

Under a big sky

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Abstract

The exegesis will elaborate on the research process undertaken to write a collection of short fiction.

The creative work is a collection of ten stories linked thematically by an archaeological approach to character psychology, expression and action. Some of the stories also explore the influence of popular culture and cultural archetypes on the characters.

Important contemporary influences in terms of both content and style have been the short stories, *Wheat* by Tracy Slaughter (2004), *Walking to Laetoli* by James George (2004) and *Aquifier* by Tim Winton (2004).

The introduction of the exegesis outlines my interests in the modern ‘slice of life’ story, in the conflict and tensions that occur between emotional and chronological time, and in Charles May’s assertion that short stories, through their use of metaphor, are a vehicle for exploring mythological perception.

The theorists who most influenced my research and creative writing are then highlighted and their contribution to my understanding of narrative technique is discussed. Four main narrative techniques are emphasised, and illustrated with reference to particular stories from the collection. The techniques discussed are all related to the fundamental craft issue of *show don’t tell*.

Finally the exegesis touches on the difficulty a writer has in being an objective reader of their own work.

Exegesis

“The writer is an explorer. Every step is an advance into new land.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“A story... is a kind of map because, like a map, it is not a world, but it evokes one...”

Peter Turchi

“Aristotle wrote that the greatest thing by far is to be master of metaphor.”

Raymond W Gibbs jnr

Introduction

Under a big sky is a draft collection of short fiction which attempts to explore the interwoven and interdependent nature of conscious and unconscious motivations and how they influence the events in the stories and the characters lives. The emotional centre of each of the stories is layered and (partially) revealed through the use of dreams, memories, fantasies, projections, and the transference of meaning from one context to another.

In this collection I have aimed to use the structure, tone, and subjective point of view of the stories to allow the reader to experience the psychological worlds and metaphorical realities of the characters. Ernst Cassirer states that people, ‘...understand the world and shape their lives in large part by assigning meaning to objects, beings and persons, by connecting things together in symbolic patterns, and by creating elaborate forms of symbolic action and narrative.’ (Ying Shen, 2009, p 24)

Because metaphor,¹ symbol and projection are mechanisms of the human psyche that assist communication between unconscious and conscious experience and understanding,² I have sought to use them in the stories as tools for exploring both character and how character drives plot.³ I have been influenced by Raymond W Gibbs' claim that metaphor is more than a language trope or poetic technique, it is, '... a primary mode of thought.' (Gibbs, 1994, p122).

A number of the stories are also efforts to interrogate normality, sanity and psychosis and, by so doing, to excavate in the characters their repressed, forgotten or hidden voices. My primary interest lies in creating and developing the modern 'slice of life' story as a vehicle for showing glimpses of the outer and inner lives of ordinary people as they endeavour to find ways to deal with their histories, their present realities and their possible futures. However, I am also interested in exploring how characters deal with the tensions and conflicts that arise when emotional time⁴ takes precedent over chronological time. In his seminal work on the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, (1963) Frank O'Connor argues that, unlike the novel, 'The short story represents a struggle with Time... it is an attempt to reach some point of vantage from which past and future are equally visible.' (p103). This vantage

¹ Here I am using George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's definition of metaphor: 'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.' (Lakoff G, Johnson M, 1981, Metaphors We Live By, University of Chicago Press, p 5.)

² See for example, Joseph Campbell's explanation of how the unconscious communicates with the ego in the DVD, *Mythos 1: The Shaping of Our Mythic Tradition*, 1996, Joseph Campbell Foundation, USA. In particular, see the diagram of the psyche Campbell constructs in the first lecture, *Psyche and Symbol*, which explores how elements of the unconscious, like the shadow, use projection to communicate with the conscious mind.

³ I use the term plot to include the ordering of the conflicts, motives, themes and resolutions of the story, rather than the more simplistic view of plot as (merely) the trajectory of chronological events, (see, Stokes, A. in, *The Creative Writing Coursebook: Forty Writers Share Advice and Exercises for Poetry and Prose*, 20001, (eds) Julia Bell and Paul Magers, Macmillian, pp 207-213).

⁴ Sometimes also called vertical time, emotional time refers to the more timeless structuring of feelings and experiences contained within the psyche that can be triggered or resurrected by, and/or projected onto, events in the present. I would suggest that the experience of emotional time is more closely linked to metaphorical and mythological perception than is the experience of chronological time.

point is, I think, a worthy aim for short fiction but one that is not easy to achieve.⁵ A method I have used in this collection, that of uncovering fragments of a character's past that resonate, or disturb, in the present, is an attempt to create a place from which an empathetic reader may piece together the significant aspects of a character's past and use them to imagine his or her possible future.

Theoretical Influences

Since the 1920s the modern short story has been perceived as a fictional form that, in contrast to the novel, is able to deal with a 'fragment of life'. (Lukacs, 1971, pp51-2) Frank O'Connor suggests that the short story highlights the voices of 'submerged population groups'⁶ (1963, p17), and primarily deals with the subject of human loneliness. In his opinion, 'Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo...' (p18) Other commentators stress that 'the form of the short story tends to filter down experience to the prime elements of defeat and alienation.' (Bergonzi, 1970, pp215-6). While alienation and loneliness are suitable subjects for exploration in all forms of story-telling, I support O'Connor's thesis that the short story, with its concentration of focus, is a particularly appropriate vehicle for a re-imagining and reconstruction of these feelings and experiences.

⁵ Ernest Hemmingway and Raymond Carver could be considered experts at creating this vantage point in many of their short stories; see for example, Hemmingway's *Hills like White Elephants* (1927) and Carver's *Cathedral* (1983).

⁶ Submerged population groups refers to those classes or groups of people who are marginalized, dispossessed, denigrated or silenced by mainstream society and who would not normally be seen as 'heroic'.

In contrast to Frank O'Connor who believes the short story to be a profoundly modern art form,⁷ American short story expert, Charles May, in his 1989 essay, *Metaphoric Motivation in Short Fiction*: “*In the Beginning Was the Story*”, argues the short story has its roots in the mythological history of story-telling. He says:

‘...The short story is a fundamental, elementary form... it is a form which has remained close to the primal narrative that embodies and recapitulates mythic perception, and whose characteristics are compression rather than expansion and concentration rather than distribution... Instead of presenting details in fully externalized form, completely fixed both spatially and temporally, it makes use only of those details which are necessary for the purposes of the story... the short story is... the structural core of all fiction in its derivation from folktale and myth.’(May,1989, p 64)

Throughout the drafting of this collection I have been influenced and encouraged by May’s suggestion that the short story is a place where ‘mythic perception’ is both possible and desirable. One of the avenues I have explored – particularly in relation to exposition, character development, conflict and resolution - is the connection(s) between mythological perception and metaphorical thinking. May’s explanation of his understanding of that connection has challenged me to consider new and deeper ways of thinking about the history, psychology and construction of story. He says:

