

## ***Sleep, Sister* by Karen Breen**

### **1987 – New Shoes**

Now that it's too late to make any difference, Marina can see the wisdom of a regular savings plan. As it is, her life savings don't amount to much of a life, so it's fortunate that she remembered to help herself to the contents of her mother's handbags and her stepfather's wallet before she left. She took nothing from Gilly.

Thinking about Gilly makes something in Marina's chest twist itself into an ugly knot. The more she tries not to think about her, the bigger it grows. Sometimes she believes the knot has ambitions of its own. And it has allies too, so that even when it appears to subside, it's just waiting in the shadows, while a tight creeping across her forehead takes over. And the creep, creep, creep goes round and round without ever getting anywhere.

The best way to keep the knot, the creeping and all the rest of them at bay, is to walk for long periods of time. That's why she got off the bus - even though it and took her much further than she could ever walk in one afternoon. She's beginning to understand how everything fits together. With the clarity that comes from the steady beat of shoes on the wet-black road, she now sees that the bus was responsible for the knot. Because a slow bus chugging up and down hills is the perfect breeding ground for these kinds of problems.



For some time now, Paul has been composing an inventory of all the things he hates about his job. At number one are the feet. In six months at Sole Mates, he's come to realise that there are very few he can actually warm to. Which makes it all the more ironic that the first time he ever sees her, as the automatic sliding doors part in deference, she stands barefoot and

toes wriggling as if to introduce them to the carpet before venturing further. Then she walks straight up to him without appearing to register Nola's sniff of disapproval.

"I need some shoes."

He wonders if she might be the one who sees how much more to him there is than a skinny guy working in a crappy shoe shop in Dargaville. But Nola is hovering, so he keeps the talk professional.

"Heels or flats?"

"Flat. Good for walking. And cheap."

She looks a couple of years younger than him, seventeen maybe, but it's hard to tell with girls. This one is definitely not a local. He steers her to the back, motioning her to sit on a low stool as he kneels on the ground before her. She is a perfect size seven. His hand hovers over a row of trainers on the shelf beside them, until he finds the one he wants.

"This'll support your arch. Plus it's on sale - last season's stock." Then he flips the lid on a

nearby basket, revealing an assortment of socks and knee-high tights.

“They’re all clean.” As soon as he says the words he wants to unsay them. He can tell she doesn’t believe him, but neither does she refuse the white ankle socks he offers her. She paces up and down in the trainers, stretching from tip-toe to flat, then swivelling and bouncing into a jump. She examines them in the mirror from all angles. She is as serious about shoes as a seven year-old girl, the most exacting customers Paul has encountered to date. Nola sees that he’s made a sale and slinks back to the stockroom to examine her cuticles.

As Paul takes the girl’s cash, which she pulls out of a little purse in the shape of a koala, he makes one last attempt to impress her. “Tell you what; I’ll throw in the socks too.” She looks at him in surprise and he realises she had completely forgotten that she was still wearing them. And as she springs out of the store, he thinks that only a girl with that much style could

make those trainers look good with a long red coat.



She keeps her eyes on the ground to avoid standing on cracks or walking on anything which might defile the pristine shoes. The new smell and new look won't last long, but that doesn't mean they can't give joy while they do.

When she was little she used to wear new shoes to bed, even gumboots. But the next morning her feet would be all soft against the sheets and the shoes or boots or sandals would be lined up where the bedspread tassels met the floor, as if they'd decided to get up and leave in the middle of the night. As if they were far too busy to be sleeping in a bed, when there was lining up to do.

A shadow passes over her as she comes under the arms of a large Magnolia tree. More cracks on the footpath, where the roots are pushing up from beneath her. She pauses, this is

getting complicated. It will take a long time to work her way out of this one.



Paul cannot believe his luck. The girl in the red coat is sitting in a bus shelter drinking a coke, legs crossed and foot tapping to some silent beat. He pulls up and winds down the window.

“Comfortable?”

She doesn't answer. Instead she examines the writing on the coke bottle as if it's a secret code.

“The shoes, I mean, are they ok?”

That makes her look, she even smiles.

“Better than the last ones, they just fell apart.”

“Where are you heading?”

“North.”

‘Anywhere in particular?’

“Just North.”

“On your own?”

She returns to the coke bottle.

He could leave it at that, say goodbye and drive back home to his dinner all ready for him and an, "Eat up, dear," from his mother. Or, he could take a chance, ask her out for a drink, try and win her over. But instead, for some reason, he opens his mouth and says, "Mum's got a roast on, how about a home-cooked meal?"

"I'm a vegetarian."

Yeah, he thinks, you look like a vegetarian. Even though she's the first one he's ever met.



Lying is so much easier. Marina stares at the placemats featuring scenic New Zealand and fabricates an entire life story for Paul's parents. She would love to stop but the lies seem to feed on each other. She is their instrument. No sooner has she explained that she is an orphan, than that requires a full description of her childhood as the daughter of missionaries. She offers to say Grace.

“Marina’s a vegetarian, Mum, she can’t eat that,” says Paul, pointing to roast lamb and gravy.

“Now you tell me!” The smile disappears from Pauline’s face.

“Give it here,” says Gordon, and he scrapes the meat onto his own plate. “Don’t worry, hasn’t even touched the spuds.”

Marina smiles and takes the dish back.

Pauline pushes a wiry strand of hair behind her ear, soaks her own food in gravy and says, “It can’t be safe Marina, a young girl travelling round on her own. I wouldn’t be happy - if you were my girl ...”

Marina chews slowly as the creeping starts to limber up for a long walk around her head. Her eyes grow heavy in expectation and they fill with tears. Paul looks accusingly at his mother, as she makes a face and mouths the word “sensitive” across the table to her husband.

But Gordon just smiles back and says, “Bloody marvellous, this mint sauce is fine.”



Breakfast is awkward. Everyone, except for Pauline, crowds along a cluttered breakfast bar, elbows knocking, while the mahogany table and six large dining chairs, upholstered in maroon velour, sit empty. Paul's mother stands in the kitchen sipping coffee from a *She's the boss* mug.

Awkwardness turns to frostiness the minute Paul reveals his plans.

"When did all this happen?" His mother hisses, unable to break a lifetime's habit of not raising her voice in front of anyone who is not family. Glaring at the blankets neatly folded on the couch where Marina slept.

Nonetheless, as soon as he reverses out of the carport he feels taller and stronger - something to do with the girl sitting next to him. Not his girl, but the closest he's got. Sole Mates and Nola are burnt rubber on his parent's driveway.

But before they've even reached the main road north, she's already jumpy. "I'm not good when I can't walk."

"Let's just talk." She doesn't answer. Most of the girls he knows love to talk, but then he's never met anyone like her.

"Well, sing then." It's a desperate line but at least she smiles. And she does sing, only it's some ancient song he's never heard before. Something his Nan might know. No chance of that one becoming their song then. God, he thinks, I'm acting like a girl. Take control. If his brother were here, he would know exactly the right music to impress her with. Something he'd read about that would never make it to the Top 40. But Tom is gone and Paul can no longer shine in his reflected good taste. You're on your own buddy.

And singing doesn't seem to make her happy either. After she's finished he leans over and opens the glove box. "Choose a tape if you like, I've got everything." The car swerves slightly as he does but she doesn't react, even when he

pulls back too far to the right. She's watching the engine gobble up the white centre line. He moves back to the left, slows down and wonders if he's made a mistake.

After a couple of hours of not much talk they drive into the sort of small town that only gets the tiniest print on a map. There's a shop that sells fertiliser, gas tanks and sandwiches in sealed plastic wrappers. Out the front is a solitary petrol pump. He goes inside, leaving her to pace up and down on what passes for a forecourt. When he returns, loaded up with sandwiches, cokes and chocolate bars, she won't get back in the car and strikes off on her own. He runs after her, but she ignores his questions, won't look at him, and refuses to come back. He heads back to the car alone. He follows her for a bit, before unwinding the window and calling out to her.

"What's wrong?"

She spins round and he brakes hard. "You tell me. What do you want from me? What are you doing here? What's wrong with you?" She's

crying. “I know I’m not normal so what does that say about you? Don’t even think about getting out of that car. Keep away from me.”

He wants to say, I’ve been waiting all my life for something to happen to me and I think you’re it. But she’s obviously freaking out enough already. He considers trying to be cool and witty, get round her that way. But instead he gives her the condensed truth.

“I’m nineteen, I still live with my parents and I hate my job – I just want to get out Marina. I don’t want to hurt you.” He yells at her through the driver’s window, not in anger but because she’s asked him to stay in the car, and she’s already backing further and further away from him.

She stops for a moment and gives him a look that he can’t read but he holds her gaze. Then she turns and walks away. The sun is shining but there’s a sharp breeze that sneaks up every now and then. He sits in the car watching her slow march as the blue and green backpack shrinks into the horizon. He can almost

see the wind drop down from the mountain range, seek her out and push her on. You're out of your depth, boy, says his father's voice in his head. Then he pulls the ham sandwich out of its wrapper and eats each half in two mouthfuls.



Already she feels better as she strides along the highway. It's a curious combination of being both light-footed and stable at the same time. He was right about the shoes, they give just the right amount of support but they're not so heavy that they drag you down. The best thing about him is that he doesn't ask too many questions. He just gets on with whatever's doing. That sounds like something Donald would say, she thinks - and her grandfather's absence suddenly feels like a tunnel going through her heart. All the cold air rushing in.

Twenty minutes later Paul pulls up alongside her and without saying anything she

gets back in. He hands her an egg sandwich,  
“You’re not one of those vegans are you?”

“I’m not anything at all. Sorry.”

“You mean, you’re not....?” It takes a  
minute before he realises what she’s saying, the  
knowledge slowly stretching across his face.

“Marina,” he says, “You missed out on the roast  
lamb of the century.” And as they smile at each  
other she feels the tunnel start to contract.



The Bella Vista Motel is one big vacancy.  
“I can highly recommend the honeymoon suite,”  
says the incredibly tall man behind the counter.  
But they take the cheapest twin room, and as he  
passes the key to Paul he barely looks at him.  
“Pool’s round the back, no swimming after  
seven.”

There’s a pub on the corner but it doesn’t  
do food. “Fish n Chips up the road,” says the  
woman as she deals coasters onto the bar. Paul  
orders a beer, Marina wants a sherry. The

woman raises a carefully drawn eyebrow. “You don’t look old enough to be drinking anything girlie.” But she serves her.

They sit in the corner nursing their drinks. Paul stares at the worn, green carpet for inspiration. “I’ve never met a girl who drank sherry.”

“Ladies always like sherry.”

“That’d be why, then.” He smiles back, no longer bothered by how hungry he is. The beer goes down fast after that and he blows more money than he should on the next couple of rounds.

“Come on,” he says, “I’ll teach you how to play pool,” and then watches as she sinks every ball with a series of fluid shots.

She grins as she chalks the cue and says, “My dad’s idea of school holiday activities,” and she doesn’t notice his surprised reaction because she’s so busy lining up the black.

Just when he thinks he could stay there forever he hears a couple of grunty cars pull up outside and in walk four guys covered in tattoos.

They go up to the bar, give the woman a nod and she starts lining up the pints. Suddenly, it doesn't feel like their pub any more. It's Paul's turn but he puts the cue down and says, "Let's get something to eat."

As they reach the door, one of the men says, "Don't let us scare you off, eh." And the rest of them laugh. But Paul and Marina don't answer, don't even look back. They just keep moving, until Paul trips on the welcome mat and goes flying.

"What was that?" He lies at her feet, both of them laughing.

The night is cool after the warmth of the pub and they head up the hill toward the fish and chip shop. The closer they get, the more the smell of battered fish and deep fried potatoes stirs their hunger. Their arms bump into each other several times before Marina lets him take her hand.

They order more than they can possibly eat and go outside to wait, away from the fluorescent lights and the spotty kid making their

dinner. This is it, he thinks, this is how it happens. He pulls her close. She looks up at him. As he bends down to kiss her, he feels her fingers on his waist as if she can't decide whether to pull him close or push him away. Then someone else's fingers grab his hair and pull it back. He cries in pain. Marina makes a strange whispery noise. And there's somebody else again, stroking a chunky silver ring on his little finger. A pinky ring.

“You wanna watch your manners, boy. I was talking to you.”

And then all the fingers curl into a tight fist that's coming right at him.



As Paul hits the ground, the grunty car pulls up beside them. Inside are two men who watch while their mates give Paul a good kicking. Seconds later headlights from another car appear from further up the road. The kickers jump back in their car, which reverses downhill at

speed. There's the screech of a 180 turn at the bottom of the hill before the car accelerates into the night.

Paul clutches his face, curling away from her. "Jesus fuck, don't touch me."

She runs into the shop. The spotty kid has disappeared but their fish and chips are wrapped in newspaper and waiting on the counter.

Afterwards, she wonders where all the others came from, how did they know? The cop, a woman in a dressing gown with two small kids in the back of her car and finally, an old guy who said he was a doctor, smelling of whiskey and curry. They ask her questions she can't answer.

"You've had a shock," they say. "Now, was it someone your boyfriend knew?"

Much later, back at the motel, the doctor's final instructions are on constant replay in her head.

Paul lies sleeping on top of the bed. His long fringe flops over his eyes, matted in blood. She leans forward and gently extricates the hair from the gash on his right eyebrow. His hair is

the same light brown, same silky fine texture, as hers. He could be her brother. At least her ears don't stick out.

He wouldn't talk to her when they got back. Didn't want to eat anything, didn't want anyone's help, but it's cold and he's still uncovered. She wants to slip the duvet out from underneath his body but worries that she'll hurt him even more. She can't settle, hovering between wanting to help and not wanting to intrude. His feet dangle off the edge of the bed and she's irritated by how much this bothers her. It can't be comfortable. He shivers and moans. She looks in the wardrobe for more blankets but all it contains are a fold-out ironing board and the sort of clothes hangers that can't be stolen. She finds two white towels hanging on the bathroom rail but when she lays them on top of him they look like sad rectangular tissues. Eventually she takes the duvet off her own bed and gently spreads it over him. Then she wraps the two white towels around herself and sits on the floor beside him and watches.

Two hours later she wakes him. He mumbles something about the fish. Three hours after that she wakes with a start, suddenly worried that too much time has lapsed. But he's already awake, staring at her with his one good eye. In the pub it was brown but now it looks black against his pale blood-streaked skin. He reaches out toward her, one finger straining across a quilted sea.

"Sorry," he whispers.

"Why?"

"Should have done more."

"No. No, no, no," she whispers back. A tear squeezes out of his eye and he looks furious, rolls to his back and bats it away with his hand. Softly, softly she bends down over him and kisses it away. Kisses all the way along a faint silvery scar on his cheekbone, and then down to the corner of his mouth. Tastes blood and salt.

"You're cold." His voice is soft. He lifts the duvet like a tender wing and she slides in beside him. His arm settles around her.

“Sleep now,” she says, her voice all  
feathery light

And they lie there. Closer than they have  
ever been.



Paul snores as the sun beams through a  
small window above their heads, illuminating a  
black and white print that hangs on the wall.  
Looking right back at Marina is a faded woman,  
sucking on a cherry on a stick.

Would he snore if he were unconscious?  
She allows herself to close her eyes again.  
When she opens them next it feels much later.  
The sun has moved off the photo, but without  
getting up she can't see where it's gone. Paul  
sighs and then settles back to sleep. Later again,  
and a ringing phone breaks her anxious dreams.

“We do have a fairly stringent check-out  
policy, although we're more than happy to extend  
the booking.”

She has no desire to stay and no way of leaving. But she's saved from giving an immediate answer by a knock at the door. Paul groans and rolls over, prompting a deeper moan of discomfort and he rolls back again. More knocking, and she walks to the door and peers through the safety glass. It's Doctor Curry from last night, only today, as he strides into their room, he smells of coffee and soap. "Where's our boy?"

Our boy looks groggy as he pulls himself up. He goes to push his hair from his eyes and grimaces as he hits a swollen bruise. The doctor spends considerable time examining all the most sensitive parts of his anatomy.

"And here - what about here? Is that better or worse?" Marina can't stop staring, anticipating Paul's pain with each prod. She swallows the desire to rip the doctor's hands away from the body she has been guarding all night.

"Nothing broken, but we'll send you for an x-ray to be sure." And as he hands him the

referral slip he adds. "Don't worry I'm sure she's not with you for your looks anyhow. Hah! Just keep a lookout for delayed concussion," and he gives them something between a wave and a salute as he walks out.

Marina and Paul stare at the door as it slams behind him and then turn to each other before cracking up. "Yeah I feel a lot better now," he says as her giggles turn to snorts of laughter. "Relieved and ugly and starving," and he has to beg her to stop laughing because it hurts too much when he laughs with her.

Half an hour later, and the policewoman is back. "Will you reconsider making a statement?"

No he won't. And just as she starts in about civic responsibility, the motel man is at her elbow.

"Just checking everything's ok and perhaps you could sort me out for the little matter of the bill." This is directed at Marina, who gives him her best blank look in response. She backs away from them all, trying to merge with the wall,

make herself into another black and white print in a nondescript frame.

“We’ll be out within the hour,” says Paul.

“Well, in the circumstances ...” says motel man, and he walks out with the policewoman, muttering, “Probably over the girl.”

Marina starts picturing the white centre line disappearing beneath them and as she does the knot in her chest loosens just enough to let the air move freely again.

That afternoon they drive up and down winding hills, heavy with lush bush and the occasional stretch of orderly pine forest. In the side mirror Marina watches every twist and turn that disappears behind them. Then the green eases out into rumpled pastureland, and the horizon grows wide once more.



They pull into a small town marginally bigger and noticeably richer than the one they just left. There is a café, with tables outside, but

Paul's feeling the cold more than usual so they go inside. People turn to look as they walk in and then quickly look down again. Two older women edge away in their seats, drain their cups and then rise and leave. Marina inspects the food while he retreats back outside to the payphone to call his parents. He talks briefly to his father about the scenery and the weather. His mother's voice is becoming insistent in the background, but the men keep it brief.

Afterwards Marina makes a call too, but she won't say who she's ringing. While she stands with her back to him, Paul watches through the window, trying to find answers in the tension in her arms and shoulders.

Money's running low. They order two coffees and a savoury muffin between them. "You're not really an orphan either, are you?" he says as he spoons sugar into his cup.

"Yes and no."

His body aches in places he has never even noticed before. He's hungry, weak, light-headed. He has left his job, upset his mother and

spent almost all the money that was supposed to go toward a one-way ticket to Australia. So this is living.

“Just tell me one true thing, Marina.”

Her hands shake as she lifts the cup to her mouth. She fastens her lips to the rim as if that might steady her, anchor her to the world, but it's hotter than she's expecting. Startled, she spills coffee onto the table and her eyes fill as she puts the cup down. He reaches across and puts two warm hands over hers.

“One true thing.”

She pauses and then speaks without looking at him. “When I was little I thought there was a cold bony hand that lived under my bed. Every night my sister, Gilly, would shine a torch to show me that it had gone. But I knew it was just waiting until no one was looking. And Gilly was the only one who was ever looking.”

“Is she looking for you now?”

“No.” A whisper.

## 1974 – The New House

Lynette opened the door and immediately saw that her real life was about to begin. He was golden, that was new. Golden-brown, except for his cheeks which were turning red. He could hardly bring himself to look at her, but that was good. She knew what that meant.

She was expecting him and the place was immaculate. Even her two girls, sleeping in their beds, looked like perfect little dolls. She'd told the chemist they were going on a long flight - emigrating - and he'd been very understanding. He had just the thing, they'd used it for their own children when they went to Los Angeles last year.

So it was almost as if it were just the two of them, walking through the flat in the soft evening light, with all the windows wide open waiting for a cool breeze that never came. He didn't once look at his clipboard.

“So, I'll see you next month then?” Her voice was so quiet that he had to lean in to hear.

“Lynette, all this, it’s nothing to do with you. This guy’s the same with all his properties - most of his tenants are students - nothing like you.”

Even his eyes had tiny bits of gold in the blue. It occurred to her, that with a man like him, she would never have to worry about shoes. Even in her highest heels, he would still tower over her.

“Don’t worry about me, Brian. I’m very flexible. Just let me know when you want to drop by.” She ran her fingers through her hair, sweeping soft dark curls off the nape of her neck. Took a deep breath in. Then she smiled on the out breath.

“Do you always work this late?”

It was a hot night. The sort of night when it’s hard to think straight, unless you’re a clear-headed woman.

And although he was still unable to look her in the eye for any length of time, he couldn’t seem to stop staring at the small covered buttons securing her top which ran all the way down to

just below her waistline, at which point the fabric diverted outward across her hips. A strange noise came out of his mouth. She met it with another smile.

“Nice to see you again, Brian,” carefully brushing against him as she opened the front door.

“You too, Lynette.” At last he looked her straight in the eye, and he stayed there, just like that, for a long time before he finally left.

Two nights later he dropped in on the pretext of having to clarify some small issue regarding the landlord’s obligations vis a vis the lawns, and from then on, he paid the rent. When he got sick of that, he paid the mortgage.



Everything is new. Their house is new, like all the others on the street. You can smell it, almost taste it. Delicious. Outside it’s painted blue, but inside, each room is a subtle variation of camel. Camel is a very fashionable colour -

they know this because their mother said so.

And, the carpet is wall-to-wall, which is the only way for carpet to be these days.

To go with the blue house is a blue Christmas tree which Brian, their new Dad, says will always look perfect. Despite being new it has no smell whatsoever. But it saves their Mum the hassle of having to vacuum up all the mess that a real tree would make, which is the last thing she's going to feel like doing at the moment.

Since they moved into the house, Gilly and Marina have their own rooms. This is fine, until you have to go to bed. And then, Marina finds, it's not nearly as good as lying there listening to someone else's breath rise and fall.

The other problem with separate rooms is what to do when you have to get up in the middle of the night and there is nobody to make sure that you are not pulled under your bed by a cold bony hand. This Christmas Marina has asked for a torch. When she gets it she's going to make Gilly shine it under her bed every night, to make

sure the cold bony hand has not moved into the new house with them.

But just like the new baby, Christmas is taking its time.



They're still eating their cornflakes and she's already crying on the phone in the kitchen. "Could you please just come and take them out – get them out from under my feet?"

Gilly spills her juice and there's nothing to mop it up with. She'll have to go into the kitchen and get a cloth. Marina hunches over at the table waiting for what comes next, but this time it doesn't happen. Gilly runs back with a dishcloth and a grin.

"Didn't even see me."

By the time Lynette sticks her head through from the kitchen, the table is spotless. "Hurry up and get dressed, you're going out with Nana and Grandad."

They go to Farmers, the big one in town. Gilly and Marina and Grandad spend hours waiting for Nana to cross everything off her list, until finally the shopping is done and they get to the top floor.

In the middle of the room is Cinderella's coach and all round the edge are little cars and bikes that anyone can ride. And there are climbing things, and the crazy mirrors that squash you down fat, or stretch you out all thin and bendy, like a spring that won't bounce.

Marina's scared of the mirrors but they won't leave her alone. Even as she's zooming around in her yellow car, hair flying in her face, she's looking back over her shoulder. When she can't stay away any longer, she begs her sister to go with her, but Gilly wants to race the big boys. So Marina goes alone. When she gets there, there's another little girl with frizzy red hair, crying big fat tears on her soft wobbly face. She grabs at Marina, tries to hold onto her with a wet snotty hand.

"Yuck, get off," says Marina.

“I don’t like the mirrors, they’re scary,”  
says the frizzy haired girl.

“Are not,” says Marina, who suddenly  
sees that there really is nothing to be frightened  
of. “It’s just a funny mirror,” she says wiping the  
back of her hand on her dress as she runs off,  
leaving the girl behind.

She goes once around Cinderella’s coach  
before she starts to feel bad. She’ll go back and  
help the little girl find her Mum, she thinks. But  
when she returns the girl is gone.

“You’re a mean girl,” says a voice in the  
glass.

Marina looks in the mirror and the frizzy  
haired girl looks back. The glass between their  
hands is cold, it’s getting thicker. The mirror  
starts to laugh. The girl is getting smaller, soon  
she’ll disappear. The mirror creaks and stretches  
and swallows her up.

