boy shrugs one shoulder in an irritable acknowledgement.

"Can't you go and hassle someone else?" he adds, and calls out as Martin leaves, "Cos I'm the only one who's doing any work!"

Martin walks over to a square of low steel frame couches, the kind that used to line the walls of state institutions twenty or thirty years before. Cold morning light is streaming through large shop front windows onto the garish couches, where sit five teenagers, huddled motionless over a central table. Here he hesitates as the heads of the five couch-sitters wrench themselves around to give him a uniformly hard stare.

"Have you been sleeping rough again Dayna?" he asks a girl who is half dressed in a faded sleeping bag.

"What's it to you?" Dayna yawns and drags on a cigarette she had been shielding from his gaze between her knees.

"Take it outside thanks," Martin responds, moving to the bench to put the jug on.

"Well you won't let us sleep here!" comes an anonymous accusation as Dayna waddle-hops in her sleeping bag to the door.

"Who wants to sleep in this dump!" someone else ripostes and there is general laughter amongst jeers. Even the lone student at the bank of computers turns to add his voice to the sudden hubbub. They are cheering up because they know Martin will organise some food.

It is 9.30 am and so far only one of his students is on task. However, the fact that Dayna has taken her cigarette outside can be taken as a win, Martin thinks. There was a time when there would have been a lengthy debate over that instruction and quite possibly a mass walkout. The main thing is that they're here, complying with the terms of their agreements. That reminds him of the other eight students that should be here and he looks at his watch. Monday is a difficult day to get attendance or any sort of compliance so today is pretty much standard fare.

He has turned the oven on and as he waits for it to heat he passes out papers to the students on the couches. "It's write me a letter time," he states. "Tell me stuff."

"What sort of stuff you wanna know?" sniggers someone.

"Bout yo weekend man!" laughs another. This prompts another burst of hilarity.

The students watch him as he transfers the sourdough mix he had prepared the night before into earthenware bread moulds. Dayna returns, flanked by two students who have just arrived and a waft of cold air comes in with them. One of the newcomers gives him the brow lift which both acknowledges Martin's presence and his bread making while the other casts himself upon the couch.

Martin knows that there will be a bunch of adolescents here within the hour and he knows the bread will be a large part of the reason why. He took on this job, teaching life skills to "at risk" teenagers, with infinite

compassion, only to find that compassion wasn't wanted. However, food and comfort was. These kids didn't need teaching, he thought. They needed parenting, and he was providing his own limited version of this with a commitment to total reliability and regular bread making.

Martin made sure he was here every day at the time they expected and that he provided food in a predictable routine each morning. In return, he had managed to gather a core of regular attenders who agreed to be writing something down should one of the administrators of the course decide to call in. The extras he just accommodated because he could.

Martin had tried to interest his students in compiling a *Curriculum Vitae* and in scanning the papers and internet for job opportunities but these kids knew better than that. They knew that any opportunity in this town came only through who you knew, and they didn't know anybody. Leaving town for work just didn't work. And besides you would have to leave your friends.

Martin had managed to scrounge six more computers to add to the initial four provided and he had intended these to be used for research and job applications and the learning of new skills. However, what they had ended up being used for was, in one or two cases, creative writing and in many others Photoshop. This creative focus had come entirely from the students and as some of them were bringing intense concentration to their efforts he just followed along. The effect of three or four engaged students seemed to settle the others down and almost all completed some writing each day, beginning to use paragraphs and a formal letter layout which made him feel as though he were teaching something.

He levers the two fraGary loaves out onto a rack, giving one of the students plates, knives and butter to put on the table. A quiet boy called Kaden unwraps some smoked *kahawai* his *whanau* has given him to bring. Another student begins to pick out a quiet melody on his guitar. Martin

places slices of bread on the table and some boiled eggs. The students don't wait to be asked. This is how home should be.

Martin's sister and her husband have escaped the Northland winter and are sojourning in the capitals of Europe, along with Faith, the distracting daughter. Selling the beach house now solely relies upon their trimly jacketed real estate agent, who is very capable and has been given clear instructions. Gabe has gone to stay with friends. Martin had moved weeks ago, needing to be near the town centre, carless as he was.

The orange cat now resides with Martin in the unit he has taken at the partly abandoned Sunshine Motel complex. Martin is paying a nominal rent for a 1970s style one room flat with microwave and electric jug. The cat has taken the change in his circumstances in his stride, cosying up to the owner of the complex in a shamelessly upwardly mobile way. Martin wonders if the cat is fully aware of the social nuances of the situation, since the motel owner has cracked and tobacco stained teeth and is letting the place go to rack and ruin. Part of Martin's deal is to tidy the grounds on the weekends.

The cat sits in a patch of sunlight which makes his apricot winter coat glow against the darker orange tones of a repeating sunburst design on the carpet. Its golden eyes half close as he observes Martin lying upon the couch, his own eyes squinting back at the cat in the glare of a lazy autumnal Saturday morning.

Martin is thinking about his students. What does he know about their lives? He thinks of an old socialist quote he'd picked up when reading a memoir written by New Zealand artist, Jacqueline Fahey. *If you have more than you need then you have something that belongs to someone else*. The memoir is entitled *Something for the Birds,* and one of the photos inside show her in her dressing gown holding a large shallow bowl and distributing chunks of bread to a gathering crowd of ducks. Her gesture recalls the founder of the religious order Martin had spent so long

in. Saint Francis of Assisi, the 13th century mystic who had founded a whole religious order around simplicity and renunciation of wealth. Saint Francis was often depicted with birds or animals. Martin rests his eyes upon the cat.

He thinks about Aiden's son, David, a tall young man who sometimes drifts into the *New Start* centre. He is thin and broad shouldered and tends to hunch himself against the wall, gaze aloof but catching others' eyes despite himself. His main mode of communication is to laugh along with the crowd, sometimes contributing an unexpectedly elegant ending to a joke, never beginning a conversation. It may be just the fact that he is not on the class list for Martin's course that makes him seem awkward. But Martin thinks not. It seems to him that David has never felt completely accepted anywhere.

There are others in the course that are said to be using drugs, probably the majority. But it is David who always looks like he attaches himself to the group with an effort, as though he is coming from a place very, very far away, further than anyone else in the room has been. Martin knows part of his story from David's father, his own old friend, Aiden. The cat stretches and yawns pretentiously. It strolls to the glass sliding door where net curtains catch a breeze in the narrow opening Martin has left for the cat's convenience. This cat is far too sure of himself. He is not a cat that Saint Francis would bother himself about, Martin thinks.

Martin recalls another quote which seems relevant, from the music teacher he'd got to know in Rome. *If a student is playing out of rhythm, listen to the student's rhythm and play it back to him, so he knows that you've heard him*. This might be what Martin is trying to do with the students in the course. Or it might be that Martin is lazy, an untrained teacher, who has given up on pushing those students forward. However, the students have been pushed all their school life by well-intentioned

teachers and have ended up where he is, really, abandoned, out of the loop, in some sort of lay by. Where is forward?

Martin is trying to see where they're coming from. He is trying to remain interested in them, even though they are uninterested in him. He is trying to be there, even though he feels as though he is no use.

That music teacher. She'd taken piano lessons in a room in the presbytery where he had lived while absorbing the finer points of religious society administration. He'd shown a talent for organisation back in Australia and this sojourn was a kind of reward. Cara, her name had been. He'd confessed to her that he'd moved a tiny 15th century depiction of Saint Bernard into his room, from the high shelf where it had sat undisturbed for years. The antiquity of it had fascinated him and its previous neglect had legitimized his action. Every day he noted with reverence the icon on the mantelpiece in his bedroom. He would have replaced it at any moment, had someone instructed him to. But no-one noticed. Only Mrs Cara Fernetti, Cara, already his willing accomplice. How quickly the noble descend into ignominy, Martin thought. There was probably a quote about that somewhere too.

She came from a wealthy Italian background and took him to the area where her extended family had lived for years, in a cluttered structure of room upon room, apartment jostling with apartment. The complex of tile-roofed buildings encircled with a wall upon which the Madonna and Child were modelled into plasterwork. Within the wall was peace; a gentle hill slope with winding paths, arches, trees and gardens. Everyone who lived there was related and it was apparent that many were treading the same paths and crossing the same doorsteps as their ancestors from years past. From the base of the rise a broad stone path wound upwards through gardens. This was an outdoor *stations of the cross* with iconography at every bend, visited every day for prayer or for recreation. Martin was charmed and his fascination with the past descended into obsession.

And Cara was part of the obsession. They began to go together to concerts, to visit art galleries and she showed him her favourite parts of the city. Martin was lost in admiration of her Italianness. He met her husband and children. He lunched with them. He began to wear similar clothes to those that her friends and family wore, understated, elegant. The shoes. Nobody noticed or if they did they probably approved. He looked sleeker, more confident, more commanding.

Saint Francis would not have been happy. Saint Francis the patron saint of Italy (along with Catherine and Bernadino of Siena). Saint Francis the great reformer. Saint Francis, friend of the animals. Saint Francis, wearer of rough brown cloth and sandals. Martin had attempted to follow in the footsteps of this strange impassioned zealot. But when physically in Italy, at the closest point he would ever get to the saint, he'd fallen, he'd failed, finally finding himself inadequate for the journey.

The cat crosses the threshold of the unit, stepping outside with a decided swagger, his tail at the very last levering the white net curtains aside with a flourish.

2. Chiesa di San Francesco

On impulse he decides to take along with him a large book of reproductions from the restoration of the chapel of the *Chiesa di San Francesco* in Arezzo. This book is his current favourite from a selection he makes every few weeks from the Whangarei library, in the small city to the south. The time taken to bus down to the city is fully repaid by the hours of reading he gains.

She is sitting in an armchair which is positioned to catch the sun through French doors which lead onto a small concrete terrace. As he greets her he looks beyond, into to the crown of the ponga tree unfolding like a ferny rosette and angled towards the tubular steel barriers which define the edge of the terrace. Another testimony to Sarinda's father's planting programme, the delicate green fronds feather the air like a benediction.

"How are you doing?" he ventures.

"I'm tired all the time," she replies.

"Will you be able to come to Gary and Linda's tomorrow night?" he asks and sees Sarinda's mother through the opening into the kitchen wave her hands frantically. "No, no", she is indicating if he reads her correctly.

"Possibly," Sarinda replies and begins to turn the pages of the book.

"It will be easier to read at the table," Martin suggests and lifts the heavy volume onto the green formica dining table. Sarinda moves obediently and this is most worrying of all.

As she leafs through the lavish photographs of Piero della Francesca's 15th century frescos Martin looks around the large room which, perched over a basement garage, scans treetops and looks over towards the dark bushclad hills. The room drinks in autumn light with at least three quarters of the view a magnificent cloudscape. They are 1950s large windows, with a pair of louvre windows at the top corners to catch the breeze. Sarinda's father signals his recent presence with carefully painted wooden joinery, all set for coming winter storms. Martin runs his fingers along the even white coating of paint and knows the hours of painstaking work it would have taken.

"Sit down," Sarinda commands irritably and he does.

Her mother brings through tea and biscuits and they sit chatting amicably. Sarinda scowls as she peruses the massed figures of the legend of the cross. As Martin discusses the house with her mother he feels like a callow suitor and wondered why he'd come.

"These figures are so chunky," Sarinda expostulates.

"They're rather lovely dear," her mother says as she peers across the table.

"Of course, they're amazing," Sarinda replies vaguely.

Martin moves to sit beside her and they discuss the most beautiful scene of war that could ever have been created. It is Constantine's victory over the barbarians, a triumph of the true church, shown by magnificent horses, large colourful banners swirling against a pure blue sky and, most touching of all, a partially damaged domestic scene of village life. This features a river of astounding clarity supporting a few oblivious ducks. This scene is central, in the background of the large event but somehow asserting its importance. Peace and beauty at the centre of life. A small and insignificant fragment of the avian world, pursuing its independent course through the centuries.

Martin becomes absorbed alongside Sarinda, drawn to the detail of della Francesca's vision and Sarinda's mother leaves unnoticed, clearing cups and plates from around the pair.

"They look…" Sarinda began.

"Sad?" queries Martin. "Formal?"

She shakes her head.

"Sort of defensive," she said. "Like they're doing something really important but are not sure what the meaning of it is."

She looks at Martin. "They look like you," she laughs. "With rounded faces and severe looks," and she touches his cheek lightly with her hand.

For a heartbeat Martin is still, and then begins to flick rapidly through the pages.

"There is no-one here like you," he says and his eyes meet hers. "You are still too thin," he adds.

"No," Sarinda replies firmly. "*They* are too fat."

As Martin leaves, Sarinda's mother calls to him and throws into his arms a heavy jacket and a thick fisherman's rib woollen sweater.

"They were Jack's," she says. "Barely worn…" There is silence as she looks down at the items. "Take them if you can use them."

Martin thanks her and takes the clothing from her. To cheer them all up he tries on the jacket and Sarinda comes out to give her considered opinion. They all agree it looks great.

Martin leaves the women and the house on the hill with the trees that Jack planted and the windowsills that he painted and the life that he had made and then left behind.

3. The Farm Manager

It is a celebration of sorts at the farm. Though far from being solved, the inheritance issues are being worked through and one particular landmark has been passed. This was the introduction of the Farm Manager, appointed through Public Trust and there to determine the best way for the land to be packaged and sold. It could revert to a dairy farm,

could be sold in smaller parcels or packaged in whatever way would most advantage the beneficiaries of the will. The Manager was also there to oversee current farming practices and this was Linda's father's final insult to the couple who both had tertiary degrees in agriculture. They had brought their accountant with them to the meeting and had been meticulous in their preparations. But the man has turned out to be reasonable.

"I'm not here to tell you how to do your job," he said. "It's obvious that the land is being managed well." This small statement of fact gives them something to go on.

Aiden had offered to give Martin a ride to the farm and so it is that Sarinda and Martin are waiting in the car as Aiden drops some groceries into David's house, hidden behind trees on the corner of a rural road directly across from the farm. It is a plainly built 1960s house which has been extended so that it has a large deck over the garage sheltered by two wings, one with French doors from the main bedroom. This end of the house has all windows open and this is where David emerges from. The boy still looks apologetic and as though his clothes don't fit him properly.

As Aiden and his son chat, Martin and Sarinda survey the vast expanse of grass and weeds in front of the house from within the car. The property is bordered on one side by stands of bamboo and sheltered in front by the spreading branches of pohutukawa. Every so often a car races by on its way to the beach, but because the property is elevated, these cars are not visible beyond the pohutukawa trees and the bank down to the road.

Martin notes large strands of kikuyu woven over random pieces of junk in the yard. The grass forms a slimy winter mat over what looks like piles of junk, white buckets, car parts and other household rejects. A wooden desk with a crack through the top sits sodden outside the garage.

Aiden bustles down the stairs from the deck. Martin's impression is that he is desperate to leave this scene of devastation. The boy farewells them from above, a tiny white cat with ginger splotches held in his arms.

The farm entrance is only minutes along the road but is a world away in its bucolic tranquillity. Linda rides horses so there are horse paddocks with neatly painted railed fences, corrugated iron sheds and trees bordering one side of the long driveway. A bunch of solid looking cattle chew their cud calmly while observing events from the other side.

The sun is getting low but its rays warm the group of people who space themselves genially around barbecue and picnic table on the far side of the house. Here, sloping towards the sunset, a broad vista sweeps down two kilometres to the sea. Martin remembers being here after haymaking at the end of the summer. At that time Linda's dad, Vic, had still been operating the baler. Although they worked all day together Martin and the others had little communication with the old man who had remained an aloof figure hunched over the tractor steering wheel in the distance. It was always a surprise to see movement from him, usually when his stick figure needed to climb down and peer into the baler, where string had jammed the works – again.

Two funerals. A generation of men, dwindling. Martin has the sense that he is now a part of the history of this place despite himself. He is becoming the older generation, along with the others here. Gary and Linda had seemed so secure. They'd worked the farm for 25 years, added to it, grown into it. But that was the past. In effect, they'd been made redundant. Her siblings wanted the cash and her father had stipulated that the farm must all be sold with the best outcome sought for all three beneficiaries. It must be sold.

He looks at Sarinda, sipping her drink obediently at the picnic table. And he compares this image with the way she was last summer, at this

very place. Gary and Linda had showed them how they had landscaped the area that the house sat upon in order to maximise the view, eliminating the fence line across the front of the house.

"It's a haha", Linda had said as she pointed out the retaining wall in front which separated the house area from the rolling paddocks below.

He'd heard the term before, from his reading and from garden shows that referred back to the 19th century landscaper Capability Brown. This gentleman with the reassuring name prioritised views and Martin could see how the hidden retaining wall created a perfectly invisible barrier for the stock.

Large tawny beasts made their way in clumps across the hillside, following some programme predetermined by their own animal instincts. One or two of them loitered on the track beside the retaining wall, so that Martin felt he could just about step onto a broad undulating back.

"They come very close," he said, in appalled admiration of their sheer bulk.

Linda laughed and waved further around the side of the house where a bunch of cows with overgrown calves beside them clustered around the fence line which emerged there.

"They're curious," she said. "We are their entertainment for the night."

Sarinda had joined them then, resplendent in some rainbow coloured creation and waving a glass full of gin and tonic. "One must drink gin and tonic with lemon if one is near a haha," she stated firmly and proceeded to take a gulp of hers. Luxuriant hair swathed her shoulders and half bare breasts. Where had that Sarinda gone?

As the summer sun had moved down towards the distant horizon they watched the cattle swarm restlessly on the hillside below. There was a bull, a pugnacious looking creature who walked stiffly, aware of his own

importance. He began to strut briskly along worn paths, followed by his harem along with the heifers. Sarinda whooped as they went past the haha, playing on the edge of the retaining wall like a child. Martin had never seen such a strange juxtaposition as that of the willowy woman with flowing garments alongside the solid auburn meatiness and cherubic blonde curls of the bull, who forged onwards at her feet. Although maybe he had, on second thoughts, in those images of saints or Madonnas with wild beasts at their feet. He'd loved Sarinda then, for the zany freedoms that she grasped. His empress. His saint. His Madonna.

Later the bull had stood at the southernmost corner of the paddock bellowing, it seemed fruitlessly, into the distance. Eventually, a distant bellowing responded to him. A bull dialogue of some urgency then ensued until darkness. The haymakers, exhausted from the long day in the sun, retired soon afterwards. Vic had chosen not to be part of this gathering. He must have needed to go home to nurse his grudge.

Aiden joins Linda and Martin at the haha. "Just tell me when you want me to take you two back," he ventures, looking back at Sarinda who sits quietly at the outdoor table.

"Did she eat anything?" Linda asks and Aiden shakes his head.

Sarinda remains at the table, oblivious to the party around her. She has cut her hair short, urchin style, to combat the gradual loss of volume that is becoming apparent. She wears the orange silk sheath dress and it does not hang too loosely upon her emaciated frame. But she clutches a woollen shawl around thin shoulders.

Linda goes to find something that Sarinda will eat. Martin mentions that David has been into the *New Start* course occasionally. Aiden nods grimly. "He better not have his car on the road," he replies. "It doesn't have a warrant."

Martin shakes his head. Driving unlicensed or unregistered is not uncommon amongst the kids he's encountering and it is by no means the most antisocial activity they will be engaged in.

"They worry me," he says. "The way they laugh about the most appalling things. What is in their heads? I sometimes wonder if they're human."

Aiden smiles grimly. "Our kids," he replies. "Not what I expected them to turn out like."

"The other day," Martin adds, "they were talking about that girl who got torn apart by dogs in the early hours of the morning and died. Apparently she was on P and was dancing in some gang house or another. Must have strayed outside and taken the dogs by surprise."

Aiden nods. "I heard about it."

"They were laughing about it," Martin said, and surprises himself with the level of emotion in his voice. "They said, at least she died happy." He doesn't add that this last was David's remark, he didn't think Aiden needed the situation underlined.

"David's been using P," Aiden said. "He's off it at the moment."

He looks into the house where Sarinda is smiling weakly at Linda who is making coffee.

"It's her fault," he says with raw anger in his voice.

"Linda's?" Martin responds in surprise.

"Sara, or Sarinda or whatever you call her," Aiden says bitterly. "She wrecked our lives like a child because she could."

Martin asks, more urgently than he wished to, what he meant.

"Yes, and you got sucked in as well," Aiden laughs. "I thought about warning you but I didn't think it would make much difference."

The story Aiden told was not an unusual one, but Martin's closeness to the fallout, these two people who were struggling so much, the man/boy who lived like a hermit in the *pohutukawa* house and his father who bached on a friend's property, his life on hold, made it real. Sarinda had been a friend of his wife's. Or a friend of both of ours, Aiden adds, to be fair.

It was the usual story. They'd had an affair on and off for years. Then Aiden and his wife Jackie had moved down to the city to be with her mother who was unwell. This also had the benefit of allowing David to attend polytech to study for an engineering course. But there everything had fallen apart.

Aiden's wife said she wasn't going back to the beach. She'd never loved him, he had been a mistake. Now the kids were grown it was her time to find out who she was. She was angry. "She's an angry woman," Aiden concluded. She'd taken off with a convenient purveyor of a fantasy kind of love, later retreating to lick her wounds overseas. Aiden had responded by going out to sea for months at a time.

"I should have known," he said, "when she organised us to clear the whole house and burn heaps of stuff before we rented it out and moved away. She was destroying our lives even then. And David's finishing the job now."

Martin recalled Aiden telling him that David had recently thrown the heavy wooden clock which had sat on the mantelpiece for years into the fire during a bout of angry texts with his mother. It had been his great grandfather's clock and the arbitrary conflagration seemed like the ultimate rejection of all the family's history and culture, of civilisation itself.

The *pohutukawa* house, the family home that had been theirs for thirty years was taken back from the young couple who had wished to buy from them and rented to David, who was then working and living with his

girlfriend. But houses and lifestyles are not usually handed over to youth in such a way. David was physically having trouble coping after an accident on his job and he threw it in. He didn't care for the house or his girlfriend, who, travelling for her job, frequently came home to an impromptu party of surfers, or the remains of one.

With both parents far away David reigned unchecked. His girlfriend left him after a nightmare night where holes were punched into the walls and her belongings strewn around the yard outside. People had tried to help but there was nothing they could do. The authorities who were involved did not seem to have anything to offer. David had been living there alone ever since.

"Sarinda," Aiden says, getting back to the subject at hand. "She took me." He looks at Martin's face and reads the message in his eyes.

"You know what she's like," Aiden said. "We had a good marriage, Jackie and I. Sarinda decided that she wanted some of that so she took it."

Martin looks through the window at the meek Sarinda inside who appears to be eating something. He knows Aiden is right. Sarinda would take things. She had taken him, though he wasn't sure why.

"Now David's up here in Jackie's house, paying no rent, feeling like he's entitled to be looked after because he didn't expect that his family would disintegrate around him. He didn't know that we'd never be up at the house together again. None of us did."

"There's worse," Aiden said. "Lots of things, lots of details that hinged upon us being a family. It was a work of decades to get us to the place where I could build a house on my section at Onetari Beach. That was what we were headed for. The people who had rented what is now Jackie/David's house were to buy that and we would move to the beach. I had to tell them the deal was off. I could see that it laid waste to their dreams as well."

Aiden took a drink and Martin laid a hand on his friend's chunky shoulder. There was nothing to say. Just one look at the ravaged house up the road confirmed the disastrous history that had just been recounted.

"If David had had a home base to come to when his girlfriend left then he wouldn't have got into this state. We would have looked after him." Aiden added.

"I was a mess and looked to Sarinda. But she didn't want me the way I was. What she had wanted was the Aiden who was in charge, who had energy and confidence and," he grimaced, "sex appeal."

"I'm still saving," Aiden said. "I will get my house at the beach eventually."

"But David…" Martin said.

"David is wearing it," Aiden said. "But I'm not going to bail him out. He's living the life I'd planned for all my life. Doesn't need to work, goes surfing whenever the conditions are right and generally enjoys life with his mates. I'm not subsidising that."

"I'm not sure he's exactly enjoying his life," Martin said.

"Jackie had him committed. He spent weeks in the Mental Health unit down in Auckland last year. Didn't do him any good. But he's on a sickness benefit now so he can get by. Plus his mother pays his power and doesn't charge rent."

"Sarinda's boys used to be very close to David, like brothers," Aiden said. "But she's taken that away too. Doesn't want them to go there. She's got it in for David."

Sarinda's elegant form floats towards them beside the more grounded and comfortable figure of Linda. The two women clasp and give their fond farewells. It seems that the outing has done Sarinda good.

Martin feels that the silence of the trip back into town is shared not just by the three people who'd travelled out to the farm, but also by the spectre of David with his strange and lonely existence in the shell of his childhood home.

4. Canticle of the sun

Theodora. Martin had always been aware of the other perspective on this Byzantine empress. She'd grown up in difficult circumstances. She'd become hardy, resilient, a woman with an eye for the main chance. The same source, the ancient historian Procopius, who had delivered an encomium on the ruling couple at the time of the mosaics had later written a "secret history". This was not published for centuries, but when it was it delivered the sort of information on Theodora which made the Roman historian the ancient equivalent of a Facebook troll. And now Sarinda.

It is the old story of Adam and Eve. *Cherchez la femme*. Martin has tried to become used to the assault of the feminine upon the senses, short shorts worn like a weapon, music videos upon which contemporary girlworld seems to model itself. Close ups of lips and hips, grinding, unwinding, with low angle shots of towering heels and the ache of stiletto. It's a woman's right to wear what she wants. And his own entirely predictable response, the absorbing complicity, his alliance with Sarinda.

He retreats into the discipline of prayer and contemplation in his spare time. He blunders into native bush at the back of the motels for respite from the world. Here he imagines that he can feel the expiration of the trees around him. They are sustaining life. He deliberates upon the prayer to the universe composed by an ecstatic Saint Francis in his

isolation and the apparition that had then appeared to him. Saint Francis was left with physical evidence of God's visitation in the form of stigmata, wounds that resembled Christ's after the crucifixion. Could Martin even believe in this? Sadly, the answer is no.

Martin sits within the cathedral of trees which at first seems entirely silent. He sees the wavering of a spider's web strung between two seedlings. It has a couple of tufts of seed stuck in it which vibrate in the absolute stillness of the air. The only sound is a musical twitter amongst the canopy of the trees and it sounds very far away. He recalls David Attenborough's commentaries on the natural world and his familiar and reassuring voice. The most recent of the programmes show days of footage speeded up so that the growth and fecundity of forest life is laid bare for the television viewer's marvelling and pleasure. But do people marvel? Martin doesn't think his students do. Anyone who wanted to marvel at this universe just needed to sit here, like him, and hear the occasional cracks or crashes of small branches as the wind stirs the canopy and see the solitary bee searching for slim pickings amongst the tiniest florets hidden amongst the trees. *Sister Water*, Martin recites. *Brothers Wind and Air…*

Martin finds that the idea of Saint Francis of Assisi can also sustain him at his workplace. At first people had regarded the small monk as mad or dangerous. *While preaching, he would often dance, weep, make animal sounds, strip to his underwear, or play the zither. His black eyes sparkled*.