‘First I use *metaphor* to refer to that primary process phenomenon that Freud says gives rise to the mythological conception of the world, that is, “psychology projected to the outer world”... the symbolic act by which one projects subjective meaning onto the external world and then makes the “mistake” of responding to it “as if” it were external... Second I use *metaphor* in the aesthetic sense... as “a kind of model-making – in terms of system, presentation, and inference” – very much like the form and method of fiction itself... thus I use *metaphor* to refer both to that psychological process that gives rise to myth and story and to that rhetorical process by which story is transformed into discourse.’ (May, 1989, p 63)

⁷ O’Connor sees poetry and drama as more ancient, and more public, art forms, while the short story and novel exist best in the private domain of solitary, critical readers. (1963, pp 13-14)

My experience of drafting this collection of stories has convinced me that, to a greater or lesser degree, the process of writing stories is very much a, ‘...symbolic act by which one projects subjective meaning onto the external world...’ I have found the creation of character, dialogue, conflict and resolution, for example, as well as the structuring of a story, is a psychological process. It requires a desire (and the acquisition of skill) to dig beneath the surface layers of logic and behaviour in order to discover the deeper motivations and metaphors that drive the characters within the stories and the stories themselves. This is particularly so if, as a story-teller, you wish to explore the subjects of alienation and loneliness, and listen to the voices of ‘submerged populations’.

However, in the drafting process for this collection and in the accompanying research I have undertaken, I have discovered that the mythological and metaphorical impulse in storytelling is more than an exploration of psychological motivation by an author for the development of a character or a story. It also lies at the heart of many of the technical or craft⁸ aspects of writing, particularly those aspects that allow the reader to fully participate in the story-telling.

Lindsay Clarke, writing about the novel, says that it, ‘...is a game for two players... it kicks into life when a reader’s imagination collaborates with that of the writer.’(Clarke, 2001, p 256). I believe Clarke’s statement about the novel is equally true for shorter fiction. Discussing the fundamental craft issue of *show don’t tell*,⁹ Clarke states the key question

⁸ The craft aspects of writing (narrative technique) usually refer to some or all of the following: character; voice; point of view; show don’t tell; dialogue; structure; exposition; theme, subtext; descriptive detail; language features; tone; back story; tension; space and time, including emotional versus chronological time.

⁹ Show don’t tell is a rule of thumb that encapsulates the wisdom that it is usually more effective in terms of story-telling to show, through such things as action, description, dialogue and metaphor, rather than directly telling the reader, what a character thinks, feels or experiences. Showing in this way, rather than simply telling, (for example, *she felt sad/happy/frustrated/angry...*) involves the reader more directly in story creation through the process of

concerning writing technique is: ‘What is the right choice of narrative strategy at any given moment...’ in order to, ‘... draw the reader into the dream of the (story)?’ (p 257). The answer he provides has its basis in what he sees as the similarities between reading and dreaming. In both, he says, images are generated that move, disturb and involve the reader/dreamer. In his opinion, good writing needs to include images that encourage communication between the conscious and unconscious minds and help the reader to ‘dream the story themselves’. (pp 257-8).

Methodology

One of the main ways I have tried to enable the reader to ‘dream the story themselves’, and to create that vantage point where the reader imagines the character’s past and future, is to make use of image, symbol and metaphor - those aspects of narrative technique most closely associated with the dictum: *show don’t tell*.

For example, in the story *Living with Lucinda*, the narrator, Anna, experiences and survives her grief at the loss of her son by identifying with Lucinda Williams, an American singer-song writer noted for her ability to express sadness and loss. This intense symbolic identification with the persona, voice, lyrics and music of the singer provides Anna with a vehicle to journey to, and through, her feelings. Showing the projection of her overwhelming inner feelings onto someone outside herself and following her ‘mistake’ as she responds to this as if it were real, is both the structure of the story and its primary metaphor.

In *Honeybees*, Ruth, one of the central characters, is left voiceless and isolated after a series of traumatic events. However, every month at the full moon she enacts a ritual that

inference. Inference relies on the reader recognizing clues in the text and adding to them their own knowledge and experience in order to construct meaning.

allows her to project her inner emotional reality onto the external world and to (momentarily) claim back her voice. This ritual, though outwardly irrational, is metaphorically logical and is a psychological survival mechanism.

In *Mr Lorenzo Loved Lorca*, Sara, a middle-aged housewife and mother who has just learnt she has cancer, travels to Spain with her husband, Brian, to visit her sister, Monica. A chance encounter in Madrid with the statue of Federico Garcia Lorca plunges Sara back to her schooldays and to the influence of Mr Lorenzo, who taught both her and Monica Spanish and French at high school. The statue of Lorca holding a bird in his open hands and her memories of Mr Lorenzo's passion for Lorca's poetry merge, and work together to unearth submerged feelings and unacknowledged longings in Sara. Driving through the streets of Madrid in a taxi on the way to the railway station she has an epiphany: she is growing wings and, paradoxically, for the first time in her life is preparing for the joy of flight.

These types of 'mythological perception' of the world are often considered in western society to be 'primitive' (that is, evidence of magical rather than logical thinking) or are equated with mental illness. However, in the creation of story, they are, I believe, one of the key ways of showing the deeper emotional reality of characters as they try to create meaning and sustain themselves in the world. And, as stated previously, according to Joseph Campbell, mythological perception – the projection of internal, subjective reality onto the external world - represents one of the psyche's main communicative mechanisms.¹⁰

Dreams and dream images are a second method I have used to encourage the reader to participate at a deeper level in the story. In *Fly Away*, the protagonist, Miriam, after a trapped bird triggers feelings and memories of her absent mother and abusive grandfather, dreams again a nightmare from her past. In the nightmare a repressed aspect of herself is

¹⁰ See footnote 2 above

presented as a nocturnal slug, one who is forced everyday into a frightening world of light. However, in spite of her terror, in the dream Miriam was, and is, able to split into two. By doing this she is able to ‘mother’ herself, and get herself to school, even if the legs she walks on are wooden. In the story, the dream serves as a metaphor for Miriam’s damage and her strength, for those things in her past that still cannot be spoken about, and for her ability, through her intellect, to survive them.

In *The Woman Who Dreamed She Kidnapped Children*, a young woman, Elaine, has a sequence of dreams that outlines her growing intuitions about the character of, and her psychological relationship with, her unknown father. The dreams in this story, and the use of a synchronistic event, are an attempt to illustrate non-rational ways of knowing and communicating, ones that use symbolic images and narrative to explore emotional need and reality. In the final dream of the story Elaine encounters a group of lost girls, submerged, silent ghosts watching swans and geese glide across water. The closer she gets to them the more ghost-like and distant they become. She is left listening to the sound of her own repressed voice, calling out after the shadowed outline of her father.