Marina remembers how to scream, turns  
to run and smacks into an old beaky lady with a  
white scarf on her head.

“She just didn’t see,” says the lady.

“I saw, I saw,” Marina screams.

“Come on now, there’s nothing wrong with you.” Nana tries to smooth upsets away. Other people are looking. Gilly comes running with fists clenched tight but there’s no one to fight. And then Grandad lifts her up, safe from the dark glassy waves, and he doesn’t try and pretend that everything is alright.

“Time to go, Santa’s waiting,” says Nanna.

Marina continues to cry all the way over to Santa’s grotto and onto his shiny knee. Up close, his nose is quite big. Marina’s nose is running all over the place. She wipes it on the back of her arm and then Santa says, “Whose next?”

Gilly asks for two lollies, seeing as Marina didn’t want hers, but Santa just waves her off.

“Good girls aren’t greedy, Julie.”

Gilly grins at Marina, who has finally stopped crying. “Looks like Julie won’t be getting any presents this year,” she whispers as they walk back down past warm scratchy snow.

Grandad holds out a hand to each of them and says, "Time for lunch, anything you want."

The queue at the cafeteria moves slowly but they wait patiently now. Two well-behaved girls in their best clothes and new sandals. A club sandwich, a savoury, a cake. Two cakes for Gilly - just because she can - and then something fizzy to wash it all down.

"They'll never eat all that," says Nana.

"Who cares," says Grandad.

Cinderella's coach blocks out the mirrors and anyway, Marina sits next to Grandad, facing the window. Nana takes a very long time to eat a custard square with a tiny fork, and then sends Grandad up to get more hot water for the tea.

"Anything to make a lady happy," he says, but it's Gilly and Marina he's winking at.

Then Nanna picks up the serviette, dabs the corners of her mouth and says, "That's enough for one day, I think."

She has a bag full of beautiful baby things; a soft bunny, a blanket with a satin edge

and three little suits to keep Bubs cosy. Bubs, is the waiting name that everyone calls the baby.

Back at home, Lynette's folding washing in the living room. Marina puts her face into the soft clean cotton. "Did I have a special name too, before I was born?" Lynette sighs. She'll have to refold those sheets now. "Off you go and play in your room."

"I had a special name for you Reens," says Gilly, as they pull the cut-out dolls out from the sock drawer where they live. "I called you Babygirl."

They both sit cross-legged on the floor. Marina smiles, "How did you know it was me?"

"Just did."



The grass arrived around the same time as the baby and is equally stressful. There are no weeds, no prickles, and no dandelions. It is green purity – just the way they want it - sown a few months ago and off-limits all this time. Brian

didn't make a big thing about it, just an off-hand comment about keeping the girls off the lawn while it gets established. But the green is so enticing, and Lynette has seen the effect it has on both of them.

“Just get off, you're ruining it.”

She would love to tell the girls to go outside and play, especially now with Davy finally sleeping, but again, there is the problem of the grass, so they play inside. As the noise level starts to rise, her anger grows in direct proportion until it bursts into a quiet snarl. But only a quiet one. Because more than anything else, she doesn't want to wake Davy.

That's not quite true. There is one thing greater than the fear of waking him, and that is the fear he will never wake again. Just to be sure, she creeps into his room and puts her makeup compact in front of his tiny mouth. Then she quickly moves to the light to check, one more time, that his breath is clouding her reflection. She wipes it on her skirt and then goes back in to check again.

As she turns from the hall into the living room she can see all the way through the ranch sliders, past the deck and there is Marina barefoot and dancing on the lawn. And where's Gilly while all this is happening? Gilly, who is seven years old and should be setting an example. She is lying on the driveway, running her fingers through the sharp red stones of the pebble garden and then without a thought for who or what might be behind her, throws them into the air and all over the freshly cemented driveway.

The baby cries. Twenty-five minutes into his three hour sleep.

"Gilly, get in here now. What do you think you're doing?" She screams as her daughter walks across the deck and into the house. "You know you girls aren't supposed to be on the grass."

"But I'm not."

"Clean up that mess. And do something about your sister." She leans right over her, face in her face, tears now streaming down both

faces. Lynette's shell pink nails digging into delicate seven year old shoulders, leaving red, crescent moons on skin.

The baby screams too and her breasts betray her, leaking mother's milk all the way down her brand new blouse. She lets go of her daughter and tries patting it dry, but it's no good. And while Gilly runs back outside, Lynette hurries to her son, unbuttoning her top as she does. Her hands shake as she picks him up and nurses him back to sleep. And she's already waiting for the moment at the end of the day when the girls are finally in bed and it will be just them.



"You're the perfect wife," he tells her all the time, and she is too. She also knows she's a perfectly good mother. Lynette works hard to keep the lid on for Brian's sake but he's not always there and sometimes he just makes things worse.

When that happens it's best to say nothing, do nothing; and then later in the night while everyone sleeps, she empties the contents of her pantry and painstakingly wipes and re-orders each thing. The harmony of her shelves soothes her. Home-made preserves are labelled, dated and arranged chronologically so that everything is consumed in the correct order. Nothing delights her more than when a packet is close enough to empty to be thrown out.

Afterwards she'll walk through the new house, running her hand along all the shiny surfaces. Wondering, how she can make her daughters understand how important it is to make Brian love them. But Davy will make up for all that. Davy makes everything alright.



“You’re hurting me.”

“Do you want to look pretty or not?”

“Not.”

She brushes harder. "Of course you do, everyone does."

"It doesn't matter how you look."

"Who told you that?"

"I don't know." Head down, lashes wet.

Lynette leans down over her daughter's shoulder and gently lifts the wobbly chin so that both of their faces reflect back at them. "Well they were lying, Marina."

She scans her own reflection for reassurance. What a waste. Then she goes back to dragging the hairbrush through matted knots in fine brown hair. Brian always looks good. Just thinking about the way he looks cheers her up. The way he looks, when he looks at her. His breath and hands, all over her.



Every now and then Gilly tries to make Marina dress like a twin but it never works. She doesn't seem to understand that it's for her own good. Marina has her own ideas and they're not

like anyone else's. She chooses clothes that say, "Look at me," but always in the wrong way. Even the right clothes look different on Marina. And Gilly is not the only one to notice. Just yesterday, all the other girls in Marina's class, made a circle around her and they wouldn't let her out.

"Crazy-girl, crazy-girl," they made a song about it.

"Who started it?" Gilly asks.

A small, mean part of her suspects that it probably is Marina's fault. But nobody else will ever know that.

The next morning, in the playground underneath the monkey bars, the queen of seven year old girls gets a smack in the mouth and a last warning. Shelley Parker is born to lead, even the boys know it. But when Gilly comes looking, you get what's coming.



Davy has murdered Barbie. He stands there with her broken body in his hands, crying to

Marina. He says he wanted to see if she was stronger than his Dad's car so he stuck her behind one of the back wheels this morning. Brian didn't even notice as he reversed over Gilly's most precious belonging.

"Don't ever play near the car again, Davy. It's too dangerous, you might get run over." Marina hugs him close, squeezing the little-boyiness of him as tight as she can.

"Like Barbie?" The words are muffled against her shoulder. She feels the shudder of tears about to unleash themselves and pulls back. They examine the crumpled blonde, no longer attached to her pointy brown body.

"What will we do, Reena?"

"We'll bury her and never ever tell anyone."

He looks frightened.

"I'll do it myself, you go inside. That way you won't know where she is. It's not a lie then, is it?"

That evening Gilly stalks the house, looking in all Davy's favourite hiding places.

“Where is it? I know it was you,” she hisses in his ear as she places his dinner in front of him.

“What’s wrong Davy-darling, aren’t you feeling well?” Lynette is fiddling with the new stereo and Brian gets up to show her how it works.

After dinner, Marina walks into the bathroom and finds Gilly pinning Davy to the wall, her hand around his neck. “Where is she, you little brat?”

“Leave him alone,” Marina cries, peeling her sister’s fingers off his red skin. “He didn’t do anything.”

“I killed her with the car. It was an accident, Gilly.” Now that Davy can breathe properly he can’t stop crying.

You see.” She turns to Marina with grim satisfaction. “You can’t save him from himself.”

“What’s going on in there?” Lynette calls out from down the hall. “Can one of you girls run Davy’s bath?”

Gilly flounces off and Marina runs the bath. When it’s ready Lynette dances in with a glass of

wine in her hand. She's been playing the stereo up high, singing and dancing. She can make anything sound good if she sings it. "How's my Davy-darling now?" comes out like a beautiful love song. And she gently lifts him in and pours the last of the bubble bath into the water, running the tap quickly to froth it up, while he laughs in delight.



Granddad wanders off from his own party out into the garden. Everyone else sits on high-backed chairs passing trays of food along to the person next to them. The last person in the line is Gilly and then she has to get up and try and find somewhere to put them. She's running out of destinations because in Nana's house all available table space is spoken for.

There are bookcases, a large dresser and a set of three-legged tables. These can fit together like bears - a big one, a medium sized one and a baby one at the bottom. But because

Nana's treasures and necessities are so numerous, she requires all of tables on duty at once.

The dining table is solid oak and they've had it since they got married but nobody ever eats off it. Meals are consumed from a selection of trays featuring the Royal Family and all their castles. The table is required for crosswords, gardening catalogues and The Woman's Weekly. Birthday and Christmas presents are bought months in advance and stored on the table and it is not unusual for somebody to spot their own present long before they are given it. Occasionally there is disappointment when it turns out to be for someone else.

"You've had enough, out you go and play." They walk out the back door and plonk down on the steps. There's a damp chill lingering in the concrete, so they crouch on their haunches and watch Davy pour the contents of the peg basket onto the soggy lawn. Gilly is chewing on one of Nana's toffees. It seems to wrap itself around the ridges of her teeth and she

has to work to manoeuvre it free with her tongue. She can feel the indentations as she runs her tongue over the grooves.

Granddad is at the other end of the garden. They can see his head move above the grape vines, back and forth, he's singing the song that he always sings when he thinks he's alone. The three move closer, their good party shoes squelching into the muddy ground. They love this song, but it never plays on the radio. Just as they reach the grapevines, Gilly sings, "We'll meet again..."

"Don't know where, don't know when," Marina harmonises. The last of the autumn leaves have blown off the trees and settled on the ground around them. Her new red shoes have a tiny green apple on the strap. Gilly's are blue with a red love heart. But the soles have no grip and they slide on the wet, shiny leaves. Gilly grabs her sister's arm to save her from falling, just as Grandad bends down and peers through the woody vines.

“But I know we’ll meet again ...” He has a smile that could make anyone sing.

“Some sunny day.” Even Davy knows that bit and he’s only three.

This end of the garden has a secret path that winds round past a giant feijoa tree, still ripe with fruit. It then skirts past a compost box and a section of old wire fencing set against a scraggily hedge. The last part of the path is covered in shells that twinkle and crunch underfoot. It leads all the way to an old wooden shed, painted bright green many years ago.

Gilly opens the door, expecting spiders and cobwebs and dark corners. Her face drops, it’s clean and bright. Tools hang in neat rows and on the top shelf is a line of large plastic bottles.

“Don’t touch those, they’ll kill you.”

“How?” says Davy.

“Burn you up, from the inside out - terrible.”

“Straight away or slowly over time?” Gilly stares at the forbidden poison, just in reach.

“Depends.” Grandad grabs the rake and heads back out with Marina at his heels.

“I don’t like this shed.” Davy’s in the corner by the forks and spades. Gilly blocks the doorway.

“Poison could only kill you if someone made you drink it, silly.”

Tears roll down his cheeks. Gilly grabs him, wanting to hug and hurt at the same time. “Why do you always have to cry? You’re such a mummy’s boy.” Then she loosens her grip and he wriggles away, running down to where Grandad and Marina are throwing piles of leaves at each other.

Gilly stands at the shed door, watching her sister open her arms as Davy goes flying toward her. She sees Marina let him bowl her down onto the wet ground and stuff leaves down her top.

“Stupid,” she says.

## December 1979 – The Old Dad

“Firebird is on a secret mission. It has to get to Base. Faster, faster through the river over the rocks, Firebird feels no pain...”

“Firebird is a *car* Davy. New game - you’re ..... a crazy little guy.”

“Crazy. Yeehah!”

“Called, Fernando.”

“Ferr-Nando.”

“I’m a crazy cowgirl. No, craaazy seniorita - Donna Maria Luisa Margarita. I better change.”

Marina runs back inside, into her room and starts pulling clothes out from under the bed. Right at the back she spies one of Lynette’s old nighties. She hears footsteps, someone’s whistling, and as she turns toward the hall, she sees a man’s back and a man’s legs disappear out of view, heading straight toward the kitchen.

She slips into the nightie, smiles at what she sees in the mirror, and runs down the hall toward the sound of a deep voice that she thought she had forgotten.

Gilly and Marina have another Dad.

Everyone knows that Brian is Davy's Dad, not theirs – but no one ever talks about the other Dad. Now, he's sitting in the kitchen, with his back to her, saying, "Have to be a coffee then."

Lynette says, "We're out of that too." Arms folded, mouth small. He stands up, without even noticing Marina in her Donna Maria dress, and walks right up to Lynette. He leans both hands on the kitchen bench with her in the middle. He's no taller than her and he's not fat either, but there still seems to be a lot more of him.

"I like your hair like that."

Marina smooths her own hair. Her fingers get tangled in knots.

"Get out Dan." Lynette whispers but he just laughs. She pushes him but he doesn't budge. She pushes again, he laughs again. Just to prove a point he rocks side to side on his heels a few times, still fencing her in.

"You've changed your perfume." Now his head is moving down to the part of her neck that meets her shoulder and his arms are closing in

fast. She throws her head back and with one hand biffs him under the chin. But he takes his hand off the bench and catches her fist like it's a tennis ball, and he's still laughing. She's not laughing but Marina can hear her breath. She sounds as if she's been running. Where has she been?

Small fingers slip inbetween her own.

Davy's presence gives her courage.

"Dad?"

He turns around.

"Marina!" His smile is for her now.

"Where have you been, Dad?"

It's Lynette's turn to laugh now, and he mustn't like that, because he turns back, puts his other hand over her mouth and presses up hard against her.

Footsteps come running up the hall. Gilly is back from playing down the road with Amy Leonard. She's calling out, can she have a sleepover? Mrs Leonard says it's ok. The sound of her voice is like a switch going off. The other

Dad lets go of Lynette, turns around and his face is different.

Babygirl!" She hangs back, and he opens his arms, "Where's my hug?" Marina knows though - it's been too long and Gilly wants to make him pay.

"Marina's got a hug for me, haven't you darling?" And she does, she goes straight to him. She's been waiting for him to ask and as he swings her around the kitchen Gilly starts smiling too and before long it's the three of them spinning round together.

Lynette grabs Davy and storms down the hall. From the kitchen Marina hears his squeals of delight. "Daddy's got a caravan!"

Their Dad hears it too. "Time to go sweethearts," and before they know it, they're standing at the front door, holding onto his legs. He gives them a kiss and he's off, without looking back or stopping to admire the brand new caravan behind Brian's stationwagon. He's almost at his car when Marina makes a run for him.

“Get off the road, Marina.” Brian’s voice makes Dan turn round. Marina sees her own green eyes looking down from her father’s face.

“Bye-bye Babygirl.” He sweeps her up and she wraps her thin arms around his neck.

“Unbelievable,” Lynette hisses, and when Marina looks up at her mother, she turns away and walks back into the house with Davy’s hand tight in her own.



Thank goodness we’re leaving tomorrow,” Gilly hears Lynette on the phone. “Yes he picked it up today, but I’ll be up all night getting ready.”

They’re not supposed to talk about their real father. Gilly can’t remember how long this has been the case, because nobody ever talks about the not talking, but it probably goes back to Brian. If she ever slips up, Lynette lets her know. A pained look is usually all it takes but if necessary she’ll resort to withdrawal of attention, followed up with extra special attention for Davy.

Dan turns up when he turns up and they don't talk about him when he's gone again.

Davy says, "If he's your Dad why didn't he bring you anything for Christmas?"

Davy's young but he's not stupid and he starts running the minute the words are out. But Gilly is so much faster. His arm still squishes like a baby's arm and it's very satisfying feeling the fleshy bits squeeze out underneath her fingers as she Chinese Burns him.

"One more word and I'll get my Dad to kill yours."

That shuts him up.



The next morning they wake to find clothes at the end of their beds, breakfast cereal poured into bowls and Brian loading bags and boxes of food into the back of the station wagon. They're having their own Christmas this year Up North.

Davy doesn't remember Up North but Gilly and Marina feel sick just thinking about the long slow drive ahead. "Bags a window," they yell at the same time. But Davy has to have a window because he gets car sick so Marina sits in the middle and before they've even left their street they're all arguing about who has crossed whose side.



Afterwards, nobody could remember the trip back home. It was as if all the colour and sound and sensation had been wrung out of the road, leaving the faintest impression that faded in the first light of sun.

The getting there took forever and the being there was its own special world. But at the end of it all, when they were almost all back home again, none of them was quite sure how they managed it.

## 1980 – Living in the New World

Gilly turns 12 on April 3rd. Ivy takes the girls to the movies and then on to a special lunch in town. Gilly chose the film but she didn't want any friends. She's bored with her old friends, they're too young and they're all girls.

Marina doesn't say much, whatever day it is. She has said very little from the moment they found Davy and even less since she saw them put him in the ground. She concentrates on keeping out of her mother's way.

It isn't hard to keep out of Lynette's way. She's like a shady room when you've just walked in from the bright summer light. You can't quite focus on her. Gilly tries her best. She searches her out to ask about changing schools, or whether she can have a black pencil skirt, but Lynette is always just slipping out of the room, or popping out, or needing to have a rest in her bedroom with the door shut and the curtains closed all day.

Gilly and Marina settle into a routine of keeping quiet. Marina is quiet everywhere but Gilly's getting louder when she's not at home. When the food runs out they walk down to the shop and buy meat pies for dinner. Gilly's friends' mothers try and help and they ring Lynette. "Can Gilly come and play, maybe stay the night?" But nobody asks Marina to come for a sleepover so Gilly gets in the habit of saying no. After a while people stop asking her too. She doesn't care. She's got her first boyfriend.



Ivy calls her daughter at 10 o'clock every morning. Lynette lies there, looking at the phone on the bedside table and selects a random number. If Ivy holds on for that number of rings she picks it up and lets her talk.

On one of the days when she does pick up, Ivy gets straight to the point.

"You need another baby and you need to take better care of the two you've still got."

Lynette hears, "You need another baby."

That night, Brian comes home, late again, and discovers both the girls have been packed off to Amy Leonard's.

He goes to the fridge, there's nothing there.

"You can't even replace the food we eat and you think you can replace our son." He pulls a whiskey bottle and a glass out of a cupboard and walks off.

"Where are you going?" She stands screaming in the empty kitchen.

But he doesn't answer. His back is disappearing down the stairs to the rumpus room where Lynette has set up a second television so that she doesn't have to listen to the girls' programmes.

But they do still have sex - more than ever. They don't want to miss a single opportunity to make the pain go away. Sometimes one of them will deliberately hurt the other one, to see if it's still possible to feel. They're starting to like that. But she knows he

expects her to stay on the pill. So when she shows him the blue line running through the little square he is understandably pissed off.

Six weeks later she calls him at work, but she's too upset to talk. They draw together again. She weeps in his arms but not for Davy, for the someone new they can't have. He takes the pills out from the top drawer of her bedside table and throws them in the rubbish. Next month she's pregnant again.

They decide to sell the house. He's making more money than ever and they need a new start. There's a Hacienda style place with a pool that he likes the look of. She gets excited when he tells her how much money he's budgeted for redecorating and they start negotiations. He knows the value of things and he's not about to be ripped off. Two days later she steps out of the shower and one drop of blood falls between her legs to the immaculate white tiles beneath her feet.

“There’s nothing wrong with either of you,” the doctor says later. “You’ve just been unlucky. Exceptionally, unlucky.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Lynette thinks, and on the way home she buys a carton of cigarettes. One day on the radio she hears somebody say that it’s impossible to smell Vodka on the breath. She tries it out for herself but is never quite sure if she agrees. If one drink turns to half a dozen every now and then, she sometimes finds herself waking up the next morning in someone else’s bed. Davy’s bed.

On a very good morning she might even find Brian lying there with her, and they hold on tight together, listening, as the girls in the kitchen discuss who has had the last of the milk that was supposed to be for breakfast.

## July 1987 – The New Order

Gilly gets the call just as she's on her way out to her first lecture. She pauses at the door and looks back at the phone ringing, trying to decipher the intentions of the caller through the tone and vibrations of the instrument. Is it Rob? She wants to leave it but can't.

There was a scene last night. His ex-girlfriend was there. Gilly had seen them before they saw her, through the window overlooking the drive. They weren't touching, they weren't even talking - just sitting there looking at each other. It was unbearably, unforgivably, intimate. But when she'd tried to explain, she'd just sounded stupid, paranoid, young.

"Hello." Sound happy, she thinks, but her hands are shaking and that somehow comes out in her voice.

"Hi sweetheart. It's your favourite man."

It isn't of course, it's her father.

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

“Gilly, I’m back. Why don’t you two come over for a catch up?”

Gilly can’t help feeling this is all Rob’s ex-girlfriend’s fault. If she hadn’t turned up, there wouldn’t have been a fight, and then Gilly would have spent the night at his flat and she wouldn’t have been here this morning to pick up the phone.

“Where are you staying?”

“With your Uncle Kenny.”

“He’s not my uncle.”

“Good as, sweetheart. You know he’s crazy about you girls. But I won’t be here for long though - let’s do this face to face, yeah?”

Dan doesn’t like talking on the phone - too many little ears listening, he always said. Gilly and Marina never understood what he meant by that, were there other children hanging around, muscling in on their time? Gilly used to get quite worked up at the thought of another little girl having what was rightfully hers, but all these years later she knows exactly what he’s talking about and it is nothing to do with other children.

“I’ve got classes all day.”

“Classes?”

“University Dad, I’m doing law.”

He swallows a laugh. “That’ll be handy. Look, you come round to Uncle Kenny’s after your ... classes. I’ll be here.”

Going to Kenny’s tonight is the last thing Gilly wants to do. But once her father has reeled her in, as he just has now, with no effort at all, his voice stops sounding as if it’s asking for something. It’s all, tell, tell, tell. You come to Uncle Kenny’s. I’ll be here.



“Shit.” Marina’s school tights are impressively laddered, probably caught on a jagged bit of fingernail the last time she wore them, although she’s not sure when. That might account for some of those sideways glances in the corridors. There’s another pair somewhere, but she’s pressed for time so when she finds it she rushes to pull them on and in the process

ladders that pair too. The run dominoes from the toe to half way up her thigh in a matter of seconds.

She knows Lynette will have spares; sheer pantyhose, opaque tights, fishnets (unbelievable but true) and bona fide stockings that are held in place with tiny stretchy bits of lace attached to complicated looking suspender belts. They will be gently encased in soft lingerie bags. Some will still be lying intact in their packets. Lynette has a high turnover of that sort of thing, she doesn't like blemishes. But the risk of being caught out by her mother coming back from her Jazzercise class is too great so she opts for Gilly's room instead.

It's been a long time since Marina has helped herself to the contents of Gilly's drawers. Gilly is almost as particular as their mother but not nearly as territorial. Marina stands there in her underwear, uniform in one hand, while the other rifles through the top drawer.

"Looking for something?"

Shit again. "I thought you'd left."

But Gilly doesn't look nearly as pissed off as Marina knows she is entitled to be. She is beginning to wonder whether Rob has secretly lobotomised her sister. She wants to say, who are you, and what have you done with the real Gilly? But instead she says, "I've laddered mine, can I borrow some of yours?"

Gilly walks over, drops her own bag and pulls out the next drawer down, "Hosiery department," she says with a grin. Then she notices Marina's nails. "Well what do you expect, come here."

She sits her little sister on the bed and starts to file the offending nails with an orange emery board. Marina shivers. She knows she doesn't have time for an unexpected manicure but then she has just been caught out, and it's not like Gilly to be so forgiving. But Gilly's got something else on her mind.