Martin had recently read a review of two recently translated biographies of the monk in a borrowed *New Yorker* magazine. The article reminded him that his long held mentor and ideal was a unique and very real person. It helped him to keep positive in his work with his students, youth who had rejected the flawed systems and social norms around them but who had no way of creating a sustaining system of their own.

Resources were tight in this area of education, but it seemed that everyone around him knew precisely how success for these students could be arranged. Martin's direct superior was particularly full of advice from her office. Any interactions with the whanau of the students was usually fraught with ambiguity, despair and anger. Martin had read that when people threw dirt at his mentor, Saint Francis *accepted it serenely* and he attempted to do the same.

The qualities that at the beginning had marked him as eccentric eventually made him seem holy. It seemed that Saint Francis had kept his focus and vision throughout his life. He had lived what he preached and what's more, found joy in the tribulations he encountered.

The article, *Rich Man, Poor Man,* by writer Joan Acocella, ended with a comment by one of the authors of the new biographies, Andre Vauchez, summarising a nineteenth century historian. This historian said that the example of Saint Francis *constitutes proof that Christianity, at least once, has been lived by a human being in all its radicality within the context of a historical life: this allows us to sustain the hope that this great movement, taken and distorted by the Church, might be able one day to resume its influence.* The article ends after this thought with the very 21st century addendum, *But only one person, only once; this is a small sample*.

Martin does not suppose that he would be a second person that could "live Christianity". But he does aspire to some of the monk's personal qualities which were apparently attested to by everyone who knew him. *An extreme natural sweetness. He was courteous, genial, and extraverted – he was fun, a quality not always found in saints – and he laid it on the brothers, as a duty, to be cheerful*. Martin had found, in the midst of the students' defiance and despair, a dark camaraderie, which he recognised as holiness. And this kept him going.

He remembers David slouched silently against the wall for the duration of one class. As Martin encouraged the students to complete

work or to edit or modify or otherwise engage with their work, one of them shouted across the room, "Hey David, how come *you* not doing any work?" And then with a grin the questioner added in a deliberate patois, "After all man, you're da one wit all da the qualifikashuns!!"

"Yearrr, go an get a job!!" came the catcalls from the rest of the students, accompanied by manic laughter which broke the uncertainty and quiet unfamiliarity of the focussed shop floor classroom.

David grinned in receipt of the attention but did not change his stance. Martin opened the oven and the scent of bread, always a minor miracle, swept through the room as the students gathered at the table. Some were highly satisfied with where they'd got to. Martin was always happy if the students achieved that concentration, the concentration that was always broken with relief and abuse of the others in celebration.

David hangs back as usual and eats sparingly as others invite him in with their body language. Martin had known it would be hard for someone with David's retiring demeanour and reclusive habits to get work, but now he knows that David has a psychiatric record as well. He can imagine the interview questions, *And what have you been doing for the last six months…year… What are your strengths… weaknesses?* It is abundantly clear that the boy knows only too well that these questions await him out there. In fact he shouldn't even be here. He's not eligible to be in this class as he is well past the age of school leaving. This waiting space at the end of the educational road is not meant for David. He hears the boy's soft voice prevaricating, "If my mother hadn't committed me…." and asks the happy Saint Francis in his head what the hell can be done for David?

Many of the students here had police records. That was a given. But they were young and the chances were that they might get some kind of opportunity in the near future as long as they remained positive and developed their skills and abilities. Some of them, like David, were expert

surfers. But lack of work and its regular accompaniment, money, meant that this refreshment and restoration of spirits became less and less accessible to them. Martin wonders if he shouldn't organise a beach trip. After all, the course name, *New Start*, is all about extending their lives, creating wider perspectives. When he'd started, those that hired him had told him that some of the kids he would be teaching had rarely been to Onetari Beach, despite living only 40 minutes away from it. He thinks the name of the course should be changed as it indicates that others see a lack in these students. Into the course name is built the awareness of limitation. It is not his place to take them to the beach.

After morning tea some of the students drift off, David among them. Martin will mark them present as long as they've done at least three hours reasonable work and the students are mostly on board with this. Martin knows he is seen as too permissive. If the authorities had others clamouring to take over his job he might be in trouble, he thinks. He is expected to teach a fifteen year old how to read and write when the whole of the education system has failed to manage this feat so far. Martin can imagine a horde of primary school teachers, intermediate teachers and remedial secondary teachers associated with each of these students, all in a state of disrepair because they cared too much. These conscientious teachers had devised hundreds of strategies and implemented each one as consistently as was possible within the turmoil of school and home life. The concerned faces of whanau shimmered behind the teachers, concern turning over time to lack of belief in themselves and their children, finally into lack of esteem for themselves and anyone else along with the associated anger.

Martin's class is having some small triumphs. A young girl has been interviewed for a job at "Farmers" a local department store, even though she had no contacts there. It has restored her faith in the functioning of the world. Tino sent one of his modified photographs into the newspaper and it was published as "shot of the day". Elation swept through the room

when Martin brought the newspaper in. He has been collecting the writing other students have produced in a portfolio and is investigating the possibility of them being awarded NCEA credits for the work somehow. He is an unqualified teacher and is not sure if his supervision of the students is seen as adequate. But what he is certain of is the fact that the writing has created a bridge between their world and his, a place of safe communication of extreme experiences.

Martin thinks about the famous miracle that Saint Francis was said to have performed, also retold in the *New Yorker*. A wolf had been preying on the citizens of Gubbio. *People were afraid to go out of the city gates. St Francis sought out the wolf and gave the animal a stern lecture, telling him he deserved to be hanged for his crimes. But, Francis added, he knew that the wolf had been driven by hunger. If the townspeople gave him food every day, would he stop attacking them? Would he promise? Francis stretched out his hand, and the wolf lifted up his right paw before him and laid it gently on the hand of Saint Francis, giving thereby such sign of good faith as he was able.* The deal held, apparently.

Martin wonders what quick fix he can apply to the lives of his students, what miracle could possibly occur that would cover their range of needs. It is clear that employment is the miracle up here. Meaningful employment at rates that can sustain life.

Grim winter rain pounds him as he leaves the building at three o'clock. *Sister Water… she is very useful, and humble and precious and pure*, Martin intones as he locks the classroom door. His is a lonely figure as he follows familiar straight roads and sudden corners towards the Sunshine Motel. He finds the cat waiting there by the door, its coat rumpled into damp tufts, its furry face creased with impatience and spite.

5. Restoration

Sarinda is in the garden when Martin calls around. She stands with gloved hands full of dandelion and kikuyu which have been trying in their different ways to infiltrate the leaf litter which forms the basis for her father Jack's native plantings. She is full of enthusiasm for Peiro della Francesco and the *Skira* art book which he had lent her and which was in fact the reason for his visit.

She looks like a boy, with cut-off jeans fraying around her knees and a loose business shirt adorned with cobweb and dead leaf garlands caught when stooping beneath manuka or reaching up to grasp the dead leaves of cabbage trees which were in fact a lily, not a tree as Sarinda now informs him. She shows him where a weta jams itself into the space where the leaves join the tree's trunk and Martin admires its wary immobility and its russet armour.

Where have you been?" Sarinda challenges him. "It must be more than a month since I've seen you!"

Martin agrees. "The book is due back," he adds apologetically.

"You've been talking to Aiden and now you're full of judgement," Sarinda guesses. "Don't worry, we all came out of that badly."

"I am concerned about David," Martin replied. "You don't feel any need to help there?"

"What can I do?" Sarinda responds. "The boy is on drugs. He has to choose to not be on drugs."

"But you used to be close to the family. Your boys were friends."

"Jesse is in Dunedin," Sarinda says firmly. "And Tai is too young to hang out with that lot. He needs to focus on schoolwork." Sarinda casts a

baleful glance. "Aiden needs to take responsibility for his own messes. Come and say hello to mum."

Martin responds to Sarinda's imperative with his usual docility and follows her up to the house.

After tea and sandwiches, which he notes that Sarinda disposes of in good order, Martin leafs through the art book with her again. She has been reading all the notes, has observed the position of the frescos in the church, their sequences of meaning and she points out to him the way the fresco was created, one small section at a time so that the plaster would not dry before the pigment was fully applied. Martin and Sarinda marvel together at the technical mastery of the painter and the scope and reach of the research as well as the brilliant presentation of the colour reproductions.

The most recent restoration of these frescos had been ongoing since the 1980s when preliminary tests showed that an earlier restoration had actually put them in an even more perilous condition than they originally were after centuries of neglect. The colours now glowed more purely than since the paint's first application and some hidden areas had been revealed. As well as that, restorers had actually repainted small parts of the sequence in an entirely removable process to bridge important areas of the story.

However, the cracks from earthquakes over the centuries as well as the inevitable settling of the building have left visible damage which Sarinda indicates lightly, her hand hovering over jagged lines which bisect a brushed blue sky. "It is natural to have imperfections," Sarinda explains. "They add to the understanding of the process of living. There are large chunks of my life that I would like to just drop from sight and crumble on the floor. But unfortunately I'm not a fresco. And I won't last for 600 years. And I'm probably not as pretty," she laughs. "I would never do that again," she adds, and Martin understands that she is referring to Aiden.

"No, don't do that," he mumbles.

They look together at the images of bloodshed on the page and the serenity of the faces of those involved and wonder. Martin turns back to the death of Adam, one of the first images in the fresco cycle and they observe the calamity that the artist has depicted.

"Amongst all this though, is beauty," Martin says, and he points to the figures on the far left of the page. "Some commentators simply note these as two youths, *Adamites* whatever they may be. But this writer notes that they may be representations of Hercules and Alcestes. Legend has it that he rescued her from Hades and brought her to life. Not that I'm suggesting anything in particular by that…" and they both begin to laugh.

"Well it sure beats Theodora and Justinian," Sarinda says, "who were getting rather boring."

Martin laughs and decides not to share his latest discoveries about the character of Theodora at this point. The historian had also implied that Justinian was not the hero he'd seemed.

"You can call me Sara now," Sarinda says and closes the book firmly. "I'll take you down to the city to return this if you want. I'm seeing the Polytech about a nursing course on Monday and we'll leave when you're finished at work."

Martin agrees. Alcestis is back. What else could he do?

DAVID

1.. Nirvana

A tall young man sits hunched on a dining chair placed on the front deck

of his house. The deck faces west towards the sunset and long surf breaks which lie unseen around the point. The boy watches patches of sky seen through lithe and long branches of *pohutukawa*, trees he's known since childhood. These *pohutukawa* have held the sky faithfully for him, have presented sky like a softly changing kaleidoscope for his pleasure every fine evening for many years. He will not leave this place.

A small cat sits at the foot of the dining chair which has been commandeered for deck duty. The cat will not meow. Instead it will stand guard faithfully, steadfastly, watching the sunset. Aeons after the fall of darkness the tall youth turns, picks up the chair and walks inside, holding the door open for his small companion.

The cat goes straight to her favourite piece of carpet and begins to chew away at her fur. She has fleas again but he will not make her flea treatments a priority. The dark grey scuffed and worn carpet she sits upon is one of the few items remaining from his childhood. The fireplace mantel, a long line of bricks, is another remnant of that former life. Where once there were toy trucks and action men there are now shells and a collection of washed up items from the beach. He prefers it the way it is now.

Further along past the fireplace he sees his grandmother's table, a solid wood reminder of what he considers her tame existence. He restores the ornate dining chair to its companions there. A few other pieces of his grandmother's furniture are around, from when her house was cleared after her death. His mother is using this place as a storage facility. His gaze is drawn to the sideboard where the television used to be and he curses softly. It and the coffee table for the laptop hold bare space, these items having been taken in a burglary two days ago.

He eyes flick nervously to the back door. He has driven four inch nails through the door and into the jamb, splintering the dry wood. Cardboard has been taped over the square of broken glass that gave the intruders access. The follow up visit after a confrontation was entirely unexpected. The guys had told him that if he was going to sell marijuana it had to be through them. They'd smashed his lights and equipment. David had thought it was over then. But they'd come back the next day when he was out, broken in and taken the computer and television. He now lives with the constant awareness of their presence out there. He remembers some of them from before they were in the gang, fellow students at the local school. Even then, you wouldn't cross them.

He should eat. He finds bread and something from the cupboard then leans over the chest freezer in the kitchen for the last few hunks of frozen meat there. Something for tomorrow. The cat interrogates him softly. He saws off a piece of frozen meat for her and covers the rest with a tea towel. His father had dropped off a load of meat after he'd had a beast from the farm killed a few months ago. Payment for haymaking help. It was good meat but it was nearly gone.

Aiden had come round to help him out after the burglary. The old man talked a lot. As he'd cleared benches and scrubbed walls, as he'd loaded rubbish sacks and heaved them down to the road, as he'd cleared the fridge of catfood cans and fished the encrusted spoons from them, he'd talked. Of what David could do. Of where he should try for jobs. Of

how he should keep on top of the housework. David remembers this from childhood. His father's constant advice and intervention. Aiden came out of it looking good, organised, capable. David was the opposite, seen to be so, and quite comfortable in the role.

Anyway, it is quite good to have the place cleaned up a bit, he can actually see the bench now. He chucks his plate and knife into the sink, the first of many which will accumulate there over the next few weeks. He smokes some weed and wonders if anyone will call by and take him surfing if the waves are good tomorrow. Maybe it's worth risking taking his own car around the point if he can get it finished. He falls asleep with no firm plans for the future, near or distant.

Days pass. David reads the second-hand books that his father had insisted on buying him. *Read*, his father had urged him. *Keep the house clean. Exercise, surf.* David knows that this has been the recipe that his father has followed to haul himself through life. Firm self-discipline has kept the old man on track despite his own binge drinking on occasion (like every Wednesday night with his mates) and the furtive habit he has of smoking marijuana in the evenings.

Aiden is a relentlessly optimistic man and things had gone well for him right up until the moment that his wife left. And then it had become clear that it was all superficial, that there had always been underlying intimations of disaster. David had had a wonderful beach childhood with the constant awareness that it could all unravel at any time. He now preferred to live with his disasters out in the open. He felt perfectly fine when his girlfriend had left. The downward spiral that their relationship had described as it went down the tubes made sense to him and he did not attempt to stop it. He was living honestly.

He knows that someone will pick him up and take him to town today. It is his pay time and party time. They'll be able to buy beer and they will visit the house they buy P from. They will drink and laugh and it

will keep him going for the next week or so. He will buy cat food as well and everyone will be happy aye little cat? David opens all the windows on the front side of the house where people can see them as neighbours who pass the driveway get unnerved if there's no sign of life at the house. This is his gift to the community around him, gossiping lot that they are.

David becomes more and more restless as his friend fails to show. He goes down to the garage where his own jeep sits uselessly, the engine dangling from a steel cable. Next to it in the double garage is a wreck which he bought for parts. His tools lie scattered on the dusty concrete and there is an icecream container of oil nearby sitting with a scum of dust on top of it. The garages are always open to the weather as the vehicles are not fully inside, to allow for room at the front to work on them. David kicks at the long grass around the garage entrance.

He begins to pull the weeds that are growing there and the ones that he noticed last night sticking their fucking heads through the gaps in the decking above. He tears at the plants, seeing that in winter there's not so many seed heads to create more mayhem around the place. In summer he just gives up as it bothers him to see the seeds flying around with their intimations of disorder to come. A sense of doom descends upon him and the large section with its oversized bamboo on one side and dense macrocarpa on the other seems some pit of hell where he toils and writhes to no avail. He is helpless and useless and he snarls at the cat's delicate face as she peers out from the garage so that she jumps back. One of her feet steps into the icecream container of oil, and she shoots out towards the trees. Crazy cat.

The rumble of heavy metal music from a car window announces his mate's arrival and David leaves the mounds of weeds that he has torn from the earth and runs upstairs for his wallet. It is a wild haired, white faced boy with weed stained hands, wet and flapping trousers and sweaty oversized tshirt who slips into the front of the dusty Ford Falcon. David is filled with elation, making the sign of the goat with his hand out the

window as they pull out of the driveway, even though he's not really sure what it means. His friend squeals the tires and the car duck-walks at speed down the rural road. Beyond the house with its raggedy section Linda is checking a fence but pauses and shakes her head as she sees the lowered car make its ungainly entrance onto the road. car accelerates away with a roar and the cattle lift their heads to follow its progress.

Once, back in the day, David had given Sarinda or Sara or whatever she was called, a lift down to the city where he stayed in his grandmother's unit while he attended a theory course at Polytech. It had just been a chance conversation, but it had been a real conversation and he remembered it now listening to Kurt Cobain's uncompromising lyrics.

She'd asked why boys always seem to like heavy metal. She'd said that it was all doom and destruction, young people self-combusting and loudly. Girls, on the other hand, liked sweet lyrics, or lyrics about love and relationships, lyrics that expressed feelings. This was well before David had got together with his girlfriend.

He had objected. Heavy metal has good lyrics. "Listen", he'd said and turned the CD player up. "It's complex, it's choral, it's almost orchestral and girls do like it." They listened to the sounds and Sarinda could believe it. After all wasn't Nirvana around back in the eighties?

"Heavy metal bands do have good lyrics", he'd reiterated. He turned the music low and sang some of the lines in a gravelly faux Cobain voice:

Come as you are, as you were, as I want you to be, as a friend, as a friend, as an old enemy…

It sounded good so he continued*, Take your time, hurry up, the choice is yours, don't be late, take a rest, as a friend, as an old memoria…*

They'd laughed. And she'd been having it off with his father all that time. So much for sensitivity and caring.

HERE WE ARE NOW, ENTERTAIN US, I FEEL STUPID AND CONTAGIOUS, HERE WE ARE NOW, ENTERTAIN US, A MULATTO, A MOSQUITO, MY LIBIDO. Impossible to sing these lyrics without a snarl and David snarls now with his friend in the car as they speed towards the small town's bank and supermarket and beyond.

2. Surf break

David plunges his arm into the water, feels it submerged to the armpit, then he drags it back theatrically before doing the same on the other side. It's a bright morning and the familiar shape of the mountain guards the sea as surfers drift and slip over the waves, waiting for the right one. David is in no hurry. He plunges his arm in again just for the feel of it, right up to the armpit and back, instead of paddling with the usual flicking motion that gets you somewhere.

He runs his eyes idly over the vehicles on the beach to see if his old man is here. He's not one to miss a wave at the Point if it's going off. He waves his hand at Tai who paddles by with his friend Brad. "Stop at my place when you're done," he says cheerily. They should be at school he laughs to himself. "I'm goin back soon," he adds.

It was a good night last night. The grass at the front of the house has been ripped into donut mud. *Stupid Lucas Muldane, that was*, and the thought of it provokes David into laughing again. At this moment a likely wave builds behind him and he begins to paddle expertly into it, leaning forward intently as he plunges across the face of it, before anyone else can get it, turning and gurning and adding little flourishes to amuse his friends as he takes it all the way to the beach.

He looks like an advertisement for good health wearing the new wetsuit he got his mother to order from the internet and his long hair hanging ringletting and shiny from the salt water. He has the beatific smile of a surfer whose day is going okay so far thanks and he heaves his board onto a shelf of grass and lies himself beside it. He hasn't slept yet.

David's modus operandi is to be friendly to everyone in the hope that they will return the favour. It hasn't always worked. One of the reasons that the grass is so long at the house is because the lawnmower and weed eater were stolen from his garage at a party that got larger than it should have. Or did he lend the weed eater to someone? He doesn't report the thefts to the police as he doesn't want to attract their interest. Then one day he must have lent his tools to a friend of a friend. These were tools from his job, top tools that he paid a lot of money for back when he was working. David was being friendly. But he soon missed his tools. It was obvious they were not going to come back.

That time his father had been handy. They'd found out from others where the guy lived now and his father had driven him to the address. They'd walked down the driveway side by side to the small house, then to the sleepout as directed. David had felt strong with his toughly muscled and fit father alongside him that day. And the guy had given the tools back. Just like that. They were still all together in the back of his car. He'd had them for six months the cunt. Probably didn't even use them. Cunt.

David turns his head away from the harshness of the sun, feeling rough grass scratching the side of his face. Salt is drying on his skin and stinging his eyes as water slides from his hair and down his forehead. He sits up abruptly narrowing his eyes at the waves as he searches for his ride home. "Come on ya mongrel," he mutters as he watches one wave, complete with its complement of riders follow another into the shore. "Where are ya?" David is a serious drinker and it is time for another one.

Eventually they are sitting there, on the deck, on his grandmother's dining chairs, in the sunlight, with a beer, and feeling fine. Kurt's father has crayfish quota and will need a deckie in a day or two. David has done this a few times already and it makes him feel capable, like a real fisherman. *Record your hours*, his father says. *You might be able to get your skipper's ticket.* Always pushing, always irrelevant. David gets seasick, knows this is a dead end job anyway. Kurt will work with his father and get paid. David is just a helper.

Aiden had had fishing quota but he sold it. He got it because he was a fisherman under the old system. Always honest, he recorded his catch accurately and was awarded quota to the value of this annual catch. But he'd wanted to get out of owning his own boat anyway. So he went for the money thinking he would build the house up at the beach. Well, that didn't happen. David is well aware that half of the proceeds of the quota sale were now in his mother's hands in Australia. Well, good then, she can pay for the shit he needs. David is mounting a campaign to make his mother replace the television and computer. She would rather he claimed insurance. There has been a texting war over this for the last week or so. He's not going to report the theft to the police.

Kurt hands a joint to David and he is brandishing this as Tai and his friend pull up in front. "Woo hoo," is Tai's response to the torn up front yard.

"Shoulda been here," is Kurt's response

"Wasn't invited," Tai says coming up the stairs.

"Hey, David, Kurt," the other boy says as he gets out from behind the wheel of a grey Cortina.

"Good car," David responds leaning over the deck rail and peering down.

"My uncle's," replies the boy, grinning widely. "No donuts in this one aye.'

The afternoon mellows. David takes the thawed meat from under the tea towel and throws it in the oven. It's what he's always known. Food, this deck, a drink in his hand, the *pohutukawa* trees in front and the dry silkiness of salt on his skin. Eventually someone goes to get more beer from the beach shop, usually avoided because of the price but sometimes necessary. David tells them to get catfood too because he forgot. David is feeling fine. More people drop by after work. David feels even finer.

But then the last car takes off with a roar into the darkness. Silence. The boy wades through kikuyu grass, stumbling on hidden objects and on ridges of mud, tyre tracks which seemed like fun at the time. He is calling the cat and holds a catfood tin with a spoon sticking out of it. Moonlight picks out the details of the front yard but leaves the margins in shadow as he lurches towards the bamboo. David stoops to peer under macrocarpa and into the depths of the back shed, favourite spots for the cat. He hasn't seen her since he thinks two days ago when he pulled out all those weeds.

Finally, a dull glow of fur curled up amongst dry bamboo debris at the foot of the monster stand of bamboo. David calls and watches as the small head lifts slowly then is lowered again. David rattles the spoon against the can but the cat doesn't stir. He'll have to go under. It takes a bit to get that far in and David grunts and berates the cat gently. But as he levers her warm body up and angles it out from the bamboo, he begins to worry. She is limp and seems overheated. David wedges her against his body as he scoops up the cat food tin and heads back to the blazing lights and open doors of the house. As he walks up the stairs he avoids bits of broken glass that resulted from some of them lining their beers up on the deck railing, then some else stumbling against it, toppling the lot. Dumb old Leveritt Manton probably. Or Lucas Muldane again." David grins despite himself.

He puts the cat on his bed and finds that it has left a slime of oil on his tshirt. He takes a closer look at her and finds that one of her hindquarters is covered in oil. "What the hell?" he mutters and gets a towel to settle her on. She doesn't squeak back in her usual response to his questions. David turns off lights, locks the door and gets into bed. *It's the gang again*, he thinks. *They've done this to make a point.* And what was the point? That David should be scared. Very scared. And he is. But he will not leave this place.

In the morning he phones Aiden who uses his most reasonable and logical thought processes to tell David that it's very likely that the cat is poisoned from trying to lick the oil off herself. He's seen the icecream container in the garage and she might have stepped into this? David snaps that the cat isn't stupid enough to step in oil. The gang guys must have come in again and forced her into it. Intimidation, David says. They do it all the time. He is shaking and the cat still lies prone on the bed.

"The oil is always there, she's never stepped into it," he insists. "Why would she step into it now?"

David's voice has risen. He starts to scream at his father. He says the cat has to go to the vet. His father says to call him at the end of the day and tell him how the cat is. To wash the cat's leg in detergent and dry it off. His deep voice is even and reassuring. David signs off with a few choice swear words. He puts the phone down and returns to bed, picking up a paperback and then, after a cursory glance, throwing it against the wall.

He is still there at six that evening when his father phones to ask about the cat. David raises his head to survey the end of the bed and then reports no change. They agree to talk about it in the morning and the boy blunders from the bed to the toilet. He feels like shit. His face in the bathroom mirror is white and scabby looking. There is a raw looking coldsore appearing at the corner of his mouth. Pretty much the usual.

David returns to bed and watches the day darken into night from the room that used to be his parents', with the windows now closed, with the half dead cat on the bed and his grandmother's dining chairs strewn across the deck in the pitiless moonlight.

3. The Smile

He gets a lift into town the next day so that he can buy some better cat food. She is starting to eat now and he fully accepts that it was just a mishap that the cat somehow put her leg into the oil. Stupid cat. He will call around to the *New Start* room as well since there's nothing better to do. It is raining as he walks down the main street of the small town. Like damp petals from a springtime tree in the wind, the faces of his compatriots blur by as they walk, run or shuffle past him to escape the downpour. They are none of them familiar and look like a pile of refugees from some 24 hour party, with white faces and strained, exhausted looks. Some of them drag small children behind them. One carries a bundle of flax.

He utilises his smile in order to reassure himself. It is a small sweet smile which he can maintain for hours. It covers a range of moods and feelings that might not be acceptable to others and it is the public face of David.

It came in handy when he'd had to go to group therapy. It covered his lack of engagement. It came in handy with the doctors, particularly the one he had to see every few months to continue his sickness benefit. It comes in handy at *New Start* as well, although he is beginning to feel he

might not need it there now. He looks at his phone to see if it's morning tea time there yet and it nearly is.

David is hungry but he could buy bread anywhere. What he wants is to be involved in a meal that has been prepared and is shared. He wants the feeling of normality, of fun and acceptance, of routine and safety. Somehow Martin has manufactured this rare commodity.