A third method I have attempted to employ in this draft collection is the exploration of identification with myth itself. For example, in *Under a Big Sky*, the title story, and the largest in the collection, identification with myth is of critical importance to a number of characters and to the unfolding of the story. The story’s main narrator, Matt Mulholland, is a writer of cowboy stories who tries to come to terms with the guilt and shame he has carried since he was a teenager when he failed to help the young girl he loved. Throughout childhood, youth and into middle-age, his emotional and professional identification has been

with the romantic cowboy myth of the lonesome male hero who forges a path through the wilderness of the western prairies. The myth of the heroic cowboy also has another less attractive character, Barry Dixon, in its grip. Barry walks and drawls like the ‘Duke’ (John Wayne), and travels with a side-kick, Keith Munro. Petty thieves, they move from town to town, hanging out at local rodeos and A&P shows, wearing Stetson hats and cowboy boots, preying on the sexual innocence and naive dreams of teenage girls.

As well as an exploration of male characters and their identification with an example of the romantic hero, *Under a Big Sky* is also an investigation of Carlene Riley, a character from a truly submerged population group. Carlene was Matt’s childhood friend and his first love. She was also the victim of male violence and sexual violation. The story is structured so that Carlene’s partial and fragmented voice is woven between Matt’s and Barry’s, providing the reader (but not Matt or Barry) with information about what really happened to her. The resurrection of Carlene’s voice from the riverbed is my small attempt to follow in the footsteps of what Frank O’Connor has called the tradition of Gogol’s “Overcoat”.¹¹

The use of recurring motifs, often taken from the natural world and onto which characters unconsciously project or align aspects of themselves, is another way of structuring a story and of helping the reader glimpse the psychology of the character. In the story, *Toetoe*, the central character, Magda, has two images from her visit to the beach the previous day that break into her consciousness as she attends her daily grind of work meetings . The motifs of her shadow lengthening on the sand in front of her and of the toetoe fronds

¹¹ A saying attributed to Turgenev that all short stories writers, including such luminaries as Chekhov, have come out from under Gogol’s “Overcoat” – *The Overcoat* is a story of a poor, insignificant and despised clerk whose only thing of value, his overcoat, was stolen from him. O’Connor suggests the humble clerk in the story is the first time in the history of fiction that ‘the little man’ and his non heroic concerns are taken seriously and treated with respect. (pp 14-17)

changing colour in the afternoon light serve to emphasise her growing anxiety, and her unspoken unease with elements of herself and her job.

Conclusion

The two short story experts that have given me most guidance as I have worked on this draft collection of short stories are Frank O'Connor and Charles May. Frank O'Connor believes the short story to be a modern phenomenon. In his view, it is a private art, one that requires an individual, critical, reader who engages with the lonely voice of an author as he or she explores the (lonely) voices of characters from marginalised social groups. Charles May, on the other hand, argues that the roots of the short story go back to myth and folk lore; and that in its contemporary form the short story continues to represent, primarily through its use of two levels of metaphor, a link to mythological perception.

A third theorist who has underpinned my thinking and writing has been Joseph Campbell. An expert on myth and mythological stories, he draws attention to the centrality of story-telling in human culture. Campbell has also explained in terms an ordinary person can understand how aspects of the human psyche work. Drawing on the earlier work of Carl Jung, Campbell discusses how the unconscious ‘talks’ to the ego through the use of dreams, shared symbols and structures from the collective unconscious, and projection.¹² Knowledge of the human psyche and how it works, like the observation of human behaviour, is essential for the development of believable, multi-layered characters.

Lindsay Clarke’s discussion on the shared vocabulary of image that reading and dreaming have in common, and how these images encourage the ‘oldest, pre-verbal parts of

¹² See, for example, Bill Moyers interviews with Campbell in, *The Power of Myth*, 1988, Anchor books, Doubleday, USA, and also the last series of recorded lectures Campbell gave before he died, in the DVD, *Mythos 1: The shaping of our Mythic Tradition* (1996) in particular, the first lecture on *Psyche and Symbol*.

the brain to speak to the neo-cortex,' (2001, p258) has added to Campbell's views and enriched my understanding of the reader's role in story-telling.¹³

As I have written this draft collection of stories I have reflected on the origins, theories and potentialities of the short story form. I have come to the conclusion that, while in disagreement with each other about the origins of short stories, O'Connor and May have offered complimentary perspectives about how and why they continue to appeal to writers and engage and move readers. O'Connor's assertion that the subject of the (modern) short story is, or should be, human loneliness, and that its characters come from submerged social groups, may not be entirely accurate or all encompassing, but it is certainly true that some of the greatest short story writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century have focused their energies there.¹⁴ What O'Connor has helped me think about and explore in my own writing is subject matter, point of view and voice. O'Connor's thesis made me ask questions about who narrates a story and why, what points of view are highlighted or obscured, and what voices are allowed to speak. The voices I have chosen to focus on include the fragmented, repressed and alienated *inner* voices of a character's psyche as well of those from characters who come from marginalised or alienated social groups.

Charles May's insightful and invigorating discussion of the metaphorical motivations in short fiction has encouraged me to explore many of the craft aspects of writing, most particularly those techniques, like show don't tell, and the use of image and

¹³ As well, my background as a teacher of adult literacy has given me access to a range of theories about what happens when we read (for example, Duffy 2001; Freebody and Luke 1990; Harvey and Goudvis 2000; Buehl 2001); all of which stress that the background knowledge and understanding a reader brings to the text is critical, and that effective reading relies on the active *co-construction of meaning* between an author and a reader.

¹⁴ See, for example, the work of: Anton Chekhov; D H Lawrence; James Joyce; Ernest Hemingway; Raymond Carver; Flannery O'Connor; Ann Beattie; Alice Munro; Carson McCullers; Grace Paley; and Tim Winton, to name a few.

metaphor, that allow the reader to participate at a deeper level of story-telling, rather than just being ‘outside’, following the plot. As well, through drafting and re-drafting these stories, I have come to feel that unpacking the layers of a character’s mythological perception - their psychology projected onto the external world - allows the writer and the reader to explore the tensions and conflicts that occur in the story when the characters experience the gaps and contradictions between emotional and chronological time. My hope is that the moments in the stories when the characters most vividly experience these tensions and conflicts are the moments when the loneliness of their voices has been most clearly captured and, consequently, are heard by the reader.