"Dad's out, he wants to see us."

"Where?"

"Kenny's."



In profile, Kenny is disturbingly circular. His breasts are pendulous, his stomach bloated and the hair above his lips is soft and thinly spread. His chins concertina down to the spot where deep below lies a collarbone.

“Look at these beautiful girls of yours, Dan. Come and give your Uncle Kenny a kiss darling.” As Kenny has not specified which one of them is darling neither move toward him. Finally, Marina edges forward for a quick peck. He gives her a delighted smile and turns to Gilly.

She hangs back, “Sorry to hear about you and Marie, Ken.”

The smile stays fixed, but he blinks furiously for a second, “That’s old news, darling. I’m enjoying the freedom.”

“Move over, Ken.” Dan is always the man of the house, even in someone else’s home. He’s both solid and lean at the same time and he wraps both his daughters in his arms at once. He smells of Old Spice and fresh cigarettes.

“God you are beautiful, both of you. When did little Marina grow up?”

“Last Tuesday,” says Gilly and everyone, except Marina, laughs.

Dan leads them into the kitchen. There’s a table in the corner overlooking what would be a garden, if it had not been completely cemented over. A rotary clothes line has been pulled out of its base and is hanging half over the back fence. Kenny notes their glances.

“Bloody good isn’t it? Can get half a dozen cars out there at any one time. Neighbours can get stuffed. Called the bloody Council didn’t they? Dobbled me in about building permits and fucking run-offs. I said, listen Mrs, I don’t need you or your fucking lah de dah mates down the road telling me what I can or cannot do on my own bloody property –“

“Nip down the road and get the drinks in, eh Ken?”

“Oh yeah, good idea, won’t be long ladies. And he pulls himself up out of his chair, feels

around in his pockets and then stands there looking embarrassed.

“Ah Dan, I think you’ve got my keys.”

“They’re in the car.”

“Right, right, in the car. Tah mate.” He’s still standing there.

“In the ignition, Ken.”

“Course, yeah,” Kenny slumps off, down the back door steps as the door slams after him.

Dan lights a cigarette. “I hope neither of you ever take up this filthy habit,” absentmindedly blowing smoke into their faces.

“How’s your mother?”

“Same as ever.” Marina peels the cellophane wrapper off the cigarette packet and then throws it back on the table. Dan turns to examine his younger daughter.

She grins and he grins back.

“Boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Good girl.” Then he turns to Gilly, but she stares him down and he laughs.

“Yeah, just like your Dad, you are. Let’s hope old Ken’s not too long with the beer. Family reunion like this doesn’t happen every day does it?” He leans back in the chair so that the front legs are lifted off the floor. “I think I feel a song coming on.” And they’re all laughing now.

When Kenny does return huffing and puffing with a crate of beer and a bottle of white wine for the girls, he’s not alone. He ran into his nephew Joe at the bottle store, and as luck would have it he’d just been paid, so he shelled out for the booze. “He’s a good boy, Joe,” says Kenny by way of introduction.

But Dan couldn’t care less and if anything he’s slightly pissed off.

“No need to go into the gory details Ken, this is supposed to be a party.” He gives him a slap on the back that’s just a bit too hearty.

Joe takes one look at Gilly and says, “It was my pleasure,” depositing himself in the chair next to her.

Gilly leans toward him and in a whispery voice says, "Were you adopted Joe? I can't see the family resemblance."

Dan opens the bottle of wine Joe bought but there's no wine glasses because Kenny's latest ex took them when she left.

"Woulda taken the bed too if I hadn't been sleeping in it at the time." For some reason this sets everyone off laughing, Marina and Gilly clutching their stained coffee mugs that Joe fills with lukewarm chardonnay.

"Did she leave you the tv Ken?" Gilly wipes the tears from her eyes as she asks.

"Nah love, but the pool table was too big to get on the back of her brother's ute, so we're still on for that."

If a round table could have a head it would be the place where Dan sits. He smokes and listens, every now and then puts a hand out to one of his girls. Then he notices Joe topping up Gilly's glass, again. Her third, by his count.

"I don't think so," his voice cuts through the good times.

“You trying to get my daughter drunk,  
Joey boy?”

Joe is 23 but he looks no older than Gilly herself. His tee shirt sleeves are rolled up to his shoulders and he gives his arms an extra flex.

“Nah mate, just being.... hospitable,” he smiles, like it’s no big deal.

“You’re being hospitable to my daughter in my home? Mate.”

A quiet voice carries a long way when the right person speaks. A ripple of muscle runs all the way from Dan’s fingertips to his neck.

Joe laughs, as if he thinks that will help. Kenny examines the floor. Gilly’s eyes shine as she looks from Dan to Joe and back to Dan again. Marina stands up, walks over to the bench and puts her mug in the crowded sink. “Anyone else hungry?”

Dan leans back in his chair. “If you’ll excuse us, gentlemen, I’m taking my girls out. Keys, Ken.”

“Yeah mate, help yourself.” But he’s already got them and he’s out the door. Marina

follows quickly but Gilly can't help but take her time and say goodbye to Joe.

"Gilly!"

"Coming."

Once they're all outside there's a bit of discussion about what to do because Gilly has her car too and it seems a shame to leave it. But there's no way Dan's driving a Daihatsu Mira or even being seen in one for that matter. So he leads the way and they follow him to the pub, where he has another couple of beers and they eat peanuts and chips because the kitchen's closed at night.

"I've got something new lined up, could be big. Might take me out of town for a while though."

"Can I come?" Marina's voice comes out louder than she intended. Dan and Gilly stare at her.

"Don't be ridiculous," snaps Gilly.

"We'll spend some time together when I've sorted things. I promise." His voice is gentle but his word is final.

“Time you got your sister home, Gilly.” He walks them to the car and then stands in the middle of the road with his hand up high, stopping the traffic, so that Gilly doesn’t have to wait to pull out.



Back home, she parks the car and turns off the lights, but neither of them is in a hurry to get out. Marina stares at the house all tucked up for the night.

“Do you ever think about the old house?” she says.

“Which one?”

“The new blue one. The first one.”

“That wasn’t the first one. Just his one.”

Brian raps on the window, startling them both, “Where have you two been? Your mother’s worried sick.”

They laugh.

“Inside now.”

“When did you get so angry about everything, Brian?” Gilly is in no mood to know to another man tonight. She stalks past him, but he won’t let it go and carries on all the way up the path.

“It wouldn’t hurt to call, Gilly. Marina’s got school tomorrow.”

Gilly turns around so that she’s barring him from his own front door. “And now, she’s home.”



The only reason Gilly still lives at home, is because Rob’s taking his time to ask her to move in with him. No point getting a place of her own when she’ll just have to move out again. “He’s not good with feelings,” she says. “But any day now, and I’m out of here.”

She’s left before. The first time she was sixteen. She’d had a huge argument with Brian, after he told her she dressed like a slut.

“That’s strange because I’m wearing Mum’s clothes.”

Lynette sucked in her breath and slammed her glass on the coffee table. “I’ve been looking everywhere for that. Get it off now.”

“You heard your mother.”

“What are you going to do Brian, take it off me?”

Gilly knew how to deliver. There she stood, hands on her hips, dark red nail polish chipped at the edges, silver rings piled up on each finger and long wild curls sizzling on her neck and shoulders. She wore one of those tiny black lycra bodysuits that buttoned under the crotch so that every curve was shown to full effect. Skimming her hips was the same black mini skirt that Lynette usually teamed with a nautical themed designer jacket with big shiny buttons. There was nothing nautical about Gilly.

Brian paused. Gotcha, she thought.

Lynette got it too, and smacked her hard across the cheek.

After a couple of days of Gilly camping on her best friend's bedroom floor and a few anxious calls from the best friend's mother, Lynette came to collect her daughter, and without discussion, they agreed never to mention the incident again. Brian started playing interclub squash, straight after work, twice a week.

A year later Gilly fell in love and moved in with her 27 year old boyfriend. He was a painter/decorator, hired by Lynette to touch up the skirting boards and architraves. He came highly recommended but he didn't use dust sheets. Brian sacked him at 2 o'clock in the afternoon so he had just enough time to pack up, bank his last pay cheque and still collect Gilly after school. They moved into a small flat in an old house with high ceilings and wooden floors. There were only three rooms in the flat and they had sex in all of them. Afterwards, he told her he'd paint the whole thing Spanish cream, make it more homey. He never got round to it.

After a couple of months of that Lynette offered to bankroll her first year at university if

she moved home and passed her final school exams. She asked so nicely Gilly felt like she was doing Lynette a favour. They were starting to get on a lot better. And she missed her sister.



But now that she's been here for a while, it's her mother who seems to want her the most. All of a sudden, for the first time ever, there she is perching at the end of Gilly's bed, wanting to talk, go shopping together, telling her all sorts of things about Brian that Gilly doesn't really want to know.

"Why is she being so weird?" Gilly asks Marina, but she's smiling all the same. And after a while, she starts to think that maybe it's Marina who's weird. "She makes no effort at all," she tells her mother.

When Gilly hooks up with Rob, it's Lynette who is happy for her, Lynette, who sees how perfect he is. She's also a lot more helpful on the issue of what to wear to meet Rob's parents for

the first time and how to deal with his annoying ex-girlfriend who is still in the habit of ringing his flat in the middle of the night to see if he's 'busy'. Marina has nothing to say on any of these subjects. She sits quietly listening while Lynette and Gilly debate the finer points of flat shoes or heels and how important it is not to appear to be too much of a bitch in front of your boyfriend. Gilly has to admit that her mother knows a thing or two about relationships. And they puff puff away, out on the deck, on endless packets of Benson and Hedges, until Brian comes home, when they all pretend that nobody smokes any more.

## Dreams of Vivienne Leigh

Ivy walks through the day room, with its pink walls and fleur de lis dado strip, past the ladies grouped in silent semi-circles on grey washable chairs, alongside the wall with inbuilt shelving that houses the television and board games, all the way up to her husband. He wakes with a start.

“Who are you?” he demands.

“It’s me, dear. Ivy.”

“Are you one of them?”

“No, I’m with you.”

“Something’s going on. I’ve lost my mother.”

“Yes, that was sixty-five years ago, Donald. It’s time for morning tea.”

“Where is she?” Sometimes Donald appears bewildered, sometimes irritated. Today, he is utterly bereft, weeping copious man-sized tears into Ivy’s hanky with the delicate primrose embroidered “I” at the corner. Then he blows his

nose and the scrap of fabric is practically demolished with the force of it.

“No thank you dear, you keep it.”

“Something about a piece of mutton.”

“Pardon?”

“That’s what she said, something about a piece of mutton. For supper.”

Ivy is astonished. She has heard variations of this story for years but the mutton is an entirely new addition. It is so unexpected she wonders if he has had some sort of breakthrough. Perhaps it was the butcher?

“They’re sending me overseas. This may be all we have.” He takes her hand in his, brings it to his lips and kisses it so tenderly she thinks she will cry. Then he stretches back into the left wing of the chair, still holding onto her hand.

“Cup of tea?” she asks

“Lovely, milk, two sugars.”

She should be used to it by now but the fact that her husband should say such a thing to her is deeply hurtful.

“Biscuit?”

“I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“It’s me dear, Ivy.”

“You’re very kind. Do you know my  
mother?”



Years ago there were many ways that Ivy imagined her marriage might end - but this is not one of them. All the old troubles are gone. Was that really them? The past is like a film that she’s already seen. Right now, she is living in someone else’s movie.

As the bus rounds the corner of her street, she finally starts to relax. She pushes the buzzer and stands in readiness to descend.

“Thank you driver.” She has no idea why she continues with this once common courtesy. Man probably doesn’t even speak English. He certainly has no idea how to drive safely. Neither does Ivy actually, but that’s not the point. If she were in charge of a large moving vehicle that

transported the young, the poor, and the elderly,  
she would make it her business to do so safely.

As she walks the 50 yards or so to her  
gate she sighs. Her home is waiting, just as she  
left it, and there is nobody but herself to  
consider. No point calling Lynette. Perhaps  
Marina might help?



“You’re going out? Who’s the lucky man?”

“Grandad.”

“What?”

“Ivy asked me to visit him. Give her a  
break.”

“You’re joking.”

Marina just shrugs and examines her  
eyebrows in the mirror

“It’s Saturday night, Marina, and you’re off  
to visit an old man who won’t even know who  
you are?”

“That’s right.”

“And doesn’t he have a curfew or something. Tucked up with a Milo at 6 o’clock.”

“It’s only for an hour or so.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Marina, you’re 16 years old. Saturday night.”

You could give me a lift. Or come with me.”

“Well I could, if I didn’t have a life. God, those eyebrows need professional attention. Give it here.”

“No, piss off.”

“Language, dear, what would Ivy say?”



In the end Gilly and Rob drive Marina to the rest home and pull up in the most secluded end of the car park while Marina goes inside.

“Take as long as you like,” Rob calls out to Marina, as she walks off, although he’s looking at Gilly as he speaks. “*She’s* different.”

“Come here and say that.”

“Aren’t you a bit hot in all those clothes, Gilly?” She laughs. He’s a tryer.



Donald sits in the armchair next to the window, tracksuit bottoms tucked into socks and his gold watch hanging round his wrist like a bracelet. Marina thinks about the wicked young man laughing in the photograph on Ivy’s dressing table. Here is the big strong Grandad who could throw her in the air – now just another shadow on the edge of her life.

It started the year after Davy died. Little things at first. Repeating himself. Confusing strangers for old friends and old friends for enemies. Obsessing over piles of dead leaves accumulating in the garden, and the constant fear of the military police, until eventually Ivy was too scared to leave him on his own. He would light a fire in the garden, and then walk out the gate, down the road and not come home for eight hours. On one memorable day the old

garden shed burnt to the ground, and the only reason the damage was contained to the shed and the compost bin was a timely Spring downpour that saturated the bombsite. Ivy came home from the shops to discover two fire engines outside the house and a mixture of ash and shell blowing in the wind. The birds stayed away a long time after that.

And so it was that his name detached itself from her grandmother's name. Nana and Grandad, Ivy and Donald - became just Nana, just Ivy. Of course the children weren't told all this at the time. The only way they ever discovered what was going on was by moving so quietly and sitting so still, that adults simply forgot they were in the room and would speak more freely than they should. Marina was particularly good at this.

Very occasionally, after a few drinks to soften her up, Lynette would talk about her father, the man who always won the fathers' race at school. The one the ladies all loved – and yet their husbands never minded. The war hero. The

man's man who was still a wild boy at heart. Blowing a week's pay on the horses and then winning twice that on a game of cards 12 hours later. Taking her out, all dressed up, down to the shops, to collect the Sunday bread. Pausing to lift his hat to every woman they passed on the way. "Good morning ladies. Yes, she is beautiful."

Marina and Gilly loved these stories in the same way they loved the old black and white movies that played on television on a Saturday afternoon. They were just stories, and that grandfather had no connection to the man they remembered pottering about in Ivy's vegetable garden. Once he disappeared from Ivy's house and Ivy's garden altogether they saw him less and less frequently, until they never saw him at all.



"You are the best looking girl I've seen in years."

“Thanks Granddad.”

Confusion wipes across his face. He holds out his hand. “Donald Gordon.”

She shakes his hand “Hello Donald. It’s me, Marina.”

“Lovely name, so unusual. Sit down,” he gestures to the bed. “I knew a Marina once, in the war.”

He looks at her and smiles as if he’s just recognized her. “You look a bit like my mother. She was beautiful too.” The smile disappears. “I lost her when I was very young.”

Unlike Ivy, Marina has never heard this story before. “What happened to her?”

“She went out one afternoon ... never came back. Life’s brutal like that. Smashed her to pieces. How about a drink?”

Nobody has ever offered Marina a drink, apart from one of Gilly’s boyfriends, who thought a Malibu might entice her to take off her school uniform.

Donald gestures to a cupboard on the other side of the room. "Leg's playing up, would you mind? That's right, the bottle too."

Marina doesn't mind at all. She pours him a neat scotch and herself a sherry at his suggestion. He's got quite a little stash in there.

"Ladies always like sherry, bring that one too, save getting up again."

As she sips it she decides it's a lot better than Malibu. She suppresses a giggle. Saturday night and she's out drinking with an older man.

"Do you follow the horses?"

"No." She wriggles further onto the bed, trying to get comfortable.

"Well, that's no good. Not if you want to make something of yourself. You can go anywhere in the world if you've got an eye for a horse. A young lady should have an interest. Do you?"

"Have an interest? No."

He studies the amber contents of his glass intently. "My mother always knew a winner."

Horse just had to show itself in the enclosure and she knew.”

He leans across the small table between them. “She got it from her Dad’s Dad. No one took her seriously at first because she was such a pretty little thing. Rose Red they called her but she was dark like you. She could dance too. You follow the horses?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so.” His voice drops to a whisper, “She wouldn’t say a word till we were back in the stands and then she’d circle the one she wanted and send one of us off to place the bet. ‘This one’s got the look,’ she’d say. Oh, they all wanted to know, ‘Who’s the lovely Rose Gordon backing today, Donnie boy?’”

“Who wanted to know?”

“Her friends. Her enemies. The Foundation.” He grows serious, almost angry, swallows the last of the whiskey and slams the glass onto the bedside table, rattling the bottles. “I’m sorry,” he says, to the glass. Then he looks up at her. “Forgive me, so emotional.”

“What’s The Foundation?”

He looks around and then leans even closer toward her. “They’re everywhere. They pretend to do you no harm, but they’re jealous and they wait and they watch. And when the time’s right they take the thing you love the most. They know I’m here - they think I’m out of the loop.”

“How do you know that I’m not one of them?”

He looks at her in amazement and then bursts out laughing. “You are delightful.” Then he sits back in his chair, arms folded in front of him, one hand patting the opposite elbow. “If the old man hadn’t lost his job at the bank, maybe it would have been different. She did what she had to. She loved us. I suppose your father’s always worked?”

“No. He’s not like other fathers.”

“Do you have a light, box of matches?”

Marina shakes her head, he looks put out. She’s finished her drink, it was only tiny but she doesn’t like to ask for more. But as soon as she

places her glass on the bedside table he is refilling it, already animated about something else.

“So, who’s the little fellow then? He’s a character.”

She looks around, doesn’t know what to say.

“He’s been mucking about for ages but I suppose it was you he wanted all along. Can’t say I blame him,” and he chuckles. “What’s your name then?”

“Marina.”

“Reena, that’s what he meant. Funny little kid, gets so upset.”

Donald puts the bottle down and takes her hand in both of his. His skin is much warmer than hers.

“They never really leave, you know. The ones who love you. People want you to think they do, but they don’t. I’ll tell you about my mother. Rose Red they called her. She was just here but she had to go out. One look at a horse

was all she needed. She'd just know. Do you know what she'd say?"

"This one's got the look."

"You remember! You remember it. Of course," he smacks a thigh with his hand, a smile lighting up his face, "You were there too, I couldn't place you before ... It's funny how some things get mixed up, but others remain ... what's the word?" His voice floats somewhere else.

She would like to stand but her legs are seeping into the soft quilt on the too-hard bed beneath her. Donald stares out the window at something faraway, beyond the rhododendron bushes sloping down to a grey weathered pagoda, with the distant hum of the southern motorway that is just out of view.

"My mother loved green too. Dark haired women look wonderful in green. Vivienne Leigh ..... most beautiful woman in the world. I met her you know, when they were touring here after the war. Do you remember? Course you do. Green satin and a white fur stole, those shoulders .... sensational. And the rest. Shame about her,

wasn't it? He didn't understand her. She was highly strung, like a thoroughbred. Like my mother. Rose Red they called her."

"Grand – Donald?"

"Yes my dear?"

"Tell me about the little fellow." She pours them both another drink.



In the car on the way home Marina keeps quiet in the back.

"So did he know who you were, or not?"

Gilly won't stop pressing.

"Not."

Gilly and Rob look at each other. They pull up at a red light and Rob reaches back from the driver's seat for his jacket that's lying at Marina's feet. She leans down to pick it up for him at the same time. Their faces are almost touching. The backs of his fingers skim across her shins. He breathes in as she breathes out and she realises that he knows she's been

drinking. He looks surprised. The edge of his mouth twitches as if he might smile. His lips are full in the centre but thin at the end. She watches the way they move as he speaks.

“Did you have a good time?”

Marina is so unused to attention from him, or any man, for that matter, that she is unable to say anything at first. But Gilly won't be put off and turns to face her too.

“Has he changed? Did he sing?”

“Sing?” Rob's mouth turns into a full smile which breaks up into a laugh.

Gilly smiles back patiently, but doesn't elaborate.

Marina stares at the rain chasing itself down the car windows. The wipers squeak as they extend out over the windscreen. “No, he didn't sing. He was ok, actually. I think I'll go back again.”

Gilly stares at her sister. She almost looks sad. “I'll come with you next time, if you like.”

“No.” The force of her answer startles them all. Marina backtracks quickly. “You don’t have to hold my hand, I’m ok. And you and Rob have got things to do ...”

Rob reaches over to Gilly and pulls her close to him with his left arm. They stay like that for a matter of seconds before he has to change gears. In the backseat, Marina bites her lip and watches.



Three days later, straight after school, she takes two buses to the rest home. She wanders through a maze of corridors before she finds him in the pink dayroom. He looks at her in her navy blue blazer and grey pleated uniform and starts yelling.

“What are you doing here? The war’s over, it’s over. I won’t go with you. I’m a free man and you’re all bastards. You don’t own me. I’m a free man. ” His voice breaks as tears threaten.

“Stop that at once,” commands an elderly lady in tweed with a battered handbag on her lap. “Father will be home soon, and he won’t want to walk in on this sort of hoohah, will he? After the day he’s had. Pull yourself together, or you’ll be out in the dark.”

A nurse appears and Donald is soothed and cajoled. Six ladies, sitting around the perimeter of the room, speak at once. One of them grabs Marina’s arm as she stands there, uncertain how to make amends.

“I have a theory about you.” Her grey head shakes as she speaks, setting off a similar reaction in her left arm all the way down to her fingers.

“Really?”

She stammers her words but she is determined to speak. “I think we both know what I’m saying.”

“Do we?”

“I take the ferry whenever I come here.”

“Yes,” Marina says. “I like the ferry too.”

“I knew I was right.”



The door slams as Lynette leaves.

“What’s wrong with her?” Gilly asks.

“Pissed off.”

Because?”

I spent my birthday money at an op-shop.”

“And?”

“It was for *new* clothes.”

Then she stands up and slips on a long red coat with black velvet cuffs and hard glittery buttons.

Gilly grins, “Yeah!”

The lining is coming away, but nobody else knows that. Ivy’s going to mend it. And it has a great swing when she walks. She goes out of her way to walk in this coat. It’s the first thing she’s ever owned that makes her feel like a woman. Donald loves it too. And because he loves it she keeps it on the whole time she visits him, despite the suffocating heat. Just in case

anything else she's wearing sets him off and gets in the way.



On a cold Sunday afternoon Marina sits in Donald's room, in the chair by the window, watching the sparrows cling to bare branches in the garden. Davy still loves her. She weeps as Donald tells her. He strokes her head and says, "Of course he does. He's your Fernando." The sparrows swoop into the air and disappear from sight.

And funnily enough, Marina can recall an evening when Rose Red came in to say goodnight before she went out. She wore an emerald gown and sparkly clips in her hair. They didn't want her to go, they tried to count the number of pearls strung around her neck. "Not now darlings, we'll be here all night," and she danced out the door. All she left behind was her perfume hanging in the air and they held on tight to the scent for as long as they could.

“She didn’t want to go.” Donald whispers softly to Marina. “But there were so many parties and she had to.”

Marina nods, “She wanted to be home.”

Tears well up in the old man’s eyes. “Yes, I’m sure she did. Just like your little man.”

Donald eases back onto his bed. He’s tired. She can see him fading in front of her. Like a baby he blinks furiously to keep his eyes open and then, quite suddenly, succumbs. A crumpled copy of Best Bets falls from his hand to the floor. Marina takes the whisky glass out of the other hand and places it on the side table. She watches the involuntary spasms flick through his body as he lets sleep wash over him. Davy used to do that. Perhaps she does too.