David thinks Martin is okay but he knows there are some rumours about him. What is he doing here with our kids? Is he teaching them the right way? He must have some agenda, people muttered darkly. The town had been blown apart earlier in the year by a predatory paedophile teacher who worked a local primary school mercilessly. They felt they'd been too trusting. David could well believe it. Lazy, he thought. Letting someone they didn't know take their young boys away for weekends. What were they thinking? But they had felt they did know him.

The thought of Martin having wicked thoughts about the rabble at the shop front classroom made David's smile suddenly become genuine. He wouldn't have a chance. Any offending to be done in this case would be done against Martin, and it's fairly certain it wouldn't be sexual. Anyway he'd seen Martin with Sarinda a few times, looked fairly normal. Standard fare for around here.

David peers through the glass door before letting himself in. Not many here, must be a Monday? He hazards a guess.

"Nah, it's Friday ya manus," someone corrects him. David blinks. Where has the week gone? Anyway, attendance wasn't that good on a Friday either.

David sits and accepts a piece of bread when it is offered. He should have brought something, he thinks, some jam or something. But the bread tastes good and the tea even better. He leans back against the support of the couch and relaxes.

He hears that Manaia got herself the job at Farmers. He might go in there later to see her. He hears that the boys are working on photography credits for NCEA. They have a tutor come in every week. He hears that Jacob went down to the city and got an apprenticeship in panelbeating. Jacob was a big strong boy and had been a consistent attender at the course. David had worked with him at the haymaking one year. All of it made no difference. David would not leave this place.

He begins to talk about the parties at his house. "A hard week," he smiles. "Really harsh."

"Got some good surf too," he adds. "Must've been, um, Monday? Might have been Tuesday though," he adds, feeling a familiar uncertainty creeping up on him. "Anyway, round the Point there…"

He knows he'll get some interest and he does. Surfing is a universal language. Those who can surf wish they had been there or have already heard about the swell from others. Those that can't like to hear the details of the sport that has prestige and mystique anyway. *Surfers rescue swimmers more than lifeguards do*, David's father had often boasted. *No-one knows more about weather conditions and swells*. *Except maybe fishermen*, he'd added.

"Had some dolphins out there too, for a while," David said, wrapping up. This got them going and the boy basked in the afterglow of his contribution to the world.

"Did you see Tai out there Monday?" Martin interrupted. "Sara said he bunked school."

"Ooooooo…" a chorus rose spontaneously then degenerated into laughter.

"Don't think so," said David and covered his thoughts with the smaller version of his smile. It wasn't his job to look out for Tai.

"Well, if you do see him out there on a school day…" Martin began lamely and then stopped.

Tell him to come home? Unlikely. Report on him. Not going to happen. David continues his smile and the conversation drifts in another direction. Stupid Martin.

David goes around to Farmers and finds Manaia helping with a window display. He makes some jokes and she laughs but she continues to keep her focus on the job. David glares at the woman she is working with, making Manaia giggle but then she tells him he has to go. She says she can't meet him for lunch as her mother is dropping by. David gives her the smile. "All good," he says. "Another time."

David walks down the back of the shops to the riverbank. It has stopped raining but the long grass is damp under his thin trousers as he hunches forward to pick up a rock. He fingers it gently, exploring its contours and then selects another. The brown water below him swirls and splutters as it scours the clay banks in a ceaseless exploration of the sodden undersides of the bend. With sudden decisiveness David stabs his white forearm with the rock, jabbing and pulling, digging and grinding, until the pain stops him and he sits back gasping and holding the sweater over the damage. He will not leave this place.

4. Kai Moana

David wakes to a text message and recalls immediately that he's meant to go out on the boat with Kurt and his dad. The cat springs up with him, tottering over to her food bowl confidently. He's been good with keeping up the cat food since her accident.

David puts on a long sleeved skivvy, tight around his arms. He slimes some sunscreen onto his face and jams a cap over his springy curls.

The mirror shows him that he looks pretty much the same as usual. He practises his smile. They'll be out for two nights so he puts extra cat food out. She's a good mouser anyway. He pats her kindly for a while then remembers he needs breakfast himself. After eating, he chucks plate, pan and knife onto the pile on the bench and leaves the bread packet open, spilling slices from the bag.

Kurt beeps the horn from below and David grabs his stuff avoiding the broken glass on the steps and skirting the piles of dying weeds.

"Hey bro," he grins and Kurt reverses out the gate. "Might just shut that gate," David mutters and jumps out to pull the gates closed, running his eyes over the house, his refuge, his anchor, his turanagawaewae.

David's never liked fishing. He'd avoided going out with his father for long enough that his father gave up on asking him. "Always ready to eat the fish though," his father had commented at the dinner table often enough that David can't eat fish now without an accompaniment of guilt.

This is partly why he goes out now. To feel like one of the blokes. He's a big guy and can do some physical work as long as he's primed with the basics – food and sleep. Also he gets to eat on the boat and usually takes away a few crays or whatever is going. There is strictly limited drinking out there so David always feels good when he gets back. By the time he gets back it will be nearly payday again so this trip fits in well.

They pull up craypots until well into the afternoon and then David and Kurt take the catch into the beach by tender to be picked up by the truck. The boat's too big to bring in far and sits out well beyond the point like a surly misfit. The locals glare back at it, wondering why Kurt's father has to bring his boat around to their waters to get his catch.

David remembers a story his father used to regale people with if they were new to the area. A party along the beach a bit at someone's

house and someone spotted a commercial fishing vessel, a drag netter, well into shore. The owner of the house ran for his gun and soon the report of a rifle was being heard along with the cheers of the partygoers. The hull of the boat resounded with a metallic scoring system so that spirits rose before the vessel slowly pulled away. "You can't fight them though," his father said grimly. "They do what they like for the most part."

David's father has a fund of stories which are not for general public consumption. There is also one about an SUV that drove back and forth, up and down the access road one afternoon. The beach was full of kids and the driver didn't seem to be particularly aware of them. Plus it was just damn annoying to hear the same truck come up and down, a *Riner* as the locals called them. Foreigner. Someone who didn't live at the beach. Even someone from as close as Kiaroa could qualify as a *Riner*. It depended on their behaviour.

David's father had walked over and waved the SUV down. David was only four and Aiden felt fully entitled to make his protest. He was entirely in the right. But his protest was not met with an adequately conciliatory attitude so Aiden, with the speed and dexterity of his lifelong karate training, had leaned in, plucked the keys from the ignition and threw them into the sea. A good throw too.

Luckily David's father was fit and could run because the driver chased him up and down the sand dunes far longer than anyone would have believed possible. Anyway it had stopped the driver and added to the sum of the stories of the wild behaviour of those inhabiting this particular stretch of beach. It was also an entertaining afternoon's viewing for the locals who watched in delighted horror.

Or there was the time when David's father was driving a jeep, a tidy little number along the beach. The tide was up and there wasn't much space but Aiden was keeping left, as you do. But the ornery old bastard coming the other way didn't want to take his truck up onto the edge of the

sand dunes and kept coming directly towards him at speed. Without driving into the water the jeep could not avoid the oncoming vehicle. *What the fuck*, was Aiden's response and a decision was made not to lower his own speed. The two vehicles collided, as anyone could have predicted, leaving Aiden to carry the injured driver out for two kilometres along the beach. But he was in the right,

David shook his head sadly. You'd think the old bugger would have learned by now. But this was how he'd got respect. David knows that his father is a notorious figure around the place. He knows that it might not have been so easy to rescue his tools without his father beside him. They were a strange couple, the shambling apologetic son and the doughty pugnacious father, one tall, one a bit shorter, but both broad in the chest and well-muscled from surfing.

David had been karate trained as well, in the days when his father had run classes in the small town. But it was hard to develop champions so far from the main centres. His father had been trained while at boarding school in Auckland and had a black belt. David couldn't help it. He loved his father.

And this helps him work well for Kurt's father, Brady. As they sip their beers, rationed to two each evening, David starts to share what he's been remembering of his dad's tales. Brady is from the east coast and hasn't got the entire story on the inhabitants of this part of the country and seems to appreciate the flavour of the anecdotes.

"People get these names as well," David laughs. "Like Notso, a local fisherman. One day dad was on a boat with a few others just fishing away happily and this guy called Mike Smart comes along with his drag net. His boat comes closer and closer and the guys fishing start to call out loudly, making fists at the larger boat and cursing. Inevitably the drag net catches the fishing lines and it's all a disaster." David's smile widens. "For thirty years now they've call him Notso at every opportunity. Notso

Smart," The three men roar with laughter, Brady smacking his hand against his thigh and repeating "Notso," at odd moments during the evening. "Lucky our name's Brady huh dad?" Kurt says. "Can't do much with that." David looks over the waters to the faraway beach and towards his house up the road. He will not leave this place.

5. Notoriety

David sits on the deck with a beer. He can hear the ocean through the dull evening air so the wind must be onshore. The beer is cold against his fingers and he puts it on the rail and lights a joint. The pohutukawa trees hold the sky and he can hear some bird action down there. The cat hears as well and begins to mouth her strange language towards the trees. David laughs at her. "Go for it Ninja," he urges. She looks around and smiles. She does! Then she walks to the edge of the deck and peers through intently. David had been able to give her fish scraps for dinner and so she is content.

David hears a few cars passing by. He feels the evening air darkening around him. If he had the television or computer he would go inside now. Irritation surge through him. It's his mother's fault. If she can't organise the insurance she should just replace them herself. After all, she's earning heaps over there. He wastes a text on her. *Die bitch*. That might do it. He throws his butt over the rail.

Inside, he lies on his bed and picks up one of the paperbacks his dad left for him. His mother responds querulously as per usual. But this time she doesn't phone him. David's arm is a mess. He fingers the scabby, weeping area with a detached interest. No-one cares about him. No-one comes around. He can't even play playstation any more. His cat jumps onto the bed. She begins to bite at a raw area of skin around her tail

where the fur has been decimated by fleas. David digs a fingernail into his damaged forearm and pulls it through until he can stand it no longer. Then he does it again. He will not leave this place.

David texts Randall in the morning to see if his mother is taking him into the course and she is so David decides to go too. Randall has to go because the courts ordered him to. He's always liked Randall's mum and he can't understand how Randall turned out to be involved in some of the most major heists around the place. They listen to National Radio in the car and David catches up on the news. He keeps up his end of the conversation. By the time they reach town David's smile is practically real.

The first indication that something's wrong is when the old lady opens up the place. She has a tight mouth and tells them all to sit down on the couches for the moment please. "Where's Martin?" came the call from various students who already felt they'd been tricked into coming in and were muttering about going home. Or going into town. But for most of them, they knew, there was nowhere to go. Randall's mother has disappeared into the distance and David feels anxiety taking him over.

The woman drags a kitchen chair over and takes the attendance. She says that Mr Mason is no longer in charge of the course and that a replacement will be found. They are to get their folders out and continue with the work they are doing and she will come around and see where they're at. David and a girl called Reitu are told that they shouldn't be there.

"Lucky it's not bread time or there'd be way more people that shouldn't be here," Reitu grinned as they sat by the riverbank sharing one of her cigarettes.

"You got money for coffee?" David asks, but she doesn't. They end up going for a walk along the main street, calling in to see Manaia who seems excited to see them. She runs to get a newspaper from the reception area.

"Look," she points to a newspaper heading and David and Reitu obediently read. *OUTREACH TUTOR'S CRIMINAL PAST*. Below it is a picture of Martin with three of the kids from the course, the ones that got taken on by the flash hotel up the road. "He stole something over in Italy," Manaia says. "Something really valuable."

"That can't be right," David says and peers at the text. "He'd be in prison if he had."

"Because he was a monk they didn't press charges," Manaia responds triumphantly.

"What in hell is a monk," Reitu asks.

"He's religious," Manaia answers.

"What in hell is he doing stealing then?" Retu says and they all laugh.

"Let's go steal us some coffee then," David adds. "After all, if religious people can do it why can't we?"

"Come back here and I'll make you some at break time," Manaia says. "I'll tell my supervisor it's just the once. She's quite nice. I'll tell her it's because you're so traumatized by the news."

They laugh and go away again until Manaia's break. But as they walk down the road David realises that he is traumatized.

"I don't like this at all," he says to Reitu.

"No more morning tea bread," she replies. "Typical."

They head back to the shopfront classroom and Reitu waves outside the window until she can attract her friend Gina outside. There they pass the news on. Gina goes inside to announce it proudly, though not quite believing it herself. The supervisor's reaction confirms the news. The students sit on the couches, trying to work it out, some puzzled, some angry, a few saying he must have been framed.

The supervisor says these things happen and they all look blankly into the distance.

David and Reitu watch from outside and then head back to *Farmers*. David decides to text his dad to see if he knows and hopes that maybe he can come and pick him up. He might be out on the boats himself or be down in the city with his latest girlfriend.

Manaia's coffee tastes sweet. Reitu lives in town so she will walk home. David won't hang out there because Reitu's father is bad tempered. Reitu herself isn't keen to be home. "Boring," she says. "How boring this is. Why does he have to be a crim and mess up my life?"

David's dad texts back telling him he's coming in and where to meet him. There is a sense of urgency about the text and David feels reassured, as though his father will ride in on a white horse and fix this anomaly, this strange and unexpected interruption to a part of the world that was so homely and predictable.

David manages to get Manaia to agree to go to the movies with him but they both know it's unlikely that he'll show up. They've been down this road before.

Once in the truck David is in a world of action and interrogation. Unfortunately he can't remember much of the details so Aiden stops and gets a paper. They are on their way to Martin's motel. They will get to the bottom of this. Someone has been out to make trouble.

But Martin isn't there. A reporter hurries up to Aiden and gets a rocket for his trouble. David sees a national news van pull up and raises his eyebrows, whistling softly.

The reporter follows them so David and his dad stop and have lunch in town. "He'll be at Sara's place," Aiden says. "But I'm dammed if I'm going to lead them there." The article was short and included only bare details. A 15th century painting missing from the monastery. It was

last seen in Martin's room. A priceless piece. Police were looking out for it at auction but it had not as yet appeared. The monk unable to account for its absence or even why it had been moved to his room. The monk leaving the religious order, moving to a small town in the back blocks of New Zealand.

"Backblocks," David objects. "Who do they think they are?"

Aiden texts Linda and leaves his Suzuki with David, escaping with Linda to Sara's house. With this unexpected bonus and checking the petrol gauge, David decides to drive to an east coast beach for fun. He picks up Reitu. She puts some Bob Marley in the CD player and they go on a drive to nowhere. *Buffalo Soldiers!!* Yeeeah Mon! *No woman no cry.*

CONFLICT

1. A delegation

Martin stands stolidly in the centre of a huddle of people who have gathered in the back garden of Sara's mother's house. His star student Tino stands on his right hand side holding a framed copy of his famous digitally enhanced photograph, the one that was published. Martin holds up the other side of this. To Martin's left is a woman only introduced as Auntie. She is a Kuia, smiling warmly, and she holds Martin's hand. Beside Auntie is skinny white Dayna wearing her usual scowl but this time not draped in a sleeping bag despite the fact that it is cold. Next to Dayna is a Kaumatua. It is clear that he is a Kaumatua because he holds a twisted manuka walking stick and this stick is used for emphasis. For the moment it is firmly under control, tip poked into the soft earth. The front lineup is enhanced by a range of adolescent faces who gesture and smile behind them, one making the pukana face along with a hastily assembled hand gesture. Sara's mother, Maeve, snaps the picture and then leads them all inside where a feast is laid out on the old formica table.

The Kaumatua, Henry, praises the treetops which jostle for space below the large window, speaking in Maori and then repeating in English for the benefit of the group. He performs a karakia to bless the food. E Te Atua, whakapaingia enei kai. Hei oranga mō mātou tinana. Amene.

Then they all arrange themselves around the room to eat sandwiches and drink tea. Auntie clings to Martin's arm, whether for her

own or for his comfort is unclear. Her slight figure is bent and her face has fine lines which ripple into a smile, even while barking orders at the *rangatahi*.

"Here Tino, take this!" she says and passes him her empty plate. The muscled-up lad in basketball singlet and oversized shorts takes it.

Martin enquires gently about the well-being of the students, both here and absent. He is overwhelmed both by the formality and reason for the visit and by the assurances of support he has received from those present and apparently a whole *marae*-full out there somewhere.

"We don't know what you did in Italy," Auntie had said, "but we can see what you've done here and we think you're a fine fellow. What you did for our *mokopuna*…" she added. "Anyway, we've all done the stupid things sometimes," and she laughs. "Isn't that right Henry??! But we learn from it and move on. Now don't you worry, you just go on out there on the streets and look them in the eye, those *keha*. You've got friends."

Auntie then beamed holiness at him until his heart warmed and he beamed back, holy.

"Not like the drongo who really hurt our town," she said bitterly. "That's a whole different ball game."

"That's enough Auntie," Henry said, "Let's not go there."

Martin grins with relief. He is not as bad as the paedophile. He has never felt so cared for and he holds the photograph given to him carefully. It bears the carefully scrawled signatures of most of his ex-students on the back.

Henry calls them all to order, including a bunch who had vanished into Tai's room on his return from football practice. Henry delivers a last oration and begins their exit with a *hongi* to Sarinda, Martin and Maeve, followed by all of the group. In this process Martin experiences the

students' multidimensionality in a way he has never expected to and which feels like love.

"It's their *mauri*," Auntie smiles.

Martin props the picture on the mantelpiece and waves as they go down the driveway.

"What was that all about," asks Tai just for something to say.

"That was amazing," said Sarinda, by way of answer.

"They just wanted to thank Martin dear," Maeve adds vaguely.

Martin says nothing but looks down to the road below where Auntie is being helped into a car.

"I think I'll learn Maori," he says finally.

"What for?" says Tai and Sarinda at the same time states, "It's really hard you know."

Martin thanks the two women for the food preparation and begins clearing up in a slow and methodical way that signals enough has been said for one afternoon.

As he washes dishes he hears Tai's rising and falling tones as the boy outlines plans for his Saturday night and the importance of the plan and how it can't possibly be altered and exactly what it is that he needs from his mother and where her responsibility of duty and care should END. He hears Sarinda's voice strong at first but becoming less convinced of her ground at every moment and ending with total compliance to Tai's will.

"After all he is seventeen," she says to Martin and Maeve as she returns from dropping him off. "I have to trust him sometime."

"The party is only just around the corner," she adds. "Why, he could walk home if he wants to."

Martin retreats to the deck for a cigarette, a habit he has recently revived. All around him he senses the bird world settling into the dusk. Birds can't see in the dark he recently read in a novel of Barbara Kingsolver's. Is this right? It seems important not to get things wrong. He thinks of the stunned sea bird at New Year. Did it ever catch up to its bird friends? Did it get where it wanted to go? He breathes the soothing smoke out towards the sunset sky. What about the moreporks at the beach? Will they be alright? He has no answers.

2. Aiden O'Neill

He knows where the paua wedge themselves into crevices in these rocks. And he waves an airy hand towards quite an array of seaside rocks. There is a special crack that was all his until he told his usually reliable friend Brian. For years it was his but Brian must've told a few others and finally everyone's down there. Only the best divers though because it's quite deep and hard to find. He himself called it "The Crack" and that's still how it's referred to.

He knows where the best places to gather mussels are and what's the right tide to do it. He has the lungs to freedive. It's a few bays along from here. His last girlfriend was into diving for mussels. She was pretty athletic. He ponders this for a moment.

He knows where there is foul that the fish frequent far out at sea and he knows the names and positions of all the underwater features on the way to it. He knows.

When the water will turn blue bringing skipjack tuna and marlin down from the tropics. Not for a while yet, sadly. He knows.

He describes the time he was first on the scene when scallops rumbled in with the storm, clattering around his feet in the shallows,

dislodged from whatever sandbank harboured them. A few judicious texts then whole families with trailers, trucks and bins surged to the seashore to collect as many as possible. Whole trailers full. Luckily exactly where the beds are remains a mystery.

He knows everything there is to know about surfing. Knows what the wind will be doing and which break will shape up nicely in the particular conditions. He is intensely interested in the shape of the waves and once parked will give his full attention to the sets, first from behind the wheel and then, leaving the car, shouldering aside the salt wind to eye up his adversary, the Tasman Sea.

Now he packs himself into a black wetsuit and runs, gaily for such a solid man, down the beach.

Maggie sits there surlily. If there is such a word. She has rattled around the reef road with him for forty minutes and has said barely a word. And this has not bothered him in the least. He has enough voice for both of them. In fact, one of the most infuriating things about him is that as she becomes more and more withdrawn, he expands to fill up the space, puffs himself up like one of those puffer fish, ridiculous looking creatures that spring to their own defence far too readily and then expire trying to hurt someone they think might hurt them.

She reads his expression expertly though they've only been going out for ten months, and at a distance since she lives in down in the city. His expression says what a great guy he is, a surfer you know, fifty eight and fit, and not about to let himself be brought down by some moody woman.

Her emotions are raw. She doesn't know how much is due to her own self esteem issues which cause her to interpret every comment as a blow and how much is his damned arrogance. She has been bumped and thudded by the rough trip around the point in his dammed Landcruiser

and feels dull and chill like the surfboards strapped to the roof in their insulating covers, hauled around here for his pleasure.

She watches him paddle out, judging wave surges expertly, assured feet paired tidily and pointing in her direction. I am my own man, they say. Don't try to own me.

He's told her he's in demand with a certain sort of woman. He was surprised at the attention he attracted after his wife bailed. She's read the statistics as well and she feels like a break from being single. She's decided she will go along for the ride, experience the age-old connection again after all these years but today it is really not worth it. The nights, however, are a different matter.

When he sleeps he falls deep like a child and can stay like that all night without stirring. She loves sleeping with him. After all this time. To touch his white skin and hear him shave before bed – for her. His muttered queries in sleep, his extended grumblings and yawnings as he turns occasionally, partly constructed as a game to amuse her.

Last night they'd had a visit from his son David and his mate that he fishes with. The boys had brought crayfish and Maggie watched as the flailing creatures scissored the air in the stockpot which was then placed on a gas ring outside Aiden's temporary cabin home. His son had a large skinny frame which gathered itself around the cigarette his father handed him, inhaling deeply and then seeming to expand into geniality.

The three men had gone over wave conditions and tides minutely as David and his father tended to do each time they met. This kind of conversation can continue for some time and Maggie let the sound of the tide swelling just beyond the sand dunes dominate, voices building and falling without her assistance. She might not have existed. Did Aiden introduce her to the friend? If so it was very cursory. She listens to the unhurried review of places they've been and what the conditions were like.

David seems to revel in the minutae, coming up with the most bizzare occurrences and presenting them to his father like a cat revealing a special treat to its master. Two days ago he'd seen a van lose its purchase on the rocks, chassis lifted by the incoming tide when the two boys had been trying to beat the tide back around the rocks trail after a surf. The sight of the abandoned van drunkenly lurching and falling to rest had taken him by surprise at first.

"Thought we were hallucinating," he laughs.

As their truck drew closer they saw the van making a stuttering independent progress across over the rough terrain, a determined escape attempt on the part of the vehicle. Man-made machine makes a glorious but doomed journey of its own to nowhere. Tourists of course. Trying to bring a van like that around the point.

Maggie sits at the long picnic table inhaling the reek of the boiling crustaceans as they turn from slimy black to a garish orange and are finally laid out for their degustation. She fully participates in the tearing apart of the creatures and as night falls and the waves boom louder she lets the slurping suctions and resounding crashes of waves persuade her that she fits here, that Aiden's wife and life have gone and that there is space for her. But that had been before he'd told her his heart and soul had gone too. He had said it rather jubilantly. "I'm not going to get involved with anyone."

They'd had these times before. They'd made conscious attempts to be more loving after a few false starts when his lackadaisical romantic style and her propensity to rage had left them bereft and alone – a familiar feeling to them both. They had realised that a modicum of effort would be necessary to keep this long distance relationship functioning so they'd agreed to practise being loving to each other. For her, this meant that she would be physically affectionate even when she felt like giving him a blast from her perennially sharpened tongue. Sometimes she was both loving

and sarcastic at the same time which was interesting for both of them if they could survive it.

For him, being loving meant that he would pick up her towel after her and hang it on the heated towel rail (in the basement of Brian's nearby house) and that he would catch fish and bring it down to her house in the city. Sometimes he even cooked it for her. When at the beach he would rinse the sand from her togs and wetsuit in fresh water and hang them in the shade to dry. And this was the extent of their loving relationship. Perfectly adequate and better than either had experienced before.

She watches him jog lightly back up the beach to the car. The roman emperor style grey hair slicked down with salt water. The white skin which emerges from beneath the wetsuit as she helps him peel it from his wide shoulders. The helplessness of his shivering sounds. The way he is not much taller than her, short for a man. She is warming to him again.

But there are problems with loading the surfboards. First she lets the rope dangle and the car door slams on it.

"It'll wreck the rubber seal if you do that!" he calls.

Then she stands on the tyre to reach the rope to throw it over the boards to him.

"You don't have to stand on the tyre. You should open the door," he says.

"Well do it yourself then," she responds grimly, though resentfully aware that the job is already complete.

"I was trying to help," she adds as they swayed in unison with the vehicle bumping over rocks and into hollows. Maggie is keeping stiffly to herself, measuring the distance between them during the rocky return journey.

"You want to learn how to do it right, don't you?" he asks.

"So you're not going to talk to me," he states.

"What are the facts?" he asks.

"There's a right way to do things and I'm just letting you know it," he adds.

"I've done this thousands of times before and you want me to do it your way," he rolls his eyes.

"It's your tone," she begins.

"What tone," he says coldly.

"That tone," she replies.

"You want me to let you damage the door seals just so your feelings don't get hurt?" he expostulates.

"I don't like the way you talk to me," she says.

"I don't like the way you talk to me," he replies with satisfaction.

They emerge onto flat white sand and Aiden takes the crayfish carcasses down to the water at the end of this last beach. Someone joins him at the water's edge and Maggie decides to be sociable and go down. However, when she is half way there the two men begin to walk further away and Maggie gives up, watches the broken orange pieces bobbing in the waves. The tide seems determined to return the pieces to her and she throws them back out. It might be fisher folk behaviour to return scraps to the sea she thinks dourly, but swimmers sure as hell don't want to trip over them. She returns the bits two or three times before the waves finally take them and then she turns to walk back to the car.

As she returns she notes that her earlier footprints have already been obscured by drifting sand.

3. Paradise

Large tracts of flax have colonised the ditch which divides Jack's native bush from the neighbour's oversized driveway. The flax has crept over to capitalise on the gushing water from both Jack and Maeve's roof and now the neighbour's. The flaxes have dug their dogged root systems well into the clay and diverted water to pool in the hollow at the bottom of the bush slope. Martin takes the spade to it. It's the least he can do.

He wants the ditch clear and preferably straight so that it doesn't continue its serpentine excavations of the clay floor of Jack's surburban forest. Large chunks of rubble from the neighbour's new driveway have rattled down to meet the flax and the job is not easy. He wonders what a digger would cost to hire and then muses that Jack would have certainly known someone with a digger. Someone that he'd done something for over the years. Payback. It was how things worked if you lived somewhere for fifty years. Martin labours on alone.