Whether I have succeeded in doing this is not a straightforward or easy thing to assert, as, according to Lindsay Clarke, I am only one of the two necessary players in the game of the creation of story. As a writer I have tried to share my exploration of specific characters, their conscious and unconscious motivations and their experiences of, and struggles with, the slippages of time. Whether readers are equally able to share in the characters’ worlds, piece together their motivations and sympathise with their struggles, depends on a number of factors: the prior knowledge and understanding of both the world and of text they bring to the stories¹⁵; their personal reading history and tastes – not everyone wants, or knows how, to use the higher level of inference required in this kind of writing, nor do they always favour the subject matter of alienation, grief or loneliness; and, finally, and possibly the only aspect I have any control over, how well the narrative techniques I have employed (in particular, those associated with show don’t tell) speak to their empathy and imagination. Paradoxically, this last factor is the very area I am least able to be objective

¹⁵ “Cognitive research has shown, as reader response theorists have previously insisted, that the knowledge of the world readers bring to a story determines their understanding of it.” (May 2002, p127)

about, as, by definition of being the author, the narrative techniques I have chosen are the ones that most appeal to my own empathy, imagination and understanding.

My intuition tells me that Aristotle may well be right: the greatest thing by far - and the most difficult - is to be master of metaphor.

Under a big sky

A collection of short fiction

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Living with Lucinda

They've put a Christmas tree in the lunchroom but I haven't seen it. I prefer my meals out on the veranda. There's too many people in this respite house and shuffling in lines and holding trays just makes me jumpy. Anyway, I'm listening to Lucinda. I've gone back to the beginning, to the very first album, to the very first track.

The first time I heard her it was also Christmas Eve. I'd made myself get in a car again – the new one, the one paid for with the insurance money - and I drove across the bridge and parked beside the pohutukawa trees near the library. There'd been a storm the night before and the red needles from their battered flowers stained the concrete and the grass. I limped a few yards across the park to a wooden bench, stretched out my damaged leg and watched other families, whole families, having picnics. There were old guys pretending to be French, wearing berets and playing petanque, and kids mucking about in the sand. After a while everything started to ache and I went back to the car, pushed the seat back, closed my eyes and listened to the radio. A woman was singing:

I think I lost it

Let me know if you come across it...

The window was down and I could smell coffee, fish and chips and diesel on the breeze. Her voice sounded as though she'd been driving all day and finally found herself out of gas in some one-horse town out west. Something about her tiredness made me feel better. She was one worn out woman. But she wasn't down and she wasn't out.

‘That was Lucinda Williams,’ the DJ said.

I drove back across the bridge into town, found a park then hailed a cab to take me to the music store at the bottom of Queen St. The driver waited while I bought two of her CDs.

Back home I closed the door on Mickey’s room, sat in an armchair by the window, my leg propped up on a stool, and watched the long narrow leaves of the cabbage tree rise and fall. And I listened as Lucinda’s voice filled the empty house.

You can’t depend on anything, really

There’s no promises, there’s no point...

I liked the drumbeat at the beginning of that track, as if something was being announced and then postponed, as if a parade was being flagged down.

The winter after the accident when my left leg and arm were still in casts, I lay on the couch in the living room and looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows. I spent weeks wrapped in a duvet watching banks of grey cloud move across the sky. After a while I realised I wasn’t just watching clouds, I was watching something else, something invisible – currents of air pushing molecules of water across the sky.

When I wasn’t watching the wind I mined images from childhood – my own as well as Mickey’s. One memory clung to me: I must have been nine or ten, lying in the sitting room on a Saturday afternoon with the curtains drawn, watching an old black and white movie on TV.

A scene from that movie kept returning to me: a child was playing a violin on the bank of a flooded river. The piece of earth he was standing on broke away and became a moving island. There was rushing grey water and a stormy sky. The adults were invisible, out of camera range, but they must have been there, standing further back on the bank watching as the boy, in a tightly buttoned jacket and soft corduroy cap, was swept further away. The sound from his violin rose into a wail as he retreated, sailing away in the distance until he became smaller and smaller, washed out to a dangerous rip just past the river mouth.

He became invisible. The way atoms and thoughts and memories are.

Invisible as the truck I never saw that smashed into the side of the car. Invisible as the moment between the second-to-last breath and then the last one – and then the moment after that.

When the casts came off the following spring I got around using a stick instead of crutches. I put the house on the market a couple of times then took it off again. I tried to pack up Mickey's stuff, empty out his room. I stood in the doorway looking at the unmade bed, the sneakers and tee shirts abandoned in the corner by the wardrobe, the posters of Bruce Lee on the wall, the picture of his Dad, Billy, in his boxing gear on the bedside table. Tomorrow, I said. I'll do it tomorrow.

The day I got back in the car and drove myself across the bridge, the light was far too bright and I wore the biggest, darkest sunglasses I could find. I went over in the middle lane clutching the wheel, looking straight ahead, blinkered like a skittish horse. The car was filled with noise: the rushing of invisible currents of air past my ears, the disembodied sounds

somebody else's mouth was making on the radio, the sudden asthmatic gasping and wheezing of my breath as it tried to escape out of my chest, out of the car window and over the bridge.

That was the day I found Lucinda. I'm playing her now as I sit on the veranda looking out at the pohutukawa trees again, looking at the dull red stain their flowers leave on the footpath after the rain, lighter than the stain left on the crumpled car seat after they took Mickey away.

Summer was late the year after the accident. There was hardly any rain and in the afternoons I sat out on the deck under the green sun umbrella watching the shadows of the cabbage trees lengthen and eventually disappear. In the evenings I went inside and lay on couch and dozed. I dreamt I was living with Lucinda in a rambling house by the beach. Paint flaked from the old weatherboards and the roof leaked when the rain came in from the west. It was a big house but the only room we lived in was the kitchen. Lucinda sat at the table drinking coffee, picking out tunes on her guitar, writing lyrics on the back of envelopes. I walked through the empty bedrooms, sat on the dusty wooden floors and listened to the silence as it stretched out past Lucinda's music.

Here, they ask about your dreams, they want you to talk about them in the therapy group - they act as if they matter but it's only so they can draw a line between sleeping and waking, between living and dying. As if you could tell the exact moment someone slides from one place to the other. Once I asked one of the counselors what they call the place you go to that is neither living nor dying but he didn't answer. He just raised his bushy eyebrows and

turned away. I followed him down the corridor, out onto the veranda where he stood with his arms folded across his chest looking out at the trees. I asked him again.

‘You have to stop this Anna,’ he said.

As it always does, summer ended and I went back to work. The only thing I missed were those afternoon sessions riding the back roads with Lucinda. She understood how your wheels can spin when you try to escape, how tired you feel when people leave and don’t come back.

Each night when I got home from the office, instead of speaking or thinking or remembering, I listened to her. Her words seeped under my skin and became a bridge – something to carry me between the accident and tomorrow.

We travelled to that invisible country between waking and sleeping, between living and dying. We drove out of town in her ‘57 Chevy with the hood down and cruised the back roads, listening to the car radio. Autumn changed to winter and the sky was crisp with stars. Her headlights lit up poplar trees on the side of the road and as we drove their leafless branches shivered.

We came to a town I didn’t know. Lucinda slowed down and parked outside an apartment block. We sat together in silence for a while then I got out and walked up the stairs and found an empty room on the sixth floor that looked out onto the deserted street.