She should leave but she doesn’t and the longer she stays the harder it is to move. The heat of the room smothers her. She leans back in the chair, yawns and closes her eyes. How long does she stay like that before she feels it? A soft warm breath on her cheek.

“Come and get me, Reena.”

“Too tired,” she murmurs.

“Take me home.”

She tries to open her eyes, but they’re heavy and resistant.

“Later.” There have been several sherries today already. Perhaps four, maybe more. The glasses are small but she hasn’t eaten since lunch and that wasn’t much. Lynette and Gilly are on a diet and there’s never any food in the fridge.

But he won’t take no for an answer, she feels a tug on her arm.

“Come on.” He’s insistent and the tone of his voice is different. How old is he now? Suddenly she is wide awake and they are there together. He is so small. Of course he hasn’t changed at all. He’s just had his birthday and his hair could probably do with a wash.

She wants to speak but finds she is unable to move her mouth. Love flows through her to where he stands. He stares back. “I’m lonely.”

She hears a thought as it forms in her head. Me too. There is a circle around them, and a straight line connecting them.

“Don’t leave me Reena.”

Grief and something worse shoot off her at all angles. She wants to say, No I won’t, I’ll never do that again, but to utter those words will confirm the worst thing she has ever done. And no one has ever done that, least of all her. So she pours all of her heart into her eyes and hopes he can read it there. The effort of it is a huge strain and she feels her eyes tire again. “Don’t go, don’t go,” she wants to cry. Perhaps she does.

The next time she opens her eyes she looks straight into Donald’s blue gaze. He seems concerned. “I’ve lost my mother,” he says. “Do I know you?”



Lynette isn’t sure how she feels about Marina spending so much time with Donald. Of

course it is wonderful that she wants to get to know her grandfather but ... first of all it doesn't seem normal for a girl her age to seek out an old man who is clearly senile. And then, there is that little voice in her head that keeps saying, but I'm his special girl, not you.

There have been many times over the years when she has longed for her father's shoulder, his easy way of making her feel bright and beautiful. She tries talking about it to Brian, but he never says the right thing.

"Your Dad's your Dad Lynette, whatever."

But that's just it. He isn't. He's someone else altogether.



Marina knows now that ever since that first visit with Donald, Davy has been following her. Not in a horrible way, but a friendly, interested sort of way. Sometimes he's too interested and she wishes he'd give her a bit more privacy, but that's little brothers for you.

And he was never any good at knowing when to stop, so there are times even now, when she just has to shut the door on him and say “Not now Davy, go away.” Except she doesn’t say the words, she thinks them - but it’s all the same to him. Mostly he obliges, but there are times when she thinks she can hear him crying and she relents because she knows how lonely he is. And loneliness is such a terrible thing.

On nights when the rain sounds like gunfire on the tin roof and the wind drags leaves and branches against the windows, she listens out for him, waits for his footsteps up to her bed and the whisper in her ear. “I’m scared of the noise Reens.” And she opens up her heart to him like a big woolly hug that he climbs right in to.

In the morning he is gone of course. But as she stands in the shower, with hot water pouring over her body, bracing herself for the chill of the tiled floor, she can still feel the indentation in her chest where he crept inside as if some remnant of his weight lingers.

She carries this weight everywhere she goes. It is now so much a part of her that she no longer remembers how it is to move lightly through the world. And given the choice she would never give it up, anyhow.



At school, every senior student is required to have an interview with the career guidance councillor. Marina walks down the quiet corridor lined with photos of hockey and netball teams and wooden shields embossed in gold. There's a chair outside the office and she takes a seat. Voices, laughter, and the door opens. A shiny-bobbed girl walks out, straight past her.

"Come in, come in!"

Marina goes in.

The woman looks up with a smile. Behind her is a corkboard plastered with motivating phrases. She's a part-timer, they've never met before. "I'm Glenda. Now, let's talk about you. What are your thoughts?"

Marina looks at the dangly pyramid earrings swinging back and forth, narrowly skimming over an elaborately wrapped turquoise scarf. Glenda's face will not sit still for Marina's eyes. She keeps getting bits of skin, an eye, lipstick bleeding from the corner of the mouth, a flash of turquoise and the swish swish, of the pyramid earrings.

"The most important thing for you to know is that there is absolutely *no pressure* for you to have specific long-term goals at your age. Although it does help." Glenda's hands and arms are doing their own special dance while she talks. "I always say, keep your options open with a broad range of subjects and, this is the important bit, make the most of every opportunity that comes your way. But I'm sure you're that kind of girl anyhow."

Marina forces herself to look at her shoes so that she can hear the woman without distraction. "Yeah."

Glenda quickly re-reads her notes. "Your marks are excellent. You could do anything you

want.” She looks up. “That’s right, you’re Gillian’s sister. Now, she gave herself a good shake-up and look how well she’s doing.”

There is nothing that Marina wants to do, so she does not respond.

Glenda’s voice sharpens, “You know a good attitude will take a person a long way. Talent won’t do it on its own.”

Marina realises that if this was a test, as most things are, she has failed.

“Thank you Marina. Send the next one in please.”



“What do you think I should do with my life?” she asks Donald later that week, over the first sherry of the afternoon. Marina’s quite fond of sherry now - Ivy is getting a little miffed at having to top up supplies so frequently.

Donald sighs and takes a sip from his own glass, “Let’s just get through this damned war. Bloody Japs, there’s some out there,” he points

to the rhododendron bushes. "Better close the curtains. Not many women can wear that colour you know. And where the hell are our boys? We're bloody sitting ducks."

Davy's always playing around in the background trying to get their attention. Sometimes he knocks things over, breaks things. But that's just the way it is with children. No point getting mad at them, Donald always says.

But today is different. "I can't hear myself think with all that racket," he yells at Davy, who's hiding in the wardrobe. "And nobody's pulled the curtain. They can see right in here you know."

Then it all comes out. He tells Marina that Rose Red wants him to meet her tomorrow at Ellerslie Racecourse for the 2 o'clock. She sent a message while he was asleep but they can't let anyone know. Marina will have to wag school but Davy's really looking forward to it. Marina is a bit put out that Donald told him about it before discussing it with her first.

"Course he can come," says Donald. "He'll love it." And because it's another thing that Davy

has never done before, Marina feels she has to agree.

But the next day, when she turns up to collect them, it's too late. "Bloody Foundation heard about it, can't go now."

"Probably just as well," she says.



Marina has become quite proficient at pouring drinks. "Thank you dear," says Ivy, "I'd love one."

It's nice and cosy in Ivy's sitting room, with the last of the afternoon sun reaching in on a wintry day. "Now, something's been bothering me Marina, what's a five letter word for cord, starting with T?"

They sit listening to the soft whoosh of the gas heater and the overloud tick tock of the clock in the hall. "Twine," Marina answers.

Ivy is full of admiration. "So 18 down must be .... stupor. I thought as much."

"What do you know about Rose Red?"

Ivy continues staring at her crossword, but they both know it's finished.

“There was a lot of talk about her at the time. They always make it the woman's fault, don't they? My mother was dead against us marrying when she found out who his parents were. But Donald talked her round. She was his biggest fan in the end, until we had Lynette.”

“But Rose?”

I don't know. All those years he never once mentioned her - and now he can't stop. I don't know if he's remembering or imagining. I always thought he hated her.

“He loves her.”

“Love and guilt are a terrible combination. Why don't you stay for tea? I could do us a nice beef stew.”

## Love

Gilly doesn't really want to be lawyer, but it puts off making any other decisions and keeps her mother happy. Plus, it can't hurt to find out how much a person can legally get away with.

But the law seems so much more real now that she's seeing Rob. Not that he lets it get in the way of anything. But he's not just another student drinking cheap beer and lying in the park. He's third generation legal establishment. His grandfather was the Smythe in Walker Smythe and his father is a senior partner in the same firm - the biggest in the country.

Rob grew up in a mansion in Remuera but his parents have now downsized to the ultimate incarnation of the minimalist white box. They paid a huge amount of money to achieve this level of simplicity. All the family antiques were either given to the children or sold to fund their new passion. Charlotte and Alan are major collectors of contemporary New Zealand art – their walls are covered in it; the downstairs loo

has a Mrkusich and there's an enormous Colin McCahon at one end of the dining room and a Hotere at the other. In between, the glass stretches out for what seems like miles, framing the Waitemata Harbour and Rangitoto Island, as if they too, are examples of exquisite taste. Gilly sits at the table in the dress her mother bought her this morning.

“And what does your father do, Gilly?”

Charlotte has the kind of hair that moves altogether rather than in individual strands.

“He just got out of Mt Eden Prison and he's on the dole.” That's what she wants to say. What she actually says is, “He's a property developer.” In her mind, Brian's image superimposes itself over Dan's, and she hates herself. But, as open-minded as Charlotte and Alan would like to think they are, even nouveau riche is better than repeatedly incarcerated.

Charlotte smiles and changes the subject, “Do you ski? I'm surprised you haven't been down yet Robbie. We thought you'd join us last weekend.”

Rob talks snow with his mother, but his father, Alan, is far too busy topping up Gilly's wine. Taking the time to squeeze the smooth flesh of her arm as he does, with his soft, free hand. His voice drops an octave. "Pulled this out of the cellar just for you Gilly, so let's not let it go to waste." Gilly is careful and continues to smile. She offers no opinions and none are requested.

Later, back at Rob's flat, she cannot believe how much better she feels once she learns to inhale through a rolled up twenty dollar bill to her nose. She says whatever comes into her head, and it's all funny. His replies are either profound or hilarious, sometimes both. She laughs so hard she smashes her head on the glass coffee table. He grabs handfuls of ice out of the freezer, wraps them in his shirt and then sits astride her, pinning her down, while he presses the ice to her head. He says, "What happened to your brother?"

She stops laughing. The ice is so cold it hurts as much as the bruise that's already forming under her skin. She thinks, maybe I

could. But the ice is cutting through the haze, so instead she says, "Later."

Despite the bruise they go out to a bar and then on to a club. But nowhere seems to be good enough for him once they get there.

The phone goes in the middle of the night. He picks it up, mumbles something and then hangs up. She lies there, pretending to sleep as he gets out of bed and walks down the hall to the kitchen. She hears him dialling, but can't make out the conversation. She gets up, creeps down the hall, and stands naked and shivering at the door, listening to his voice tease someone else.



It's concert-time at Greenhill's Retirement Home. Admission is free but there is resentment from some quarters that the television has been turned off. Marina sits next to Donald. On his other side, is Dorothy.

He leans toward Dorothy and says, "Do you know, I'm madly in love with you?"

“We won’t be able to come back if you keep talking,” Dorothy answers in a stage whisper.

He turns to Marina and says, “She’s breaking my heart, this one.”

Donald talks non-stop throughout the performance by the Greenhills Intermediate School Choir. They finish up with *Amazing Grace*, by which stage several of the residents are asleep and one is crying because she’s lost her purse.

“I’m as good as stranded now.”

Dorothy glares at the spindly woman in the long brown socks. “I’ve already told you that we won’t be able to come back if you don’t behave. And that means you too. What will Father say?”

“I’ve lost my purse. Lost my purse.” She yells in Dorothy’s direction, but doesn’t look her in the eye.

Ron shuffles through on his walker and the women fall silent. He is the only other male occupant of Greenhills.

“What’s he doing here?” whispers  
Dorothy. “There’s something wrong with him.”

Ron keeps on shuffling.

Marina looks at Donald and mouths the  
words, “Let’s go.” He rises slowly to his feet,  
reaches out for her and she takes his arm.

“Don’t go,” says Dorothy. “You just got  
here.”

“Just taking Donald back to his room,  
Dorothy. I’ll be back soon.”

“Will you really?”

Donald bends down toward Dorothy. “You  
are a lovely woman.”

She giggles, “Not so loud, you, or Father  
will hear.”

Marina and Donald negotiate pink and  
grey corridors. Along the way they pass open  
doors. Identical rooms labelled with individual  
names are laid out for all to see. Photographs  
hang on walls or hustle each other on standard  
issue shelving. Faded snaps of young men, arms  
crossed, leaning against fibrolite baches. Black  
and white prints of proud mothers with

substantial hairdos and big-eyed babies. Men in hats. There are quilts, pot plants, cards. Like a slow train chugging through the lives of others, Marina and Donald follow the line all the way to the end of the hall and a handwritten sign that says, Mr Donald Gordon.

“I’m a bit tired,” he says to her as she helps him onto his bed.

“You sleep.”

“This isn’t my home.”

She pulls the slippers off his feet and a blanket over his legs. He closes his eyes. “Want to go home.”

Marina feels a tug on her skirt and hears a little voice whisper, “Me too.”



The hospital corridors are too bright and the people around them are too loud. She shouldn’t have had that line before work, but it’s too late now. Gilly feels saturated with noise and colour but her main problem is keeping up with

Marina who is running ahead. Just like her to make things as difficult as possible. And how does she know the way? She's never been here before either. A door swings closed in her face and she bangs on it before she realises there's a switch on the wall that will open it again. She sees her sister at the far end of the corridor disappearing into a room on the left.

By the time Gilly gets there her mother is standing in the doorway, slipping on her coat and wrapping a pink cashmere scarf around her neck. Ivy sits on one side of Donald's bed and Marina stands on the other with her back to the door.

Lynette motions to Gilly and walks her away from the room.

Gilly starts to apologise for not being there earlier but her mother cuts her off – “It doesn't matter now.”

Marina joins them. “Is he going to die? Can't they do something?”

“It's for the best this way. Anyhow, he died years ago, darling.” She fiddles with a gold

earring that Brian bought her after the rugby world cup. The gold has been worked into a small braid hoop, studded discreetly with diamonds. Lynette doesn't like flashy jewellery any more.

Marina's eyes are dark lakes. "You are such a bitch."

Lynette stares. She turns as if to leave and then turns back. Her hand, swift, wide open, makes contact with the smooth skin of Marina's cheek. It happens so fast that if it were not for the sound of the slap Gilly might have missed it altogether.

"All that you know of this man - is what was left behind. Don't you judge me." Then she turns and addresses Gilly.

"I need a cigarette, you stay with them."

"You're coming back though, aren't you?"

Gilly asks.

Lynette doesn't answer. The clip clip clip of her high heels merges into all the other background sounds as she walks down the long

blue corridor, further and further away from her daughters.

Gilly wills her to stop, to turn back, and amazingly she does, her coat flaring beautifully.

“Oh Gilly, Rob called. Give him a ring.”

Then she turns neatly on her heels and walks through the swing doors and out of sight. Gilly puts her arm around Marina who appears to be shrinking downwards and inwards, and leads her back into the room where Ivy has heard everything.

Ivy holds out her hand. At Marina’s touch she lets out a sob. Then just as quickly, quietyens it back down again.

“She’s a hard little bitch dear, she can’t help herself. He was selfish too but there was such a way about him. You had to love him.” She turns Donald’s hand so that his palm faces upwards and places it to her cheek.

“Stop talking about him like he’s dead already.” Marina’s words come out in great gulps of salty water.

A nurse walks in, picks up the notes at the end of the bed and scrawls a series of coded letters they do not understand. Then she goes out, before returning with a box of tissues, which she gives to Marina. Now that Ivy has Marina to worry about she seems to perk up.

“Let’s get a cup of tea shall we? There’s a kitchen down the hall we’re allowed to use.” But Marina doesn’t want to leave.

“You two get the tea. I’ll stay with him.”

They go to leave. Marina sits in Ivy’s chair, her red coat wet with rain. She mutters something under her breath and Gilly pauses at the door.

“Did you say something?”

“I can’t play now.”

“What did you say?”

“I won’t leave you.”

Gilly’s head throbs and she turns away.

Outside it’s howling. The wind is coming in from the sea in a rage, but inside this small room, in the centre of a great sprawling hospital, the sound of the weather is drowned out by the

beep beep ..... beeeep of the machine, and the  
flicker and buzz of the hall lights.

## **Goodbye to Love**

Lynette doesn't speak at the funeral - Brian does. That's the beauty of being a woman in this situation, nothing is expected of you. Just like at a wedding, the women decide what will happen but the talk is all down to the men. Lynette smiles bravely and is thankful for her best black suit.

As she scans the churchyard she is astonished to see two unlikely figures emerge from the church vestry and out into the grey glare. Dan and Kenny. What a ridiculous couple they make. Kenny looks fatter than ever and Dan - Dan is walking over to the girls and both of them return his smiles and kisses as he hugs each of them tight in his big bear arms. He's not wearing a suit but at least he managed a jacket. She holds her head a little bit higher and considers walking over but decides against it. Let him come to her.

From under the brim of her hat she watches him work the crowd. He moves like a

big cat, with controlled energy. They can't see it but she can. He's good when he wants to be, no change there. A surprising number of the old folk acknowledge him. The same people who commiserated with her parents when she ran off with him and then turned up to witness the subsequent christenings. There was no big church wedding to Dan. She was too far gone for that. Her mother was furious that she let herself go so cheaply. Her father - just furious.

Dan moves over to Ivy. She sees her mother in her best blue dress that must be 20 years old, and is curious to know how she will react to the man she once threatened with an electric eggbeater when she caught him naked in her 17 year old daughter's bedroom. Ivy is so white her eyes look like dark holes. Her smile doesn't fit her face. Dan opens his arms and Ivy allows herself to be held, briefly. Dan murmurs something; Lynette can't hear what, and Ivy smiles, really smiles. What a bastard. Then he gracefully lets Ivy move on to the next person

and looks up, past all the others milling around, and straight at her.

Yes she thinks, reading his thoughts. I do look good Dan, don't I? She gives him her best uninvolved smile and turns to welcome an old man from the RSA with an unexpectedly warm kiss on the cheek. He is quite chuffed with this display of affection from Donald's little girl, amazed that she remembers the lemon sherbets he used to put her way.

And here's Dan, at her elbow. "Sorry about the old man, Lyn. I know you two were tight."

She turns sharply. Is he laughing at her? She finds no evidence of it in his face and softens. Apart from her mother, he is the one person here who truly knows how much she loved her father. The man who took her away from him.

"I'm surprised to see you here. It's not as if you two ever got on." They stand close, speak quietly but do not look at each other. The air is heavy with expectant rain.

“I’m here for the girls. Marina’s pretty cut up.”

Softness evaporates. “She’ll be fine.”

“She’s not like you, Lynette.” His words are flat and without judgement.

She sneaks a look at him and thinks, how strange that some faces, like Brian’s, get puffy with age, whereas others, like his, get thinner, harder, darker. He turns toward her. His eyes look greener than she remembers.

“Do you want me to leave?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Alright, darling?” Brian appears at her side, puts his arm around her waist. She turns her body toward his - only slightly - but enough to make the point.

“Dan was just leaving.”

But he doesn’t, not straight away. Instead he pats Brian on the back, “Good speech, mate,” and slips a fast kiss on Lynette’s cheek.

“You look great in that hat.”

“Fuck you.” She smiles. She is starting to remember many, many, instances such as this

when he could make her lose her composure. She can tell Brian is startled to hear her speak like that in public; she's a bit startled herself. He will need to be reassured later, that her swearing at another man - her ex-husband of all men - does not constitute a betrayal of some kind. God, as if she doesn't have enough on her plate right now.

"Mum, they're ready to take the coffin to the graveyard, are you coming?" Gilly appears between her parents.

"Of course, darling." She sweeps her daughter under her arm with a look directed at Dan that says, "Mine." And then she gives him another look. The old look.



From a distance the cars seem to creep over the hill, but as the line gets longer and moves closer the swelling numbers seem to have a proportionate impact on the speed of the cortege. And the sum truly is greater than the

parts of the whole. Even an insignificant battered Toyota takes on a kind of grace on a stage such as this and in the company of so many others.

Ivy travels with Lynette, Brian and Marina, first behind the hearse. Rob drives Gilly and all the rest flow behind. After the burial there is a discreet scramble to parked cars as the rain starts to fall. There's no ritual in the drive back to the wake, they're all ready for a drink, something decent to eat. Everyone knows Donald's daughter will do him proud. There's no stinginess in that family.

But when the guests arrive at the house, they're let in by the caterer, there's no sign of the family at all. Nobody really minds too much at first; there's plenty to eat and drink and enough comfy chairs for all the old soldiers and their wives and it is also a bit of an excuse to have a nosey round Brian and Lynette's new place. She's done well for herself.

After close to an hour of this though, some of the guests are getting restless - they haven't come to pay their respects to each other. And

these things take it out of you. Some of the more frail visitors decide to take their leave, disappointed, perhaps a little offended. There was no reason to stand for so long in a wet cemetery when so many of them had made the effort to be here. And a few of those ones do file out; past the polished sideboard with the heavy framed photographs, and they pause at a particularly beautiful shot of a little boy in a yellow tee-shirt laughing back at them.



Davy's grave is quite a bit further down the hill from Donald's. Lynette has never really got over the fact that he is here all alone. She wanted to buy a family plot after he died, but they don't do those anymore. So there is room on his headstone to add her name, and Brian's, and when the time comes they'll all be buried together.

She's glad it's raining. It should be raining. She has a sudden desire to roll down the hill, an

urge to smother herself in the long wet grass of grief. Her Dad used to take her to North Head and they'd jump on bits of old cardboard and go screaming down the mountain together. Ivy never came because she couldn't stand the way they always chose the steepest, most dangerous parts to throw themselves down. She never understood how much they loved the speed, the wind behind them, the sea beneath them and that point when it all overtakes you and you go rolling over and over and the long grass just keeps on coming up to meet you. Lynette was never scared of anything when she was with her father. The only thing that frightened her was the thought that he might leave. But he didn't, she did.



Gilly sits in the car with Rob while they all wait for her mother to come back. Brian's gone too. He went looking for Lynette half an hour ago

and is yet to return. Ivy and Marina wait in the other car, on the far side of the car park.

The rain slams the roof. The windows are all steamed up; it's impossible to see anything. Gilly feels as if she is in a submarine, sealed off from the world, diving deeper and deeper away from surface light. Her body feels too heavy, when all she wants to do is float. All she wants to do is lose herself and cut herself free. But not from him.

He turns to look at her and traces a finger from her temple, down across her cheekbone, along the line of her nose and softly down to her mouth. Her lips part. His finger pauses then continues down to her chin. Then he stretches his hand till it spans all of her neck and he holds it there while he climbs across from his seat till he's practically on top of her and his mouth is on hers. There is no part of her that is not open to him. Her last thought before her head stops engaging altogether, is this, whatever you want to know, now is the time to ask me. But he doesn't want to talk.

The rain is so loud you could bury yourself in the noise and there would be nothing but water on glass all around you but still nobody would hear you or see you or find you. They could be lost together forever. Rob is pulling at her clothes, or maybe she is, their bodies are all tangled up, it's hard to distinguish which part of them is his and which is hers. But now his hand is very definitely his hand and it is inside her. He's not gentle and it should hurt but it doesn't.

“What the hell are you doing?”

The wind and the rain swoop in on them as Brian stands there, door open, hair darker than usual, slapped down by the rain. “It's your bloody grandfather's funeral Gilly, why here of all places?” He drags Gilly out of the car, “What's wrong with you?” He yells as much to be heard over the rain as anything else.

“There's nothing wrong with me,” she screams back. “I'm still alive.” He takes two steps back as if she's hit him and then grabs her by the arm. “I've had it with you.”



After the service, outside the church, Ivy had been swamped with people wanting to speak to her, offering words of sympathy. Words are the expected thing. But Marina knows how to be silent. To just, be. But the time for peace has passed. Where the hell is Lynette? Fifty of her oldest friends, a number of whom had known Donald rather too well, are waiting at his wake, and here she is tapping her fingers in Brian's flash car. If ever there was a moment to look those women in the eye and claim him back forever, now is the time. And as for the men, Donald misbehaved on behalf of everyone, no wonder they loved him. The raucous laughter that dried up the minute she walked into a room, followed by the furtive looks while everybody talked about the perfection of her trifle.

"What are they doing?"

Marina says nothing. Ivy sees tears sliding down her granddaughter's face. She wishes that

the words to soothe came easily to her, but that was Donald's gift.

“Here's a clean hanky. I don't care what anyone says, they're much better than tissues.”