At three pm he is interrupted by an oriental vision, a woman bearing a cool glass of water and wearing a heavy silk smock over short wide trousers. Martin does not look lower than the edge of the trousers for fear of the inevitable shock of muddy gumboots. Instead he keeps his gaze to the bashful eyes of a geisha, which meekly adore him from under a short straight fringe. The face is white and dark hair cropped at the level of a delectable jawline.

"You're so strong," the vision gasps in breathy voice as she hands him the soda water.

"Konichiwa," he grunts, for lack of a more apt remark in an appropriate language.

Sarinda has risen from her afternoon rest in full Sino-European mode. She takes short stuttering steps towards a tree victim, pulling on

heavy gloves with her free hand, holding loppers in a vice grip beneath her elbow. He's always admired her dexterity and stands in awe of it now as he sips soda water. She wants to open up this part of the bush, she wants light and space where there was choked up foliage and stagnant air. She has been reading Junochiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* and she wants elegant calligraphy branches to replace the competitive, jostling horde of upstarts which are taking over here. She begins chopping without further ado.

Martin is not sure about this new incarnation of Sarinda's. It seems to him that she is far too ready to metamorphise into the new, the untried, the unknown. She leaves behind her a dried out carapace like the ones cicadas discard after a painful period where their exterior is too small. Or maybe more gracefully, like a skink shedding its skin. She emerges as something new while he shelters like the weta, lodged firmly into a place of safety, inert, practically dead.

Sarinda chirps away as she works. "Tai didn't phone until four am this morning," she shares merrily.

"You know how I was reassured by him being at that party just around the corner? Well he ended up down at Kai Iwi Lakes. KAI IWI LAKES!" she pauses for breath. "That's miles away."

When Martin asks if there was a sober driver, Sarinda airily replies. "I'll ask him when he gets up."

They continue their separate exertions. Amputated limbs rustle as they fall crisply to the ground. Spade bites the mud and scrapes noisily at metal chunks which resist extraction.

"For God's sake Martin," Sarinda resumes. "You must have been young once. In fact, Aiden told me that the pair of you were rather wild."

"That tone is very un-geisha like," Martin reprimands and is pleased to see her bow shaped mouth recompose itself. She really was doing rather a good job on those trees.

"I'm not going to worry about Tai anymore," she says. "He knows what he's doing."

"What about the bunking?" Martin asks.

"Well whatever I'm doing seems to make no difference," Sarinda replies. "Might as well give up I reckon. Anyway I'm going to be down in the city on my nursing foundation course so he's going to have to pull himself together."

"I have to trust him," she adds, chop chopping wildly. "Then he'll do the right thing."

"You are doing a fine job there Mrs Hatchimoto," Martin ventures and is rewarded with a sudden armful of silken sensuality, sun-warmed and sassy. They haven't been together in some time and he is seriously tempted. He steals a kiss. For a long moment he feels the loppers dangle dangerously down his back, wavering in Sarinda's careless grip.

Maeve has gone out so they indulge themselves for one highly regulated and exotic tea ceremony the like of which he never seriously expected to encounter.

"You might as well come down south with me," Sarinda breathes into his ear afterwards.

"Tina says a friend of mine is coming over from Italy," Martin replies. "Tina and Steve visited the presbytery in Rome and talked to some people there about the situation. The music teacher I told you about," he adds and feels mildly gratified by Sarinda's abrupt attention. Geisha-like, however, she keeps her dignity.

"Is Mr Hatchimoto involved with this woman?" she demands in a fake accent.

Martin knows that a full explanation is due.

"I did rather lose my head over her," he admits. "She had that Italian thing, you know, sophisticated but down to earth."

Sarinda nods sagely and waits.

"She came into my room a few times," he continues. "It was next to the piano room. She loved the plainness of everything and she loved looking at the painting of Saint Bernard that I had on the mantelpiece. She wanted to sleep with me. It was intoxicating. But we both knew it was wrong."

"So?" Sarinda demands. "What happened?"

"One day we kissed," Martin answers. "That's all." That was all but it had been enough.

"She was heading off to a skiing holiday with her family. "When I found that the painting was missing it all made sense. What did a woman like that want with me?"

"Are you sure she took it? "Why is she coming here then?"

"I don't know. Guilt? Maybe she wants to share some of the cash with me."

"Oh, yes," he added. "She knows the Rome art scene inside out. After all she introduced me to it. She gave me the medallion." Like a one of the bugs he'd seen whirling through the afternoon clearing in the bush in aimless delectable experience, he had been oblivious.

Sarinda raised her eyebrows in self-mockery. She had totally missed her cue in that art gallery conversation.

"And who knows where that came from," Martin ends.

"Anyway I need to be up here to see what the story is. Tina was trying to help. She'd heard half the story but not the bit about Cara."

"Cara," Sarinda repeats. "Why on earth did you not tell anyone, clear your own name? "

"My name would be mud after having the most elegant member of the local congregation in my bedroom. Her husband and kids as well. I didn't want to screw up her life."

"You are so sweet," Sarinda says standing at the mirror and flattening down her fringe. She was a play actor who tried on guises. She was no one. Cara was an Italian woman, with breasts no doubt, who could cook and converse wisely and buy art, who could afford to buy art. Sarinda kicks aside her satin smock and rustles up a sensible outfit from her chest of drawers.

Martin returns to the garden to chip and gnaw with his spade at the metal conglomerate versus opportunistic flax battlefield at the side of the property. As the afternoon wears on his mind chimes in as it does sometimes, throwing him the headline of a critical review he'd read in his library meanderings. *Back to the Garden*, was the title of the review which featured a book *called Paradise Lust: Searching for the Garden of Eden.* It covered the concept of the lost Paradise, a place humankind universally seems to wish a return to. It reviewed the summary of a collection *of cranks, preachers, professional archeologists, armchair theoreticians and others who have all insisted they have found the historic Eden*. The reviewer noted that if you could get all these people in a room, each would insist they have the evidence on their side. The reviewer than added the following. *That makes their efforts funnier, and also sadly Quixotic*.

We all want to be somewhere where God is beneficent, where he approves of us, where we know what we're doing, Martin reflects. His

own vocation had filled a happy twenty five years of his life and was, he concludes, sadly quixotic.

The article had held his interest though with further detail from the book. The actual close reading of Genesis, *maddeningly terse*, as Wilensky-Landford notes, describes the landscape of Eden. *A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches*." The branches are named and *it would seem that all you'd have to do is find the four branches and bingo*. It is easy to locate the Tigris and the Euphrates which run from Turkey through Iraq and into the Persian Gulf. *There are those who say, however, that today's Tigris and Euphrates are not the Edenic ones. And then there are the branches Gihon and Pishon, and no one knows for sure*…The article goes on. Mad people, wondering if the Thames or the Danube could be one of the branches. Longing to find the physical paradise. A little town at the junction of the current Tigris has had *from time immemoria*l a tree of some sort within it. Could it be the original tree of knowledge? If so, humankind is doomed for the tree is dead, surrounded by concrete in a small town square.

Jack's forest around him is darkening, gathering cold and misery. A fantail flurries around his head and shoulders as he soldiers on, determined to use all possible light, working into dimness, until all birds are gone and a square of light coming from the kitchen of the house signals that food will be ready soon, but still he doesn't give in, he scrapes and lifts and chops and levers the spade under and over and through until finally the trees let him go.

4. Dinner

After sitting with Aiden's back to her for an hour or so during Tina's elegantly contrived homecoming feast, Maggie makes a wounded retreat

to the L-shaped sofa dominating the other end of the open plan living area. It is so large that if she leans back against the cushions her feet lift from the ground and she feels at a disadvantage, childlike with her ragged brown curls and intellectual glasses. To calm herself she rhythmically smoothes down the coat of a handsome ginger cat, who doesn't really appreciate it. Maggie finds herself banging down on his head quite firmly and then raking her fingers down his spine. Her abdication of her seat at the dining table has been entirely unheeded. She tugs at the fur at the back of the neck quite viciously and the cat gives her a cool, long look.

Far away on the other end of the L sits Faith, frowning into her iphone. The teen alternately texts furiously then sits staring into the distance. Maggie does not exist for her. The cat does not exist for her. Faith can feel only the loose weave of the white couch pressing into the feet she has drawn up, wrapped securely in the folds of her long dress and hidden along with the beating of her heart.

The cat lifts its head to prompt further ministrations and Maggie complies. She is wondering what it was in her childhood that makes her so needy of attention. Aiden is enjoying talking to Steve. Is it too much to ask that he turn from time to time, include her, actually *show* that he enjoys her company?

Tina has basted, peeled, sautéed and sprinkled for much of the afternoon but still manages to glitter at the head of the table. Her son Gabe is at the other end, under duress. Steve, Martin and initially Maggie have distributed themselves along one length of the table, with Aiden, Sarinda and David facing them. Her hostess calls Maggie to join them as Steve brings over coffee. Faith rouses herself from her texting stupor and squeezes a chair in beside her. Tina feels that her cup runneth over as she watches her daughter, so beautiful and so charming.

Silence descends as people eat. David, pale and until then withdrawn, offers a topic in which he can feel a certain confidence. He

gathers the words to describe the day he surfed around at the Point a week ago. Who he got a ride with. An intricate detailing of wave shape and weather conditions. Who was there. Maggie sees that David is using the same old hook to catch his father's attention but Aiden has his back to their end of the table, begins his own arm-waving, foot-stomping yarn directed at Steve and Tina. He won't yield to his son, if he is even aware of him.

Maggie slouches as she watches David's futile attempts. Though she's a jeans and boots kind of girl she has made an attempt at being womanly for this rare excursion with Aiden as a couple. But she needn't have bothered. It seems that anyone else is infinitely more interesting than herself - or David obviously. She is uncomfortably aware of the surliness of Gabe on one side of her, an ominous looking Martin on the other. And before her, now stumbling over his words is David, losing the thread of his story.

The boy tilts his head back, in a study of the ceiling. Whiteness is attacking him. The room too tidy. He clears his throat. Feels the shattered glass pieces move inside it. Coughed up shards the other day. His mouth continues to try to articulate words, any words through the sharpness. Was it last week or this week around at the Point? He no longer trusts that he really did see a van capering about on the rocks. Maybe he dreamed it? His voice stutters and stops. He looks towards his father. But Aiden doesn't pause in his own rollicking conversation.

Gabe surveys the table and leans back, wrenching a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of fashionably loose jeans. "Fucken loser," he mutters as he grinds his chair back and lurches towards the deck. If his intention is to capture attention he has been more successful than David.

David's face frozen into a mask with a pasted-on smile directed upwards at no-one or at God. His father's straight back, still firmly

presented to David and Maggie's end of the table, becoming straighter if anything. The reassuring drone of Aiden's deep bass voice, gone.

Sarinda lays her warm hand on David's arm and directs a smile at Faith, urging her to stand up and display properly the dress she is wearing, one that Tina has said they bought in a market in Florence. Faith, in serene compliance, twirls.

A halo of lightness surrounds her. Pale hair glows as it flows over the white muslin dress and the dress dramatically sweeps the ground, cinched below pale uplifted breasts. It has long sleeves which narrow as they reach wrists and a square neckline, cut low. All over the fabric are scattered tiny embroidered flowers, twisting and turning and seeming to fall through the fabric towards the ground.

Faith, used to admiration, takes the opportunity to sway, arms above her head like an Indonesian dancer, soft whiteness gathering around her legs in a lucent swirl.

"Botticelli," Sarinda whispers to Martin across the table and sees his instant glance of comprehension. Faith is reminiscent of a figure in the artist's famous painting "Primavera", one they'd come across in their art history afternoon excursions back in summer. Faith was both Flora wearing her dress of flowers and scattering others from a basket, up to 150 botanically correct species apparently and, in movement, like the three graces who dance with linked hands on the opposite side of the painting. In the centre of the painting, a naked but modest Venus, goddess of love. Faced with such beauty, how can one not believe in goodness? Although there was some unsavoury looking action behind Flora if Sarinda remembers rightly. The wind and a nymph. The book couldn't give a definitive explanation about that.

Their own blonde vision seats herself again, taking unspoken tributes as her due. Sarinda cannot help herself. She introduces a subject that suddenly seems urgent. "We've decided you need a break from up

here David," she says. "Martin and I have got a great big place at Te Kowhai Bay on the Tutukaka harbour. You can stay with us while you get yourself off these dammed drugs." She has a mind to throw caution to the wind. "You need to get your head clear," she said. "You look awful."

Gabe, returning from his balcony break, gives a dry laugh. "Yeah why don't you, head on down to Loser town," he chants. He is met with a vacuum where he expected a smile at least. After all, Whangarei has been the butt of jokes for ever, up here. Shut in a valley which channels southerlies and rain up the harbour, and with only a tame and hard to access coastline. Practically no *kai moana*. Sensing the mood of the table is not with him he adds a louder epitaph, including Martin in a sudden sweep of fury, "Fucken losers!" he spits. And then, as another idea crystalises, "Fucken criminals!"

A rattle of cutlery as the mountain of Martin moves. Maggie's eyes freeze onto the white damask tablecloth where a glass of wine has spilled at the judder of Martin's lunge from his chair. Quiet, focussed Martin now in action, a blur of a big man connecting with his nephew with a thud, a thwack, a reeling back of Gabe's young head with its trucker cap and dirty blonde curls. Gabe's bitter young face blank now, arms not reaching to break his fall, the mother, his mother, reaching towards him in supplication, in sorrow, the 20th century approximation of a *pieta*. Her face upturning, unbelieving, a sunflower turning to her brother the sun, Martin, who stands immobile now, one hand enclosing the other, still curled in a fist.

Mountain Martin staggers and Maggie feels the bump of his weight as he grabs the back of her chair for balance. The man is trying to make sense of his internal terrain, find a pathway out but the weather is not kind. He can see only through sulphurous fog. Wants to vomit. Around him the room reassembles itself. Steve in the doorway, returned from taking a phone call, entering a room substantially altered from when he left. David's eyes unusually wide and alert.

Faith breaks the silence with a sob that is more like a gulp, a hiccup, a query. Gabe was just being Gabe. It's what Gabe does. But who was this Martin?

Aiden bends to pick up the chair that no-one heard fall. He grips Martin from behind, one warm hand on each bicep, friend and jailer, support and restraint, his feet planted squarely apart in a resilient martial arts stance. It is not the time for explanations and no one attempts to explain. It is not the time for recriminations, but the time will come. It does seem, however, that it is the time for the cat to scoot stiff-legged with excitement past the dining table into the kitchen and make a noisy assault on its cat biscuits.

Steve bends and helps his son to his feet and then levers the boy over to the wide white couch where Gabe reclines confounded.

Aiden explains the situation somehow and directs Sarinda to take the silent and wooden Martin down to the car. "A wonderful meal," he says gratuitously to Tina as he hustles his son towards the stairs, dragging Maggie behind him in a rare display of ownership.

"I'll call you," Sarinda promises Tina. "I'd better get him home. We'll talk."

She gives Faith a quick hug on the way through and leaves the family to regroup, to think over, to judge and justify, to query and exclaim. She can't see a way forward from this night.

As Maggie leaves the house with her man and his boy she hears the clink of glasses. It is Faith loading the dishwasher, the goddess full of grace moving slowly and certainly, making a small homely gesture towards an explicable future, flowers still falling as she moves, but never quite hitting the floor.

5. Rejects

David fumbles in the darkness as he opens the padlock on his gate. It secures what is left of his world. His retreating figure is spotlit by the garish, nightmare twist his father's headlights bestow as the boy navigates grassy mounds of junk piles towards his front stairs.

"No one should live like this," Maggie says, uncontroversially enough in her opinion.

Aiden turns. "He makes his own choices," he states coldly. "What do you want me to do, bail him out? I've spent all my life working to get to a position where I can retire up here, go surfing when I want, fish and play the day away. David has it made. And he knows it."

"He looks terrible," Maggie tries to end the conversation.

"Only he can choose how far down he's going to go," Aiden added. "If he needs money to get a job, to go to Aussie and look for work, to follow up job leads in other cities, then I'm there for him. But I'm not giving him money just to stay here and do what most of us would like to be doing ourselves. He's on his own."

Maggie stops talking as she has found that this is the only way to extract herself from these sort of conversations. We're all on our own, she thought. And particularly you, Aiden O'Neill, she thought. You are more on your own than you think.

"He needs help to get out of the situation," Maggie finally ventures. "People can't stop that sort of drug use on their own."

"He's not using that much," Aiden mutters. "He tells me what he's using and it's not that much."

Maggie rolls her eyes as they speed through the dark. What does she expect from an adult who drinks too much most nights and invariably begins the evening with a joint? Nothing.

Maggie got psychoanalysed a few years' back, after she ditched yet another promising relationship. She was beginning to get the idea that she might be part of the problem. The psychoanalyst, a man in his seventies, was sufficiently bland enough for Maggie to project all her insecurities onto him and aware enough that he was able to point them out to her. He had been very sharp actually. Their working relationship followed the usual trajectory and Maggie battled to keep her distrust at bay. But eventually it triumphed and she stopped going. She felt he didn't like her.

"We're all alone," she intones now, in response to Aiden's earlier statement about David. She is echoing the psychologist, channelling him actually. She thinks it particularly applies to Aiden and David. Both of them, acting out their abandonment by the apocryphal Jackie. The mother that should have been there for them. But also Maggie herself. She's had to do everything for herself.

"You're so fucking negative," Aiden expostulates. The man who has cooked for her, fished for her, rescued her from herself so often.

"Take yourself," she answers reasonably. "You were married for how long?" He throws her an evil look so she continues unassisted. "You are on your own, Aiden O'Neill and you need to realise it. You need to stop thinking I'll step up and out-Jackie Jackie. This is a new world."

She doesn't know where this is coming from. She suspects it is coming from her own deep sense of inadequacy about his ex-wife, who had built with him the life he so valued and had lost. Or, she guessed, he would say he had built it despite his wife. But she'd taken it anyway, or half of it. Maggie and her shonky house down in the city was a poor replacement.

"I'm outta here," she says with a familiar sense of satisfaction. "This is not going to work." She waits for his protests but they are not forthcoming. So be it. We're all on our own. Every man or woman for him or herself.

In the morning as Maggie packs she hears Aiden and Brian in the garage. Aiden is telling Brian about Martin last night. It's her last day up here and she listens as she packs her stuff.

Aiden tells a story about when he and Martin had been students together in Dunedin. Way back. They'd been studying hard for an exam and had ended up at the Gardens' Tavern for a beer. Aiden sat with his back to a stairwell, facing his friend. The bar was the old fashioned kind, with many high tables along with high stools such as the pair themselves were using, other patrons standing, jostling for position in the spaces between. It must have been in the last few years when jugs of beer were available and Aiden and Martin were sharing a jug which was placed on the table between them. Eventually Aiden saw a man reach over and pour himself a drink from their jug. Martin continued to talk so Aiden assumed he knew the guy.

But when the stranger reached over to help himself to another beer Aiden objected. "Is he a mate?" he asked Martin.

"No, I thought you knew him," the youthful Martin said, turning to look. "Fuck off," he said to the man.

The man grabbed Martin by the neck of his shirt before the exclamation was fully complete and then two of them dragged and kicked him through the swing door and down the stairs. Martin was being laid into on a landing midway down the stairs. Aiden took cognisance of the situation. The landing was half way down then the stairs turned back to the outside door. Aiden, then a thin and bony teenager, no threat, flattened himself against the wall and avoided eye contact, running lightly down the upper portion of the stairs as though it was all nothing to do with him.

But it was a classic trick to invite the opposition to become confident, off guard, exultant, and, when passing the second man, he bent forward, using his weight to throw the bastard over his shoulders and

down the second half of the stairs. He followed him all the way, grabbing the man's hair and kicking him, finally looking up the stairwell to where Martin was now getting the better of the one who was left. Aiden shouted that they'd better get out of there.

But Martin couldn't seem to stop kicking his aggressor. The big man had gone completely feral. Aiden had to restrain him, drag him away. "He couldn't stop kicking", Aiden said in wonder. "You don't cross Martin in a hurry."

Brian shrugged. "Sounds like those buggers deserved it. Need to show some respect." And the men's voices faded as they moved onto some obscure male activity in the garage.

Maggie sighed at the thought of Aiden as protector. That would be the Aiden she wanted. A good man to have in your corner. She knew she'd be back.

He senses a warmer atmosphere as he comes back into the cabin. He suggests they go down to the café before her long drive home. She agrees.

"Gabe was out of line," he remarks with his first gulp of a long black.

Maggie nods, flicking through a *Woman's Weekly*. Trashy reading is one of the habits that annoy him. At least she could be reading the newspaper. That way she often tells him things she knows would interest him.

"Martin should have known better than to hit him though," Maggie ventures absentmindedly.

"It's the hypocrisy," Aiden says and lapses into silence.

Maggie looks up but then continues her flicking motion, giving each colour photo of a celebrity a one second summation from her experienced

eye. Only rarely was she arrested in this motion by an interesting fabric, an unusual hairstyle or, best of all, a truly shocking headline.

Aiden scans the café tables for signs of a celebrity. It is no joke. The surf conditions here have become well known internationally so that, particularly in summer, it is not unknown to see the odd Hollywood mogul or rock star. Maggie would be unimpressed though. She'll believe it when she sees it.

The coffee is making him garrulous. He is aware of a premonition of missing her. He hopes she'll come back. He's never sure.

"Gabe's been known to take party pills himself," he mutters. He is rewarded by Maggie's quick attention.

"Well, he holds down a job," she says, partly to reassure herself.

"Yes, his JOB." Aiden says bitterly. "His job that his father got him. He thinks he's so much better than David. Well, at least David got his own job. Though it was such a tough job that I couldn't object when he threw it in." Aiden's voice held real pain.

Maggie shuts the magazine with a flourish. "What do you mean his father got him the job?"

"Apprenticeships are hard to find," Aiden tells her. "Steve used his contacts to negotiate one for Gabe. The boy had been a real prick at school, no-one would have taken him on. And now Gabe sits there calling David a loser. Steve offered to pay for all the Polytech courses – basically bribed the firm to take Gabe on."

"Well, he must be doing the work okay," Maggie says reasonably.

"Yes, but wouldn't all the young guys up here want the opportunity to learn a trade that will take you anywhere? Gabe should be thanking his lucky stars, or his dad, and not judging others for not getting what he got."

Maggie nods sagely. It was the way of the world.

"I'll come down with some fish when I get back from this next trip," Aiden says, pushing his own luck and seeing Maggie nod in cautious response.

But as they gather their things to leave Sarinda joins them. "Don't go," she says urgently. "I've just called in to fortify myself with coffee before visiting Tina and Steve." Then she flits inside in a way that signalled that her business is urgent. Sarinda's business is always urgent.

She returns forthwith and seats herself, eyes serious beneath the rim of her mildly eccentric fringe. "What am I going to say?" she begins.

"Shouldn't Martin be doing the saying?" Aiden enquires.

"He won't come, I tried to make him," Sarinda responds.

Aiden nods. This is well within his comprehension. Tina and Steve are a formidable pair.

"He thinks Gabe should apologise to him," Sarinda adds. "And to David as well."

"I'm going to go," Maggie says gathering her jacket and bag. "But Aiden," she smiles graciously, "why don't you go along with Sarinda? I'm sure she can do with the support."

She almost laughs at the look on Aiden's face but Sarinda farewells her with gratitude and relief.

Maggie kisses Aiden lightly in the way that they have agreed proves that she loves him and takes her meddling, mischievous self to the car.

"You really need to treat her better," Sarinda remarks as Maggie's car roars off. She is curious about Maggie now. Wonders what she's like as a lawyer, how someone like her can indulge herself with an ornery old braggard like the man before her.

"And what do you mean by that?" Aiden returns.

Too much baggage, Sarinda decides with a shrug and a dismissive shake of the head. It's every man for himself, or every woman for herself as it happens in this case. What the hell. The English language sucks. And the world is ever inhospitable to the feminine. She needs to get this discussion back on track. Aiden was ever a one-track thinker. A pursuer of logic and avoider of messy emotion.

She enters Aidenworld. Takes cognisance of the situation. Deals with the logistics. Co-constructs the entry to the beach house, engineers responses in the case of argument.

And when, predictably, logic once again fails to triumph over the pride and emotion of the parents in question, Sarinda simply sighs and moves on.

HERCULES' CHOICE

1. Te Kowhai Bay

Her son texts from hospital. *I need my books*, he says. He means the *Dungeons and Dragons* books he was once obsessed with. Sarinda is pleased that finally something has driven him back to reading. But she is still packing and wants to take the dog out before leaving for the city. Any trip to the hospital will just have to be added to the end of this list. She had intended going there on her way out of town anyway. She can't believe he has broken his leg, just now when she's got to start her course. On the football field, not in a driving accident as had seemed so likely at one stage.

After tea, she texts back and gets the prompt reply *wtf*. Standard communication for her boy. She'd even started thinking in terms of *wtf* herself. Tai breaks his leg playing goalie *What the fuck?* Martin hits Gabe *What the fuck?* Her dad dead, *What the fuck?* She'd responded in kind to Tai earlier in the year when he'd played bass in the band that came runner up in the Northland Rockquest. After only playing bass guitar for the six weeks he'd taken to get the hang of it! *Wtf?* she'd texted back when he'd shared the news, prompting Tai's bandmates to think she was some cool mother.

However, Tai does not think that at present. Quite the contrary. Tai has shared his intentions of finding his father, with or without her help. It will have to be without, Sarinda has decided, since she doesn't have a clue where to start.

"I'm MAORI, mother," Tai had enunciated clearly in case she didn't understand. "I need to KNOW."

"Well, what's the hurry right now?" she had responded, trying to buy time. "There's just too much on. And I don't know anything about your father or his family."

"You know where you met him," Tai pushed further.

"Yes, in a marquee at Ocean's Beach seventeen years ago," she replied. "That's the sum total of my knowledge."

Tai frowned. He'd known this particular piece of information for ages.

"Haven't you read the books?" he enquired. "Boys need their fathers. They don't particularly need their mothers," he added for emphasis.

"Well, if it's that easy to provide a father then I hope Steven Biddulph is going to rustle me up one," she said. "Because they're not that thick on the ground." She was missing her own father. She was sure that Tai wouldn't talk to her like this if Jack was around. Ironically, Tai at his most aggressive and demanding often took on a look of Jack, that most unassuming of men. It is surreal, Sarinda thought as she caught the likeness right now. Eyes that met one's own uncompromisingly, that hid nothing.

Even if his older brother Jesse were here Tai wouldn't be doing this, she thought with irritation, avoiding those eyes.

But Martin, possible father figure, definitely male, sometimes available, is no good at all. Sarinda sees him slide past her doorway at a loss, avoiding any conflict, heading out to the garden. He and Aiden will be bringing David down to the house she has rented near the small city pretty soon though. Then there'll be some father figuring going on.