I waved. Watched her pull out from the curb, go down a side street. I heard her skid a little on some loose gravel. I imagined her turning up the radio, relaxing back into the driver’s seat, one hand on the steering wheel, the other resting on her lap. She was headed for places like Greenville, Lake Charles, Lafayette, Baton Rouge.

I leaned against the window and looked at shadows cast by street lights on the road.

I could hear her singing; hear a slide guitar, feel it wail along my spine.

And behind that there was the echo of a violin and a vision of floodwater rushing

between clay banks.

Towards the end of that second winter the tide came in and pulled me right out.

Out to join those other parents, the ones on the riverbank who were helpless as they watched

their boy being pulled past the river mouth.

All I could do was grasp hold of a big black rock, one that jutted out from that riverbank. Each day I climb onto its slippery surface and stare into the open sea.

Mickey is out there with his Dad, bouncing about in the waves, diving into and under the water as it curves and curls into giant walls. Their bodies are smooth and sleek and whole, in harmony with the water, shot through with green light. Sometimes I call out Mickey's name and wave but he's too far away, too intent on using his body to ride the waves and stay afloat.

I sit on the rock with water swirling round my knees and watch, longing to be out there with him, playing in the water. Sometimes though, I hear his voice in my ear. I see his face the way it was just before the truck rammed into us, freckles smattered across his cheeks, sky-blue eyes dancing behind brown eyelashes. He leans up against me and tugs on my jacket sleeve, the way he did when he was little and wanted something he couldn't reach.

'What can I get you, Mickey?' I say.

Yesterday he came to me and laid his head against my belly. Today I rub my hand across his invisible hair as if it's a lamp that contains a genie. Then I hear the engine of the chevy purring as Lucinda finally makes it to Jackson. She drives through the main street and parks the car. She gets out, stretches her long legs and waves across all that distance to me.

'It's a long drive,' she says, 'but you've got to hold on.'

They've put a Christmas tree in the lunchroom. But I haven't seen it yet. I prefer to sit on the veranda, look out at the pohutukawas and watch the way the wind blows their red needles across my path.

I'm living with Lucinda.

Mr Lorenzo Loved Lorca

Federico Garcia Lorca stands black and shining on the edge of the Plaza de Santa Ana in Madrid. In his opened hands he holds a bird. He holds it up as if he's offering it as a gift to the city.

Sara discovered him yesterday, just as it was getting dark. Lorca was smooth and cool to touch. He stood with one foot in front of the other, looking down at the little bird. His jacket and trousers were crumpled and gave the impression of being dusty, but his shoes were polished clean. His clothes reminded Sara of those her father wore when he went to work in the winter: an old jacket buttoned against the southerly wind, baggy trousers held up with a belt of plaited string, heavy, lace-up shoes. Her father though, had carried a dented tin lunchbox in his hands and gone to work in the woollen mills. The only birds she saw him with were dead magpie chicks he carried on a shovel to the compost heap.

In Spain she'd seen plenty of statues, often of men astride horses or standing with their legs apart pointing the way to the future, their energies sculptured into heroic poses. But Lorca was gentle, focused on the possibility of flight cupped within his hands, holding the bird so its wings could stretch open. Holding it so it could leave him.

This morning, her last in Madrid, Sara retraces her steps to the Plaza. She walks in the light rain without an umbrella or street map, a purple shawl bought in a stall by the Puerto del Sol wrapped around her head and shoulders. A cold wind blows the shawl's long tassels back across her face. People stand in queues to buy lottery tickets, trying not to poke each other's eyes out with the sharp corners of their umbrellas, stamping their booted feet to keep warm.

In her head she creates her own map. The hotel Astoria is her centre, everything else fans out from there. She uses buildings and shop windows and metro signs as markers, pacing out a small number of streets so she won't have any trouble remembering them. It's one of the things she and Brian argue over, her inability to use a proper map, along with her refusal to travel on the underground. Why come all this way only to travel across Madrid in the dark?

"How can you stand not knowing where you are?" Brian said yesterday, waving his tourist map in front of her just before she stumbled right instead of left and found Lorca, poised like a ballerina, in the almost empty square.

She pointed at her feet on the pavement. 'I do know where I am - I'm right here.'

Brian folded his map. 'Don't be childish.'

If she'd done what Brian wanted she would have returned to the hotel and missed the whole experience: fading daylight; Lorca's body carved and shining, his hair swept back from his forehead, his deep-set eyes concentrating on the bird; the glow from the old-fashioned streetlights; the whiteness of the buildings at the other end of the Plaza.

It was almost five o'clock. After a day of sightseeing, she knew all Brian wanted was to soak his feet and have a decent cup of Earl Grey. After that he'd watch CNN and consult his map for tomorrow. Sara stood in the plaza looking at Lorca's face and bit her lip. Pain radiated from her lower back down her thighs and into her calves and ankles.

She turned her back on Brian. Thirty-five years slipped away. Mr Lorenzo, her French and Spanish teacher, materialised beside Lorca. His dark hair fell across his forehead, shielding his eyes as he leaned forward in front of the class and read the opening lines of one of Lorca's laments. She hadn't read Lorca since she left school and couldn't remember who

the lament was for, but a fragment swirled between Brian's impatience and Lorca's glossy form:

*The rest was death, and death alone
at five in the afternoon.¹*

Mr Lorenzo had been fond of laments. On a good day in their Spanish class he put aside syntax and pronunciation and read poetry. When this happened, her mother's failing health and her father's sullen moods disappeared. She escaped to another hemisphere and became a traveller, moving with ease across time and space. She was never sure if it was the words themselves that transported her or the way Mr Lorenzo delivered them. Sometimes when he read Lorca he carried his chair from the front of the classroom and sat among their desks. His voice, as he read first in Spanish and then in English, sounded different. It was rich and warm, like someone singing, the sound coming from deep within his body. He leaned forward on the edge of his chair and held the book of poems open in his left hand. His right hand beat back and forth, an angel's wing caressing the air.

Brian put his hand on her shoulder. 'Sara,' he said, 'It's freezing. Can we please go? My feet are killing me.'

Back at the hotel Brian turned on the television and boiled water for tea. She went to the bathroom, filled a glass with water and swallowed painkillers. The reflection of her face in the mirror was pale, her skin almost transparent under the fluorescent light, the inner rim of her lips stained purple, as if she'd been eating Black Doris plums. Afterwards, she lay on the bed curled onto her left side, pretending to read, waiting for the pain in her lower back to dull. Brian had a map spread out on his knees. He was tracing an underground route with a tobacco-

¹ Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias, www.cyberspain.com

stained index finger. She closed her eyes. The week before they left New Zealand, the oncologist had spread the map of her skeleton on his desk and pointed at the problem areas with his index finger. His fingernails were clipped short, filed and buffed.