She gets a smile for her efforts and feels quietly pleased, but only for a second, because she is seriously, seriously, worried about being so late.

Far away on the other side of the car park Ivy can see Rob's car. The rain is pouring down and Lynette's taken her umbrella. She could run over and ask them to take her back – but she's just had her hair set and she wanted to look nice for Donald.

“Marina, I just can't wait any longer. Run over for me and ask them to drive me back, there's a good girl.”

Without a second thought Marina is out of the Mercedes and running along the gravel path, red coat flapping. She holds her head down, watching her step, uncertain in the high heel shoes Gilly talked her into wearing. A man's shouting, Gilly's screaming back. And with the

rain nearly blinding her she's practically knocked down by Brian dragging her sister back to the Mercedes.



“Just get in the car and shut-up, you selfish little bitch.” The door slams. The car starts and then screeches to a halt just before the gates where Lynette emerges clutching Ivy's umbrella. Marina watches the silver machine disappear into the distance. She feels the lightest touch in the small of her back. She turns, Rob stands in front of her. Wet to the skin.

“Looks like it's just you and me.”



Gilly is half naked and dripping wet and the leather upholstery is cold against her skin. Her mother turns to look at her, opens her mouth and then closes it without uttering a word. Lynette then puts her hand to her own hair,

stroking as if to comfort a small child. Her wedding ring is loose on her finger.

“If you’re not careful you’ll lose that.” Ivy’s noticed too.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Gilly screams at Brian. “What is wrong with you?” He is silent, his profile impassive, but his grip tightens on the steering wheel.

“Do you have any idea how late we are, Lynette?” Ivy’s fingers tap, tap, tap on the arm rest.

“Oh Mum, not now.”

“This is not about her,” Gilly turns on her grandmother.

“This is not about any of you, or me, or Davy.” Ivy waits for an apology. They drive on in silence.



Marina steps into Rob’s car trying to avoid Gilly’s underwear on the floor.

“Give me your coat.”

“That’s alright.”

“You’ll be more comfortable.” As if to prove a point he starts unbuttoning it himself.

“Jesus it’s freezing. Get some heat on.”

He smiles at her reaction. “Not you, I meant the heater.” He laughs to himself and they drive off into the rain. He fiddles with the tape deck and the car swerves slightly. Her hand instinctively shoots out to his arm.

“Don’t worry Marina,” his voice is running all over her. “I’ll look after you.” She closes her eyes and lets the bass from the stereo drown him out. The car slows down as he pulls into a lay-bye, tears are pouring down her cheeks - but she’s still got her eyes closed. He doesn’t say a word but winds his arms around her and she cries with her whole body.



“You two took your time.” Gilly’s changed into dry clothes and done something with her hair. Her sister, head down, runs past her along

the corridor to her room. He takes Gilly in his arms. "What's wrong with her?" she asks.

"Nothing - except that her Grandfather just died and her entire family left her alone at the cemetery. Any chance of a drink at this wake?"



Marina takes off her wet clothes and pulls on her pyjamas. Little boy pyjamas Gilly calls them. Blue and white checked flannel trousers and a teddy bear on the top. She climbs into bed and pulls the covers over her head. In her mind she is screaming, but nobody passing her door on their way to the bathroom would hear a sound. She is running in the dark, breathing hard. If she stops the trees will swallow her whole, absorb her entirely, until she becomes as hard and dense as the wood itself. And if anybody tried to find her they would have to hack and hack and hack, all the way through to the sweet sticky sap, and still they wouldn't find her

because she would be nothing but splinters flying  
in the night air.

They won't come back. She knows it now.  
She's tried for days but they're gone for good.



Ivy sits surrounded by her oldest friends.  
They fuss and gently chide her for not eating.  
And as they do, she ticks off their treachery one  
by one. Brian brings her a cup of tea.

"You're a good boy," she says, patting his  
hand. And she takes a fancy little cake from a  
tray that a stranger holds out to her. Everyone  
smiles.

Gilly's young man is talking to Lynette. So  
Marina must be back. And then the woman who  
spent ten years trying to get Donald to leave her  
comes up and kisses Ivy on the cheek and says,  
"If there's anything I can do."

"You've done more than enough already."

The woman, she has a name but Ivy doesn't care to use it, smiles and says, "He's free now."

"He always was." And then she says to nobody in particular, "You know I think I'd like a sherry." And just like that, one appears.



Brian has lost count of the number of men he has seen Lynette touch today. Not shake their hands thanks for coming touching, but stroking their collar, what a beautiful suit touching, or, give me a hug before you go, that's right a proper hug, my god you're all grown up aren't you? Not to mention his personal favourite that she is presently unleashing on her own daughter's boyfriend - I don't need a chair, I'll just squeeze in here with you, thigh to thigh and a light hand on his knee. That sort of touching. Gilly's not speaking to him. Lynette's not touching him. Marina has evaporated. He wants to smash something.

“So Brian, what are you driving these days?” Some bastard who knows his wife.

“It’s called a car, mate. Think I need another drink.”



Rob lies in bed until he hears Brian leave for work and then makes a run for the bathroom. As he walks back he wonders which room is Marina’s. Gilly’s parents have the whole of the second floor to themselves - Lynette gave him a tour last night, Christ, what an embarrassment she is. He opens a door, it’s an office, another leads to the living room. There is one door left. She must be behind it. He can’t stop thinking about her. She’s so young and so fucked up. Not a good idea. But that’s the way he likes girls.



Lynette has a headache that has overrun her whole body. She has one hand on her

forehead and the other holds the phone to her ear while a woman from her daughter's school yaps on and on.

“We thought you might have forgotten to let us know. That she wasn't coming in. To phone. Sorry, should have said, it's Kirsty. Just calling from the school.”

Lynette reorders the words in her own head until they make sense and then slowly formulates an answer. “Yes, it was her grandfather's funeral yesterday. We're all very upset. They were close. We all were.”

The yapping recommences and she puts the phone down. Her head sinks back into the pillow and then is up again as her stomach protests. She runs for the toilet and as she stands there vomiting into the bowl, wonders how she managed to get those bruises on her knees. Then she goes back to bed and lets everything else wash away while sleep makes it all better.



Gilly wakes up alone. It's as if Rob was never there. She starts to doubt her own memory. There is a trick she knows, she tries it now. Forcing her mind back as far as it can go. Down long corridors with linoleum floors and wet raincoats on hooks above schoolbags. Back further still - even beyond Davy - to a red trike with yellow handlebars and Marina standing behind her on the little blue trailer, her hands on Gilly's shoulders. The freedom of the street before them.

I wonder if she remembers, she thinks, as she gets out of bed, opens her door and walks down the hall toward her sister.



Someone has come. Storming through the trees to reach her. He can see her in the darkness. Finally, somebody has noticed. Strong, warm hands, ripping her out of her wooden shroud.

“What are you wearing?” he whispers.

She watches his lips as he says the words. He starts to laugh, he’s always laughing. She has never known anyone with so much to laugh about.

“Take it off then,” she says and that makes him even happier. The teddy bear top has gone and the blue and white checked trousers are disappearing too. Then he stops.

“Did you hear that? Shit.”

But she’s dreaming of flight, soft wings in the air, “You found me,” she says. And Gilly walks through the door.

## Gilly

Gilly always knocks on her father's door. She never knows what she'll be walking into and she doesn't necessarily want to know. She can hear music, voices - he's got someone with him. She bangs on the door and calls his name. When he finally appears she sees at once that this was a mistake. It's all over his face. She stands there, with her bag at her feet, hope draining away with every second that he doesn't invite her in.

He comes out of the house, closes the door behind him and says, "What's going on, Gilly?"

"I can't stand them. Can't stand being there. Especially now." There is a silent please that accompanies her words.

"Sweetheart, your mother -"

"- Couldn't care less... Can I stay or not?"

"Yeah, of course, it's just..."

But he's already said what she wants to hear and she's through the door. She goes down

the hall into the lounge, throws her bag to the floor and sinks into a chair. It's still warm. There are two wine glasses, new ones, on the coffee table. Cigarette butts, plastered in lipstick, in an ashtray. Poking out from under the couch, like a shadow on the rug, Gilly spies a single black silk stocking.

“Shall I go out and come back later?”

The relief on his face is all the answer she needs.

“I'll just get a drink of water.”

He trails her to the kitchen. “You know, maybe this isn't such a good idea. I don't know how long I'm going to be here and then there's your mother, and Marina taking off...” His voice trails off and she thinks how very unlike him that is.

For a moment she considers pleading. But she's had enough humiliation. So she strings him out as she slowly pours herself a glass of water, drinks every last drop and puts the glass back on the bench with exaggerated care.

“Gilly, we're on the same side here.”

She doesn't answer. Her main goal is to get out of there without crying, although it may be too late. She turns her back to him to leave, and as she does, she has an uninterrupted view out of the side window, across a sea of concrete to a row of cars without number plates, a two-tone combie van and, right at the end, a late model silver Mercedes.

It takes a few seconds to process what she's seeing. "She's here?" Pushing past him, moving toward the hall, toward the bedrooms. He grabs her arm and swings her back to him. He's not rough but he's serious.

"I love you Gilly. I love both you girls. But there are some things that are none of your business. You should know that by now." He has the same tone to his voice that he uses on dogs and people in shops who aren't fast enough.

Her tears are spilling out now. She doesn't know why she cares, but she does. She runs back down the corridor out the front door and toward her car. While she's pulling her keys out of her jacket pocket and trying to find the right

one, she hears him coming up behind her. She wipes her eyes and nose on the back of her sleeve so she can look a little more dignified when she tells him that there is no way in hell she's staying with him now. His hand's on her shoulder, steering her around toward him. A soft voice now. "Babygirl."

She hates herself for crying into his chest and then she hears it. The thud of her bag dropping to the road. She pulls away and looks to the ground between them.

He puts his hand to the back of her neck, tilts her toward him and kisses her on the forehead, "Save you coming back for it."



She gets in the car and starts driving. She doesn't know where she's going but she drives as if she has a purpose anyway. Is this how Marina felt? Who's looking after you now, sister? Bitch. And then her face crumples up and she misses the turn-off she meant to take and

somehow finds herself heading into the city. As she negotiates roadworks and pedestrians she realizes she is just one block away from Brian's office. She can see the building from here, it's all glass and big concrete pillars. She's never been inside, but she dropped her mother off at a drinks party last Christmas. Her foot has decided to hit the brake and her left hand finds the indicator. Whatever happens now will all come back to this foot and that hand. Gilly's heart races at the thought of so much pain at her disposal.

She pulls into a car park marked Reserved. A quick glimpse in the mirror reveals weeping mascara and a shiny nose but she is trained to be prepared for this sort of thing and always carries the necessaries. Then she fluffs her hair and swings her long legs out of the small car. Two men in suits walk out, their eyes move from Gilly's legs, to her car and back to Gilly's breasts. Smiles all round and one of them stops to open the door for her. Without looking back she knows he stays to watch her walk all the way to the receptionist's desk.

Brian comes running out to meet her.

“What’s happened? Have you heard from her? Is your mother alright? Does she need me?”

Gilly’s feels sick. “No, no, I haven’t. She .... I just...”

He looks bewildered. Gilly examines her watch strap. “I just wondered ... if you know where Mum is?”

“I think she’s gone to see how your grandmother’s holding up.” He stares at her while she looks at anyone or anything but him. “So that’s all you wanted then?”

Gilly nods as she moves to the door.

“Sorry, Brian.”

And by the time he answers she’s already outside but she can still hear him reply, “For what?”

She gets back in her car, reverses out of the driveway at high speed and narrowly avoids hitting a courier van. And then, while she makes her way to the restaurant, early for once, wonders where she can score something to take the edge off the way she’s feeling.



Gilly has never been short of boyfriends. They replace themselves all on their own. All she has to do is turn up at a party, or a bar, or someone's flat and before the end of the night there's a new man with her number, ringing her the next day. She knows girls who go months at a time without seeing anyone. Gilly's anxiety levels start to spike.

And there's another feeling muscling in too. Every time she starts thinking about what happened, it resurfaces. It is a feeling she recognises from a long, long time ago. Something she thought she had buried away, but it was obviously a shallow grave. And her own sister kicked up the dirt and let it back in the world.



After the last customers have finally left, Gilly and the other waitresses sit round drinking in the bar with the remaining kitchen staff. Then they all head out to a club. Gilly moves slowly through the hot, crowded room, smiling at no one in particular, but getting a lot of friendly attention in response. Everyone looks happy, she thinks, and then realises she probably does too. The DJ's cranking up her favourite song. Everyone else can feel the beat. The last time she heard it she was in bed with Rob. She's knows she's had too much to drink which is possibly why she decides it would be a very good idea to call him. Just to tell him what a complete bastard he is. And hopefully disturb anything new he might have going on.

The phonebox is outside the toilets but there's a queue lined up behind a girl who is crying into the phone. Gilly looks at her and sees someone she doesn't want to be. So she grabs her jacket from the coatcheck and heads out the door. Her car is just around the corner. She really shouldn't drive, but she usually does. Then

she trips on a paving stone and one of her shoes slips off. She goes back to get it and finds herself directly outside a bar where a woman is trying to eject a middle-aged man who can hardly stand up. He's got his back to Gilly and the woman sees her standing there and rolls her eyes.

"What? What's your problem?" He's clocked the look. And before he even turns around, Gilly's heart dives toward the pavement. It's Brian.

They sit in the back of the taxi in silence for about 20 minutes. Then, when the driver has given up on getting anything out of either of them and turned up the volume on talkback radio, she hears her stepfather quietly say her name. He repeats it and she turns to look at him.

"Did you get hold of your mother?"

"No."

"But you know where she was?"

"No."

He leans over, grabs her by the wrist and slowly and deliberately twists her skin between his thumb and index finger. "You used to do that

to Davy all the time, didn't you? What's the matter, Gilly, you can dish it out but you can't take it?" He drops her wrist back into her own lap and then wraps both his hands around her head, jerking her face up to his. She doesn't fight him, doesn't pull away. Her body weight is cupped between his hands. He smells of beer and cigarettes, even though he doesn't smoke. He looks at her as if she is the wrong part of a map.

"I've always wondered how you could let it happen? You were the oldest."

The car slows as the driver negotiates a traffic island.

"No Brian, you were."

His eyes widen and he lets her drop. She resists the urge to rub her jaw. He stares at her, illuminated by streetlights intermittently flashing through the sunroof. "Christ, you're her all over aren't you?" On the radio the talk has turned to domestic violence and the driver turns the volume up.

"She thinks she can treat me like this? After all this time. After everything I've given her.

And now when it's all going down the pan she does this, with him. The bitch." He turns away.

Gilly doesn't want to hear him say it. Would rather hear anything else than have him tell her what happened this afternoon.

"I knew the minute she walked in the door. I had to force her to tell me who it was. Not exactly someone you'd want to advertise, is he? Your Dad."

The taxi driver pulls into their driveway and before he's even turned off the engine, or the meter, Brian opens his door, leans out and vomits down the side of the car. Then he lurches out, picking his way through his own mess, before walking into the full glare of the headlights, arms outstretched. He turns back and blinks, "She'll sort you out for the fare," and then staggers off.

Gilly hands over the remains of her tips for the night and tells the driver to keep the change.

When she gets inside she can hear Brian stomping about upstairs. He's yelling at Lynette but she's not saying anything back. Nothing that

Gilly can hear anyhow. She pushes a chest of drawers in front of her bedroom door and then pulls a small blue suitcase down from the top of the wardrobe. It's covered with stickers from somebody else's travels. Wrapped around the handle is her favourite – Destination LAX. She smiles to herself, unzips the bag and reaches into a side pocket where she finds the small plastic bag she's looking for. Tomorrow, she tells herself, she's out of here. But right now she needs something else and this is all she's got. And she pulls the mattress onto the floor, rolls herself a joint, then lies back and inhales.



Someone's banging on the door. She rolls over, covers her head with her arms and grunts her irritation. The banging continues and now somebody's calling her name.

"Go away." Her voice is muffled, barely loud enough to hear herself.

"Open the door, please ...please."

“Leave me alone.”

“She’s left Gilly, she’s left us both.”

She hears his body slump against the door and then slide to the ground. The door reverberates to the beat of his body convulsing in tears. “The bitch, she’s really gone.” Gilly blinks, instantly fully awake and yet not able to move from her mattress on the ground. Dry eyes wide open.

“You knew didn’t you, you knew what she was doing?” He rages at her before the banging on the door starts again. “Is she with him now, are they waiting for you too?”

A deep sigh slips out of her mouth. She hauls herself up, drags the chest of drawers away from the door, and as she opens it he falls into the doorway at her feet.

“No, they’re not.” But she can tell he either doesn’t believe her or no longer cares whether she speaks the truth or not.

She makes bacon and eggs which they both eat too quickly. The taste of salt hangs around long after the food is gone. Then she

pours hot, strong tea into two mugs, and sets one in front of him. As she goes about the motions of preparation, cooking and cleaning, she feels her resentment grow. I'm supposed to be the child she thinks. Except of course she's not anymore, and they both know it. How can I leave home, she thinks, when my mother and my little sister have already left first?

The phone rings and he runs for it. But as soon as he answers she can see his face fall. He doesn't even bother talking, just drops it to the ground and Gilly has to scoop it up off the floor, untangle the cord and then explain to her grandmother what's going on. Ivy wants to talk but Gilly says she'll have to ring back later.

Brian's fading, barely able to hold up his head. She says, "You go to bed, I'll wake you if she calls."

And as he trundles off, he stops in the doorway, turns back and says, "Thanks, Gilly." She counts the thud of each footstep as he climbs the stairs. Waits for the sound of the door closing behind him. Counts again in her head,

until she thinks it's safe. Then she shuts her eyes and sinks to the floor, welcoming the chill of terracotta tiles through acidwash denim.



She finally hears Ivy's news later that afternoon. Marina called. She's safe and well but she doesn't want to see any of them. Ivy's still worried but Gilly's not. As long as she's not with him. Bitch.

Gilly says to herself, well, I'm alright. I've ditched Rob and I don't have to deal with Mum or Dad anymore. Brian's a basket case, but I can handle him. I'm the only one that's got it together.

She runs a bath, pours herself a glass of wine, floods the tiled floor and stays in there for half an hour. When she gets out she pours herself another glass. Then she drags the chest of drawers back in front of her bedroom door before lying down on the mattress and smoking another joint.

Eventually she decides that her mother has not left at all. Brian's always getting things wrong and this is just another example of his hopelessness. There is no way she would have left without telling Gilly first. And why would she leave when she could just kick him out?

What would she take, if she really was leaving? Apart from Gilly. Suddenly, she remembers an electric-blue silk dress that Lynette wore to Marina's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday last year. Such a beautiful dress. It was all anybody talked about.

Gilly slips on a robe and goes upstairs. Brian's finally gone out; she's got the whole house to herself. I could have a party, she thinks. But she can't think of a single person she'd like to invite. The wardrobe doors are open, most of the clothes still there. It's obvious, she must be coming back. Gilly runs her hand along each garment, disturbing the perfume embedded in the fabric. But she can't see what she wants. Perhaps it's at the back, she thinks, and she

starts pulling out dresses, jackets and sundresses. It's not there. She could weep.

She pulls every single item of clothing out of the wardrobe. Pulls down boxes from the top shelf and empties the contents onto the floor. Pulls out and turns over every drawer in the room. Any hint of blue is hunted down. But it's not there. Finally, under the bed she finds a shoe box. It's too small for most dresses, but this one is so sheer, so delicate, that if you folded it with care it would collapse into almost nothing at all. Hah! And she opens the lid and finds herself staring into the beautiful face of her baby brother, cradled in her mother's arms.

"That's my box," says Brian, standing at the door.

They go back down to the kitchen and this time he makes the tea. Gilly considers apologising or at least explaining, and then decides that she just can't be bothered. She imagines herself saying, I was looking for a blue dress and I thought it might be in a shoebox

under your bed. Despite the terrible way she's feeling, she finds herself giggling and can't stop.

Brian ignores her and stands with the pantry door open, looking pissed off. "There's never any bloody biscuits in this house. I work night and bloody day and I can't even get a bloody gingernut for Christ's sakes. Selfish bitch." He slams the door shut, or at least he tries to but the force of his action is too great and it just swings back out at him again.

Gilly lifts her head and can see him seriously consider hitting the door. Go on, do it, she thinks. And then another little voice in her head chimes in. Fight, fight, fight. All of which starts up the giggling again. But this time it's catching because Brian laughs too and they carry on hysterically, until the kettle boils and he pours the tea.

When they are both sitting down, Brian opens the box, and slowly lays out the contents on the table. More photos, a red matchbox car, a soft curl tucked into an envelope, and a newspaper. Gilly picks up the paper and looks at

her stepfather. "From the day he was born," says Brian. "You won't remember back that far, you were so young." Gilly looks at the date, strokes the paper and thinks about the white tin letterbox on a pole that this paper must have sat in. She thinks about the soft green grass on the lawn surrounding the letterbox and the way it seemed to be out of bounds for months and months while they all waited for it to grow. She sees the front door always open and the shagpile carpet that was luxury laid out to them. She remembers the servery between the kitchen and dining room and how ingenious they all thought that was. Remembers the three of them, lining up, placing orders for breakfast, as if they were in a fancy cafeteria.

"No," she says, "I don't remember."

## Making Honey

Money is tight. There'll be no more motels with pools and soon there won't even be enough for a tank of petrol. Paul and Marina pick the last crumbs of savoury muffin off the plate and make their way out of the café. On the pinboard by the door, they both see it at the same time. A small notice, written in purple felt tip pen: Home Help Wanted: childminding, painting/decorating, beekeeping. Around the border someone has drawn an elaborate daisy chain. Above each "i" is a love heart, where a dot would do. The contact name is Aurora.

Ten minutes back down the road is a bright yellow post box at the end of gravel road that winds past a stream, up over a bridge and then out of sight of the main road. Eventually Paul and Marina pull up outside a bungalow painted lavender, with a deep blue trim on the sills and eaves. The roof is a soft mossy green. A water tank is painted to match.

Lying in a hammock, under a tree in front of the porch, is a black haired woman breastfeeding a baby. She swings her legs out of the hammock and walks over to greet them, baby still attached. Paul makes a concerted effort to stare at her face.

“She smiles, “Are you looking for honey or skin products?”

“We’ve come about the job.”

“Which one of you is interested?” The woman detaches her nipple from the baby’s mouth and places her daughter over her shoulder. She pats the child’s back and a giant burp erupts. She murmurs her approval, and only then does she pop her breast back into the folds of her dress. By this stage Paul is showing a huge amount of interest in the knots of the rope hammock and the tree trunk to which it is tied.

“We’re looking for a job share situation. If you’re open to that?”

“I’m open to most things.”

Now that Paul feels comfortable enough to look at her, he finds he is completely unable to speak. She holds out her hand, "I'm Aurora."

They introduce themselves and start to explain their situation but just then a young boy comes running out of the house. He veers away from Paul, zooming in on Marina. "Do you want to play swingball? I'll go easy on you."

Marina laughs and says, "I'm the queen of swingball, so I'll go easy on you." And, after a quick glance at his mother, she lets him drag her off around to the back of house.

Aurora takes a long look at Paul. He feels the heat creep up his neck toward his brow. "Someone wasn't very nice to you. Why don't you come inside with me?"



He sits at a round table in a square room that looks out onto varying shades of green; fields, trees, hills that steadily merge into mountains. Aurora stands with her back to him, her finger

slowly tracing a line along a shelf until it comes to rest. Outside he can hear Marina and the boy laughing and the sound of the tennis ball pounding from bat to bat. The baby lies wrapped up tight in a moses basket at her mother's feet.

Aurora walks over to him, gently places a blue glass jar on the table and takes his hot face in her cool hands. She tilts it up toward the light, running her fingers and her eyes all over his bruises.

“You really don't have to –“

“Hush,” she says, as if he is the baby. She lets go of him and his face is inches from her breasts. While he is wondering what to do with himself, she unwinds the top of the jar and scoops the thick, sweet smelling cream onto her fingers, before working it into the palms of her hands. He closes his eyes as she rubs it into his face, down his neck and as far across his shoulders as she can reach through the neck of his tee-shirt, which he half hopes and half fears she will tell him to remove. This is only his third

job interview but unlike any other he has ever had.