She sends a conciliatory text to her fatherless son and hurries to finish packing. She tells Maeve about the text as she loads the car, "You're welcome to him. I don't know what's got into him." *What the fuck*, she is thinking.

Maeve reassures her. "He's fine when you're not around," she says then realises how unreassuring that sounds. "Just leave him to me," she says as she hugs her daughter.

Tai will be discharged and home by the end of the week. Martin can help get him around the house while the leg is still healing and then Maeve can drive him to school when he's ready. In three weeks Maeve will bring him down to the house Sarinda has rented at *Te Kowhai* Bay for part of the school holidays. Hopefully David will be alright by then. Sarinda's mind feels cluttered. She trusts that being a nurse is not this hard.

Martin and Aiden arrive at the bay with David in the back of the car like a trophy. Sarinda's rented beach property sprawls in sunlight on the north-facing side of a convoluted harbour, its marina full of deep sea fishing launches and the smell of money.

Sarinda watches David spill from the back seat of the car and stumble between the two men who buffer him against the strangeness of his surroundings. She notices Mrs Olsen look up and wave across what serves as the village green, a swoop of mown lawn which links the cluster of houses to the gravelly beach. Mrs Olsen who has lived here for years, rummages around in her vegetable garden as she so often does when something interesting is happening.

Tall *Pohutukawa* trees knit their crowns of leaves high above the haphazard community of makeshift baches and houses. Each tree surges upwards from a thick and ancient base, branches independently and idiosyncratically weaving their way to the heights above. There they display their leaves in blessed silence. Interspersed amongst them upon the nearby hill are the eponymous *Kowhai* trees, leaning out towards the water.

David protests as they cross the sliding door threshold into the downstairs living area and Sarinda nervously leads the way to the bedrooms at the back where he gives a dull, medicated survey of his surroundings. He then disappears into his designated room, his father ushering him with his bags. Martin takes the next door room with a look of resignation.

Sarinda stands outside on the concrete paving out the front and frowns at the text she has just received. She crouches to ruffle the dog's thick coat. The dog cannot be let off the lead because of Mrs Olsen's cat. Sarinda shifts her glare to the cat, stretching its ancient limbs on the fence of the Olsen's yard. The dog also keeps its gimlet stare upon the cat while generously making its ears available for attention.

Martin emerges into the winter sunlight. "It's like a different world down here," he comments and Sarinda smiles. She got this house through sheer luck and has it for three whole months.

"Your Italian friend is arriving tomorrow," she says.

Martin frowns at the text from his sister Tina. "My sister is really determined not to contact me," he says.

"I guess you could always apologise," Sarinda says. "I have to work at the hotel tonight, by the way. I'll be working there most weekends and some week nights." Not that you care, she thinks.

Martin raises his eyebrows. "I guess I'll travel down to meet the flight if I can borrow your car." He waits a beat and then adds, "Aiden will probably come over to stay with David."

"He'd better," Sarinda replies and then watches Martin light a cigarette.

"They're bad for you," she says finally.

"I don't need your nursing advice," Martin replies in his new, uncompromising manner. "How is it going anyway?"

"It's hard slog, mostly paperwork," Sarinda replies. "Not sure I can last at it…"

Martin gives her a sardonic look. His face has gone very lean and his mouth has one of those bitter twists that anti-heroes often have, Sarinda thinks. Quite attractive. And his hair has grown longer and falls…

They fall into one of their sudden moments of reverie as the light begins to change, first on the small island before them, then on the hillside of the far side of the harbour, with its hotel and collection of boats. This shared silence is so familiar, is one of the joys of being with this man, Sarinda thinks. He slips from the world so easily.

"I've applied for teacher training down here," he begins after a while. "I don't know whether they'll take me given the publicity up north."

"Oh, but you must have got some good references from that job," Sarinda answers with sudden excitement.

Martin nods. "They need English teachers apparently so I might be lucky."

"We'll be pillars of the community," Sarinda notes, restraining herself from clapping her hands. She'd always worked, part time jobs with difficult hours, low paid temporary jobs, casual labour like the room cleaning which she was doing for the hotel on the weekends, as well as

waitressing for the restaurant in the same place which she will be doing tonight. She wants to have a proper job. It is time.

"Why is your friend coming here?" she finds she has to ask.

"Maybe she just wants a holiday," Martin replies.

And the silence which they fall into this time is not quite so comfortable.

Mrs Olsen appears on the horizon and makes a zigzag line across the short grass for no obvious reason.

"Hello dear," she greets Sarinda. She holds out a crumpled plastic bag and Sarinda takes it, unwrapping it with interest.

"It's a lamb bone," Mrs Olsen says, "For the dog," she adds helpfully and Sarinda extracts it for her highly interested canine companion.

"This is Martin Mason," Sarinda introduces and Martin shakes Mrs Olsen's small and hesitant hand.

"Martin will be going to teacher's college," Sarinda cannot resist adding.

"Oh," Mrs Olsen says making a dramatic face. It is difficult to say exactly what the face is expressing which is entirely appropriate to the occasion, Martin thinks.

"And what were you doing before?" Mrs Olsen asks. "Previously, I mean."

"I was part of a religious order," Martin answers.

"Oh," Mrs Olsen repeats the facial accompaniment but does not enquire further which also is entirely appropriate Martin thinks. He is beginning to like this lady.

"Is that your house over there?" he asks, gesturing in the general direction of a low, concrete block house which spreads like a clutch of motels in a long line facing the sea.

"Ted and I have lived here for 43 years," Mrs Olsen confides. "We built our house here when there was barely a shack to be seen for miles."

"Good choice," Martin nods, and sees Mrs Olsen swell with pride.

"Places along here go for millions," she says. "We'd never be able to afford one these days."

"Well they do build them big now," Martin adds surveying their neighbours to the left, mansions which climb the hillside which separates this bay from the one to the east.

"It's still a lovely quiet place," Mrs Olsen replies. "I hope you enjoy your stay here. Oh dear, it's time to watch *Judge Judy*!" She laughs apologetically and is gone.

"It is a lovely quiet place," Martin murmurs to Sarinda and she feels something catch between them, despite the fact that she isn't being anybody at the moment and in fact is feeling a bit bedraggled after setting up the house to receive visitors and her week's study as well as doing the hotel cleaning and waitressing. Can Martin be attracted to a hotel cleaner? She imagines a scarf wrapped around her head and a feather duster in her hand.

A question trembles in the air between them as David drifts from his bedroom to the doors where they stand.

"I need to get back," he says urgently. "The cat…"

"You know the cat is over at Linda's," Martin responds.

"The house," David begins.

"The house is locked up. It'll be fine."

"Mum will sell it," David says and Sarinda sees the torment in his eyes.

"Your mother has said she won't sell it," she says and winds her arm through his.

"I don't trust her. She *will* sell it," David replies, extracting himself.

Martin goes to the kitchen to see when he is due for more medication. David follows him, haranguing him all the way. He will be seeing a psychiatrist in town but not until Monday. He's also booked into a drug dependency support group in town. He was in the same programme after his stay in hospital last year but confronted the group with relentless smiling and excuses. The situation he was in was not his fault, he had maintained. The circumstances which drove him to his habit were beyond his control. Beyond anyone's control. Nobody could put up with his mother. His parent's messy breakup. His father. His girlfriend.

The next dose is not for two hours. Martin commits the next two hours of his life to reassurance, taking an outdoor seat next to the boy, who begins to sob. David needs to get back to his car which needs fixing right away, he is sure his mother will sell the house, what is happening with the cat. It will be surrounded by farm dogs. David castigates an unkind universe.

Martin waits with him, the first many long nights. He'd listened to a radio interview recently featuring the Chief Executive of the Australian Alcohol Advisory Committee, but doesn't remember too much detail. The man seemed to be claiming that cannabis does not harm the developing brain as much as alcohol can do. There wouldn't be the *mayhem on the streets*, if teens were smoking dope. Although there might be motivation problems, he conceded. *Put cannabis, alcohol and other drugs on a level playing field*, he urged. Martin hears many people espousing the same thing. It seems to be fashionable with the baby boomer generation to look kindly upon marijuana. It may be that it is even fashionable to use it

"recreationally". Like mustard coloured Ford Escorts and ethnic skirts or shirts it is a relic from their youth, the time when they were most social, most hip, most in demand. These baby boomers, parents now, are playing at being young. But David's muddled brain and surges of anxiety show the effect of the drug's availability, and how it can conspire with alcohol and love of a good time to bring someone to methamphetamine and gangs and disaster.

Martin listens and thinks and listens more until gradually the only sounds to be heard are the sounds of darkness, gentle rustlings in the trees and soft plopping sounds from the sheltered water before him. Far away beyond the mouth of the semicircular bay he sees but cannot hear white boats ghosting past as they enter the Marina.

3. Cara Mia

Sarinda comes home to the hearty smell of home cooking. She places her bag carefully inside the front door and tries to sneak upstairs. Why bother, no-one looks out for her although the car crunches the gravel just as noisily as ever. She takes off her uninspired tidy clothes designed to impress matrons and changes into basic Sarinda mode, which is ragged jeans, loose hair and muslin top. Quite possibly the same low top that she'd worn the night she first met Martin. Her boobs have grown back, might as well utilise them.

She descends into a scene which has become familiar over the past week or two. Cara, the golden Nigella Lawson, flirtatiously leaning over a slow cooked soup constructed in stages through the afternoon. It's as though she is performing for television all the time. Martin or, more

surprisingly, David, will be at her side, laughing, enquiring as to the recipe, grabbing utensils from the drawer to set the table.

Cara is darkly blonde and beautiful. Cara is the real deal. Cara is fara way from home. She calls to Sarinda asking her how was her day? She tells Sarinda that they took the dog for a walk on the big beach further round the headland. The dog loved it. Everybody one big happy family. Sarinda can tell that the dog is full of admiration.

Cara has been a boon, an asset. She hired a car which means that Martin and she can run David in to his sessions in town. They shop and visit cafes except for the one day that Martin had his interview for teacher's college. Sarinda responds to the friendliness and then eats her soup in silence.

Cara thinks Martin should return to the monastery in Melbourne. The mystery of the Saint Bernard icon is unresolved but Cara would not be surprised if it was someone like Brother Aloysius who might have moved it for safety and then forgotten about it. "You know what he's like," she laughs to Martin. Martin nods and Sarinda sees that Cara can reassure him, that he feels safe with her. They are good friends.

Cara seems to think that teaching in New Zealand would be a waste of Martin. No-one in Rome is seriously thinking that Martin was someone who would steal anything, let alone a picture of that antiquity. It will be in some cupboard somewhere. It will turn up.

Martin seems half convinced. David seems smitten. It seems that Cara had lost her phone before she went on holiday in Switzerland. She hadn't responded to Martin's texts and then it had felt awkward to enquire about his whereabouts. Some people had suspected, it had been clear. Cara, with her rolling Italian figures of speech, with her warm and enveloping nature and with her statuesque and arresting appearance. Cara did not mind talking about her admiration of Martin, about their closeness. They were "simpatico". Of course, people had noticed.

Sarinda retreats to her palatial upstairs bedroom at a legitimate hour. She has her last day of the course tomorrow, followed by an evening of waitressing. On the weekend coming up she will clean motels. Sarinda is Cinderella. Downstairs happiness pervades the atmosphere. David has begun to read, utilising the extensive book collection of the owners of the house. He thinks of visiting Italy one day. He casts about for possible work directions and discusses them with Martin and on the phone with his father. He will go to bed earlier than the others leaving Cara and Martin alone, to retire to their own rooms downstairs in good time. *Or will they*, Sarinda wonders.

Aiden stays with Maggie in town. They are coming to dinner on the weekend. Everyone is happy. Sarinda will try to get a night off so that she can be there when Maeve and Tai arrive on Sunday night. She is looking forward to being with her clever and unusual boy, his leg now supported by a moon boot. In this way Sarinda keeps herself optimistic, busy, a bright smile upon her face.

It is all good. David looks cured. Tai bounces in happily, followed by his grandmother and they are somehow integrated seamlessly into Caraworld. Though Cara somehow seems less intrusive with Maeve around, Martin less enslaved.

Sarinda heaves mattresses around in the hotel and polishes the mirrors assiduously. She can see herself, mother of two, free lover and determiner of her own fate since way back, wild hair now just brushing her shoulders, eyes cleverly made up to look flaky. It's what men want.

She is ready to take advantage of the Christmas break from nursing studies and hurries home to spend the afternoon with Tai and her mother. After all, it is she who found the house, organised the place, and schemed to get David away from his broken-down home. It is her success, her show. Spring, new growth and possibilities. Martin will be a teacher and she will be a nurse. Cara will be back in Italy. David will be somewhere.

Sarinda can't figure out this bit. And Maeve. Maeve will probably soldier on. Sarinda feels a moment's regret for her mother and the huge burden of grief that Maeve quietly manages. She will go shopping with Maeve.

But Tai has news for her. She'd hadn't reckoned on Tai earlier in the afternoon. He hunts her down on the beach with the dog tugging at its lead one way and the wind tearing her hair in the opposite direction.

He is leaving school. He is adamant. Sarinda looks into the implacable brown eyes of her inexplicable son.

"For what?" She cries dramatically, expecting a total lack of a plan, a reliance on a summerful of surfing, an expectation of the sort of drug fuelled excitements which had ultimately led David to enforced seclusion at *Te Kowhai* Bay.

Tai brazenly reveals his intentions. "Well you know how I've been doing that agricultural course at school," he begins.

Sarinda looks confused. "That was just to make up your options," she says.

"Well I like it," he states firmly. "And if you work hard on a farm then you can take time off when the cows are dry."

"Cows?" his mother echoes.

"Dairying," Tai states. "There's good money in it and a future too. You can get your own farm in the end."

"Farm," Sarinda says as if trying out the word. The closest she's got to farm work was standing on the haha drinking gin at Linda's place. Her artistic son. Her son who was so musically gifted he could win Rockquest with six weeks' practice. Tai who was the sports star, the quick stepper, the indomitable defender, the striker, the one who could see the game, make the quick decisions.

"I met this guy who works on a farm out of Wellsford, trips off to Queenstown for the Winter Festival. Can afford to ski and do what he likes."

"Wellsford," Sarinda says with loathing. If people up north disrespect Whangarei, the people of Whangarei have no time for those of Wellsford.

"What's wrong with you, most parents would be happy to know their son has a job! You're never happy!" Tai begins his program of mother domination in the same way he focuses his mind to turn a soccer game around. Attack is the best form of defence.

Sarinda catches the note in his voice and hurries to adjust her attitude. "Tai you will be on your own in the middle of nowhere."

"Yes," Tai says.

In *Wellsford*," Sarinda says with renewed venom.

"No," Tai replies.

"No?" Sarinda enjoys her moment of hope.

"No, on a station in Otago."

"Station," Sarinda says in wonderment and tugs the dog back firmly from its position straining at the end of its lead.

"Mackenzie Country," Tai says. "Riding horses, stuff like that."

Sarinda laughs at the surrealness of the conversation. "You've been watching too much *McLeod's Daughters* she says.

"I might go to Australia later on," Tai says thoughtfully and Sarinda realises that this is for real. Her boy is a man.

"I don't believe it," she says by way of giving up.

"I'll do a year or two's work then go to Agricultural College."

Sarinda sees a point to score. "They won't take you," she says. "You won't have enough credits to do tertiary if you leave now."

"Come on mum," Tai says. "I can get any number of credits from the College. I can't waste any more time mucking around at school. I need to get my life going."

He flings an arm around her shoulders. "And at least I won't be on drugs," he adds.

"Well I suppose they don't have them in the middle of nowhere, in the snow and ice," Sarinda responds dourly.

"Drugs were never really my scene," Tai says. "The way David used to spend his days doing fuck all. He better not get back into that. He wasn't even getting out to surf that much."

"I hope he doesn't as well," Sarinda replies. She hugs her boy. The words he is saying have convinced her. "Farming's gain, Northland soccer's loss," she says.

"Arriba," Tai says, utilising one of his classic irrelevant asides.

The boy will be wasted, Sarinda reflects, but at least he'll be him.

4. The Choice of Hercules

Sarinda waits for the dog on the beach. Mrs Olsen and she have worked out a system. Her elderly neighbour has texted that she has put the cat inside so that the dog can have its evening run. And it has run yip yipping, through the dense bush on the promontory behind their house.

The moon is huge. Soft noises travel towards her across the shallow water. Their source the flickering of tiny fish, which make the surface water shiver with their movements. They are mouthing the air for insects and ruffling the liquid moonlight with their tails. Like a musical composition, patches of them appear and disappear at random, one patch or many more operating at unpredictable intervals. They keep her company. She wonders if Martin will join her.

It is clear that she is too sexual for him. She should be more like Cara who has a noble quality. Of course Cara and Martin would not have sex. They are both too noble for that. Sarinda had read about Hercules' choice when she was being Alcestis way back. Hercules was faced with the choice of pursuing the "good", the right way, a noble woman or succumbing to a vamp, a sexually available and despicable woman who is, Sarinda supposes, herself.

This alter ego of Sarinda's can be seen depicted in some paintings of the late Renaissance and early Enlightenment as a beautiful woman with the tail of a serpent and clawed feet. Of course Hercules' other option who would be Cara, wears Grecian robes and gestures towards the sky. She is virtue, duty, and service. Since the myth is an instructional one, a young man's choice between a life of morality and one of vice, Hercules has to choose Cara. And so it would seem, has Martin.

Thus Hercules exemplified official moral doctrine and the assumption revealed, according to a commentator (AC Grayling) *that moral duty and worldly avocations are mutually exclusive, indeed at war with each other, the outcome at stake being nothing less than the fate of the eternal soul.*

And what did Hercules get for his trouble? A life full of hardship and the labours that made him famous, finally leading to his being admitted among the immortals on Olympus. Sarinda hopes that Martin finds it is worth it in the end.

David must be one of Hercules' labours. His father has gone back to sea. They all know that David is back in contact with his mates up north. He rails at having to attend therapy sessions in town. His latest incarnation throws biblical misquotes around like "Take the bean out of your OWN eye," and the boy looks like a deranged prophet with his wild hair and gaunt face, his finger shaking as it points. "Another papal decree," he would respond to any guidance from Martin, "From Father misfit." Martin thinks it is a sign of improvement in his condition and ignores the boy. The bouts usually end with David calling him Father Dickwit and telling him to go perform his miracles somewhere else.

The dog appears in the dimness, taking her by surprise as it often does, each ragged clump of hair outlined in moonlight. It turns its head to taste the air even as she crouches to hold it. "A keen dog," she says, and then pursues the poem through as far as she can. *A lean dog, a keen dog, a wild dog and lone; I'm a rough dog, a tough dog, hunting on my own; I'm a bad dog, a mad dog, teasing silly sheep; I love to sit and bay the moon to keep fat souls from sleep.*

She holds the dog firmly, leaning her head against its woolliness as if the dog's warm coat might comfort her. She's tried to rehome the mutt already, giving it to friends who live in the country, but it would not stay confined, no matter how large the confinement area, and the countryside provided more livestock to worry about. The friends gave it back.

I'll never be a lap dog, licking dirty feet, a sleek dog, a meek dog, cringing for my meat, not for me the fireside, the well-filled plate, but shut door and sharp stone, and cuff and kick and hate.

She hates the idea of nursing for ever after or even for a year or two. At morning tea on the ward where she is having work experience she listens to the others talk about what they're learning. But the talk invariably veers towards their personal lives. She hears them share details of their weekends, the people they know, moreover the people they know

in common, or know of, or wish to know. Ages ago she'd read about the dynamics of conversations and she knows that a healthy group follows a free flowing, dynamic pattern. If remarks within a conversation were arrows, a diagram of it would show many diverse and unpredictable links. At the course, however, all arrows are directed at important people, the most senior staff as well as any visiting tutors. These paragons then distribute their arrows in a very limited and judicious manner. No-one ever asks Sarinda how her weekend was.

She has taken to throwing in bizarre comments, whenever there is a brief intermission in the lovefest of the core group of women. The surprised look on their faces is preferable to the indifference that has met any of her more conventional offerings. She is bored, bored, bored.

Not for me the other dogs, running by my side, some have run a short while, but none of them would bide. O mine is still the lone trail, the hard trail, the best, wide wind, and wild stars, and hunger of the quest!

She ruffles the ears of the dog once more and then stands up. It is time for action.

She ties the dog up at its kennel. She slides open the entrance door, peering around the dimly lit room until she sees Martin who is clearing up the kitchen. One of his laborious labours. Each dish is wiped incredibly dry before being stored away in the correct place. Sarinda knows she would just shuffle them from dishwasher to cupboard in half the time and David would not go near them at all. She takes Martin's hand, soggy though it is, and leads him upstairs to her room. There she employs that hand in the service of some very ordinary sex.

Then she reveals that she will never make it as a nurse. She will continue at the hotel for the time being. She has given up on her dream to be one of the pillars of the community. Martin tells her that he has been accepted into Teachers' College and will start in the New Year. "That doesn't give you much time," Sarinda says and he replies with a nod.

Sarinda should do what she thinks best about the nursing, he says. Martin neither returns to his bedroom downstairs over the few remaining weeks in the house, and nor does he move his gear upstairs. Like the rest of her life, she thinks, he remains in flux, incompletely assimilated, unwieldy and ultimately unsecured.

Sarinda has decided to be a writer. She wrote a romance when the boys were little which had some interest from one of the big genre publishers, but was finally rejected, ironically, for not being romantic enough. Some writing advice that she read somewhere said that a writer needs to be able to live in a state of indecision, of lack of completion, the work never quite matching the vision. If so her life matches the brief, she feels.

At the restaurant, David's large green eyes meet Sarinda's through clouds of billowing steam. It is a busy night and she has barely been able to check how he's doing. It is reassuring to see that he clatters plates into their slots in a tray like a professional, whisking trays in and out of the hood of the steriliser and, in quiet moments, or when there is a pileup, returning them to the waiting cupboards and drawers. He moves economically for such a tall creature and doesn't get in people's way. It looks like he will be a success.

Sarinda herself is in her element. The Maitre'd is away and she is a more than adequate replacement. She is sustained by the whole system of the restaurant, the way the glasses and cutlery reflect light, the way the flowers hold it softly, the glowing tones of the wooden furniture, the clinks and shuffles and murmur of conversation. All this, hers, she glides through in her narrow black skirt and white top. Majesty. Harmony. Flux. She glows.

Although she doesn't feel so majestic the next morning, lying on a lounger she has dragged out on the concrete in the sun at the front of the house. She squints at a pair who have passed the Olsens' house and are

approaching down the long sweep of driveway, obviously destined to arrive at her own secluded spot. Something is familiar about one of the figures. The couple trudge steadily along the gravel, a male holding a suitcase in one hand, the other hand sitting in reassuring fashion on the girl's nearest shoulder. There is something about them both that makes Sarinda nervous and she knows what their news is before they tell it.

"I'm due in April," Faith says serenely. Her companion stares away at the sea, his bulky gangster style cap slightly askew and his hands jammed into large pockets. These hands have been proffered to shake the hands of Martin and Sarinda before returning to safety. He is a part of the family now, Sarinda realises. They have come here for advice, assistance, and accommodation for the moment. Te Ariki is his name. They move into Martin's room. Sarinda knows that it is inevitable that they will be closely followed by Faith's parents. In fact, it might just be her duty to alert them. She lifts her phone to text then puts it down again. She is working tonight. Martin will cook. She might as well let things develop.

As has happened in the past when a young and pregnant couple are homeless at Christmas, the household is compelled to move on. Luckily, Faith is not due to actually have the baby for some time as the logistics are awkward enough as it is. Aiden decides to take David down to his sister's for Christmas day. Then David wants to come back to the area and he says he can get a room in a flat over the hill with someone from the hotel kitchen. That leaves Maeve and Tai, Sarinda and Martin and the young couple unless one of their families claim them again. Sarinda is looking for flats in the city so that Martin can attend his course next year. But what she has seen does not bode well for a joyous Christmas. They consider going up north to Maeve's place. But Mrs Olsen saves the day. She offers to host Christmas at her house and they can all stay over for a few days until it is time for Maeve to return, Tai to disappear and Martin and Sarinda to move to their tiny new flat in the city.

"Why do we love classical and renaissance art so much?" Sarinda muses before sleeping that night. She is rereading *The Architecture of Happiness*, and is intrigued by beauty and its link to the divine. "I mean, why don't we get the same buzz from New Zealand art?"

Martin shrugs. "Maybe because I'm RELIGIOUS," he offers in a remarkable approximation of Mrs Olsen's voice.

"We don't look at it enough," she says and picks up a newspaper which has a feature article about Ralph Hotere. "He's from up here," she says.

Martin reads aloud. *The minimalist works of Ralph Hotere,* he quotes. They speak of *transcendence, of religion and peace*. "They do," he agrees looking at them. "But what I think I can learn most from is the language."

He looks serious with his new reading glasses from the chemist slipping down his nose. "The same things we feel when we look at the frescoes, like a sense that there is a whole world order behind them, a beauty and elegance about the expression of ideals and communal values, I believe can be found in *Te Reo*. Concepts like *Kaitiakitanga, Te Kotahitanga,* and the *Kahikatea waiata*, I can't remember at the moment…"

"That's just the point," Sarinda winges. "It's so bloody hard to remember any of it."

"Well we won't be truly be at home here until we do," Martin responds in a patriarchal priestly manner that inspires her to turn out the light.

5. Michelangelo

It's Christmas Eve. Sarinda gives David a shout that the restaurant are on the phone asking if he can come in to work tonight and he agrees. She hears him telling Te Ariki and Faith that he will get a free meal at the hotel halfway through his shift. He is enjoying having them around as they are closer to his own age, though they had been a few years behind him at school.

David has a job to go to. He organises himself to leave on time with Sarinda. He weaves purposefully around the kitchen, getting himself a snack. Faith comes to sit at the bar stool at the kitchen counter and he makes her a sandwich, which she shares with Te Ariki. This is the new world order.

Sarinda finds herself either working or exhausted. Her money pays the rent, Aiden pays board for David and Martin is living off his meagre capital. Faith is oblivious, creating a tableau of happiness around her wherever she is at the bay. She is five months pregnant, a goddess with Te Ariki and David as acolytes. She takes the dog for walks, letting it roam and somehow avoiding trouble. She bakes. She chats with Mrs Olsen and her cat. Faith and Martin have been organising the shift of gear over to the Olsen's in preparation for the owner's family's return to Sarinda's rented house.

Sarinda lies in her room this morning, turning the pages of a novel and letting the skylight sun slowly explore her sleep sated body. Martin has gone into the library in town and will get groceries. She listens to the laughter of the three young people downstairs who have returned from a swim and it makes her feel fine. She might call for a cup of tea soon. But a new note slices across the voices before she can be bothered rousing herself, a new strand of conversation, its business-like tone quelling the facetious banter.