He had looked at her over the top of gold-rimmed reading glasses. His eyes were brown with flecks of green around the irises. ‘I wouldn’t advise travel,’ he said. ‘You need treatment.’

Their tickets and hotel vouchers lay in a folder in her handbag. She rubbed her fingers along the bag’s woven leather strap and fiddled with the buckle. In the silence that followed she listened to his steady breathing. She looked at the black pen sitting beside the white prescription pad on his desk.

He took off his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose, put them back on. Reached for the pen and pad. ‘How long are you planning on being away?’

To get to the Plaza de Santa Ana Sara walks left for a block then turns right down a street splashed with posters of flamenco dancers. Graffiti defaces the stone walls of the tapas bars and tavernas. She passes a church with its front entrance boarded up and knows where she is. The Plaza is just across the narrow road. Lorca stands small and dark on the edge of the square. Someone has tied a red scarf around his neck. This afternoon she and Brian will catch the train to Barcelona where her sister Monica lives with her husband, Eduardo, and before she leaves Madrid she wants to touch the outspread wings of the little bird.

The rain intensifies. It runs down the surface of Lorca’s trousers and onto the smooth black of his shoes. Raindrops glisten on the tips of the bird’s wings. She walks to the other end of the square. Buys postcards from a tobacconist then seeks shelter in the café next door.

The floor and walls of the cafe are made of polished wood. Miniature cubist prints in thin black frames hang above each table. In schoolgirl Spanish she orders coffee and a local pastry filled with delicate slices of glazed apple. She chooses a seat at the back by a window, unwinds her shawl and takes off her coat. The wooden chair seems a long way down. She lowers herself onto it, keeping her back straight. From her handbag she takes their railway tickets and checks departure and arrival times. At the station yesterday she and Brian had argued over which train to catch – she wanted the slower, cheaper one, so she could take in everything along the way; he, for once, insisted on the more expensive option.

‘Three hundred kilometres an hour, Sara,’ he said. ‘I’ll never live it down if I don’t go on that.’

She takes her phone from her coat pocket and texts Monica: c u @ 4.30.

It was Monica who’d sent the tickets so they could come to Spain. Monica and Eduardo had no children and serious money. Two weeks before her appointment with the oncologist the tickets had arrived by courier post, along with Monica’s latest book, a translation into English of a Spanish poet Sara had never heard of. The book, like all her others, was dedicated to, ‘My friend and teacher, Mr Ernesto Lorenzo’.

Sara slips her phone back in her coat pocket and looks out the window onto the Plaza. The rain has almost stopped. She sips her cafe con leche and cuts the apple tart into quarters. The pastry is crisp and the slices of apple sit on top of a thin layer of creamy custard. She eats slowly watching an elderly man and woman greet another couple sheltering under a large umbrella. The women hold little dogs in their arms. The men wear woollen caps and rest the palms of their hands on walking sticks. Even though they are small and a little bent with

age, there is something elegant about the way they stand. Mr Lorenzo, she remembers, had stood like that.

Mr Lorenzo's father was Italian, his mother Spanish. One armistice day at their school assembly he was invited to talk about how his parents escaped from Italy during the war. Instead, he chose to tell them about his first few days in New Zealand. He had stood on the stage above them, a slender figure, wearing brown corduroy trousers and polished brogues. His jacket was dark green with gold coloured buttons that caught the light when he moved. Tucked into the opening of his shirt was a brown silk cravat.

'I was nine,' he said, 'but very small for my age. My father woke me up and took me on deck as we berthed in Auckland. The whole world was grey with rain. The sky, the sea, the pavements, everything grey and dull.' He smiled at the gathered assembly. 'And the wooden buildings.' He raised his shoulders and spread his hands, 'So flimsy.'

'On the overnight train to Wellington I lay stretched out on the seat between my parents and tried to sleep. Above me I heard my mother crying. My father whispered to her that this was a peaceful country, everything would be alright. Next morning, just as it was getting light, my father's older brother, Antonio, met us, and we caught the bus to his place in Lyall Bay.'

After sharing his memories, Mr Lorenzo ran his fingers through his hair and told them about the great Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, how he had been shot during the civil war and buried in an unmarked grave. He pulled a small book out of his jacket pocket and opened it. He stepped forward to read.

Mrs Dorset, the head-teacher, coughed and rose from her chair. She said, 'How interesting, Mr Lorenzo, and thank you, but really, we don't have time.'

He closed the book and slid it back into his pocket. He bowed slightly to Mrs Dorset and walked, a small figure, elegant and erect in his green jacket with the glinting buttons, to his chair.

The apple pastry is so delicious Sara walks to the glass counter and orders another. The young woman behind the counter smiles at her.

‘Hola, Señorita Carmen,’ Sara says, reading the name badge on her smock. ‘Yo soy Sara. Habla usted inglés?’

Carmen slides the pastry onto a thick white plate and smiles again. ‘Sí, un poco.’

Mr Lorenzo was the senior language teacher at Sara’s school, fluent in Italian, Spanish and French. He had smooth olive skin and deep-set, almost black eyes. His hair was brushed back from his forehead and fell below his collar. Her father said anyone who wore a gold medallion around their neck, read poetry and had hair that long was a pansy. He wouldn’t allow the likes of him in the house. She and Monica told him Mr Lorenzo was religious; the medallion was his grandfather’s St Christopher medal, given to him when he was christened.

Her father just stood by the kitchen table, hitched up his work trousers and sniffed.
‘Men,’ he said, ‘don’t wear jewellery.’

There was nothing elegant about her big boned father or his workmates. On Saturday afternoons once the lawns were cut they hunched over their cars in their overalls or stood in the garage with their feet wide apart drinking beer. Monica told her Mr Lorenzo’s family grew grapes in their backyard and made them into wine.

One weekend, just before the summer term started, Mr Lorenzo visited them. He arrived with three books on Spanish poetry for Monica. A red carnation was tucked through the top button hole of his jacket. Her father was out in the garage talking engines and having a beer with her Uncle Rob and Mr Cotton from next door. Mr Lorenzo went out to talk to him about Monica joining his scholarship class. From the open bedroom window Sara heard wolf whistles. She went into the kitchen. Monica was crouched by the backdoor, holding the books across her chest like a shield. Her face was blotchy, as if she'd been crying. Sara stood beside her. Mr Cotton, Uncle Rob and her father formed a semi circle around Mr Lorenzo. They were grinning. She heard her father say, 'Pretty as a picture'. Mr Lorenzo's feet in his polished shoes were placed together and his back was very straight.