“Where else are you hurt?” she asks.

He thinks about his back, his legs, his bum.

“Nowhere,” he says.

She smiles. “Shall we go and rescue your friend? And find out what you can do for me.” But just then there is a tap, tap, tap on glass and they turn to see Marina and the boy, laughing at them through the window.



Aurora needs someone to paint her kitchen, her hallway and a small bedroom which will eventually be for Skye, the baby. Hemi, who has just turned six, is home schooled by his mother. Part of his schooling includes the care of bees and the production of natural remedies and beauty products. There is no sign of any Mr Aurora. Paul and Marina have no experience, no equipment suitable for painter/decorators, nowhere nearby to live and one of them is badly

injured and not yet up to any kind of physical labour. Aurora hires them both, on the condition that they share a single wage between them and never raise their voices in anger nor knowingly hurt any living creature while in her home. Then she takes them outside and leads them to an old orange and white Anglo caravan parked up beside a plum tree.

“It’s yours if you want, see what you think.”

And she leaves them alone to talk.

Paul goes bounding inside, like a big Hemi. “Look it’s got cupboards and a table and seats, and that must fold out to be a bed. What do you think?” But Marina just stands there in the long grass, staring at the orange and white panels and the curved windows.

“Does it have green cushions, for the seats?”

He pokes his head outside the door. “How did you know that, are you psychic?”

She walks slowly up the little step, and then past him into the caravan. “It looks like somewhere I’ve been before. But I don’t think it can be. It just feels like it.”



The plum tree is in blossom and the bees are insane. Paul and Marina have their own small home in the orange and white caravan and every night she makes sure she goes to bed before him so she can pretend to be asleep when he climbs in next to her. Of course he knows what she's doing, because he lies there listening to her try to control her breathing. Making it slower and deeper than it really is. Some nights she almost reaches the point of hyperventilation before she gives up the pretence. He pretends not to notice.

During the day, it's as if the air is sucked right out of the caravan altogether, draining their energy with it. Only Hemi and the bees are immune to its stultifying qualities. The little boy climbs in and out all day long, especially if one of them is inside. The bees stream past the small curved windows, on their flight path to the sweet blossom on the other side.

His body is healing but his mind is on fire. He obsesses over sanding, cutting in and the correct technique to get perfect coverage with the roller. When he isn't painting he's chasing and wrestling Hemi. Wrapping him up in his long arms, throwing him in the air, pushing him to run faster, climb higher. Whenever Aurora is anywhere near him he is unable to say anything more complex than two or three words strung together.

But she and Marina have become their own little team, veiled and gloved, methodically checking each frame in the hives to see that the queens are laying and all are healthy. They are easy in each other's company, comfortable in shared silence. From a distance Paul watches them, cloaked in smoke and swarming bees, and then has to remind himself not to.



The baby is growing, the walls of the house are coming alive with colour and it's

getting hotter at night. In the caravan, they kick off the blankets, get tangled up in each others legs and like the way it feels. In the middle of the night she dreams his hands are all over her and then wakes up and finds they really are. They roll together in their narrow, hard bed and spend forever on one kiss. They never discuss their relationship, but wear less and less in each others company. One night when she stays up later than usual talking to Aurora he goes to bed first. When she creeps in, he's lying on her side of the bed naked and wide awake. She takes off all her clothes and he holds out his hand to her. She slides in beside him and kisses all the places where she knows they hurt him. The bruises are gone, but she believes that the body holds its own memories of pain. Her memories are deeper and older but he is learning all the best ways to make her feel better. The first time hurts but it's the kind of pain she doesn't mind.



There's a crate of Golden Queen peaches on the kitchen bench. "They're early this year," says Aurora, who stands peeling the fuzz off the juicy fruit. The oven door is open and inside Marina sees rows of preserving jars, already heating up. She goes to Skye who's sucking on mashed peach and banana in her high chair. Marina breathes her in and smells milk beneath her fruity breath. Her baby gums are swollen and she gnaws on Marina's finger, coating it with peach and banana and saliva.

"Beautiful girl."

Aurora turns around from the sink and smiles at the two of them. "Paul's just loading up the van, can you take over here while we do the deliveries?"

"I'll go with him if you'd rather stay here."

Aurora laughs. "No, they're all yours."

From the window above the kitchen sink, Marina watches the van putter down the winding driveway. Skye waves chubby brown arms marked with deep creases that may or may not have been created with rubber bands.

“Do you know what to do with all this?”

Marina asks Skye, looking at the huge vat of peach, simmering on the stove.

But the baby girl has seen a bird through the kitchen window. She calls out and it takes to the sky. Tears stream down her grubby little face. Marina picks her up and feels a sticky hand grab her hair and pat her back. Baby Skye, everyone calls her, but when she cries she's Baby Blue.



“What do you dream about?” Paul and Marina lie face to face in the grass. Beneath them the earth hums, above them, gulls cry out to each other. He runs a finger down Marina's nose, squishing it at the tip.

“I can't breathe” She giggles at her honking voice.

“Tell me the truth.” He does not release, and she rolls away compressing the long grass

beneath her hot body. She imagines rolling forever until she comes to the sea.

“Come here.” His hand spans her hip bone and he tips her onto her back with ease. She stretches, arms to fingers, legs to toes. Feels the bumps and grooves of the ground. Grass and twigs and sharp little bits of stone, which she can already feel making their imprint on her skin.

“I can’t remember.”

“Why does everything have to be a secret?”

She reaches out and locks her fingers around his. Pulls his hand to her lips. “Running.” He feels the words form on his fingertips.

Clouds move as if they have centuries to reach their destination. They morph from one age to the next and all the while Paul and Marina lie in the grass listening to cicadas sing on grizzled bark.

“Running to, or running from?”

She thinks how much she loves the sound of his voice.



“I’ve had a big order from Auckland, a new client. How do you feel about a weekend in the city?”

Marina feels the stirring of an embryonic knot.

“Yeah, at last. Let’s have some fun.” Paul paces back and forth as if he wants to go right now.

“I’ll stay and mind the kids.” Marina wipes and re-wipes the bench. Paul’s face falls.

“Well we can’t all go, can we?”

“No,” says Aurora, and she smiles as she packs blue bottles into a box.



“I don’t want to go away with her. I want to go with you.” He knows he’s whining but he can’t help it.”

“Stay then.”

“There’s nothing to do here.”

She rolls away from him. "I'm tired."



She's running through the trees. It's dark, but she can see a tiny point of light - if she could only reach it. Leaves and branches slap against her limbs, her face. Her feet are tough, she never wears shoes in summer, but even so, every now and then something sharp, something unexpected, pricks the skin and slows her down.

All of a sudden the ground beneath her is hard and smooth and hot. She's running on the road. She knows this road, it's very close but at the same time so far away from where she needs to be. If she could just get there then everything will be alright. Everyone will be alright. There have been so many houses but there is only one home and for some cruel reason she can never get back to it. The road stretches in front of her like elastic. Her breath is becoming heavier, slower, desperate. And she waits for the

moment when the elastic flicks back and knocks her out entirely.

Eyes wide open she adjusts to the country night, where there is no light relief, no streetlamps or neon signs to help you navigate your way. She realises that she is holding her breath. As she breathes out she hears Paul breathe in. She closes her eyes again and rolls toward his back as if the heat and the scent of him will keep her safe. She thinks, half rationally, half in a dream state, that if she stays very, very still, then nobody will know she's there and nobody will be able to get her. But even as she's plotting her escape, she knows that the sound of her breathing will give her away, and, once again, she takes a deep breath and holds on for as long as she possibly can.

## Late Night Thursday

Thursday night after work is always a big one. This particular Thursday night Gilly agrees to go out for a drink with one of the regulars at the restaurant. He's drunk, but in a harmless sort of way. Not as good looking as some of his friends, but a much better tipper and with far superior manners. His mates are amazed she has finally said yes and they decide to come along too. She pulls in a couple of the other waitresses and they all head out to a bar that wraps around the corner of the two streets where most of the midweek action is located.

Gilly and the harmless drunk get the prime stools at the end of the bar. From where she sits she can see everybody who walks in the door. The harmless drunk gets to look at Gilly. Their friends radiate around them. As the night wears on the friends drop off, either singly or in tandem. Gilly starts to think that the harmless drunk is not quite so drunk, possibly because she herself is now very drunk.

This guy is starting to make a lot of sense. He knows all about the stockmarket crash and what it's going to mean for the economy. He got out in time, but then he's no fool. Doesn't wait around for someone else to tell him what to do, and he tells Gilly he can see that she's just the same. He talks about things she knows nothing of. Under normal circumstances she'd be bored, but tonight she's seeing that money means power and power means control. And it's very nice to have a man acknowledge that she's an intelligent woman.

So when they leave the bar and he says, "Shall we share a taxi?" She thinks, why not? Then, once they're in the cab he tells her how he's always liked her and she's the only reason he comes to the restaurant because the food's a complete rip off. She laughs and lets him kiss her.

They are heading in different directions and when she tells the driver where she lives he turns round to the guy she's with and says, "Drop the lady off first then?"

And this guy, who now has his hand all the way around her so that he's squeezing her left breast – and she's not at all sure how that happened - says, "Yeah, that's right," and then he kisses her again. A few minutes later, much too soon, he says, "Just pull up here, mate."

The driver says, "You're joking?"

And the guy pulls out a \$50 bill and says "What do you think?" And he yanks Gilly out of the taxi. The driver takes off before the door is even properly closed.

Gilly looks at the inner city park and says, "This isn't where I live."

He says, "Down here, I want to show you something." He has his hand behind her back and he's pushing her. Everything is happening too fast. She wants to stop and go back to the moment before she got in that cab, before she said yes to a drink.

"No, I'm going," and she turns to leave.

He grabs her around the waist. She tries to push him away. He slaps her. She thinks, this can't be happening. But already he's grabbed

her arm and he twists it and then he pushes her down onto a bench. She tries to fight him off - but he squeezes her throat hard with one hand while the other hand unzips his fly. She has such a slender neck. She looks him straight in the eye and says in a hoarse voice, "I'll suck it, you sit down."

He says, "That's a good girl, I knew you wanted it," and takes the pressure off her throat as he pushes onto the ground, guiding her head toward him. She takes him in her mouth, works him for a bit and then just when he's starting to go "yeah, that's right," sinks her teeth together as hard as she can.

He screams, "You bitch, get off me." And he grabs her by the hair but has to let go when her nails make contact with one of his eyes. Then he swings a fist toward her, shrieking abuse, but she's fast Gilly. Now that she's prepared. She can accelerate off either foot and she boots it. And the only person left to hear him rant as he stumbles about, is the homeless man trying to sleep in the bandstand.



She rings the bell at least six times before Brian finally answers the door and then it takes him another five or ten minutes before he can find his wallet and pay the taxi driver who is parked in the driveway waiting for the fare.

Gilly rushes straight to the bathroom, locks the door, turns on the shower, jumps in and stands there fully clothed. Hot water streaming over her, head upturned and mouth open, she swills and spits out the water, over and over again. She's not aware of how long she stands there but eventually the water starts to go cold. She strips off, leaves her clothes in the shower and then wraps herself in one of Lynette's soft white bath towels before brushing her teeth. When she's finished she can still taste him so she does it again, several times.

She can hear Brian walking about the house and her heart sinks as his footsteps move

closer, hears his quick intake of breath before he knocks on the door.

“Are you alright Gilly? What happened?”

His head is right up against the door, she can tell by the sound of his voice.

“Go away.”

“Can I do anything?”

“I don’t want you.”

Silence. Then she hears Brian move away - his footsteps climbing the stairs. The sound of the extractor fan above her seems unusually loud. Goose bumps are popping out all over her body. She wonders if that bastard found her bag in the park, if he remembers the address she gave that first driver. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she whispers to the door, pushing her fists into her eye sockets. Her face still stings.

Then more footsteps, running above her, bounding down the stairs two at a time and then up and down the hall before he’s back on the other side of the bathroom door.

“I’ll leave these here for you, Gilly. You can open the door and get them while I put the kettle on.”

She listens, waits, and then carefully opens the door and grabs what’s on the floor before bolting herself in again. Her hands shake, the fingers wrinkled from so long in the water, but she’s got what she needs; her softest pyjamas, Marina’s pink kitten slippers, and best of all, Lynette’s long, blue, winter dressing gown. She’s shaking all over but she gets them on. Feels her mother and sister wrap themselves around her, and then finally, the tears start to come.

## Threes

It's Brian's birthday and Gilly knows that neither of them is going to feel like going out so she's spent all morning planning a special dinner. She gets back from the shops just after lunchtime so she's got plenty of time to get things underway before he comes home from work. But he's already there. His car's in the driveway.

She has five bags in total and as she walks down the hall the plastic is starting to cut into her hands. She can hear his voice, he's on the phone. As she swings around the corner and into the kitchen one of the bags splits and an orange goes rolling across the floor careering all the way to the other side of the room where it meets the open-toe end of a black stiletto heel shoe.

"Gotcha," says Lynette. And she smiles at Gilly, who stands there staring.

Brian walks over to Gilly, takes the bags from her hands, lifts them up to the bench and

says, "Gilly, you must have spent a fortune." The skin on his face appears to have shrunk. Tension strung out from mouth to cheek to ear.

Lynette doesn't look at him, stays fixed on her daughter, but there is a slight shift to the tilt of her head. She walks over and puts her arms around Gilly. "I know you've had a bad time. Brian's been telling me all about it."

Gilly says nothing.

"I should have been here for you," she murmurs, as she strokes her daughter's hair. Brian turns away from the look Gilly's sending his way.

"I did ring. But you didn't answer, neither of you did." Gilly speaks to the side of her mother's head.

Now it's Lynette's turn for silence. She drops her arms, turns her head and looks about the room. "Who moved the table over there?"

"Who do you think?" says Brian. Then, when the silence continues for too long he adds, "Nicer in the sun."

Lynette fiddles with the butterfly clasp on her earrings and then gives him a look that makes him cross his arms in front of his chest. Then he uncrosses them again and runs a hand through his hair. She walks over to him, keeping her back to Gilly as she puts her hand on his arm and says in the softest lullaby voice. "I think we need to talk."

"Do we?"

She swivels on one heel, looks over her shoulder to her daughter and says, "You understand don't you darling? We really need some time on our own."

"Some of this stuff needs to go in the fridge." Gilly reaches into the shopping bags and starts pulling everything out

"Leave it to me, Gilly," says Brian and he walks over, takes a bottle of wine from her hands, and then, for the first time in years, kisses her on the forehead."

"What time do you have to be at work tonight, darling?" Lynette's voice is very bright.

“I don’t work there anymore,” says Gilly. Tears threaten to erupt so she walks out of the kitchen, out of the house and spends a few minutes sitting in her car before she realizes that she has nowhere to go.

She blinks back her tears, reaches into the pocket behind the passenger seat and fishes out a map book. The cover is stiff with newness, despite its age. She closes her eyes and remembers the day she got her driver’s licence. The last badge of adulthood on her to-do list. Afterwards she drove Marina into town. They didn’t have anywhere to go they just wanted to know they could.

She closes the book but as she does she notices neat round letters in fine blue ink on the inside cover. The words are written diagonally across the page by someone with an invisible ruler in her eye. Dear Gilly, Congratulations, travel well. Love Nana Ivy

Gilly looks at the writing and wonders how she missed it. Marvels that she never thought to ask. Ivy knows where Marina is.



Gilly squirms in a stiff armchair padded with small cushions which do nothing to make it comfortable. Ivy brings her a cup of tea and places it on the table to Gilly's left. An occasional table, is how Ivy describes it. As a child, Gilly never understood if that made it the occasional table, or if it was just a table, occasionally. With adult eyes, she sees quite clearly that it is a side table.

She hasn't called her Nana for years. Neither of them has. She doesn't know why, and Ivy seems to like it. The only person who doesn't is Lynette. There was a time when they went out of their way to use Ivy's name as often as possible in front of their mother. Just to see what it did to her.

"Can you tell me where Marina is?"

Ivy dunks a biscuit in her tea, looks up and says, "Sorry dear, did you want one?"

"You already asked me. No. Thanks."

“Did I?” She sucks on the damp biscuit.

“Don’t seem to be able to hold anything in these days.” Ivy sighs, “Nothing seems very important anymore.”

“What about Marina, Ivy?”

“Oh yes, of course.”

For a second, maybe two, Gilly wants to slap her. “What do you mean?”

“She’s very important. I miss her terribly. And I’m very worried, no matter what she says. ”

Ivy takes another biscuit, goes to dunk it, changes her mind and bites straight into it with a loud crunch.

“So, where is she then?”

“I don’t know where she is. I just know where she was. Tea isn’t really doing it for me.” She’s up again and heading for the kitchen.

“How about a proper drink?”

Gilly hears cupboards open, pictures tiny glasses, then hears the cuckoo clock in the hall. She closes her eyes, opens them again and starts reading aloud the words of Desiderata, framed in black on the opposite wall.

“Was that a yes, dear?” Ivy is full frame, a glass in each hand.

For the first time ever, Gilly notices her grandmother’s long tapered fingers. “You should be covered in jewels, Ivy.”

“I’ll drink to that, dear.”

The clink of delicate cut crystal.

“Lets have another.”

Gilly ends up staying the night in Ivy’s spare room. She sleeps in one of her grandmother’s long flannelette nighties, unable to find a plausible reason to object to it. Ivy tucks her into striped sheets and woollen blankets, topped with a faded pink candlewick bedspread.

“Would you like a hot water bottle, dear?”

“No thanks, Nana.” Gilly rolls over and has the best night’s sleep she has had in ages.



Hemi starts waking in the middle of the night, screaming at some dream which continues into a half awake state. From the caravan,

Marina hears his cries and fights the urge to run to him. Night terrors, Aurora tells her the next morning. In daylight, with a boiled egg and toast soldiers, he has no memories of broken sleep and unnamed monsters. Dark moons under his eyes the only trace of what's been before. They don't come every night, but often enough.

“What can we do?” Marina asks.

Hold him close and let him cry it out,” says Aurora. And as quickly as it starts, it ends.



The paint is dry on the walls; the hives are soaked in honey and in the square room with the round table the shelves are filled with glass jars of blue and green. On Sunday Marina stays with the children while Aurora and Paul drive to the market in Kerikeri and set up stall. “The sweetest stocking fillers money can buy,” Aurora sings out to the crowds. Paul takes their money and Aurora says, “No need to push, there's plenty for everyone.”

In the car on the way home Aurora says, "Let's stop here for a bit until it dies down." They pull over at a small pub by a stream and sit outside in the afternoon sun. The traffic crawls past. A car travelling from the same direction that they are headed, pulls into the car park.

"Head on collision," the man announces as he passes their table. Then he pauses, addressing Aurora's breasts, "Eases off just round the bend."

Aurora doesn't seem to mind. She just smiles and pulls her long black hair away from her neck. It's a hot day but they sit under the shade of grandfather trees, overlooking the stream. "You're not really a country man are you?"

Paul smiles, flattered by the word man.

"Everyone has to follow their own path, Paul. You're too young to let yourself get so tied down."

His smile fades. "What do you mean?"

Aurora stretches her legs out straight so that her feet sit between his under the table. It

will be impossible for him to move without making a bigger deal out of it than he really wants to.

“The Paul I saw in Auckland was a lot more fun than the Paul that’s been hiding away up here. We had a good time.”

“It was alright.”

“She’s never been with anyone else before has she?”

He wonders why she asks, when he knows she knows the answer. “So what?”

“I worry about her.” Aurora leans toward him over the bench. Her hands cup his elbows.

“I think you want more than she can give you. More than she’s ready for. Maybe you should broaden your horizons.”

Dark red sweeps down his face. “I thought you were her friend.”

“I am her friend. I’ve said the same thing to her.”

“About me?”

“About her.”

He swings his feet out from under the bench no longer concerned with how it looks, “Might stretch my legs and then we should probably be heading back.”

“Paul,” she calls after him, “How do you know that she’ll mind? Who are you really angry with?”

He walks away from her, fists in his jeans pockets. Jandals flapping under his feet.

That night at dinner, Hemi squirts tomato sauce over Paul’s white tee-shirt and Paul shouts at him, “Bloody hell, Hemi, I told you to be careful.”

Everyone is quiet except for Skye who sits in her highchair sculpting mashed potato and pumpkin. “Oh oh,” she says as she surveys her work.



Back in the caravan Marina is in tears. “Just apologise, Paul. If she knows you mean it, everything will be fine.”

But he won't say sorry, won't go back in,  
won't explain why.

"We can't stay here forever, anyhow,"  
over his shoulder as he stuffs clothes into his  
backpack.

"Why not?" Her voice, all wet and runny.

"She doesn't need us, Marina. The  
painting's finished, the honey's gone and she  
has jars and jars of all that girlie stuff.

"The children ..."

"Hers. Not ours. It's not our home, Marina.  
It's just a crappy old caravan in the middle of  
nowhere."

His words make it so. Small, musty and  
dented, like an old Wendy house. We've just  
been playing, she thinks.

He puts the pack on the narrow laminated  
table, goes to her and takes her in his arms.

"One more night?" she asks.

"One more night."



That last night is the first time she finds the mattress too thin and the air too thick. A mosquito whines in her ear, bats against her eyelashes and she feels the prick of it enter the softest parts of her skin. She slaps at the dark air but it won't die. In the end she grabs a torch and follows the sound with a small circle of light which attracts even more of them. And while she holds the torch and they hover in the rays, Paul closes in with a book in each hand. Smack. Then silence.

"Now let's sleep," and he throws the books with their wispy black corpses onto the floor.



Paul wakes to the sound of the thwack of swingball. Marina's already up and he stretches like a starfish. He lifts his head up to the window, pulls up the papery blind and waves at Hemi. Hemi ignores him for a second or two and then

drops his bat and comes running in. He jumps on top of Paul.

“Sorry about your tee shirt.” Hemi has the big dark eyes and shiny nose of a puppy.

“I’m sorry I yelled. We both made a mistake.”

Hemi wriggles away. “I had a bad dream and Marina saved me.”

“Was she there when you woke up?”

“No, silly. In my dream. Marina can save people in their dreams. She can fly to them. She picked me up and carried me away.”

“That’s some dream, Hemi.”

“Where did she go?”

“In your dream?”

“No. Man, you don’t know anything today. For real. Where did she go? I want her to be back tonight in case I have another bad dream.”

Panic makes its own noise in the head and Paul can hear it growing louder and louder in his own. He runs out of the caravan, through the long grass, up the three steps to the back door of the house and all the way down the corridor

calling her name. A door behind him opens. The door to the square room with the round table. In the second it takes to turn around he already knows.

“She’s gone, Paul.”

Aurora stands before him in a long, cotton dress the colour of watermelon. It drifts toward his naked body on a soft breeze floating in from the back door. He grabs her by the shoulders and pulls her toward him. Smells rosemary in her hair.

“Where? When?”

“About an hour ago. She didn’t say where.”

“And you didn’t try and stop her. Didn’t think about warning me?” He imagines slapping that gentle smile right off her face.

Then a small sticky hand grabs his leg and he looks down to see Skye pull herself up for the first time ever. A great big smile on her face.

“Oh, oh!” she says and she wobbles for a moment before the other hand steadies herself and she stands straight and tall.

Fifteen minutes later his bag's in the boot and he's heading down the driveway. He gets as far as the bridge when he hears shouting and he slows to check the rear vision mirror. A little figure in a red tee shirt, blue shorts and bare feet is tumbling down the hill in a direct line toward him. Paul gets out of the car and stands waiting, arms outstretched. The boy is so light. There is almost nothing to him and yet the absence of him seems a heavy thing when he finally gets back in the car and drives away.

## Intersection

He heads first to the west coast because it's closer, and then turns around and drives back to the east. As he does he stops at every petrol station on the way. No one has seen her.