"Sarinda," Tina greets her as she ventures downstairs, hair mussed up and brain foggy from the surfeit of sunlight. Steve looks away from Sarinda's singlet top and fluffy pyjama bottoms to consult his watch. There is no doubt that Sarinda is at a disadvantage. The visitors are both dressed as is usual for someone from the provinces on a trip to a city,that is, overdressed. "One of Faith's friends said she was staying here with you." Her tone is buoyant and charming but Sarinda knows better.

She decides to meet the anger head on. "Faith needs some space to think about her situation," she says. "She is welcome to stay here."

"Faith needs good advice," Tina says firmly. "From her family." She tells her daughter to get her things.

"I'm not going," Faith says. "I'm staying with Te Ariki."

"But what will you do?" Tina asks coolly and waits. They all wait.

Finally Steve begins, "You are both very young. You need support. Te Ariki hasn't got a job. You are studying."

"Other people manage," Faith says, taking Te Ariki's hand.

"Come on Faith, no-one in Te Ariki's family has worked in generations," Steve snaps. "HOW will you manage? Will you live there as well, with that lot?"

Sarinda tries to intervene. "I'll make some coffee," she says.

"I'll help," Faith says and follows her.

Tina pursues them to the kitchen. Sarinda fills the jug. Faith shelters near the fridge. Tina begins.

"Well," she directs her wrath at Sarinda. "Here you are." She looks around her taking a pause to gulp in air. "In a fancy nice house that someone else has built, someone else worked for, paid for, furnished. The lot!" She sweeps her hand around to indicate the whole sitting room,

view, three men standing with their stares uniformly directed at the kitchen, at them, at the new locus for the battle.

Sarinda swallows hard, remembering high school, the last time Tina had turned on her in this way. For good reason too.

"Tina, let's be adult about this," she says.

"Adult! Hah!" Tina screams. "You don't even know the meaning of the word! Look at you, at home in BED at this time of the day. You don't live an adult life. You live off OTHERS. You have no idea what the rest of us go through. The stress we have…" She tries to swipe away the hot tears reddening hot eyes. "And now you're taking other people's children!"

Sarinda's mind is whirling. It is still stuck on the fight she'd had with Tina over Jesse's father, Pete, back in high school. He'd been in a steady relationship with Tina since fourth form but Sarinda had got him when it mattered. She'd become pregnant with Jesse, while the matter of which of the girls owned Pete was still unclear.

Then there was the long period of solo parenting after she'd left Pete. The crazy jobs with crazy hours and the managing of two young boys. Her second son a product of a one night stand that was the impetus for the break up. She didn't know stress? Tina was mistaken.

Te Ariki and Steve still stare towards the kitchen drama. But David has bailed out, sunk into an armchair facing out to sea.

"Look at all this," Tina begins again. "I bet you're not even paying RENT. You USE people's things and you've got all these people here. Does the owner know that, HUH? A DRUG ADDICT!!"

"Do you mind," comes a polite protest from the depths of David's chair. "A reformed drug addict, I would say."

"We can offer you and your baby safety, security," Tina targets Faith who tears with her teeth at a fingernail, trying to disappear into the bench.

"Faith and I are in this together," Te Ariki says firmly.

"Woop, woop," adds David, from the depths of his chair.

Tina rolls her eyes then sweeps out the sliding door towards their car, Steve following behind.

A dark Steve-shape hesitates beyond the glass sliding doors, silhouetted against a diamante sea. "Faith!" A command issues forth from the shadowy figure and if they could only see it his lips are compressed firmly in a less engaging version of Faith's usual expression when in a spot of bother. A long silence ensues.

"Faith," he repeats and it's an entreaty. "Faith!" And again "Faith", he calls, "Faith!" The word resonates through the room like the Catholic church calling through empty centuries. He looks like he might crack. They all wait for him to crack but he doesn't. Crack. He follows his wife to the car.

The four remain, sprawl on their separate chairs, his the timbre of his voice still resounding through the room. They know they are jetsum, thrown from the known world, a world of importance, responsibility and prestige. Bobbing about in a sea of uncertainty and irrelevance, unsure of how long they'll last and what the tides will do to them. The recognition of their utter uselessness renders them null and void for the time being. David doesn't care, he's been here before. Te Ariki kind of expected it. It's the *pakeha* way. Eventually, Faith presses her lips together in a Stevenish way. She pours them coffee. It revives them.

"Your parents will come round," David says. "Maybe if it's a boy call it Steven. What's Steven in Maori?" he adds as an afterthought.

"I dunno," Te Ariki responds. "Steven probably."

"It's Tipene, babe," Faith says, trailing her hand through his hair. "If it's a girl I'll call it Zahra, after you Sarinda."

"I'm no role model," Sarinda says dourly, finding herself suddenly unequal to the task of being Sarinda. "I think I'll take the dog out," she mutters and grabs the lead from its spot on a low table by the door.

She is sick of being brave. She's known what others think of her, how she must appear sometimes to people. But she's had to become good at carrying on regardless. She is always after a bargain, a good deal, a house sitting job, someone to take her children out, anything to get that little bit ahead. It seems as though people sense it in her, resent the fact that she hasn't followed a conventional path, that she's had the odd bit of luck, not the least being her parents.

Sarinda is realistic. Her parents parented her boys, she knows that. Although they had not lived with them, in fact had moved down to the South Island on a whim, the boys had seen their grandparents regularly, had learned from Jack, had thrived under Maeve's nurture and firm management. Sarinda feels that she didn't deserve such boys, clever, good looking and happy. They are happy children, but not because of her. She remembers Tai telling her at a soccer game to stop being ambitious for him.

"It's nothing to do with you whether I play well or not," he'd said. Just drop it, mum. If you want to be ambitious, go and do something for yourself." Sarinda remembers the day vividly.

But she hasn't strived to be anything or get anywhere. She takes up and drops ideas. And now she's given up on nursing, just because the others didn't like her. A lone dog, some would say a bitch. Her life so different from Tina's and those nurses. She could imagine the women as new mothers at a cosy play group, having coffee, or shopping for clothes, while Sarinda at that time had been working for a home care service, driving from one elderly person to another, paying her own petrol,

spending her days taking the clients shopping or cleaning their showers, their toilets or their bottoms. For a pittance.

When the boys had started school she'd begun at the school office and things were slightly easier, but did Tina and the rest of those double-income divas know that Sarinda had not been paid over the holidays in that job? The times that there was no food in the house. The bizarre style she had developed to disguise the fact that she shopped at thrift stores. Stress! Married women didn't know the half of it.

Sarinda takes a breath. It is time to recommence being brave. She daren't let the dog off because the dammed dog has no respect and will make her look even worse, careering after cats or sheep or bunnyrabbits up the hill. Nothing at all will heed her. She had been only nominally in charge of her boys. And Martin, why he just does what he likes! She is no-one. She is nothing. And she puts her head in her hands, long strands of brassy toned hair flopping over her face for want of funds for a hairdresser. She sits for quite some time like this until she realises she is late for her cleaning job, whereupon she scoots inside for the keys and slews her car carelessly down the gravel driveway.

She is cleaning the apartment of the hotel owner and his wife, Susie. She bump, thumps the vacuum cleaner down their stairwell, pushing the nozzle into crevices repeatedly, trying to rid the carpet of strands that are stuck fast, but still manage to make the place look messy. She is wondering all the while why, in this day and age, this one job remains difficult, awkward, unwieldy and decides that it is probably because men don't do it much. She is surrounded in her work by photographs of the couple and their children, beautifully dressed in exotic locations. Susie, who Sarinda has to admit is quite nice, smiles prettily in each of these, more sweetly than Sarinda can manage today. However, and Sarinda has perused most of the bookshelves idly as she moves about the apartment, these people don't read. There is nothing interesting there.

At four pm she slaloms her car back along the driveway at a much more moderate pace. She takes a few quiet minutes to re-establish Sarinda mode before stepping from the car. They are all down at the water's edge after the big house move, along with Mrs Olsen and a few other passers-by. David and Te Ariki have board shorts on, are playing at the edge of the water. Suddenly they both run for the deep and plunge straight in, laughing, screaming and pushing at each other.

Sarinda makes her way across the grass to join the others. "Looks like fun," she begins.

Faith beams. "It's a bet." The boys are roaring around the water, screaming at each other and splashing wildly. Late afternoon sunlight plays over the scene and spectators clap and cheer. Faith's hair hangs in wet and salty strands upon her shoulders, a towel wrapped tightly around her shoulders and brushing over the bulge of baby belly. The boys, holding their arms out of the water stiffly, begin to wade back into shore where Faith guards their towels from the dog's determined interest.

Te Ariki shivers his way straight out holding his arms forward to take the towel but David stays in the water, looking back out towards the Marina. The evening chill has made his torso whiter than ever as he stands waist deep. He has twisted his shoulders slightly to look out at whatever has caught his attention and Sarinda nudges Martin suddenly. The boy has lifted his arm in a graceful move to scratch his shoulder. "Michelangelo," Sarinda mutters urgently.

Martin raises his camera, all too slowly for Sarinda's liking, and takes a photograph of the boy, his chest newly rounded from home cooking and exercise, his skin pearly and luminescent, the boy with a job, a home, a life, far, far away from his house up north with the kikuyu smothered yard and dilapidated deck. He is David now, the young man capable of defeating huge obstacles, the drug his Goliath, his arm poised

to smash it. His parents' breakup history, his girlfriend gone like other missed opportunities, inevitable, irrecoverable, his life about to begin.

Sarinda wraps Martin tightly in her arms, partly because of the cold and partly from happiness. He hugs her back but she thinks it might be just because of the cold.

GABE

1. Girls' High

Two girls in uniform loiter on the footpath talking to a man with movie star good looks, who leans into the morning sun through a café kitchen window. Martin has to pass them to get to the school. He wants to cross the road but it would look too obvious. It is already two hours after school has begun.

He nods to the girls who turn, recognising him as a teacher. He notes with relief that he hasn't come across them at the school. He feels judgemental, can't help his brain from categorising them. They are the ones who come in late, loudly exclaiming and greeting their friends in the middle of a quiet lesson. They are the ones who have queries marked all through their attendance record. They will shrug when their form teacher asks them about their absences, or falsely try to think back and manufacture excuses.

"I'm just seeing my dad," one of the girls says with a grin. Martin's gaze flicks to the second student. "She's my sister," the first girl adds blithely. Martin looks towards the apron-clad father and the man grins back at him, definitely reminiscent of Errol Flynn or some early film idol. The man acknowledges the teacher, the judger, Martin, the person who should be safely caged in his classroom and not out and about discovering the students.

It's all very casual, all very warm. Maybe the man doesn't live at home and this is the only time his daughter catches up with him. Maybe he just gave the girls some food for breakfast, or lunch. But Martin, freshly exposed to the vicissitudes of the classroom as a trainee teacher, has seen the impact of these diversions during class time. He knows that the girl would say she had to see her father, it was important. Maybe the father has just returned from years of absence. It is always of dire importance. The friend HAD to be there for emotional support or whatever.

But while these girls are chatting, scuffing the ground with their regulation shoes, enthusiastically sampling the café's wares, the rest of their class will be spending their time grappling with details of an assessment, gaining vocabulary, questioning the teacher or participating in discussion. They will be learning. These two girls will rejoin a class that has moved on markedly from where they left it last. They will not find it so easy to catch up, even if they try.

They might query, they might question, but if they are consistently missing classes they won't really expect to understand. They are just going through the motions. The teacher will also go through the motions, being unable to replicate an hour's lesson, a class's attention, an atmosphere of enquiry, on demand. The absent students, prodigal daughters, full of self righteousness due to their current presence in class might turn angry. They might attack, *You can't explain stuff properly*, they might say. *My teacher last year was better.*

Or they might just interrupt the flow of their next class on this topic with demands for information in an accusatory fashion. *I wasn't here!* they might protest. *I haven't heard any of this*! The teacher will look at them in despair, aware that these students have not gained the information or understanding to pass an assessment but unable and unwilling to stop the progress of the rest of the class in order to pour time and energy into someone who might decide to stay away again on the next day of the assessment, for something "important". Martin wonders does

the father know this? Would he pass the time of day with his daughter if he knew the full impact of that quiet sunny interlude.

It is more likely that the girls will sit silently at the back of the room, tune out and text boys and feel like they've got away with something. If they do too much of this casual non-attendance they may display their alienation by disrupting any further progress of the class, or handing in work that shows great effort and some talent but no comprehension of the parameters of the task. They will be marked as *Not Achieved* which will fuel their anger further. Does the father know this?

Martin explains to the father "I'm starting late, been to the dentist," then feeling complicit in the situation he adds to the students, "I hope you two are going to make it to school eventually."

"Yeah, Mister," the girls smile. They'll sign in late, their form teacher will ask them why, they'll say they had to see their father, it was important. The teacher will look at all the spaces marked "Late" on their record, compute their actual presence in classes as about 60% and, unless she or he has the time and ability to phone home she will nod and that will be the end of the matter – until report time. At this time the family might query the teachers, earnestly trying to fathom what exactly is wrong that a capable and bright student has lost all ability and interest in her schoolwork. The girl will sit sullenly or politely at the interview and say that she just doesn't understand, just doesn't see the relevance of the work.

They look sensible enough, dressed correctly in school uniform, though with fashionable scarfs draped around their shoulders (in school colours). But to them school is an optional extra, a place to meet their mates, somewhere to parade their dramas and create new ones. It is fun to subvert uniform regulations in subtle ways and Martin can see the gleam of dangly earrings within the cloudy mass of dark hair of one of the girls. They are the beautiful rebels, the ones who are sent to the Deans,

those who go all out to capture the attention of like-minded students, to create a band of followers, smokers on the field, bunkers, a cohort of mates who will defend each other to the death. Does the father know that?

Martin has been in the classroom long enough now to know that a lecture, either to father or daughter will make explicit the distance between their viewpoints. He must try to understand, listen and try to hear what their behaviour is saying. He is walking quickly, full of the work ethic of his class and caste which tells him it is 11 am and he should have been at school hours ago. Behind him the girls amble and laugh, and eventually disappear into the supermarket that Martin passed 30 minutes before.

He had toothache. It is the time of life that one's teeth deteriorate, it seems, and it is just fortunate that it looks as though he will be able to get a job at this school once his training is complete, considering the price of a dentist these days.

As a student he has more time than the teachers he is observing and who allow him to take some classes. More time to worry at the problems around some of the students he sees before him. Even the ones who work hard, who attend well and may be attaining huge successes in their extra-curricular activities. There are always those students. But it is also their problem. The classes are mixed, as is current educational practice, and it makes sense because their world will be mixed. Their world is mixed. Those that are beyond the system and don't care to conform will be part of everyone's life in one way or another. The lone dogs. Sarinda has shared the poem with him and tells him that she is a lone dog. But if so she is fairly tame, he thinks, most of the time.

One student in the form class that he assists with has been abused not just by her father, but by many of the male members in her family from very early in her life. She is beautiful and proud and very difficult to

engage in lessons. This student had told him that her mother had made a life change, cut off all association with gangs and gang members. The girl's uniform, which had been unmercifully modified for years had become meticulous and she was beginning to interact with the class more. Martin had responded to what she had told him with the comment that she was very lucky to have a mother who could make such a big decision. And he hopes it still stands, but did not say that.

But Martin had noticed that the girl was very alert to any food in the room at form time. Someone might bring a cake to share or have some lunch left over. Her eyes seemed drawn to the food and she would take any opportunity to comandeer it. One day Sharla asked Martin if he had any food and, as was his habit, he searched the teacher drawers for stray items. He came up with two barley sugars which he gave her, to her visible satisfaction. However, a pakeha well fed student who had missed lunch through playing hockey, impulsively descended, "Oh, can I have one?" and Martin watched with interest as Sharla, hesitating, made the ultimate sacrifice and passed one gleaming amber package over to the student. The middle-class girl who had lunch money in her pocket seemed to recall the order of things as she efficiently demolished the lolly. It may have seemed wrong to her that she never spoke to Sharla and had then taken her food. She asked Martin if she could visit the canteen, even though it was out of bounds during form time. Martin agreed, though he knew it was costing him his teacher credibility. The girl urged Sharla to come with her.

Martin was charmed by the interaction and felt a step had been taken for inter-racial relations as Sharla walked back into the room eating half of her fellow student's cheese and salad sandwich and looking confident and secure for the first time in that classroom.

But there has been a new development. Martin sees an email from the Food and Nutrition teacher that Sharla and her group have been inappropriately raiding the food trolley that the students use to compose

their menus. Sharla has been taking more than their share and her group have been eating up large during cooking classes. Sharla is unrepentant and the teacher has banned the group from the class. There is nothing Martin can do as he and the real form teacher of this class have not been consulted. The whole issue has been through the levels of middle management and notes recorded on the student's file. It just seems wrong to him.

Sharla is in trouble for being hungry. He sees no change in her behaviour at form time but there is also no further development of the interaction between her and her fellow students. He emails back to the teacher that Sharla's general behaviour, uniform and attendance have greatly improved this year and that it would be a pity to jeopardise her progress. But he holds very little hope. Sharla's difficult background cannot be revealed for privacy reasons and it may be that real hunger is just a little beyond the particular teacher's comprehension, unfortunately.

At parent interview time Martin sees, however, what the teacher may have felt. Sharla does not attend the interview with her mother, as had been arranged, but comes in with an older sister some hours later. Martin takes the interview as the real form teacher continues with her scheduled meetings. Sharla's older sister has four children with her and luckily there are sufficient chairs to drag up to the table. As Martin goes through the report with them one of the children asks for a mint, from a bowl which sits on the table. The kids all take one and part way through the discussion he asks for another mint. Sharla's sister demurs and Martin suggests that maybe when they leave they can have a second one.

The children behave beautifully and Martin is moved to comment that he doesn't know how she manages four children under school age. They are not all hers, she says, and points out her two and the two who belong to a friend. Martin feels slightly chastened as he realised that he was guilty of buying into the cliché of Maori unrestricted population growth.

Sharla's report is, predictably, a mixed bag and she summarily ends the interview, saying "We only came in to pick up the report but we got told we had to come down here." He gives them the report to read at home and as they leave he pushes the mints towards the child who asked for them originally. The child takes one and Sharla picks up the bowl to give one each to the others. Then she makes deliberate eye contact with Martin as she uses her hand as a scoop to commandeer the rest of the sweets, pocketing them as she leaves the room.

Martin sits back in the chair, feeling violated but knowing he must be overreacting. Why, there are packets and packets of those sweets in the next room. Maybe he should have stopped her for the sake of pure manners though. It is exploitation, an attitude of rape and pillage enacted before him. Then he stops himself. They are only sweets, he reminds himself. Worth fifty cents, if that. But he remembers her hard eyes and feels shame for Sharla, himself, the children, the sister, the school, everybody. He is shaken as he returns to his colleague and listens to her confident interactions with other parents. He wonders whether he will make it as a teacher. But then he remembers. He has to, his teeth command it.

2. Faith

Martin finds Faith hunched on the doorstep of the tiny flat that Sarinda has found for them. It is a unit in a line of seven, near the city and cheap. Faith's suitcase, looking very battered, is cast aside next to her. She is eating bread from a packet.

"Thank goodness you're back," she says.

"I'm not going to live like that," she tells them later. "I don't want that for my baby."

They are having dinner. Faith tells them that David is smoking dope again, maybe worse. He is still working at the restaurant along with the chef who was renting them out rooms in his house in the more populated bay along from the hotel.

"Those boys," Faith says. "They stay up all night and then play computer games during the day with all the curtains pulled shut." Te Ariki was just as bad, as was the chef. "They drink. It's a party house. They don't clean up after themselves."

Martin is pleased to make the acquaintance of Faith the implacable, steeped in Steven and Tina's organised and forthright world.

"You can stay here," Sarinda offers, all the while wondering whether this is the cue for Faith's parents to come to the rescue.

Faith hugs her. "I won't be any problem," she says. "I'll sleep on the couch."

"You are going to need some long term support though," Martin says. "What about your parents – or Te Ariki's whanau?"

"His family don't like me," Faith replies. "They'll be so happy that we've broken up." She looks down at her hands.

"Don't cry," Sarinda says quickly. She realises that she is out of her depth with girls. Give her a robust discussion with a teenage boy any day.

"I'm sure you must be mistaken," Martin adds.

"I only went with him once, to a *Tangi*," Faith says. "It was three days and they all ignored me completely. After that, he went to family things on his own."

Martin frowns. "That doesn't sound right," he says. "Are you sure you didn't do something that upset them? Did you follow the protocol?"

"Well who would know?" Faith says impatiently. "I sure don't. I'm too blonde I suppose," she adds. "Or it might be to do with mum and dad's

house at the beach. It's right next to *tapu* land," she enlarges. "But it's not their fault!" She looks defensive. "The local Maori say that the developer has the survey lines wrong. It's his fault if anyone's."

Martin feels strangely comforted. He hadn't known that the long line of sandhills, ancient trees and swampy land was *tapu*. But he'd been relieved to see it there, untouched, shadowy, trackless. Tina and Steve had wanted the juxtaposition of the dark, impassive bulk of the beach house with the teeming wilderness beyond.

"You know that small stream that winds around the house then goes through the sandhills?" Faith asks and her audience of two nod.

"They say a *Taniwha* lives there," Faith giggles. "They threatened the developer that it would eat him or something."

The stream, dark and edged with marine rushes has a narrow beaten footpath of shells alongside it onto the beach. It had been Martin's favourite walk. "It had practically dried up when I last saw it," he muses. "Poor *Taniwha*."

"Oh, it will have water in it again over winter," Faith says confidently. "Dad has a bore and uses lots of water over summer to grow veges."

Martin nods with comprehension. "Poor *Taniwha*," he repeats, remembering the stagnant pools he'd noticed in place of the running water of his youth.

"Never mind the *Taniwha*," Sarinda says, looking hard at Martin. "You need to get some sleep, Faith. You look exhausted." There is no point getting wound up about the stream just now.

Sarinda makes up a bed behind the brown velour couch circa 1970. She wedges cushions tightly between couch and wall and covers with a sleeping bag and woollen blanket. "I'm sorry we can't offer anything more comfortable," she says to the expectant mother. Faith, showered and

looking restored, turns her phone on and the sound of multiple text messages comes through.

"You will have to talk to him," Sarinda advises. "He must be worried. Now that you two are parents you will need to have good communication. Whether you are together or apart."

Faith lies back in her makeshift bed, holding the phone up to view and looking thoughtful. Sarinda takes it that this is the end of the conversation. She helps Martin clear away the last of the dinner dishes, noticing that his back is super straight and he moves more swiftly and forcefully than usual. She can tell he is upset. They leave Faith in mid text conversation, practically sure that she will be back with Te Ariki by the morning.

"She seems so spoilt and thoughtless," he says later, once Sarinda has begun to follow her own advice and communicate. "I think that I would ignore her on a Marae if she were saying some of those things."

"She's not racist," Sarinda says. "She is involved with Te Ariki; she wants to be part of his life. She is definitely not racist. Hell, she's having a Maori child."

"Not racist, but certainly ignorant," Martin says dourly.

"She's eighteen, for God's sake," Sarinda replies. "She's got enough to worry about without being politically correct as well. Don't tell me you wouldn't take a beach house like that if you had the chance?!" And she glares around at the confines of the tiny concrete block room that she exists in for the present.

"It's too big, too close to the stream and the *tapu* land and it's taken over the space that the moreporks used to fly in," Martin replies grumpily.

"Moreporks," Sarinda queried. "Wtf are you talking about?" and she grabs a pillow to thump him but as she does she sees that he is truly

upset. He has an arm thrown across his eyes and she could swear he is hiding tears.

"Martin. Martin," she says, half in frustration, half in concern. "The moreporks will be alright. Truly, they will learn to avoid the house. They will develop a genetic memory of where the house is…"

"Once enough of them die off," Martin says as he switches off the light and it is the last word. She feels unequal to taking on the whole of the Darwinian system of thought just now.

In the morning Te Ariki is at the flat and the pair are discussing what they might be able to afford to rent in town. Te Ariki had begun to help out at the restaurant at the bay and that was the main reason he would like to go back there. The house where David stays is not the right place he agrees. "I want to be with you," he tells Faith and she gives him a melting look that makes Sarinda feel ancient.

The stand that Faith has taken is provoking discussion of what the young couple want for their future. Te Ariki wants to be a chef. He had proven to be quick and efficient with preparation of vegetables and simple dishes at the hotel restaurant at the bay and he enjoys the repartee and adrenaline of the professional kitchen environment. He wants to learn more.

Sarinda promises to ask around at her current job in the city. She tells him to enquire at the Polytech for courses and requirements.

"Might as well make use of what's available in the city now that you're down here," she shares her usual philosophy on life.

"Sarinda always knows what to do next," Faith says comfortably, placing her hands on her large belly and stretching backwards. Te Ariki strokes the bulge fondly.

"We should find somewhere to live today," he says. "Somewhere the baby will like."

And they walk, hand in hand, into the city.

Martin and Sarinda are left to contemplate each other and life. "We should go and see what David's up to I suppose," Sarinda said sadly.

"There's no point trying to monitor him," Martin replies. "That's what Aiden did for years and it made no difference at all."

"Restaurant kitchens are full of drugs," Sarinda says. "I should have known better."

"That's ridiculous," Martin replies.

"Well I am ridiculous," Sarinda responds. "Haven't you noticed??" She stares at him, full on, wanting a reaction, any reaction.

Martin looks up with guarded eyes. He has seen this coming before but managed to avert it. Now they are alone, enclosed in the concrete block kitchen and all around them are unsatisfactory stand-ins, utensils and furniture, detritus from other people's lives. Nothing beautiful. Nothing precious.

"I didn't say you were ridiculous," he begins.

"I'm not sensible. I'm not calm and confident. I can't be a nurse or a student. I wasn't the greatest mother. I probably disappointed my parents," and she looks around her for more inspiration.

"Hey," Martin protests.

"You care more about *Taniwha*'s or moreporks than you do about me!" She picks up a teapot, "This is the only thing I own!!" Her eyes gleam wildly from within their mascara'd fringes.

"Sarinda," Martin begins.

But Sarinda is on her second wave. "I'm nothing like Cara," she says. "Beautiful Cara, poised and precious Cara. I'm a shoddy imitation of a woman who takes other people's men and wrecks lives. Admit it,

Martin. She's the noble Grecian woman and I'm the one with the serpent's tail and clawed feet."

Martin raises his brows, at a loss as to how they arrived at this.

"Cara's a wonderful woman," he begins, "but…"

"Yes, but she's married and the noble and sanctified Martin cannot go there. So he's stuck with me, I guess."

"It's not that," he says. "You and I…"

"You and I what?" Sarinda hones in. And this is what he doesn't like. She is so sharp, so aware of the nuances of words and gestures. He doesn't know what.