The cafe is warm and starting to fill up. Sara rubs the condensation off the window with her paper serviette. She has another hour before she needs to meet Brian by the tropical palms in Atocha railway station. The pain in her lower back is deeper and sharper than yesterday. Tingling and numbness alternate in her legs and feet. The oncologist had warned her of this. Finding a comfortable way to sit and sleep and walk, and hiding the pain from Brian, sap her energy and concentration. She takes her notebook from her bag, opens a new page, writes the date and time then draws a clumsy stick figure with her pen. On the trunk and limbs of the figure she marks the points of most intense pain with an x, and the numbness with an o. She agreed to do this each day so that when she returns to the oncologist she will have a detailed map for him.

Sara had just turned seventeen when she got pregnant in the back of Brian's father's car. She never finished her last year at school or made it to university. When their second son, Mark, was three, her father mangled his left hand in one of the machines at the mill. He sold up and moved in with them so she could look after him.

Monica was the one who'd achieved things. She'd joined Mr Lorenzo's scholarship class and left home as soon as it finished. She caught the train to board in Wellington so she could study Spanish and French at Victoria University. Mr Lorenzo left town the following year. Sara saw him at the railway station carrying his suitcase in one hand and a leather satchel full of books in the other. She stood on the platform with her father waiting for Monica to arrive from Wellington for the weekend. Mr Lorenzo sat on a wooden seat on his own, reading. Every five minutes or so he looked at his watch. When he caught sight of her he touched the brim of his panama hat.

'Dad,' she said, 'It's Mr Lorenzo. I'll just go and say hello.'

Her father reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. 'Not now girl, the train's due.' He gave her some money. 'Get me some smokes.'

She raised her hand and waved at Mr Lorenzo but his head was down, absorbed in his book. When she returned with the cigarettes the train had arrived and he was climbing into the last carriage.

In the back seat of the car Monica whispered, 'Did you see him?'

'Who?'

'Mr Lorenzo, stupid.'

'Yeah, he was waiting on the platform.'

'What did he say?'

‘Dunno. I was going to say hello but Dad wanted his smokes.’

‘Thought the old bastard had given up?’

‘Me too.’

‘He’s going to Auckland.’

‘Dad is?’

Monica dug her in the ribs. ‘No, you idiot, Mr Lorenzo – he’s going to teach in Auckland.’

‘Why?’

Monica looked at the back of their father’s head. ‘What planet are you on?’ she said.

When Sara was pregnant with Mark, she went to ante natal classes. There she met Cilla Lynch, Monica’s best friend from school. After class they often sat together in the park talking babies and school friends. One windy autumn afternoon Cilla told her why Mr Lorenzo left town.

In 1975, the year Franco died, Monica and Cilla were the stars of the scholarship class. Mr Lorenzo did things he wasn’t allowed to do in ordinary classes - playing the guitar and singing gypsy songs. He brought in his portable record player and they listened to Joan Baez reading two of Lorca’s poems.

Sara remembered Cilla and Monica reciting poems to each other in the bedroom while she cooked tea and her father watched TV in the lounge. If they made too much noise he shouted at them to keep it down, he didn’t want that bloody pansy’s poetry drowning out the news. They and the other scholarship girls grew their hair long and parted it down the middle, so it framed their faces like folk singers.

Mr Lorenzo had written a one-act play about Lorca's death and the scholarship class were keen to perform it. There were rumours that during rehearsals the cast drank wine brought in by Mr Lorenzo. And someone told Mrs Dorset the play required the boys to kiss each other on the cheek and put their arms around each other. One afternoon Mrs Dorset came to watch a rehearsal. Afterwards she banned the play and suggested something more suitable – a scene from Shakespeare perhaps, or something from the *Importance of Being Ernest*.

Cilla and Monica and a few of the boys had stayed behind to clear up and heard Mr Lorenzo arguing with Mrs Dorset in the next classroom. They pushed their desks back into straight lines. They poured the grape juice they used instead of wine back into the bottle. The door between the classrooms opened and then slammed shut. Mr Lorenzo collected copies of his play from the front desk and threw them in his satchel. His hands shook. His face and neck were blotched with colour, as if someone had injected crimson ink beneath his skin. He turned without seeing them and left the room.

The next day someone had painted *Dorset's a fascist* on the walls of the girls' toilet block. Mr Lorenzo refused to ask the Scholarship class who'd done it. And instead of something from Shakespeare or Oscar Wilde they began to rehearse a new play, Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, with Monica in the role of the young bride.

Sara sat on the park bench with her coat stretched over her belly listening to Cilla. She wondered why Monica had never told her any of this.

'I don't remember going to see Monica in a play,' she said.

Cilla rotated her swollen ankles and tucked her scarf into her jacket. 'It was never performed.'

'Dorset the corset again?' Sara said.

'No – don't you remember, Mr Lorenzo had an accident. It was in the papers. He was riding his pushbike home from school.' Cilla looked at her for a moment then heaved herself up from the seat. 'It was at the intersection by the Working Men's club. They reckon two cars were following him. The drivers never stopped. He was in hospital for months.'

Last night as she lay awake in the hotel's narrow double bed listening to Brian snore and trying to find a position that didn't hurt, Sara retraced the last eighteen months of her mother's life. No wonder she hadn't taken much notice of what happened to Mr Lorenzo. Her father was working overtime each night and on Saturday mornings to pay for a private nurse. He came home late, smelling of beer, ate his tea in front of the television and fell asleep on the couch. The nurse came for two hours each morning and evening. She washed and massaged her comatose mother, changed drips and catheters and administered her medication. Monica was studying hard. In the evenings she helped Sara with the dishes then retreated back to her books. Sara was left with all the cooking and cleaning. Going out with Brian on Saturday nights had been her only respite.

She fell pregnant a month after her mother's funeral. Told no-one until she was four months gone and too big to hide it. Brian's mother had middle-class aspirations and called her a slut; her father shrugged and went back to spray-painting the car. When Adam turned one she and Brian got married in the registry office and the three of them went to Wellington to visit Monica for the weekend.

Monica had hugged her. 'At least now you'll get away from Dad,' she said.

After the accident at the mill, her father stopped tinkering with the car and refused to drive. He spent most of his time outside in the vegetable garden killing slugs and firing his air rifle at birds. Once a week on Thursday nights he took a taxi to the Working Men's club. Against his doctor's advice he ate steak and eggs and chips, and drank too much beer. When she got upset at the state he came home in, Brian told her not fuss. He said it was the only good time the old boy had.

Her father died in the garden one afternoon while she was picking the boys up from soccer practice. She had sat on the sideline, chatting with the other parents, enjoying the afternoon sun. Afterwards, she shouted Adam and Mark ice-creams and on the way home they stopped at the supermarket. She didn't find him until she had unpacked the shopping and went to bring the clothes in from the line. He lay face down between rows of carrots and cabbages, his rifle thrown in front of him. A few yards away there were two dead magpies chicks.

Monica had insisted on paying for the funeral but refused to come home for it. 'There's no point,' she'd said, by phone from Barcelona. 'Eduardo and I have too much to do – we've just moved into a new apartment. Anyway, I couldn't sit there and listen to people say what a great guy he was, not after what he did.'