"Where's she heading?" they ask. He doesn't know. He knows her first name. Knows she has a sister. Her parents weren't missionaries and she is not a vegetarian. She is an ace at pool, swingball and scrabble. She likes children and weird music but she can't cook. She can stare at someone without blinking longer than anyone he has ever known. She is not scared of bees or mice or spiders. Her nose peels in the sun and her favourite colour is red. She dreams of running. It's not enough to go on.

There's an intersection just outside The Lucky Dolphin Motel. Right takes you down to Awhina Bay, left heads west, and back to Aurora. The road south will carry him home but up the hill, is due north. In the bus shelter, that first day, she said she was heading north. All he knows is

that he can't go back to anywhere he has already been.

A honking horn behind him brings him back to the immediate need to make a decision. She's a babe in a small white car but nonetheless looking pissed off. For a moment he thinks it's Marina. It's not of course, Marina can't drive and even if she could she's not the sort to give a guy the fingers as she swings round the side of his car, overtaking him and then driving smack into the trellis fencing in front of the Lucky Dolphin Motel.

She jumps out of her car and yells at something he can't see until he too gets out and runs toward her. A mother cat and three little kittens hunker down, oblivious to the noise and carnage.

"You could have killed them all."

"What? Look at my car. I should have run them down." But he can tell by the way she's shaking that she doesn't mean it.

A round man wearing a striped towelling sunhat appears. "What the hell happened here?"

"She did it."

"It was these bloody cats. And he was parked up in the middle of the road"

"Well I don't think you needed to take it out on the trellis, love. I've just had all this landscaped." He carries a pair of hedge clippers which he waves as he speaks.

"Have you got insurance?" As soon as the words are out, Paul regrets speaking. Her fists clench into tight little manicured balls.

"I don't think it extends to trellising. Why, have you?"

"Look boys and girls, you could fix it yourselves in five minutes. Now get your cars off the road, off the grass verge, and then come with me."

Her paintwork is a mess but the car still goes. A girl's car, Paul thinks, engine like a sewing machine. The round man leads the way

to an aluminium shed tucked behind what he refers to as “the leisure centre.”

Armed with a tool box, several lengths of wood and more trellis, they return to the scene of impact. It starts to rain.

“I don’t fucking believe it,” she mutters.

“Yeah, well I don’t need this either,” Paul snaps. And he strides down toward his own car parked in the driveway. Motel man takes cover at reception.

When Paul returns he is amazed to see that she has practically finished the job.

“Hold this while I nail it in,” she says. “No not like that. You’re not good with your hands, are you?”

“You’re not good with cars.”

“The nail goes straight in with two hits. Despite himself he admires her handiwork. The rain returns, this time with more intensity. They run to the office where the man has the radio up loud, listening to the news. She puts the hammer on the counter and starts to ask him something but he raises a finger to silence her while he

concentrates on the weather forecast. Her fingernails tap tap tap on the wood veneer. Purple polish chipped at the edge. Weather complete, the traffic report starts and motel man turns the volume down.

“Rain kills me, kills me. Two weeks of this and I’m dead in the water. Looking for a room are you?”

“Looking for my sister. I think she might have come this way.” She pulls a wallet out of her jeans pocket and holds up a photo.

Motel Man peers at it over his glasses.  
“What’s her name?”

“Marina.”

They sit face to face in a dirty café. She is unnerved by the way he stares at her.

“Did you fight?” she asks.

“Did you?”

She wouldn’t just take off alone like that without a reason.”

“That’s what I’m thinking too.”

Gilly leans across the table and hisses under her breath. “I am not my sister. You can’t bully me, now where the fuck is she, or do I need to call the police?”

“I don’t know why she took off but I know it had nothing to do with us and something to do with you. You and your family that she never bloody talks about.”

“I suppose you think she’s perfect, do you? Virginal and beyond reproach. There’s a lot you don’t know about Marina.”

“You bitch. No wonder she’s so screwed up.”

A blonde in a smiley face tee-shirt appears at their table. “Ready to order?” she says, in a bored voice. She has freckles of the large brown variety. I bet you’re a ginger girl underneath, thinks Gilly.

Paul orders the all-day breakfast with everything.

“Make that two,” says Gilly.

A much younger girl carries their drinks on a tray. Her hands shake and coffee spills onto both saucers. Gilly lifts the cups off the saucers and waves the girl away. Takes a sip and sighs. "Instant."

"Fucking Aucklanders," he mutters.

"She is too, you know."

"She is nothing like you."

"You tell me one thing about her that you know for sure. One true thing that tells me she trusts you and that I can too."

He lowers his head and focuses intently on the crusty edge of an aluminium sugar bowl. When he finally speaks she can hear tears the next layer down from his words. Don't you dare cry, she thinks, or I'll have to walk straight out of here and leave you all by yourself with your all-day breakfast.

But it is his answer that brings tears to her eyes. He tells her the story of the cold bony hand. The torch that she shone every night. The girl who was afraid to sleep.

## Running With God

God is Marina's new companion. Not God Himself, but His word as spoken through Margaret. She proclaims His gospel at speed, intercut occasionally with references to the weather, which leads directly back to the vengeance He will wreak on His children for their sins. AIDS was the first sign, Black Tuesday, the second. There will surely be a third. Margaret has a gentle voice and two grandchildren in the backseat but she is not on this Earth to make small talk. Indeed, she says, the time for all talk has passed. Now is the hour of the deed.

Despite this, Margaret has talked incessantly since she stopped to offer Marina a lift at 8.05 this morning.

"Silence is wonderful, Marina. Silence is holy. I took a vow of silence for 15 months back when I was working in television. It wasn't easy and I was constantly overlooked for promotion. I had to speak about myself in the third person to fulfill my professional responsibilities without

dishonouring Him. But you can't make deals with God. He will always have His way. And television is inherently unholy - there's just no way round it -because *television* isn't silent, is it, is it?" She grips Marina's arm for emphasis and then turns toward her with a triumphant smile.

"Pass that here. I'm bone dry" She points to a child's plastic drink bottle and then glugs down greedily. Water drips from the corners of her mouth, over her chin and then down her neck and into the folds of her shirt. Marina looks away.

"She will absolve me. She will save us all." Margaret starts to hum.

Marina, quite pale by now, opens her mouth, but nothing comes out.

"Oh dear," Margaret says, "Did I say that, or did I think it? I keep doing that," and she giggles. She stuffs another barley sugar in her mouth and grunts. "Yes, that's better."

"Can we stop?" asks Marina.

"No, not yet, no we can't stop now. We're committed to this, you see."

"I need the toilet."

“Oh. That’s awkward.” And she frowns,  
“Can’t you hold on?”

“Not really.” Marina stares her down. “And I’m feeling a bit car sick,” she puts her hand to her mouth.

Margaret continues driving, eyes set on the horizon. A large burp erupts from Marina’s mouth and Margaret’s foot hits the break.

“Alright, alright, can you go on the side of the road?” Wheels spin on gravel and Marina jumps out. The babies wake and start to cry.



Marina disappears behind some scrub.  
When she reappears Margaret is singing,  
“Someone’s crying my Lord, kumbaya,  
someone’s crying my Lord, Kumbaya, oh Lord,  
Kumbaya.” The babies howl.

Marina stands in the middle of the road.  
“Thanks for the lift Margaret.”

The older woman turns to her in distress.  
She leans out of the window, her arm hanging

down the side of the door. A red hand, with bitten-down nails and no jewellery. "But we're so close. We'll be on Ninety Mile Beach before you know it and then it's straight up on the sand."

"In this car? Margaret, you'll never make it."

"I will, I know I will. If I have help. We could walk if we had to. Each hold a baby. Which one do you want?"

"They're too young for this Margaret. They need their mother. Where is she?"

Margaret turns away and pulls her arm back in the car. "Can't you find a little kindness in your heart for us, dear? It's a long way to walk on my own with two babies."

Marina swoops to the car, puts her hands on the window frame and her face as close to Margaret's as she can bear to be. "Then don't do it," she yells. "Take them home, where they belong."

"You're a fine one to be talking about home, aren't you, little girl?" All of a sudden her voice is like a man's, all deep rolling gravel.

They stay like that for a few seconds more until Marina decides she can no longer tolerate the proximity of Margaret's face. She feels her own face close down. The older woman sees it too.

"Just selfish, that's what you are," and the dirty white stationwagon motors away to the tune of crying babies and Kumbaya.



It has been a hard day and there is no Paul to fall down upon. No steady warmth in the sudden coolness of the night. No shoulder where her head is drawn to lie. There is no Hemi to tickle and wrestle, and no baby Skye, with big brown eyes and little fat hands pat, pat, patting the back of her neck. No cups of tea from Aurora, while she lies in the hammock. She is a girl alone - on a road that leads as far as it is possible to go. All the way to the end of the land; where the spirits of the dead fly from this world to the next. A one-way street. Marina stands in the

middle of the road and waits, but nothing happens.



That night she dreams she is flying over water. Her arms are stiff but she won't allow herself the luxury of feeling how much they ache. And there is a silence in the icy air that soothes her head. Despite this, she finds herself swooping downwards, crashing through the filmy membrane that separates her from the rest of the world. Here, there is noise and colour and heat - but the wind tosses her about and she fears she will fall into the water where the white breaks over the waves. So she stretches toward the pale sky and shoots back up into the stratosphere.

When she wakes, wrapped in her red coat in a field of jersey cows, her arms are dead straight pointing up toward the early morning sun. She tries to let them fall, give way, but they remain locked for several seconds. She starts to

laugh and then she cries. She wants to go home even though it isn't there anymore. And she can't stop herself from trying anymore.

She walks back along the road that Margaret drove the day before. Her shoes, hungry to take it back. Eventually, she hears a car behind her slow down until it motors along beside her.

"Hello, little girl," says Margaret.

"Where are the babies?" asks Marina.



They drive along for a while before Margaret passes the drink bottle "Go on, it's not poisonous," she teases, but nonetheless looks put out when Marina sniffs it. Hunger and dehydration get the better of her and after an initial cautious sip she slurps it down. Margaret's voice softens and she passes the box of barley sugars next, "Here you go, keep your energy up."

"Where are they, Margaret?"

The older woman puts the nail of a ring finger to her lips but there is nothing left to bite. She nibbles on the tip instead.

“At the doctor’s. I didn’t hurt them. I prayed for guidance after we left you and He showed me the way. They’re perfectly safe. I left them in the waiting room, next to the fish tank. They’ll like that. What could be safer?”

“Did you leave a note, explain who they were?”

“No need. The women in those places are terribly officious, but they’re perfect for that sort of thing. Two babies by a fish tank would be nothing to them.”

Marina’s head drops. Margaret keeps looking across at her, waiting for some kind of response. But the words she seeks are not forthcoming, so, gnawing now on the skin of her fingers, she says, “I know they need their mother. Of course they do. But I just couldn’t face that awful backcombed hair. It’s an abomination. A woman who can do that to her own hair, well, what wouldn’t she do?”

“You didn’t hurt them, did you Margaret?”

“I said no, didn’t I?” And as she turns toward Marina the car swerves. “Seems to me, that’s all you’re interested in. The babies, the babies, the babies. You haven’t had one word to say about how I might be feeling.”

“Keep your eyes on the road, Margaret. You’ll kill us both.”

“That may be His plan.”

“Well fuck Him, if it is.” Marina puts her arms up in front of her as the car swerves wildly. Margaret’s face is pale, her red hands grip the wheel.

“Pull over, pull over,” Marina cries.

Margaret doesn’t so much stop as slide to a halt. She crosses herself and whispers, “Thank you, blessed Lord.” Then she leans across Marina, pulls the door handle till it swings wide open and says, “Get the fuck out of my car you dirty little bitch.” A swift, hard shove accompanies her words, and Marina goes flying out onto the road. Her head only just cushioned from freshly-set black tar seal, by the blue and

green backpack that she held in her arms. She rolls into the ditch to escape the wheels but they're already steaming into the distance. The last little bit of barley sugar dissolves in her mouth.

More cars now. Where are they going so early in the morning? They don't stop for her but then perhaps they don't see her lying down there. When everything is quiet again she pulls herself up. There's a large truck in the distance. She feels its approach through the vibrations in the road. Her trainers operate their own telegraph system, relaying each arrival through a series of delicate pulses. She strides along, alive to their language.

Thinking about the shoes leads to thinking about Paul and she consoles herself by listing all the loving things he has ever said to her. After that she catalogues all his loving actions and then finally, all the things he never said or did but that she wishes, believes, he might. Her head is starting to hurt at the precise moment her feet tell

her that a car is slowing down and will very soon be here beside her.

Two middle-aged men in the front and a girl her age, in the back. “Where are you heading?”

“Awhina Bay.” For the first time she knows she’s ready.

“Hop in.”



The radio constantly switches to static and the man in the passenger seat, Marty, fiddles with the dial until the fuzzy edge of a song tunes in again. Nobody says anything. The girl, Tracey, closes her eyes and chews gum at the same time. “You asleep Trace?” says the driver every now and again.

“Nah, she answers, without opening her eyes.

None of them say a word to Marina, although Tracey offers her a stick of PK Gum. Marina accepts, and sucks and chews the thing

till it tastes and feels like an old piece of rubber. It's nutrition of a sort and gives her something to do. She looks enviously at Tracey, relaxed enough to close her eyes on these men while the car glides along whispering of the pleasures of sleep. Close your eyes, close your eyes, says each painted line in the centre of the road. Stay awake, stay awake, says her sister's voice in her head. And then, watch your back, Marina. She unwinds the window and lets the air blast her tired face.

"Can you wind that up, please," says Marty. "It's distracting Kevin." Kevin says nothing himself but Marina can see his eyes reflected in the rear vision mirror and they dart from her to Tracey and then back again.

"Stops me from feeling carsick," she says.

The car slows down and, Kevin pulls into the shoulder of the road, turns around and says, "Is that so?"

She doesn't want to say the wrong thing so she ends up saying nothing at all.

“Do you want to hop out then?” says Marty after a while.

“Don’t be sick in here, the smell sticks round forever.” Tracey is wide awake now. Three pairs of eyes stare at Marina.

“I think you’re right,” Marina says to no one in particular, “The fresh air will do me good.” She jumps out with her pack dragging along the road. Tracey leans over and closes the door on her. “So long then,” one of the men says. But she’s not sure which one because neither of them looks back at her. Kevin puts his foot to the floor and within seconds the car is gone. Marina inhales a mixture of fresh air and exhaust fumes, and her feet soak up the vibrations of the Holden Kingswood disappearing into the road ahead.

She yawns for the longest time. No sooner does she stop than the next yawn is out and then another. She blinks in the face of a sun that is so bright it makes everything hard, brilliant and sharp. The colours are all corners and edges and Marina longs for the blurred-together lines of dusk.

A rusty red lean-to in the middle of an empty field stands like a train at an otherwise empty platform. Tiredness starts at her core and walks all the way to her extremities. Beneath the rusty red is the most enticing cool shade, and she thinks, "Just for a minute, just till the heat of the day passes." That thought carries her all the way to the shadowy centre and she puts her pack on the ground, pulls out her coat, and lays her own soft red on the dark hard ground.

## Going Back

At the turn-off to Awhina Bay the road skirts along the top of the cliff for a short time before dropping sharply into bush. With each successive twist and turn the way grows darker. Here, life grows disorderly all over itself. Solid ground obscured by eruptions of root, scrub, and fallen trunks sprouting moss and fern. Gilly steers her small car down the narrow road and tries not to look sideways at the deep green. But the urge is strong and she finds the car veering left or right as she does. The bush has grown up too, she thinks. We can never catch up.

The car stalls. The silence is overwhelming. But the vibration of her heart is so powerful it is almost as good as company. For a moment she regrets her actions, her inaction. Why did she let Paul leave without telling him what she knew in her heart? Why did she send him north?

“I didn’t,” she says out loud. Then she looks around as if someone might have

overheard. Heart still hammering away she turns the key back, pulls the choke, whispers, "Do it, you bastard" and then restarts the engine.

Gilly shoves a hand into the bag on the passenger seat, pulls out a compilation tape and sticks it on. She drives straight now, music pumping out of the little white car, all the way down to the tip of the sea.



The bush may have grown, but the bay has shrunk. The long wide span of blue set on a band of gold is now a quick walk from end to end. The old campsite is gone. White markings on grass washed away or swallowed up by drifting sand. The only evidence of human life is a newish sign, nailed to a fence: Private Property. No Camping. No Fires. She goes down to the beach and listens for voices in the air. Walks closer to the water's edge, searching for small footprints in half wet sand. Skims a stone on the water and then wishes it back.

## **The First and Last Time We Were Here**

**December 1979**

Awhina Bay is so far away that once you get there you start to believe that you will never be able to leave. The last part of the drive starts at the top of a hill and then drops down, down, down into the bush.

Marina, on the backseat in the middle, keeps twisting around looking over her shoulder, “What if the caravan crashes into us?”

Brian and Lynette just laugh. His hand lies on her leg. Already tanned and they haven’t even got there yet. Marina says nothing more but Gilly sees how she still keeps turning, always watching. Finally, the road flattens out and there they are.

“Heaven,” says Lynette and her smile is just for Brian.

“Just remember that this is our holiday too, alright,” she says that night as they wriggle into sleeping bags in the tent that’s hitched up to

the caravan. "We need our rest, so no barging in, in the morning."

"They should go to bed earlier then," whispers Davy, after she's gone back to the fire, where Brian waits.

"Stop wriggling Marina," says Gilly.

"My zip's twisted all round me." They giggle and wriggle until the whine of mosquitoes intrudes.

"Undercover," yells Gilly, and they pull their sleeping bags over their heads.

The days slide into their own pattern. They make breakfast and then go for a swim. You can't take your time getting underwater, you have to run it. Davy likes to be buried in sand and Marina spends hours decorating him with shells and sticks and feathers. Gilly coats herself in baby oil and then bakes under the sun while the other two create waterfalls in rock pools. They discover bush walks through to the next beach.

Once they try walking around the rocks but the tide comes in fast and they nearly don't

make it back. Davy cries and cries until Gilly twists his arm and says “You always ruin everything. If you tell Mum she won’t ever let us do anything on our own again. And she’ll blame me.”

He wipes his tears on his motorbike t-shirt and lets Marina hold his hand. The bush walk is the safest bet.

The campsite is small. They’re the only ones with kids so far but the man told Brian that more are coming in the New Year. Gilly, Marina and Davy spend hours planning how to keep the invaders away.

“We’ll build a fortress and it will always belong to us,” yells Gilly as she runs into the surf. Her brother and sister shriek back over the waves, “ours, ours, only ours.”

Awhina Bay Camping Ground takes the overflow from a much bigger site on the next beach round. That one’s packed with kids and has a flying fox and swings. A couple of the families have teenage boys that don’t want to be there, and they console themselves by picking

on the younger children. But Gilly can handle them. Most people think she's a teenager already and she doesn't put them right. And they have an ally in Mrs Collins.

More than anything else, Mrs Collins wants to be her children's friend. The Collins family does everything together and they don't mind having three extra. Mrs Collins laughs at Gilly and Marina and Davy's good manners. "Just call me Mo," she says.

Davy has a two-wheeler for his birthday. It's waiting at home and when they get back Brian's going to teach him how to ride it. He's also got more matchbox cars, a junior cricket set and a small, silver tapedeck.

He's only four," Gilly yells. "And he got more than everyone else for Christmas."

Lynette grabs Gilly and drags her outside, pulls her by the arm all the way down to the water. White marks spread under her fingers where she presses too deeply into her daughter's flesh.

“Why is that everyone else can be happy for Davy except you? You’re just a mean selfish girl, Gilly. You can stay out here till you’re ready to come and be part of a family again.”

Gilly stays out all day, burning in the sun. Lynette sends Marina with a salad sandwich and an orange Koolaid at lunchtime. When the family takes an afternoon walk she finally goes back to the tent. Miserable, she falls onto her squab and then squirms with discomfort. Something’s digging in. She lifts her sleeping bag and finds a yellow matchbox car and a tapedeck.

Later that night Davy comes to her bed and whispers in her ear. “You have it Gilly, I don’t even want it.”

Tears soak her face but she won’t wipe them. She lies there with her back to him and says, “Neither do I. Tapes suck.”



“I hope you two are looking after him, he’s only little.”

“I’m not little Mum, I’m four.” Brian wrestles Davy onto the sand.

“Show me what you’re made of then.”

Davy shrieks and the girls jump on too and Brian ends up walking around with all three of them hanging off, until one by one they drop. These are the times when Gilly looks at her Mum and thinks how beautiful she is in her red bikini and the lava lava she got from her anniversary trip to Fiji. On a good day it is much better than with the Collins.

Mo visits their bay at the end of the week. Lynette and Brian smile and pretend to be friendly. “No we’re not doing anything for New Year’s. Yes we’d love to.” After she’s gone they roll their eyes and say, “We won’t stay long.”

So that night they have an early dinner and then Gilly leads the way through the bush to the other beach with the secret name, Collins Bay. Brian has a cask of wine and Lynette wears make-up and a strapless dress.

When Mo sees Lynette she gives the other Mums a look that Gilly doesn’t like much.

She's seen it before. Mo's face changes when she sees Gilly standing in the shadows and she makes a big fuss about the wine. Lynette's so busy laughing at the other Dads' jokes, she doesn't even hear.

No one is immune to the electricity in the air. Even the youngest children sense it. It powers the frantic screams and laughter, the desperate running to no particular destination. Everyone waits for something to happen. Guitars appear. Wine glasses are topped up fast. Beer cans litter the sand. Someone else will clean up tomorrow.

The kids get on with their own stuff. It's later than they would normally be up but nobody is about to say, "Time for bed you lot." They move en masse from site to site. Even the ones in pyjamas are running with the gang.

The teenagers are too cool for their parents and far beyond the children's games. Gilly watches them at the other end of the beach and realises how wrong her body is. Too much for where she is now, but not enough for where

she really wants to be. She should have worn lip gloss, but she doesn't have any.

Sand flies through the air and blinds her. She roars and the next onslaught lands in her mouth. "Gotcha," yells Davy.

Two strides and he's hers.

"I wish you'd never been born," she hisses. She doesn't need to wipe the sand from her eyes to know where to lay her hands to really hurt him.

"I hate you," he screams.

"We hate each other, she replies. But she smiles as she does, just in case her mother happens to look up from the bonfire on the beach.

Other children, older than Davy but younger than Gilly, gather round. They look at her, waiting for the word.

"What?" She says, suddenly protective, helping him to his feet.

"Nothing, Gilly."

She breaks the circle, not caring who she knocks into as she does. Deliberately not looking at Marina who stands a little apart from the rest.



Nobody is ever mean to Marina here because everybody likes Gilly and they do everything together. This is not the same as being wanted for yourself but it is the next best thing. Davy is only just four. Still young enough to think that everybody likes him for himself.

Marina watches her little brother not get it. Watches him bowl up to girls five years older than him and expect to be welcomed. Worse still is the way he is with the older boys. So desperate to impress and fit in that he is a joke. The Mums and Dads love him. That's not his fault, but it doesn't help his chances with the kids.

She feels for him but there is only so much she can do. If it were just them, she could shield him from all the unkindness. But it is not

just them and all these other people don't see him the way she does. He always wants to change the rules of games half way through and he goes about doing it the wrong way. He speaks when he should just listen; he disagrees when there is no good reason to and he cries when things don't work out. Then he cries even harder when the other kids laugh at him for it. Marina soothes and comforts after the others have all run off, but there's a little voice inside that wants to scream at him, "Well what do you expect when you act like that?"

That night somebody decides they'll all play Hide and Seek. Davy doesn't want to and makes a fuss. The children turn to Gilly and she goes, "Yeah, Hide and Seek - cool." Then she won't look at Davy when he starts to cry and she says nothing when a couple of the other children tease him.

"Stay with Mummy then Baby Boy," one boy sings. He's the same age as Davy but you'd never know it. Marina appears by her brother's

side, puts her arm around him and says, "We'll stick together, you'll be ok."

Gilly starts counting and they all scatter. Marina and Davy are the first ones she finds. The next seeker is Lance Collins and he never counts slowly. Gilly runs for it, Marina follows, but Davy gets only so far before his whole body seizes up and he can't go any further. He just stands there crying, wasting time when Lance Collins is getting closer and closer to coming. "It's too dark up there," he says. And without Marina even realising, the evening has become night. In the distance the grown-ups are singing and laughing and the fire is thundering, fed by driftwood that the kids have been gathering all afternoon.