"Cara was on holiday in New Zealand," he starts. "Of course she was charming and pleasant to everyone. It was beautiful at the bay. I was sorry you were working so much."

"The dog liked her," Sarinda said sadly. "David got all inspired about Italy."

"You are disappointed about David," Martin hazards a guess. "But we don't know what's happening out there. He's still going along to his group, I checked with the psychologist last week. We have to leave him to work it out."

"You are like me," Martin continues. "You care too much. If we didn't care so much we could be more cheerful. We could join in those morning tea conversations at work about parties and shopping." He grins and she smiles weakly back. He has told her about what people talk about at the school. It seems that teachers love to avoid talking about the classroom. Their break time conversation is determinedly bright, sociable and irrelevant. No-one ever asks Martin how his classes are going because he was likely to get serious. Or his weekends. He is a man with serious weekends.

"I have seen you respond to people when they need you," he says. "First David and now Faith. You don't judge people. They feel strong with you, they can develop. You are vulnerable and that allows them to be vulnerable."

"I am weak," she says.

"Some people will see it like that," he admits. "Some people see me like that." He thinks of Saint Francis, the cheerful zealot. "We must keep cheerful," he adds. "Is what Saint Francis would say."

"Well he had God on his side," Sarinda says darkly and then looks around at the sound of a knock on the front door.

They turn to see the outline of a figure through the opaque glass. It turns side on and the outline of the cap and swagger of the movement reveal that it is Gabe.

"Keep cheerful, remember," she hisses and is pleased to see that Martin has gone a bit pale.

3. Gabe

Gabe turns side on as he enters the room as though his bulky shoulders are too big to fit. "Hola," he says genially.

"Gabe," both of his hosts murmur, and then Martin stands with his hand out to shake his nephew's.

"I think I owe you an apology," he says. "I hope there were no lasting effects."

Gabe rubs his chin. "A broken tooth," he replies. "You've got quite a swing on you."

"I'm sorry. I should not have done that," Martin repeats.

"Well, I was probably talking shit," Gabe smiles. "I do that sometimes." He looks towards Sarinda. "I've come down to catch up with Faith."

"They've just gone for a walk into the city," Sarinda says.

"I didn't even know what was going on," Gabe says. "Until Te Ariki texted me yesterday asking me where she was. Faith had taken off without even telling him. I asked mum what the score was and she told me that I was to consider that I no longer have a sister."

"Oh no," Sarinda responds, truly shocked.

"I asked her if that meant I get the whole inheritance," Gabe said, "and she told me of course not. So I said I'd rather have a sister then and came down here."

"Good," Sarinda says uncertainly. "Te Ariki has come in to see her and they're working things out now."

"I'll leave them to it then," Gabe says, scanning the room where they sit with a cool interest. It must be about the size of one of the bathrooms at the beach house and Sarinda starts to feel a familiar sense of shame.

"Faith made us pancakes for breakfast after Te Ariki turned up," she says, starting to shuffle plates and glasses off the round table and onto the cluttered bench. Horrifically, a half demolished pound of butter sits unadorned in the middle of the table, its hacked and crumby surfaces beginning to melt.

"I want you all to come up for my 21st next week," Gabe says. "That way we can all get over it. I don't even know what the problem is really."

Martin prevaricates, "Can we afford to go up?" he asks Sarinda.

"I'll have to take the weekend off," she says. "If you pay for petrol…"

Gabe looks back and forth at the adults as they deliberate. Sarinda has always thought that explaining yourself is a weakness. But she decides to be frank. Gabe could do with seeing the other side of life.

"Neither of us have full time jobs," she says to the boy. "We have to live within our means. And this is what we can afford currently."

"It's not that bad," Gabe says, looking around but sounding unconvinced. Martin gets up and starts to stack dishes.

"I've just given up on nursing," Sarinda says, "so I'm back working nights at restaurants." Gabe nods.

"I know that you have done the hard yards at your job," she says to Gabe. "You were quite young when your father got you that apprenticeship and the men at the workshop were not always a pleasant lot."

"You're not wrong there," Gabe mutters.

"Stuck inside that cold barn all day…" Sarinda was remembering calling in with Tina one day. It had seemed inhumane to her and she was glad that Jesse and Tai would be in more salubrious careers. Huh! Well, Jesse was still doing well.

"Anyway, maybe I should have pushed myself through in some job somewhere and got qualified and expert, like you are now. Maybe it's crazy for me to be sitting in a home unit with no furniture of my own at 46 years of age, but it's the reality. I made my choices and I'm not complaining."

"Yes, that's fine," Gabe says, trying to staunch the flow of too much information. Martin is looking perplexed and panicky over at the bench.

"But I don't want to feel like a loser," Sarinda says. "I don't want to feel that people are judging me." She realises she is talking to Tina really and that Gabe is at a loss to know what is behind it. But it won't do him any harm.

"If I don't earn lots of money, if, as happened, I need to go on welfare because I become pregnant carelessly, if I never make anything of my life, if I live in this unit forever, it doesn't make me a worthless person."

"Sarinda," Gabe says, looking desperately at Martin. "I've never thought you're worthless. We all thought you were a really cool mother."

"It's hard work taking up the slack at this end of the income scale," Sarinda finishes up. "I'm probably getting too old for it."

"You've had heaps of different jobs," Gabe says. "Way more than mum," it seems to occur to him. "She's been working in the office with dad most of her life."

"They did very well," Sarinda says but feels slightly mollified despite herself. It would have been a lot easier to be Tina, she felt, helpmeet to her successful husband. The couple had been deluged with gifts from their suppliers, corporate giveaways, conferences in exotic destinations. For doing their jobs well. For creating work for others.

But possibly not contributing in other ways, Sarinda can see now. No-one goes to Tina when they are at a loss, down, in despair. Sarinda has always had more actual involvements during her life. Why there's always been something going down at the beach. And Sarinda sometimes comes out of it looking bad. Sometimes she has been bad too. But often she has been helpful, she knows that for sure. And this is mostly invisible to others, sometimes only a comment or a warm look at a time when everyone else is cold.

Sarinda takes a deep breath and looks towards Martin who meets her gaze, relieved that it all seems to be over.

Gabe leans forward, across the table and touches Sarinda's arm. "You have been an inspiration to me," he says urgently. "To all of us kids. You do what you want in a way that no-one else does. You fail but you are still an icon." He sits back, looking satisfied with his summation and taking out his phone. "I'm gonna surprise Faith," he says with satisfaction and starts texting.

As Gabe links the word 'icon' with Sarinda, Martin indulges in a fantasy of Sarinda outlined in blazing gold, wearing very little, perhaps holding stylized lilies in medieval arms, lilies of the kind that Saint Teresa was often seen with in the holy pictures of his youth. He could take Sarinda and place her upon the mantelpiece of his sparsely furnished soul. Martin clears his head and keeps clattering the dishes away.

But, "You're my icon," he whispers as Sarinda wipes the bench around him. As usual Sarinda misses the moment as she hurries to tidy the living room. Her mind is preoccupied with deciding whether to wear high heels or strappy sandals. By the time Gabe finishes a text conversation with his sister Sarinda is fetchingly attired in the kind of clothes that interesting and independent women wear, her hair wound into a becoming topknot a la mode. Gabe has organised them all to meet down at the waterfront for coffee, his shout.

And so it is that Sarinda is sitting where, really, Tina would like to have been sitting. With Tina's beautiful daughter Faith and her man Te Ariki, along with the surprisingly mature and urbane Gabe and with Martin, her lover and her friend, Tina's brother, looking chipper at the end of the table perusing a wine list. Martin orders a red wine for Sarinda and himself along with a beer for Gabe to have alongside their coffees. Faith can't drink and Te Ariki chooses not to in solidarity. Faith splashes out on a satisfying wedge of cake.

All around them are groups of people pursuing their own lives at other tables, light reflecting off the murky waters of the inner harbour, the

clink and clank of oars in the rowlocks of a dinghy, large yachts with their own casual gatherings of folk onboard, a few sea birds scoring the sky with broad wingspans. The combination of red wine and coffee always makes her feel like this. She lifts her glass in thanksgiving to Martin who clinks it gently, a celebration of who she is.

4. Entitlement

Two girls wait by Martin's desk. They are Year 11 and they have something to discuss.

"We need to get Excellences," one of them explains.

It is Martin's lunchtime. "A worthy aim," he says.

"It's not an aim, Mr Mason, it's a necessity," one of them says and begins to uncrumple her assessment that Martin spent all weekend marking and has just returned. "This is only a Merit."

"So you got Merit, Lucy, very good," he replies. "Your writing must have been convincing to be awarded that mark."

"But I wanted Excellence," the girl responds and the other one says, "Me too."

"Have you looked at the criteria for Merit and Excellence?" Martin says trying to pack up some of the files from the class just finished.

"What do you mean criteria?" one replies and the other one says "It doesn't tell us how to get it."

"If Excellence was a formula we would certainly tell you how to get it," Martin says. "The criteria will tell you what kind of things we look for and this was all discussed in class at the beginning of the assessment." He

knows for sure that these two were chatting at the time because these two are always chatting, in love with themselves and their Year 11 lives. If he calls upon them they claim they ARE listening. That it wasn't them TALKING. That someone else in the group had asked them a QUESTION.

"But I don't UNDERSTAND it," one of the girls says.

Martin finds himself falling into the abyss. "Excellence is hard to get," he tells the girls. "It requires perceptiveness. That means you are able to respond to a text with your own original perspective, make links and possibly comparisons with other texts and with aspects of life you have noticed, and back it all up with fluent discussion."

"What's fluent then," one girl says sullenly.

"Fluency comes with lots of writing practice," Martin says. "Usually you will need a good vocabulary so you are selecting exactly the right word for what you are trying to express and your conclusions and judgements might please and surprise the marker, with their aptness and originality." Strangely, it is quite easy for a marker to see Excellence in an essay. It is more difficult, however, to explain to an Excellence hungry student why her conclusions have not been so pleasing and surprising.

"Well, can't you tell us what to put so that we can get Excellence," the second student enquires politely.

"Listen carefully to all explanations in class," Martin advises. "When others are discussing the criteria and giving their ideas it will broaden your understanding and give you lots more to include in your own writing."

"But I still don't understand," one of the students says and looks like she will cry any moment.

"It's not something you will learn in five minutes," Martin says. "You have shown ability by getting Merit. With more detailed listening and reading of the text you will give yourself the opportunity to get

Excellence at a later stage, maybe in Level 2 NCEA where it is really starting to matter." Half his lunch time has gone now and he needs to leave. It will be impossible to get through the afternoon if he doesn't eat. He's never been in such a demanding job. "Read over notes taken in class at home as well," he adds, remembering how these girls, or others like them, have claimed to be able to take notes from the board and talk about their social lives at the same time. "Ask questions…"

One of the girls makes the ultimate sacrifice. "Thanks Mr Mason," she says.

"Better luck next time," he responds gravely and the girls leave.

This, he thinks as he races up the stairs in the search for lunch, is the other end of the scale, the students who feel they are entitled to good marks for showing up, for having parents who feed them and dress them nicely in their uniform. They look like high achievers so they must be – right?? Wrong. And Merit is a solid achievement. But ambitious parents and misguided careers advisors who have no idea of the student's ability or general work habit tell the girls to strive for Excellence. No matter that the national average for Excellence is about four percent. Their daughter must get it.

It must be a symptom of the changing job market, the insecurity that is all around, the fixing of status to work and money that is getting to people, he thinks. He's had similar discussions with the parents themselves. "I'm tertiary educated and so is my husband," one woman revealed. "We expect our daughter to do very well."

Or else, Martin silently added to himself. In the old days the students sat examinations at the end of the year and the onus felt like it was more on them to prepare. But with internal assessment, with the teacher both teaching and assessing the material the pressure comes onto the teacher. If the student does not pass, then surely they haven't been taught right. Martin has seen the effect of this on teachers and fears for

the integrity of the results. An international student marvelled with him that students in one of her classes were able to resubmit work if they did not achieve initially. "The teacher tells them what to put so that they will achieve," the German student revealed with widened teutonic eyes.

Even the best student will fail to include detail or to expand their discussion sufficiently at times. These students should fail. But it is seen as a failure of the teacher's, especially if the student is doing well in all their other classes. Various ways and means can arise to get around this problem and preserve a teacher's wonderful record of success. With the much touted performance pay there will be even more incentive to create a halo of success around a teacher. Martin thinks this is a mistake. "I want to get at least eight Excellences in my Year 13 English class," he hears a young teacher say. Whose Excellences are these anyway?

Martin chases up attendances in form time and then is scheduled to be observed teaching in Period 5. After that, it will be back to lectures at the College for 6 weeks. Back to discussion, argument, enlightenment about the educational process. No job is easy, he knows that. He has been sheltered and enclosed for twenty years and even that had its ups and downs. Now he feels he is in the real world, in the world of flux and change of difficulty and ambiguity. As a teacher he has to operate there, to risk looking bad at times for the sake of integrity. He won't always be functioning at his highest level. There will be dramas and mistakes made. The best he can hope for is that his intentions will be pure, that he will judge or dismiss neither the loiterers in the streets and supermarkets nor the students who attend with hugely inflated expectations of payback.

He will revel in the majority of students who quietly get on with the job, who bounce in the day after a difficult lesson with queries and new ideas, the ones who struggle hard and get somewhere, even if it is only to nearly Achieved level. Those are the students he learns from. The quiet strugglers in the world in general who are most rewarding to assist to whatever level he can. With some surprise now, he thinks of Gabe.

5. The orange cat

Tina has strung lines of bright globes from the house over to the trees, around and back, LED flickers colour the ripples of this nearest bend of the stream. Summer night cicada shrill. Drifts of young people will arrive much later in the night and a feast is being prepared. Like shifting masses of butterflies they will alight, in strange and wavering patterns, vulnerable beauty. The orange cat takes stock of the scene before it.

The loudest sound is Tina's jagged laugh and this echoes through the open door of the upstairs deck to reach the gathering below. The cat aims its stiff-legged gait towards the more serious mutters of Gary and Steve. Gary is telling Steve about taxes that have been incurred in the process of dividing up the farm inheritance. The situation has been resolved amicably, family relationships restored. Steve soft insistent replies acknowledge the justice of the outcome as well as the horror of taxes on exchange of properties in this situation. As he ponders the details he occupies himself basting the spit roast judiciously, importantly, attentively. The cat stares about itself, as though looking for something further.

It winds around the white plastic chairs where Sarinda and Maggie sit. "He won't change…" he hears. It is Maggie reciting the cohabitation blues. Later the tone changes to "And I've decided to be splendid tonight…" and Sarinda is ruffling the white tulle extravaganza that forms a wave-like froth around her shoulders, a 1980s southern belle dress she's picked up from somewhere. Her hair is loosely tied in a top knot of the kind all the young girls are wearing. Both Maggie and Aiden, who has joined them, admire it.

Sarinda shakes the sand out of her long skirts extravagantly. She was quite a sight walking the dog down the beach in that outfit. Aiden tells the pair that David won't come up to the beach for the party. He feels safer staying in Whangarei for the moment and has asked Aiden to bring back his surfboard when he comes down. He is determined to move on from his old life, Aiden says happily. He's told his mother she can fix up the house and rent it out. The cat raises an eyebrow and moves on.

When it peers around the doors of the bottom floor it sees Faith with her friends who have brought her the cutest baby clothes. They have laid them out on one of the divan beds. The girls' voices rise and fall with glee and sparkling wine, except for Faith who is calmly receptive and not drinking in her ninth month of the pregnancy. This scene, charming though it is, is not what the cat is looking for.

He ventures outside again, sees Te Ariki with some mates. "Might go in the army, get trained as a chef…" he hears. You're gonna have to get rid of that gangster hat then, he thinks sourly. Te Ariki is not drinking either in solidarity with his missus. They will be apart when he trains but it will be worth it for the baby. "Ya need Level 2 bro…" it hears as he walks away. "You got Level 2?" and the answer is yes, the cat is relieved to hear.

It casts an amber eye over at the dog tied up at a cabbage tree. Its ragged coat is sandy and wet from the walk it's just been on and, quiet though it is, the cat can see the dog is poised for action. It doesn't appreciate its luck, the cat thinks. It should take a political perspective, fit in with its owners more, work together to create optimum conditions. The cat complies with whatever it can see is required, while reserving the right to think as it pleases. It has no time for the dog.

Still not satisfied with its perambulations it blinks balefully into the darkness. Happily, the music is not switched on yet. Further peals of laughter emerge through the upstairs sliding doors to the deck. Tina, upstairs with her friends, is preparing an extensive range of salads and

vegetables. The cat is fond of a feast but will prefer to be offered some of the spit-roast lamb that it can smell infusing the air with muttony mint flavours.

And then it discerns within the night, standing within the furthest and darkest bend of the river, a dark shape outlined by the cosmos of blazing planets, stars and faraway galaxies. The cat ventures into deeper and deeper layers of dusk to investigate. It is Martin. Looking upwards from where it sits the cat imagines that the man is surrounded by the glory of all the heavens above. It gives a grunt of cat-like acknowledgement. Water shifts silently around the pair, forming its unbroken thread to the sea. The cat savours the moment, sitting at a respectful distance.

Until a call breaks their reverie. It is Sarinda, peering into the darkness. "Martin, are you out there?" her nervous voice sounds faintly American.

Martin swings around, as though returning from a different space, coming back to a place and time he is pleased to recall. With an effort he turns from *Taniwha*, night noises and the heartbeat of the land.

"Sarinda," he responds. "I'm over here!"

And she bunches up her frothy Scarlett O'Hara layers of skirt and runs to her Rhett Butler who holds his arms out like a priest, or a victim, or Christ himself showing his scars, big hands open to catch the fragile hands of his southern lady, his wild woman, his fascinating and fiery fabrication of each moment.

"Scarlett," he murmurs and they embrace.

THE DEEP

1. Very deep

While Sarinda works in the evenings Martin has the large wooden desk to himself. They've set up the garage of their rented unit with bookshelves, desk and lamp. They need the space more than the car does.

The dog watches monkish Martin from its sprawl across its beanbag. It switches to full alert as Martin pushes aside the *whakatouki* and lists of Maori vocabulary he's been studying to cast his eyes restlessly over Sarinda's neat and tidy stack of books and papers. An aesthete's collection of the literary and the philosophical. He helps himself to the *Junochiro Tzananaki*. It reminds him of his lover's lopping prowess and her cold geisha lips last winter. He begins to read:

I am aware of and most grateful for the benefits of the age. No matter what complaints we may have, Japan has chosen to follow the West and there is nothing for her to do but move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind.

He likes the tone of this. He can learn something here.

But we must be resigned to the fact that as long as our skin is the colour it is the loss we have suffered cannot be remedied.

His mind leaps to *Te Reo*. And beyond that, with a pang, to Sharla.

I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved. I would call back at least for literature this world of shadows we are losing. In the mansion called literature I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark, I would push back into the shadows the things that come forward too clearly, I would strip away the useless decoration. I do not ask that this be done everywhere but perhaps we may be allowed at least one mansion where we can turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them.

Beautiful. The positioning of the writer, his humble thanks for what he has been given in this life. His regret for the lost world of Japan's past, a set of values which cannot be fully explained or itemised. *Useless decoration* the consumerism all around. Martin himself clings to literature like a man to a life raft.

He shuffles through a stack of paper on his own messier portion of the desktop. Extracts a copy of 'Landfall' that he remembers had an essay on Maori poetry that interested him.

Many of the subtleties of Maori poetry are inevitably lost in translation, and much of what was originally alluded to via symbols and imagery has also been dissipated. The language of such poetry was already abstruse when nga Pakeha first began to gather collections of nga moteatea Maori.

Who is writing this? Martin looks for the author notes. Then looks up Rapatahana on the internet. Teaches in Hong Kong. PhD from Auckland.

Rapatahana adds that James Cowan said*, …there is a large section of waiata difficult to translate because of the archaic language in which many passages are couched … The translation of such songs is only to be*

accomplished by the aid of learned old men, now very few in number. Even earlier, Sir George Grey claimed*, …so ancient and figurative was the language in which they were composed that, already, large portions of them are nearly or quite unintelligible to many of their best instructed young men.*

Martin goes back to the Tzananaki photocopied article but the tiredness of the tone of it is overcoming him. *We must be resigned to the fact...cannot be remedied…world of shadows…losing.*

As an antidote he picks up the *New Scientist* from August. He'd read the headline, *Garden of Eden safe as Iraq national park* and as he did he remembered six months back, when he'd been digging out the drain next to Jack's forest. And had just found that article in *The Skeptic* magazine. He wondered where this writer would maintain that the Garden of Eden was. He had faith that, if anyone, the *New Scientist* would know.

He reads about the creation of a national park, a *remarkable restoration of the Mesopotamian marshes in the south of [Iraq].* Martin reads that in 1991 Saddam Hussain used dykes, sluices and diversions to cut off the country's two major rivers, which drained 93 per cent of the marshes, *largely obliterating the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East.*

Hussain's purpose had been to expel *the rebellious Ma'dan, but in the end it sped Saddam's downfall in 2003. Invading US tanks were able to drive north over the desert he had created and enter Baghdad far more easily. The Ma'dan later returned and broke the dykes.*

Oh the irony of life. Hussein facilitating the American victory by his earlier attempts to control his own populace. This reminds Martin of a further review from the *New Yorker, The Gift of Doubt*, a review of a

biography of economist and thinker, Albert O Hirschman. Hirschman had lived an expansive and courageous life, had studied his speciality, grand infrastructure projects, extensively, and had come to the conclusion that we cannot really know the full import of any undertakings we embark upon. The larger the project, the more unknowable the outcome. Hirschman recommended creativity as an antidote to the difficulties of planning.

Creativity always comes as a surprise to us; therefore we can never count on it and we dare not believe in it until it has happened. In other words, we would not consciously engage upon tasks whose success clearly requires that creativity be forthcoming. Hence, the only way in which we can bring our creative resources fully into play is by misjudging the nature of the task, by presenting it to ourselves as more routine, simple, undemanding of genuine creativity than it will turn out to be.

The really cheerful part of the Iraq situation, the part that would have heartened Saint Francis, were he around to hear of it, is that the magazine reports that *conservationists are amazed that, despite the disappearance for many years of most of the marsh, every species survived. All 278 recorded bird species remain, including the endemic Basra reed warbler and Iraq babbler.*

Saddam had not planned for the birdlife to die. It just wouldn't have been a factor. He also didn't plan for the USA to use his marsh-draining project as an asset. His was a case that illustrated Hirschman's theories.

Martin prepares to sleep, consciously choosing to focus on the sure knowledge of the Basra reed warbler and Iraq babbler's existence, as reported by the *New Scientist*, a magazine in which he can surely put his faith. He tries not to worry that there now needs to be an international agreement on water sharing. It is enough to know that somewhere,

somehow, someone is taking cognisance of the least of the world's creatures.

And beyond the Iraqi environmentalists, Martin thinks fondly of Hirschman, who learned some of what he knew about systems from his experiences in the second world war, a useful speaker of multiple languages, a solider turned spy, helping to form and facilitating the progress of The Emergency Rescue Committee in 1940 which helped save thousands of people from the clutches of Facism, among them Hannah Arendt, Andre Breton, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Alma Mahler.

He chooses to think that the words of Matthew's gospel apply equally to the birds and to anyone and everyone who is under threat, dispensible, unregarded: *Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me.*

As Martin leans to flick the light switch off an ancient looking representation of Saint Bernard glows from its position atop a bookshelf. It could be the painting from Rome packed mistakenly with his luggage when leaving Italy. Or a battered old holy picture picked up out of nostalgia when he saw it in a Catholic thrift store. Or a reproduction bought at the Auckland Art Gallery. Or the actual painting from a Roman presbytery, stolen intentionally and carried to this place. Your choice.

2. Not so deep

Ten in the morning is early for Sarinda to rise when she's working late nights. But she's decided to be an author and this morning has wrenched her hair into a severe ponytail to mark the occasion.

She throws open the garage door to the sun, tying the dog at the entrance so that it can train its gimlet gaze upon the passersby. She lays out notebook and pen and stares at them, breathes deeply. Then she

performs a maestro action with her arms before putting sharpened pencil to some quality notepaper.

A man sits motionless on a white couch. Within a beach house, itself under a dome of peach beach sky, the man ponders his situation. It seems as though Rodin's famous bronze statue, The Thinker been recast once more and transported across the seas to settle in this beachside suburban development, on this couch. Martin Mason is a big man and he does the downward frown into oblivion perfectly.

She surveys these sentences and thinks they are good.

She sees Martin at a loss. He finds teaching stressful, education a blunt instrument for nurturing the next generation. The latest news on Sharla has taken him a day or two to get over. It seems that Sharla was bored at home. Maybe there wasn't enough food, an argument with her mother. Whatever. Anyway the mother reported to the school that Sharla is no longer in town. Has run away with her father, the original source of her misery, to a faraway city.

Martin is left devastated, feels he hadn't done enough. Sarinda thinks that you have to let go those things that are not under your control. Sharla might find a way forward down there. The father might not be so bad. Sarinda decides to put a bit of dialogue in to lighten the mood. Maybe she should introduce Gabe. She decides that she will riddle the novel with art history to make it mean more than just the usual what went on at Onetari Beach over the summer.

She is interrupted in her work by the whirr of a text to her phone, holds it away to the correct distance to accommodate her increasing longsightedness. Then she springs back from the desk, pencil tumbling, chair upturned. The dog swivels its head, furrowing its brow and tilting its face sideways.

It's a boy, Te Ariki has texted. *His name is Te Manawanui. Big Love from Te Ariki and Faith.*

A boy! *I'm coming up* she texts back, *Arohanui!* she adds, after a quick squiz at Martin's vocabulary list. *Te Manawanui,* she thinks. Decides to see if David can come too since Martin won't come because of school. She texts. He will. She rushes to pack the car. Texts Martin that he has sole charge of the dog. Urgent mission. Sarinda's business is always urgent.

Sarinda and David drive northwards. She imagines that by bringing the boy back up home on this happy occasion he will be made whole, reintegrated, one with the universe. Things will come right, she thinks. You just have to have faith. *Tihei Mauri ora.*

Far behind in the ragged city the dog lowers its chin to the grass in the shade of a privet hedge next to the driveway. It riffles its ears as a blowfly bumbles into them in the sudden emptiness of late afternoon.

Then it shakes its head and stretches. Wtf next, it thinks, and ends the story with an existential yawn.

THE END

EXEGESIS: *THEORY INTO PRACTICE:*

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Including references

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INTRODUCTION

The *Gift of Doubt* is about the indeterminacy of the world and how hard it is to escape our own limited interpretations of events. It questions the value of trying to do the right thing as it is impossible to be absolutely sure of the consequences of any actions and interventions. The main character, Martin, has lost his faith in organised religion and himself. He meets Sarinda, a woman who lives for the moment and seems purely self-interested. The novel shows a range of responses to economic conditions in an area of the far north of New Zealand with high unemployment and associated alcohol and drug issues. A third important character is David who loses himself in the details of his beach setting, the quirkier the better.

I became interested in the West Coast beach area in the north of New Zealand when I saw the situation of youth, both Maori and Pakeha, within that wild and natural setting. An image which did not make it into the novel but started me thinking is that of a bunch of teenage boys gathering to sit on rocks beside the access road to the beach, drinking beer and cheering as tourist vehicles became stuck in the hillocks of increasingly aerated sand. The group were provided with plenty of entertainment as tows had to be arranged and other vehicles, detouring around the stuck ones, themselves became mired. It seemed that the inevitable strandings provided a rare chance for the dispossessed to view the wealthy momentarily at a disadvantage.

Given the broad range of ages, views, incomes and activities within this setting, I felt there would be scope to aim for a pluralistic aspect to my

writing, given the extra time and space I would have in a novel to develop a complex plot. I had in mind the kind of detailed moral exploration that I have admired in Australian writer and academic Helen Garner's writing, both her fiction such as *The Spare Room* (2009) and her non-fiction, such as *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (2004). I wanted to acknowledge, however, the fact that it is futile to try to depict any absolute truths.

As an idealist and ex-Catholic myself I am generally driven in my writing to try to resolve anomalies and to make a point, usually sifting through situations to identify and sympathise with victims and damn the strong and confident. I wanted to avoid that. I looked for ways to broaden my view and made Sarinda the sort of character that it would be easy to be dismissive of. This provided a tension as I was forced to find ways to reinstate her and the novel genre gave me the space to do that. The mystery about what Martin had actually done was sufficient to draw the reader into the story and David provided a focus for plot development.

With the emphasis on indeterminacy and irresolution in the storyline I looked to create an open ended novel which would incorporate many viewpoints in a polyphonic way. I had previously been interested in some of David Lodge's critical writings and decided to read some of his fiction to see how he put his ideas into practice. For example, *Kierkegaard for Special Purposes* (Lodge, 2003), an essay which explains the thinking behind his novel *Therapy* (1995), was useful because I could see how he used his reading of the philosopher to extend his characterisation and plot. Lodge makes the point that "If the whole novel were contained within Tubby's limited perspective and limited language, it might be rather monotonous" (p.272) and explains, "I felt the need of another discourse, another perspective, another (parallel) story" (p. 273). He adds, "For me, conceiving this 'structural idea' is usually the most important stage of a novel's genesis" (p. 273).

Lodge has been described by John Mullan (Mullan, 2012) as "once one of the foremost explicators of Mikhail Bakhtin in the Anglophone

world" and his fiction reflects this. Bakhtin (1986) states that "the utterance is filled with dialogic overtones, and they must be taken into account in order to fully understand the style of the utterance. After all, our thought itself – philosophical, scientific, artistic – is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well" (p.92). Lodge, an academic, novelist and critic, pushes the polyphonic (dialogic) aspect of his work while keeping an emphasis on unified narrative. In an interview discussion (Thompson, 1984) of his novel *Small World* Lodge says:

> The idea was to superimpose a satirical comedy of modern academic manners on a pattern of mythic motifs and romantic archetypes, the interlacing of several plotlines in traditional romance licensing an extravagant use of coincidence to contrive connections between my numerous characters and their fortunes or misfortunes. Since academics love to talk shop, my characters could plausibly provide a kind of commentary on the proliferating literary echoes and allusions for readers unfamiliar with their sources, *but I tried to make the novel also simply enjoyable as a narrative combining suspense, mystery and comedy* (para. 6) Italics added.

Although my novel had no overarching borrowed structure, as Lodge's did, I had begun to use descriptions of well-known artworks and some literary allusions in my novel, all from the Western tradition which might link with or interrogate Martin's previous faith in Christianity. I wondered whether the reading and discussion habits of Martin and Sarinda could bring a higher register of language, along with a sense of the sacred world which Martin was habituated to, into the world of the more casual dialogue of the novel. Maori language quoted further gave a sense of mystery and the unknown. Along with this I was aware of working within a fictional structure with the many echoes and resonances of Western literary development. Like Lodge, I wanted to retain a sense of a unified narrative world and I enjoyed the element of play within his novels. I wondered whether the focus on dissonance and indeterminancy in the novel could be furthered by elements of the narrative structure.

With the above in mind, I began to explore literary theory with a particular interest in the postmodern use of device. I was interested to read in Bran Nicol (2009) that "Throughout this book I have been suggesting that if there is anything that defines the many kinds of fiction to have been labelled 'postmodern' over the past four decades, it is to be identified at the level of *form"* (p.185). Italics added.

As I read Lodge's novel *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965) I found examples of playful juxtapositions of language and texts which lightened the mood. For example, his main character, Adam is earnestly attempting to follow church directives regarding birth control. At the same time he makes obsessive attempts to create an advertising jingle for a "Brownlong" chair in order to win a competition, culminating in his final desperate attempt, "I always choose a Brownlong chair/because it's stuffed with pubic hair" (p.157). Lodge seemed to me to be able to mimic the farcical elements of life and to alleviate the ponderousness that can sometimes take over when attempting to create a realistic narrative. This element of scatological humour also expanded the view of the sex-starved protagonist and, strangely, endeared him to the reader.

The British Museum is Falling Down also uses pastiche, smatterings of other writers' style usually accompanied by a clue of some kind. This nod to other authors is part of a literariness that Lodge is known for, particularly in his campus novels, one of which, *Small World*, (1984) features English teachers at a conference thus providing plenty of opportunity for intertextual commentary as described above. *Small World* uses a structural device which aligns the (university level) teachers with knights on a quest for the Holy Grail, again providing hints as to this 'parallel story', for example, character names but without necessarily needing the reader to pick up all the references, or indeed any of them. For example, an interview with Lodge (Raymond H Thompson, 1999) explains that the name of the hapless junior lecturer (engaged by his university by mistake), is "a play on both Perceval and Perseus" (para. 4).

Perceval is a naïve hero of the Holy Grail legend and Perseus was a heroic slayer of a dragon, rescuer of a maiden. These links show Lodge using texts in a dialogic way which reflects back on the originals as well as the originals enlarging his own novel (see later discussion in intertextuality section below) giving a sense of largeness to his storylines.

It seemed to me that Lodge's use of structural devices was ever-expanding, making each of his novels a discovery. I made the decision to emulate this while keeping the unity of a constructed world in *The Gift of Doubt*. I felt that the use of devices should not be simply a surface level stylistic characteristic, but should be justified by a deepening of character and add to the complexity of theme. Lodge, in his collection of essays *Consciousness and the novel* (2001) responds to an interviewer's question about his novel *Thinks* (2001):

> I couldn't bear to read a novel with just tricks. You have to believe in the characters and care what happens to them. These little jerks of the strings – which show you that it's actually a device – can give you an extra frisson, but then you go back into the flow of the real (p. 296).

I saw the use of such devices and disruptions as a less coercive way to prompt a reader to examine their own world than my previous writing.

Theo D'Haen (1987) in his article *Postmodern fiction: form and function* describes how he sees postmodern fiction operating. D'Haen describes how a conventional text can be disrupted and to what purpose. He explains:

> …a reader confronted with such an unconventional text will be forced to accommodate his expectations to what he actually finds in this text. The result will be an adjustment, or an expansion, of his horizon of expectations not only with regard to fiction, but also with regard to the 'real' world surrounding him. Seeing his world's familiar mode of projecting itself challenged, the reader's making the effort to meet that challenge also means his taking stock of his familiar world and its dominant world view, and recognising alternatives to it. As such unconventional works of literature subvert not only literary conventions but also social ones. (p. 149)

Bran Nicol (2009) says of the comparison of postmodernism with realism, "…it would be a mistake to regard postmodernism as the 'opposite' of realism, or as the equivalent of 'experimentalism' in fiction" (p. 23).

Nicol (2009) provides a definition of postmodern writing:

1. A self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text's own status as a constructed, aesthetic artefact.
2. An implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional "world".
3. A tendency to draw the reader's attention to his or own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text (Nicol, 2009, pxvi).

Nicol, however, goes on to qualify this list with the caveat that "none of these features are exclusive to postmodern fiction" (p. xvi).

Tim Woods supplies a further list of characteristics:

1. The undercutting of an all-encompassing rationality;
2. An incredulity towards metanarratives and a challenge to totalising discourses, which is a suspicion of any discursive attempts to offer a global or universalist account of existence;
3. A rejection of modernism (Woods, 2009, p. 10)

Given my interest in *The Gift of Doubt* in disorder and indeterminacy I wanted to be aware of the postmodern stance in the world and how its potential could be employed to disrupt, unsettle and provoke the reader to re-examine their own thinking and the world around them. The following are a list of literary devices and approaches commonly associated with postmodern fiction that I attempted to explore in *The Gift of Doubt*.

SOME POSTMODERN APPROACHES

1. Intertextuality : *insertion of or reference to texts that bring in the world beyond the novel, creating gaps, anomalies, and unintended and intentional links and coincidences*[1]

Margarete Landwehr's introduction to a collection of articles, *Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality (*College Literature, 2002*)* gives an impressive overview of the origins and use of intertextuality. She discusses two key terms, "influence" and "inspiration" and maintains that, "The concept of influence privileges an earlier text or artist over a later one for which it acts as a source. Conversely, inspiration regards the later text (or artist) as an innovative improvement over the previous one" (p. 2).

Landwehr cites Thais Morgan, "There are simply no data in literary history which are completely neutral 'facts'" (Morgan, 1985, 1). She notes that, "Thus, choice of texts and studies of influence were riddled with "value judgements". She further quotes Morgan, "The most salient effect of this strategic change is to free the literary text from psychological, sociological and historical determinisms, opening it up to an apparently infinite play of relationships with other texts, or semiosis. (Morgan, 1985, 1)"

From this discussion I could see that David Lodge's use of a variety of texts and allusions goes further than such writers as Mark Haddon (2003), whose novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* includes written and visual texts that the main character is interested in to both move the story along (as in the case of the train station information)

[1] Definitions in italics are my own.

or to give further detail about the character, whose autism prevents him revealing himself in a more straightforward manner. Lodge's appropriation of literary texts within his work shows greater ownership and openness to "infinite play" (above) and as such convey a more egalitarian relationship of reader and author, and a possible subversion of metanarratives of the past.

According to Nicol (2009):

> Metanarratives are a form of ideology which function violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of 'totality' and 'universality' on a set of disparate things, actions and events. A metanarrative is like a literary narrative in that it is essentially a means of ordering discrete elements in a particular form and thus presenting a rhetorical case about the way things work or are connected (p11).

Earlier familiarity with the above intertextuality discussion would possibly have helped me expand my use of inserted texts substantially.

Gathering of materials to include in the novel was serendipitous for the main part. Anything I read during the year was likely to become part of the reading of the characters and, in some cases, drove particular plot moments or character development. Readers were alerted early to the interpolations of textual references, building an expectation or acceptance of this device through ensuing chapters and themselves being swamped with excerpts from readings at the end. This is a self-reflexive moment as we see Martin trying to build an alternative metanarrative (having given up on religion) by linking these texts to find a right way to act, finally resorting back to a biblical quote. The reader finds they are pushed through the same painful process themselves in this chapter.

A justification for the use of artworks in the novel is that Martin's job with the Franciscans in Australia involved working in their print shop producing the holy pictures, cards and calendars that have through the years reminded Catholics of the beauty and glory of the celestial realm.

The readings that Martin and Sarinda decode from the artworks mentioned become part of their dialogue about plot events and also hint at the presence of mystery, of the unknown and the limits of language, some of the detail of the scenes presented in the paintings being unable to be definitively interpreted even by experts in the field, leading to such discussion on the relevance of figures as can be found about the 'Adamites' in Piero della Francesca's fresco cycle *The Legend of the True Cross* (Maetzke, 2001) and Botticelli's mythological *Primavera* "the exact meaning of which remains unclear to this day" (Diemling, 2007).

The novel also makes extensive use of allusion to a wide range of written and oral texts such as an interview on National radio of Brian Turner (2013), a book review of two new biographies of Saint Francis from the *New Yorker* (Acocella 2013), a reference to Hobbitland *(Lord of the Rings*), and to the Greek myth of Hercules and many more.

The rather academic texts incorporated into the end of the novel, in Chapter 8 (Tzananaki, Raupatahana and Gladwell), do make Martin's viewpoint in this section lumpen and indigestible as signalled by my supervisor Siobhan Harvey suggesting further editing of this section. However, I see the section as a challenge and a message to the reader. Previous insertions of artworks/information made the novel a 'rocky' read from the first page when Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker*, combined with reference to Dante's long poem *The Divine Comedy*, would surely provide the reader with a jolt. This is Martin's spirit pervading the text. The jovial nature and slightly wacky narrative style that brings the texts together is Sarinda (serendipitous), lighthearted and intended to be entertaining. The intention is that her swift onward rush will carry the reader across the uneven terrain of the novel.

2. Ironic understatement*: two strands of thinking are simultaneously presented to provide dissonance,*

> *understatement being the throwaway nature of these moments, the undercutting of the overt narrative.*

Nicol (2009) states that

> …the postmodern attitude is predominantly *ironic.* Irony is a non-literal use of language where what is said is contradicted by what is meant (either deliberately or unwittingly) or what is said is subverted by the particular context in which it is said. It works because we are unconsciously aware that in language meanings are not fixed but contain other possible meanings. All words bear traces of previous and other potential uses, and their meaning changes depending on the tone of utterance or the particular context in which they are uttered. Irony is therefore not just cynical, not just a way of making fun of the world. It demonstrates a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed (p. 13).

Jane Austen is a master of this device and her work is well known, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) being the most famous example. Austen's narrator uses an arch tone that fits her period (1813) and opens a gap between the accepted view of marriage, and the real one introduced as early as the famous first line, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (p. 5). This tone, associated with a scepticism towards the accepted view of affairs, is a position commonly adopted in contemporary texts. Jack Ross' *Sleep of Reason,* a review of NZ poet Brian Turner's latest collection of poems *Just This: Poems* in *Landfall*[2] (Autumn 2010) provides a possible reason for the use of ironic understatement as he discusses audience reception of his work. "If you don't get that then there's no point in persevering really. And I'm not talking about 'fully understanding' Turner's lines – rather about seeing what he's getting at, that understatement is not so much a device as a necessity for a generation as soul-calloused as ours" (p. 185). This made explicit a feature of Turner's writing which has

[2] A biannual New Zealand literary magazine

always interested me as well as highlighting that the casual understatement was there for a purpose – a response to the way people are now (soul-calloused).

Creative Writing tutor and supervisor Mike Johnson noted the use of understated and ironic humour in my own novel and my second supervisor and tutor Siobhan Harvey suggested that the work of Salley Vickers, has aspects in common with my work. Vickers not only incorporates references to art history in various ways in her narrative (as I do), but also has a great facility with use of ironic understatement, often ending paragraphs with a cynical twist. For example, in her short story collection *Aphrodite's Hat* (2010); "A part of her suspected that Hugh knew all about the dinner and sensed that it was important to her: he had the uncanny, intuitive flair of the ill-disposed (p. 139)".

Nicol (2009) states that:

> the most characteristic practice in postmodern fiction is *metafiction*, the technique by which a text highlights its own status as a fictional construct by referring to itself. Self reference is the literary version of the postmodern ironic attitude, for it indicates … that we cannot accept the reality we are presented with in a novel at face value (p. 16).

There are moments of metafiction in the storyline of *The Gift of Doubt* such as the narrator's occasional interpolations. At this stage the narrator is not identified as Sarinda and the ending of the following moment showing her response to being no longer the centre of attention should be puzzling to a reader. "'Weird,' Sarinda notes. 'Very weird and unnecessary'. *She would edit the event out if she could* (italics added)" (*The Gift of Doubt* p. 43). The hint that Sarinda is narrator is confirmed by the end of the novel and other unacknowledged comments such as "Stupid Martin," (*The Gift of Doubt* p. 104) can then be retrospectively attributed to her. The discovery of the narrator's identity at the end is itself metafictional and ironic.

3. Playfulness : *a stance that diminishes any sense of the gravity and solemnity often associated with metanarratives.*

In an author statement Lodge (2011) states that he finds immensely appealing the view of Bahktin that "the novel is an inherently carnivalesque form, subverting monologic idealogues by laughter and a polyphony of discourses". Landwehr (2002) also refers to Bakhtin's idea of the "carnivalistic" (Bahktin, 1929) in her introduction when she notes that he:

> ...criticises historicist literary criticism and its views that the novel consists of a homogenous representation of reality, expresses an author's opinions, or reveals his or her psychology. Instead he proposes the concept of the "polyphonic" novel, which includes a variety of idiolects employed by characters as well as extra-literary texts such as newspaper articles or anecdotes and, consequentially, offers a multiplicity of ways of viewing "reality". A polyphonic novel differs from a realistic work by its "carnivalistic" stance, which parodically dethrones dominant ideologies or institutions (p.2)

One of the aspects of postmodernism identified by many theorists is an "incredulity towards metanarratives" and I believe that an element of play makes this stance more palatable. Selden et al (2005) note that "as some theorists have seen, the decentering of language itself has produced a great deal of playful, self-reflexive and self-parodying fiction" (p. 199).

There is a randomness to the collection of characters and strangely bizarre events described, which in fact fit the setting very well[3]. The character of Sarinda doesn't take herself seriously but Martin takes himself far too seriously and this provides another blow to the metanarrative of religion as his search for truth seems sadly outdated. David, the third and least developed of the three who are so ceremoniously introduced, is plainly deranged, but at the same time very credible, "David had had a wonderful beach childhood with the constant awareness that it could all unravel at any time. He now preferred to live with his disasters out in the open" (*The Gift of Doubt*, p. 93). David's use of the drug P and resort to

[3] The original for this fictional beachside community provided a fund of quirky and subversive models.

self-harm is thus justified but his whimsical nature and strangely apt pronouncements ensure that he retains dignity and power.

A further playful aspect of the text is the fact that the reader is given the views of specific animals and David is closely linked with one of these, a small spotted cat. "The cat hears as well and begins to mouth her strange language towards the trees. David laughs at her. 'Go for it Ninja,' he urges. She looks around and smiles. She does!" (*The Gift of Doubt,* p.108). This extract shows both a moment of offbeat narration which could indicate David's mental space but also his communion with the cat. It stops short of magic realism as this sentence is the only moment when actual animal human communication is in fact indicated, but throughout the text the jaundiced views or disdainful behaviour of a large orange cat are shown in brief, as a commentary on human life or perhaps an abbreviated Greek chorus.

The consciousness of the ill-disciplined dog is unexplored generally but, as a force for disorder, it provides the last statement, "It shakes its head and stretches. Wtf[4] next, it thinks, and ends the story with an existential yawn." (*The Gift of Doubt,* p. 199). The dog really doesn't care. This is opposed to the cat, a political being which, however, seems to align itself with Martin as the story proceeds, a hint of the strange attraction that altruism has for the self-interested and wealthy.

Nicol (2009) notes that "where modernist art forms privilege formalism, rationality, authenticity, depth, originality, etc, postmodernism … favours bricolage or pastiche to original production, the mixing of styles and genres, and the juxtaposition of 'low' with high culture. Where modernism is sincere and earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic" (p. 2). The two main characters of my novel embody these stances; Martin looking back and searching for unity while Sarinda surges ahead with great faith in the multiplicity of the world and the variety of life events to transpire.

[4] A common SMS expletive

4. Plurality: *The viewpoints/beliefs of different social classes, religions and races are represented within a narrative and presented as equally valid responses or contributions to narrative events. The world of late capitalism is represented in its multiplicity.*

I have earlier linked Landwehr's (2002) discussion in her introduction to *Literature and the Visual Arts: Questions of Influence and Intertextuality* to the use of intertextuality and playfulness in this list of postmodern approaches. Her important summary of intertextuality also links to the concept of plurality as follows. Landwehr points out that Roland Barthes:

> …introduces similar ideas (to Julia Kristeva) when he states that writing constitutes the destruction of every voice and every point of origin. Abolishing the notion of an author, which he regards as a product of Renaissance humanism and capitalism, and of origins, Barthes claims that the text does not consist of a line of words "releasing a single 'theological meaning' (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (p. 3).

Barbara Kingsolver's recent novel *Flight Behaviour* (2012) juxtaposes the lives of struggling local farmers, environmentalists, scientists and tourists to explore a fraught situation around an environmental issue (monarch butterflies' habitat and habits). Her facility with dialogue means that the reader identifies with subgroups and experiences the issues in a less judgemental way than if they were involved in the real issues themselves.

However, Kingsolver as author is still very present in her writing, usually through the literary techniques of visual imagery and emotive words. An aim for *The Gift of Doubt* was to remove myself as author by the revelation of Sarinda as narrator at the end of the novel. Sarinda's emphasis on events cannot be trusted. This challenges the idea of the "Author-God" of Barthes previous statement.

I wanted a plurality of voices and world views within my novel in order for it to be a relevant response to the setting depicted and to explore some issues that can be difficult to discuss within the community chosen, such as racism, drug use, income disparity and the culture of entitlement. Following Kingsolver, I used dialogue to make characters credible and surprise twists to show depth (such as Gabe's mature response to family difficulties). Plurality in novels is not limited to postmodern texts but the following discussion has some bearing on why it is an integral part of the impulse of postmodernism.

Woods' presentation of a moment when architecture moved on from modernism to postmodernism helped me to identify the political impulse which seemed to make a postmodern approach necessary in literature, as though the metanarratives contained in the theory of modernist architecture had not worked and, further, that this kind of experience prompted a common feeling of disillusionment with idealistic approaches across the arts.

> 'Modern architecture died in St Louis, Missouri on July 5, 1972, at 3.32 pm.' So Charles Jencks ironically stated upon the blowing up of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing development, which had sucked in thousands of dollars in renovation plans and repair bills for severe vandalism. Dynamited along with the block of flats was the vision of social equality which underscored Gropius' belief that clean lines, purity and simplicity of form would play a social and morally improving role in society, for there was by now clear evidence that such housing projects were unable to solve modern social problems. (Woods, 2009 p111).

The above anecdote fitted well to explain why in this day and age we must acknowledge the plurality of the world around us. We can no longer be sure that whatever group/s we belong to have the moral high ground or a definitive answer with an awareness of the controlling structures of language and disorder in science where previously we would expect order[5]. I believe that my second main character embodies this

[5] See David Lodge's discussion on quantum physics and his link of these discoveries with postmodern thinking (Lodge, 2003, p.7).

thinking, in her own thoughtless way. In my novel, Sarinda's frivolity is a valid response to the plurality, contradictions and ambivalences of the world, although her stance comes at a cost with indications of mental illness/anorexia.

5. Unreliable narrator: *Where the narrator of a story is obviously, gradually perceived to be or is finally revealed to be untrustworthy in his or her perceptions, acting according to a world view which is not generally accepted or is deliberately obscuring events.*

First person narrators must always be questionable as they are part of the events unfolding. However, third person narrators, particularly omniscient, give an impression of credibility. But Stanzel (1984) notes that "personal features can, of course, become visible in an authorial narrator as well. That is why the criterion of credibility is applicable to him too – but these personality features are not linked with the notion of his physical existence and corporeality" (p. 90).

The Gift of Doubt reveals in Sarinda's last section, which ends the novel, that it was she herself who constructed the story. This *r*etrospectively throws the whole narrative into question. According to Stanzel, 'The main difference between a personalised first-person narrator and an authorial third-person narrator lies in the fact that the former belongs to the represented reality, the fictional world in which the characters live, the latter does not" (p. 90). Earlier the reader has assumed that the narrator is giving an impartial view of affairs. However, the revelation that she was in fact a major participant makes sense of many of the strange asides from the narrator and calls into questions some impressions given. Sarinda as narrator has a consistently assured tone, but nevertheless gives indications of frustration or an unwonted frivolity at times. The revelation that the reader has been reading her words makes sense at this level and may cause the reader to re-evaluate events and

impressions such as the saintly sexiness of Martin and a slight edge of nastiness or distancing when Tina, her high school rival, is mentioned. The reader may feel manipulated by the narrator and the moral and ethical character of Sarinda as it has been developed within the narrative will again be called into question.

Sarinda has said she wants to be listened to, she has been shown resolving to write, but the revelation should come as a surprise and a moment when the reader is jolted from the fictionality of the novel. The reader has to re-evaluate events and impressions, even to the extent that there may be some doubt as to whether later indications of the novel, of Sarinda's charitable and generous nature, have also been a construction of her own. When reviewing the impressions given of the character in the earlier part of the novel it may also reveal an element of self-loathing or rigorous self-examination and hard won self-knowledge, which fits with the character's trajectory.

The surprise revelation of the narrator is preceded a page or two earlier in a metafictional moment when the impression of Martin's integrity, built throughout the novel, is undermined by the reader being given the power to determine whether he was in fact an innocent abroad or a calculated thief. This can be seen as part of Sarinda's mendacious modus operandi and leaves the reader experiencing what it is like to be in relationship with her, a joke being played upon the reader him or herself.

Examples of first person unreliable narrators are the earlier mentioned *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon (2003) where there is a clear reason (autism) for the unreliability. Another notable example is *We Need to Talk About Kevin,* by Lionel Shriver (2003) whose narrator is persuasive but subtly builds an impression of obsessiveness, and the reader is left to decide whether this is due to events or a precursor of them.

CONCLUSION

The above are ways that I chose to open up the reading of *The Gift of Doubt* in order to extend my practice and acknowledge the constructed nature of reality. I was inspired to do this by the example of David Lodge's theory and practice and also by the themes I wished to address which included a juxtaposition of the world views of property developers, Maori *tikanga*, the dispossessed drug user, the teacher and a naturally blessed and bountiful beauty (beauty being an aspect of life which does seem to hint at a universal truth). There are no answers given in reality or the novel and the last chapter where Sarinda and Martin are shown separately, should throw many previous assumptions of the reader into confusion.

As Selden et al (2005) comment of the aims of their guide:

> The fundamental belief behind the book is that to be in a position to understand and mobililize theory – to be able to theorize *one's own practice* – is to enfranchise oneself in the cultural politics of the contemporary period (Selden et al. 2005 p. 12).

I feel that the learning for me in this year has been the possibility of achieving my aims of a representational novel while also using device (above) to unsettle the reader and possibly provide impetus for them to examine assumptions of their own about the novel and the world around them. I did not wish for this to be a laborious process for reader or writer and followed the light and playful manner of David Lodge. Like Lodge, (2011) I find the idea that the novel is "an inherently carnivalesque form" (para. 4) immensely appealing and would have pushed these elements a little further in my writing had there been time. However, I feel that the novel did touch upon the preoccupations I wish to explore in new and interesting ways which more than justified the year's work on it.

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