"Go back to Mum, Davy."

He stares and says, "You said I was with you, Reens. You said."

She knows she did but she wishes she hadn't so she grabs his hand and together they run back from the bush track toward the beach and they're almost there, they're so close and

then Lance Collins calls out, "Coming, ready or not."

Marina has a plan and she doesn't want to let it go. She pushes Davy in front of her. "Run back to Mum, she puffs." For the briefest moment she sees her mother's head resting against Brian. His jacket is draped around her shoulders. She looks at them, and then she looks away.

Marina turns from Davy and runs. Runs as fast as she can, heart pounding, bare feet on sand and rock, rock turning into grass, grass turning into cold damp leaves, gnarly roots and little sticks that would hurt if she wasn't so excited, so determined, so fast. There is a small hollow in a big wide trunk. It is only just off the path and she is almost there.

"Found you." A voice in the distance. Lance Collins is gathering a pack of kids in his wake but some of them want to get away from the bush and back to the beach. Marina is breathing fast and she eases into the hollow, feeling along the bark to the curvy little bit, only

someone is already there. Somebody has beaten her to it.



Marina and Gilly hold each other tight to stop themselves from laughing out loud. They can hear the other kids calling their names. Lance Collins is furious, it's in his voice - he hates to lose. Nobody has stayed hidden this long. Then some of the little kids start crying and the crying spreads and before you know it the singing has stopped and the grown-ups are calling out too.

“You kids get back down here, you know the rules.”

Are there rules? It's the first time Gilly and Marina have heard of rules.

“Who is it, whose missing? Oh Lynette, it's yours.” Mo's voice carries a long way, over the still water and up into the black bush. It seems to disturb something in the trees. Soft wings soar above them.

Then the girls hear Brian and Lynette calling out to them. Brian is getting quite close, he's got a torch but still they hear him trip and fall. He doesn't know the dips and the turns of the path the way they do.

They rush out of their hiding spot. "Tadah!"

But no one is cheering, no one is relieved, no one is even looking at them. They are all looking past them into the dark empty hollow of the tree.



The party is over and the search begins. Marina and Gilly want to help too but Lynette screams at them in front of everybody, "Just keep still and don't move. Don't even speak to me."

Every single child in the campsite is rounded up and made to sit in a circle around the fire. Davy's name sails around the sky, drifts through the sands and into the darkness. But he

doesn't call back. Marina watches other people's mothers cling to their children. A couple of men start to argue about whether or not to call the police. "Bloody kids need a good hiding." One of them gets shoved and he shoves back.

"For God's sakes," screams a woman, "Get out there and help." Some of the children start to cry, but not Gilly and Marina.

In the end, it is one of the teenagers who find him. They hear the cries as his torch reveals all the composite parts of a picture. A tee-shirt, ballooning in the water. A head, face down in a rock pool.

Men and women stampede toward the noise - only Mo stays behind. She doesn't ask how it happened, just sits there, speaking softly about the stars in the sky.

After a while, most of them return to the fire - grim, unspeaking, fierce. Others weep. One by one each child is picked up and carried back to the tents and the caravans.

Gilly and Marina wait, but nobody comes for them. Mo says, "You girls are exhausted, you better stay with us."

"It's not him," Marina cries, and she runs into the dark, blind with fear but moving toward the sound of her mother's keening. The soft pad, pad, pad of somebody else's footsteps chases her down along the cold wet sand. Marina breathes out to the sound of her sister breathing in. There's a shush, shush, shush as the waves break gently at their feet.

He's not that far away at all. Tall dark figures stand like sentries as Brian kneels over a small, crumpled pile of clothes. He's hitting it, pushing at it, and then he's kissing it, over and over and over until two of the men have to pull him off. "Let him go now mate, let him go."

The guards move back, silent in the night. It is the only sort of kindness they have left to offer.

"It's not him," Marina whispers. But Gilly is the only one who hears.

## **Back to the end**

It's too late to make the bushwalk now, but Gilly finds herself walking to where she thinks the path used to start. It still does. It's been a long time since she last ran the twists and turns all the way to Collins Bay. She smiles. She remembers the secret name but not the real one. This is a stupid idea, she thinks. And that makes her want to do it.

As soon as she's in the bush she feels cold fingers of air. It's strange that the breeze should be stronger here than it was on the shore. She steps softly, carefully. She starts avoiding specific twigs and branches that appear most likely to make cracking sounds underfoot. When she realizes what she's doing she hovers, one foot mid-air, and silently mocks herself. The foot comes down, stamps on a fallen branch and she grinds it into the earth. Who is there to hear anything all the way out here, anyway? Something scuttles to her left, no her right. And

there's the bat, bat, bat of a woodpigeon hauling itself into the air.

The path comes to a dead end. But she knows it's in there somewhere. "This is ridiculous," she whispers, as she starts tearing at bush and vine and wood. She scratches her hand on the sharp tip of something flaxy but she keeps on ripping and tearing until she uncovers a pile of rotting ponga logs. She can't see the ground beneath them but she is certain there's a dip on the other side which veers round to her right and will eventually lead to a crumbly cliff overlooking the rock pools of Collins Bay.

She tries to climb the logs and slips on an oozy black-green that trickles through the hairy grooves of the dead trees. She grips onto whatever she can and scrambles up using her whole body to half cling half propel herself to the top. Then without even seeing what's on the other side she throws herself over and goes bumping and rolling all the way down before crashing into something hard. Everything goes

dark, but for a moment she can still feel the cold  
fingers stroking.

## Christmas Wish

Marina sits in the front of a dusty ute laden down with the Christmas Trees that nobody wants to buy. Sam drives with one hand on the wheel and his forefinger perpetually raised in case it needs to acknowledge someone he knows.

“I’ll set up in town, just in case there’s any late starters but round here people tend to cut their own down anyhow.” Town stretches three blocks down and two blocks deep.

“Yeah, this is where the money is,” and he gives her a farewell wave using the whole hand this time, as she jumps out and closes the door.

Her feet are sweltering and blistered but if she takes off her shoes and socks she fears she’ll never be able to get them back on again. Sandals would be better but are completely beyond her means. She wonders if it’s possible to buy individual band aids.

The entrance to DM Bugg’s Chemist is blocked by a long line of parents and children.

“What’s going on?” she asks a barefoot girl.

“It’s Santa’s Grotto,” says the child. “The real one.”

The girl’s huge dreadlocked Dad smiles and says, “You might want to see him yourself, he’s quite popular with the Mums this year.” Father and mother start giggling but the girl smacks her father’s leg and says “Santa’s married, Dad, don’t say that.”

At that moment a brawl breaks out between four, maybe five kids in front of them. There’s tears and screams and a Grandma yells, “You lot just blew it, we’re leaving. Santa’s pissed off and so am I.” And when one of them complains he gets a whack around the head. “Bloody kids, don’t push me, or you’ll really get it.”

And with that family gone, all of a sudden they are next in the line at DM Bugg’s Grotto. Santa gives the girl on his lap a lolly and says, “Well I’ve definitely got your name on the good list,” and as she hops off he looks up at the

sound of Marina's startled cry. They stare at each other in astonishment.

"What do you want for Christmas?" he says.

"I want to say sorry," she replies, and she jumps straight onto his lap and kisses him hard, while the dreadlocked Dad cheers and the little girl cries, "You can't do that, lady, Santa's married."



"A man's nothing if he can't keep his word," says Damon Bugg, as Paul strips out of the Santa suit at the back of the dispensary. "You were hired till Christmas Eve and you've let me down, Paul. He follows him down the Baby's Sundries aisle, calling out, "And what about the kiddies?" But Paul and Marina are laughing and running two blocks down to where he's parked the car in the shade of a Totara tree.

As they cruise down the main street she kicks off her shoes, unwinds the window and

sticks her head out into the summer breeze. Her hair floats around her face, gets in her mouth and her eyes. "I don't know why," she says to the question he still hasn't asked her. "I thought I needed to be alone. I thought I deserved to be alone."

"Gilly's looking for you too." He is almost jealous to see a shocked smile crack the hurt on her face. "I left her down near Awhina Bay. She'll be home by now."

"No," Marina answers. "She'll be where I'm going. Back to where we left him."

Who?"

"Our brother. At Collins Bay."



They scoff meat pies and cokes in the car and by the time they get to the turn-off, Marina's stomach is already queasy. The twisting turning doesn't help and at one point she asks him to pull over, but it's a one way road and he doesn't think it's safe to stop. "Just keep the window

down and I'll go slow," he says and they grind on down.

When they finally come to the bottom where the road flattens out she can't believe what she sees. The campsite has gone and in its place are rows of little shacks painted orange, pink, and violet. The big sign above the entrance now reads, "Paradise Found."

"Jesus," says Paul.

"She'll hate this," says Marina. It's impossible to drive into Paradise, so they park at the entrance.

A curvaceous woman erupting from a tie-dyed sarong appears from one of the shacks.

"That'll be Aurora in a few years," Paul whispers.

"Sshh."

The woman fans her long hair red hair across her shoulders and says, "What brings you to Paradise?"

They laugh, they can't help it. Paul has to turn away. The woman doesn't move but two men appear at her side.

“This isn’t a freakshow. If you came to mock you had better leave.” The speaker wears a small pair of shorts. His body is flecked with paint and marked with a series of deep scars on the arms but his head is completely bald. It shines like a smooth full moon

“I’m sorry,” Marina says. And the sincerity of her words appeases him. Paul stares at the ground. The bald man walks towards them. Marina is transfixed; he has no eyebrows and no eyelashes. He is all eye.

“What are you looking for?”

“My sister, Gilly.”

“She’s not here. But there are other communities. The closest one is south of Ahipara.”

“No, she’d be here. It’s not you - it’s the place she’s come to. It’s the place that matters.”

The woman smiles, “Child, people are all that matter.”

“No, mother, says the bald man. “The land matters too.”

“Can we look around,” asks Paul. “See for ourselves?” The three shrug, and move aside for them to pass.

“Mother?” whispers Paul, once they are far enough away. “Either he’s had a hard life or she adopted him fully grown.”

But Marina is staring at something moving in the trees and just then a young boy in green shorts zooms through the leaves on a Flying Fox, a shriek of joy bouncing out of his mouth into a kind of warble.

They keep walking, past men, women and children who smile and watch but offer no greeting of their own.

“Have you seen a young woman, looks a bit like me but taller with curly hair and pretty?” They shake their heads at Marina’s questions and she walks on past the rainbow cabins to the tussocky dunes and down to where the sand stretches out to the tip of the peninsula to the north and the rocky pools at the base of the cliff to the south.

“Her car’s not here. She either left and they’re not telling us, or she never came.”

“She must have come the other way.”

Paul looks around and sees nothing but sea and sand and bush. “What other way? And you’re much more beautiful than her.”

A gust of wind rushes in from the sea and as it does a dark cloud moves across the sun. The lightest drops of rain fall about them.

Paul edges back toward Paradise, reaching out to her. “Come on, she’s not here.” Marina slips her hand into his and as the warm rain comes stronger and faster they run all the way back to the car.

The drive back up the road seems much quicker and once they get to the top Paul picks up speed and is almost at the turn-off onto the main highway when Marina grips his arm.

“Keep going, she says, and he brakes as he negotiates the next bend which leads to a narrow road no bigger than a driveway. A large sign says, Private No Entrance. There’s a chain that someone has left lying across the road.

“They’ll have to do better than that if they want to keep Gilly out,” Marina says and Paul snorts his agreement.

“Barbed wire and an armed guard, maybe.”

Marina stares, “Exactly how much time did you spend with her?” He feels himself blush and doesn’t reply. But she’s already distracted by the rain that’s sweeping across the windscreen. The wipers struggle to keep pace with the water and then something in Marina’s stomach lurches as the road dips suddenly. She finds herself looking over her shoulder without knowing why. She turns back and closes her eyes, remembers the smell of apple cores gone brown on the car floor and the feel of old plum stones with the last remaining bit of fruit all dry and furry when you stuck your fingers into the deepest grooves of the upholstery. Everyone singing, until Lynette’s voice soared above them all.

“I don’t know about this,” Paul says. “It doesn’t look safe to go on but there’s no way of turning back.”

“You can turn at the bottom,” she answers. And because he is too nervous to take his eyes off the road he doesn’t notice that she still has her eyes closed.

Eventually they wind down to the shoreline as the rain starts to diminish. They pull up alongside the little white car and Marina’s nerves turn to fear when she sees there is nobody inside, nobody on the beach, nobody there at all.

“We should go for help, find a phone, call the police.” All sensible ideas but even as he speaks she’s running from the car, across the grass and along the length of the bay, calling to the sister who is not there. As her feet pound the beach she wonders why her face is so wet when the rain has stopped. She calls and calls but no one answers. Footsteps chase her down and she swings around into Paul’s chest, startling him and knocking them both to the wet sand.

“It’s alright, it’s alright we’ll find her, we’ll take her home.”

“There is no home.” And the words come out in a howl made indistinct with tears.

He tries to comfort her but he’s shaking. She suddenly sees that he’s never seen grief. Never known pain worse than what she herself has put him through.

“For God’s sakes,” and she shakes him off. Despises herself for causing that look in his eyes but she can’t help it. “I’m going in, are you coming or not?” He looks at her as if she’s insane and she realises that he thinks she’s talking about the sea.

She starts to laugh, “No, not that, not that,” and she turns her back to the water as he follows her gaze up to the bush that smothers the cliff behind them.

“Why would she go in there? Why would anybody?”

“It’s the fastest way around.”

“To Paradise?”

Now she’s really laughing, “No, to Collins Bay. She wants to get back, and so do I.” And before he has time to lay even one finger of

caution or reason upon her she is up again and running toward the wet blackgreen.



On his seventh birthday the three year old girl from next door disappeared while she was shopping with her mother at Woolworths. They found her five hours later and the mother was so relieved she slapped the girl and then kissed her hard, and then slapped her once more. “Don’t ever do that to me again,” she cried, while the little girl wept in her arms clutching her stinging cheek.

Later that night when he was supposed to be asleep he heard his parents arguing. His father’s voice harder and louder than he’d ever heard before.

“So bloody judgmental, it could have happened to anyone, to us.”

“Never. I would never have let our boys out of my sight. Not at that age.”

“But they’re not runners are they, either of them? They’re not the type to just take off. And look at Paul - too scared to make a move without Mummy giving him the say-so. ”

She cried at that. From the hallway where he crouched he watched and listened and somehow her tears made his own humiliation so much worse.



The family next door moved away. Too many people knew what had happened, what the man had done to her, and everyone had seen how the mother reacted when she finally got her daughter back. Slap. Kiss. Slap. No loving words or constant supervision could undo that knowledge.

A new family moved in with a teenage son who quickly left to join the navy. “It’s a good way to learn a trade,” his father told Paul’s Mum.

But Paul’s Mum didn’t want to hear about the Navy. It was enough to keep them safe at

playgrounds and department stores without thinking about ships at the mercy of mammoth waves or guns and torpedoes and all the other dangers present in the world, when she had two beautiful boys to protect.



It's so much darker in the bush. It's getting late, too late for this, but she's discovering something more powerful than her fear. Or perhaps it is just another sort of fear that drives her on. It's like a solid object reaching up from her throat into her mouth, with its own pulse tick ticking away. Distracting her from the rhythm of her own breathing. Take control, take it back. Slow down, slow down, breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in again.

"Marina," Paul screams from somewhere behind her. She'd forgotten he was there.

You can't be part of this, she thinks.

"Don't move, just wait there," he yells.

“There’s no time,” she cries. No more time for waiting. And on the way up the hill, despite the dimming light, she sees that someone has trampled on the bush, uncovering the old track buried beneath, or perhaps creating a new one.

Gilly,” she calls, and she turns a corner, only to discover there is no where else to go. She spins around, disoriented. Where has it gone? The track was never that long and they were only children then, so why can’t she find it? I was never the leader, she thinks, never had to remember. It was always her.

“Gilly,” she calls, and calls again and again. “Gilly, I’m here.”

No one answers. She is completely alone in the darkness. “Paul,” she yells, “Where are you?” Silence.

She sits down on a bed of flax and vine and branch. Something cold and sticky smears her leg. She keeps her lips sealed for fear that the pulsing, beating thing from her heart, her throat, the terrible thing that is now in her mouth might jump out and kill her. This is how I’m

meant to die, she thinks. And she waits for the moment but it does not come, until she realises that something or some things, small tiny angry things, are swarming all over her legs, stinging or biting with invisible teeth.

“Fucking little bastards,” she yells and jumps up slapping her own legs. Slaps at whatever they are, to wipe them into oblivion, and if she can’t do that she at least tries to numb the sting with her own smack. There’s a crafty, resilient few who make the jump from her legs to her hand and up her arm and she’s outraged.

“Get off me!” she screams.

“Leave her alone,” and Paul crashes through the forest, torch in hand, trips on a ponga log and falls groaning at her feet.

She helps him up.

“Thought we’d need this,” he waves the torch, and as he does she realises that there is no dead end, just a wall of ponga that she can easily climb.

The light moves off the bush and over her body. “What was all that screaming about?” She

holds her arms up to the light and slaps the last of the ants. They both grin.

“We need to get over here,” she says.

Can you help me up?”

“Would you come back to the car if I said no?”

She shakes her head.

He sighs, “My next girlfriend is going to have no ideas of her own. It’ll be great.”

She laughs all the way up and over, easing her way down the other side. Then she waits for him to clamber over and tries unsuccessfully to stop him from slipping on the way down. As he falls the torch drops out of his grasp and they hear it roll down, down, down. Out of reach. Out of sight.

“Gilly!” She screams into the night and a bird shrieks back. She runs downhill now, as light as a dancer, sure of her step, while behind her Paul crashes and stumbles.

“Slow down, slow down.”

But she’s there again in her mind and she won’t slow down, won’t give it up for anyone.

“Come back, come back.”

## **Gilly, Marina & Davy**

Their tent is green but it looks black at night, unless you shine a torch and make little green circles on an empty sky. In the morning Marina always wakes up gasping for air. The sun drills away at the canvas and there's nowhere to hide. Already there are tiny points of light working their way through the fabric in their own private war. She wonders how long it will take before the whole thing disintegrates completely.

Gilly is always put out when she wakes up. Almost offended –and every day it takes her a while to acclimatise. But before too long she's up and organising them all, with bowls of cornflakes coated in sugar and milk.

But Davy opens his eyes each morning completely engaged with whatever's going on. Even if it's nothing at all, like snuggling in next to Marina, staring at pinpricks of white light shining through the bright green.

The day after Davy's birthday Gilly tosses and turns and grunts her displeasure with the

foam squab, the twisted sleeping bag and last night's mosquito bites. When she does get up, she flounces off to the bathroom block on her own. Marina and Davy just look at each other and say nothing. His eyes fill with tears and she kisses his cheeks and squishes his nose.

But when she hears Gilly approach she hustles him up and out of bed and is off-hand about the whereabouts of his motorbike tee-shirt. "I don't know. Wherever you left it."

Gilly smiles at Marina and says, "If you wet your hair in the shower I'll French plait it and then it will be all curly tomorrow."

"She doesn't like looking like you, Gilly," says Davy.

They both stare at Marina and she answers, "Of course I do."

Gilly rolls her eyes at Davy, "I s'pose you want feeding?"

"Mum's getting my breakfast." Even Marina laughs at him. He storms out of the tent and down to the beach. Marina eats two bowls of cornflakes before she takes his breakfast down

to him and he won't look at her when she does. But Gilly spends ages on her sister's hair and then lets her wear the pink toweling sundress that she got for Christmas.

Davy sulks, calls them names, makes up stupid dances - but they don't react. Eventually he pokes a sharp stick through Lynette's favourite sarong and runs up and down the beach like a flag-bearer. The rip gradually shreds the delicate fabric but it does the trick. The girls' laughter brings Brian out of the caravan. He grabs Davy, smacks his bum and says, "What are you playing at? Now go and apologise to your mother."

But Davy changes course and runs straight to Gilly. She waits till the very last minute and then she opens her arms to him. Marina leans over, blows a raspberry on his bare back and breathes in his particular scent of skin and salt. He giggles and the three of them lock in tight together.

Lynette walks straight past them in her red bikini, picking up speed as she closes in on the

water, her long dark hair flying behind her. Brian forgets about the sarong, forgets about the children, and chases her into the sea. The children watch as they dive into the waves and Davy counts how long it takes before they resurface, two heads bobbing further and further away.

This far north there's a real sky but you can only really appreciate it at night. At about the same time that happens, the music is usually in full swing. Nothing you'd ever hear on the radio, nothing you will ever hear again. It just comes together as it does and it's always different. Tonight's visitor brings her own atmosphere in a minor key. But it's beautiful and it suits the night. The combination of music, orange flames and smoky driftwood are sending her into a kind of trance. Nobody hassles her. Everybody has their own story of how they got here and each one has its own specific pain.

Someone passes her a joint and she's slow to pass it on. That's ok. Paradise is bountiful and there's another one going the other way.



Her head hurts and her ankle is swollen. Somehow she managed to get down here but

knows she will never make it out again without help.

“Your sister was here,” they tell her, “with her boyfriend.”

He found her first, she can't believe it.

Gilly takes another drag and thinks, “Fuck it, I need this more than anyone else here.”

“Have as much as you want.” He's a small guy, whose eyes don't blink. She hands it back.

“Not really my thing.”

“What is your thing? I might have it.” The music stops.

“Are you sure there isn't a phone here? There used to be.” They all smile at each other as if she's crazy or stupid.

“If someone could just give me a lift up the road ...”

The music starts again.

There's a woman to her left who thinks she's Nina Simone. She's so busy singing that she doesn't notice the other joint coming toward her, which Gilly takes instead. After a long hard drag, Gilly closes her eyes, opens her mouth and

sings herself out. Sings every last part of herself out into the air. Her voice silences the tambourines, the guitars, everyone. She takes another drag.

The smoke is finally hitting home and Gilly smiles, suddenly happy to be part of the circle. She passes what's left to the small man who doesn't blink. They stare at each other for what seems like ages before she finally blinks at him and they both crack up laughing.

“So you've been here before?”

“A long time ago.”

“Must have liked it. To go to this much effort to get back.”

She laughs so hard that tears roll down her face and then the sobbing takes over and she can't remember what was so funny.

The small man puts his arms around her and rocks her back and forth to the beat of a steady chant that's building around the circle. Half song, half speech - the human voice blankets her.

“You need to relax,” he whispers. “Come with me.”

“Someone’s looking for me.”

“No one’s looking for you anymore. I’ve found you.”

The circle is starting to disperse. He stands and tries to pull her up. She cries in pain.

“It’s ok, we’ll stay here.” He puts a finger to her mouth. “I told you, you just have to relax.”

She bares her teeth. The finger moves. “And I told you, someone’s looking for me.”

He laughs. He laughs so hard and for so long that some of the others who are still hanging round join in, without knowing why. And then another sound rises up from the dark and comes rushing down toward her, screaming her name. The small man turns white.



Marina runs toward the light only this time the light grows. Shadowy figures turn toward her. One of them slowly, painfully, rises with arms

outstretched and Marina knows that this is really all there is. Here is the only home, and it was there all along. The rest you have to make for yourself.

Gilly weeps in her sister's arms. "I was looking for you."

"I was looking for you."

"We can't stay here. It's not safe."

"We'll be alright together."

"You're hurt," says Paul. "You need help."

"I'm so tired," says Gilly.

"I'll watch out for you," and Marina pats the sand beside her as her sister lays down her head and gives in to sleep.

In the morning the sun rises too early and another immortal day begins. And still they sleep. High in the air a bird soars above the water, over the bush, and deep into the green country. Far below, tiny creatures move, inching across the landscape, but the bird has seen it all before. There's a pattern to these things.

Further away still, is a family packing up and setting off on another journey. Man, woman, three kids in the back. They have a long way to go, but plenty of time to get there. As they drive away from their home the children are arguing, and all day long as the sun beats down on the red roof of the car, there is one question on their lips, "Are we there yet? Are we there?"