At the time Sara thought she meant how he'd retreated from them and their mother once she got sick. How he ignored them, got drunk, and argued with everyone at their mother's funeral. Now, leaving the cafe and walking back across the Plaza de Santa Ana, she thinks it's something more.

The rain has made the surface of the statue slippery. She removes her gloves and touches the wet creases of Lorca's jacket. She fans her fingers against the bird's wings; wants to lay her cheek against their shiny darkness. The bones in her legs and feet ache, the skin on

the palms of her hands itches and burns. She has an odd sensation beneath her shoulder blades, as if something's growing there, trying to push its way to the surface. The oncologist warned her there might be side effects from the pain medication. A church bell tolls the hour. She remembers the beginning of the poem she had most liked of Lorca's when she was at school:

*My heart of silk
is filled with lights
with lost bells
with lilies and bees.*

Her heart just sits behind her ribcage, blindly beating while cancer cells hijack her bones. All the bells and lilies go to people like Monica and Mr Lorenzo.

She strokes the open wings of the bird with her fingertips. Closes her eyes and sees Mr Lorenzo again, sitting in front of their class, a book of poetry open in his left hand. His right hand beats the air. He was Lorca's little bird, held in their presence for a brief moment before he took flight.

Sara leaves the plaza and hails a taxi. She travels through the streets of Madrid, her body hovering in space, delicate, poised as an angel. The taxi driver points with pride to the long queue outside the Prado and says something she doesn't quite understand. Something about Spaniards being proud of their art galleries and museums.

Tonight in Barcelona she will show Brian the only maps she carries: the Xray of her skeleton, and the stick figures she draws every day - her underground of crumbling bones.

In the back seat of the taxi her heart pushes hard against her chest. It pumps blood through her veins and arteries as if it has the right to go on and on beating. When she returns home they will blast her bones with radiation. She sees her body as it was when she was a girl, strong and contained, belonging only to her. Now it is an open field, unprotected, rutted with the traffic of her history, held together by the merest shadow of a bird's wing. Mr Lorenzo holds Lorca in one hand. Her heart is in the other, her blood rising and falling with him as he beats the air.

Beneath her shoulder blades small, perfectly formed wings unfurl. They are porous, sticky with new life. She spreads them out, beats them in the air to dry. Preparing for a moment of flight.

Sori u hav da rong numba

I was at the Mall with Shirley looking for ribbon and remnants of lace when the first txt came through.

Where r u?

No name and I didn't recognise the number. My hands were full, matching silk thread to material so I didn't bother to reply. Later, when we were having coffee and discussing my ideas for the dolls' outfits – the regional competitions were only a month away - the same message came through again. Well, almost the same message. This one said: Mum where r u? Maybe my daughter Ronnie had a new phone and hadn't got round to telling me. I apologised to Shirley and txted back: @ da mall wit Shirl where r u?

Shirley cut her chocolate caramel slice in half. 'Go on,' she said, pushing the plate towards me, 'You're a stick insect. Help me out.'

Shirley cut her half of the slice into quarters. I raised my eyebrows. 'Slows me down,' she said. 'You're twitchy – you and Ronnie rowing again?'

Shirley knows Ronnie and I don't get along. Chalk and cheese that's the problem. Nothing in common. She hates dolls and I loathe rugby. I've never understood why Ronnie wanted to play such a rough game but she's been mad on it since she was twelve years old and there was no peace till she got what she wanted. I thought she'd grow out of it once she got interested in boys but she didn't. Now she coaches and referees full time and never a boyfriend in sight. People tell me she's a great example of that bumper sticker you used to see in the eighties: girls can do anything. They say I must be proud of her. Of course I am, she's got a

good career, I've even seen her on TV, refereeing matches at Eden Park. Believe me, she doesn't take nonsense from anyone, not even from those hothouse wannabes trying to get into the All Blacks. Still, I can't help wanting someone to talk to, woman to woman, like Shirley and her daughter, Elsie. It's lovely to see the two of them together. Elsie's into ballroom dancing and designs and makes all her own outfits. The scraps from her dresses have been a godsend for the competitions over the years.

My phone beeped. @ home wit Dad waitn 4 u. Whoz shirl?

Definitely not Ronnie.

Sori, I txted back, u hav da rong numba.

I'd barely put the phone back in my bag when it beeped again.

Mum u r soo funi.

Shirley was flipping through the pages of the Australian Women's Weekly – 'Don't mind me,' she said.

I was getting sick of this. Hey Im not yr madda so quit txtin me.

Whoever it was got upset: dont b MEAN.

I tried Ronnie's old number: Did u txt me b4?

No u gaga? 6pm dont b 18.

That was definitely Ronnie. Just like Mum – someone who called every spade a bloody shovel.

Shirley put the magazine down, took my phone away and folded her arms.

'A whole weekend with Ronnie,' I said. 'It's like having Mum all over again.'

She swirled the last of her cappuccino in the bottom of her cup. 'Don't exaggerate Pearl. Ronnie's not as bad as Lizzie.'

When I was a kid I used to daydream a mistake had been made at the hospital and Lizzie wasn't my real mother. My mother wouldn't have a mouth like a sewer or a slap that sent you sideways out the kitchen door.

'She stands the same way,' I said, 'hands on her hips, clodhopper shoes, lips pursed like she's just sucked on a lemon.'

Shirley gathered up her shopping bags. 'Aunty Lizzie was a real dragon. Ronnie's a pussy cat in comparison.' She gave me my phone back and pecked me on the cheek. 'If it gets too much, come over for a cuppa.'

On the way to the airport to pick up Ronnie I practiced being assertive. Each to their own, I said to myself, rehearsing my reply to Ronnie's criticism that I'm a middle-aged girl who plays with dolls. Another misdirected txt arrived just after I parked the car: I luv u Mum can u drop me @ Maureenz 2nite.

Maybe if I ignored them they'd go away.

Ronnie lasted 'til we were waiting by the luggage carousel. 'Good Grief Mum,' she said, 'You look like a two dollar tart in that red skirt and those high-heeled shoes.'

'No need to be rude, Ronnie.'

Next morning, before Ronnie got up, I snuck a ciggie from my stash out in the shed. The first since her last visit.

I took my phone out of my pocket and turned it on. Another txt: Maureen sd dont u like her?

"Back on the cancer sticks,' Ronnie said when I went back inside.

She was wearing winceyette pajamas, men's slippers and a lumpy olive-green dressing gown. She'd put on weight. A Lizzie-ism popped into my head: you look like the arse end of a bus. I waved the teapot at Ronnie.

She took it off me. 'I'll do it. You always make gnat's pee.'

'Toast?'

She plonked the teapot on the table. Dark brown liquid slopped out the spout onto my fresh lace tablecloth.

'Cereal.'

'You should've said – I'd have got some in.'

Ronnie screwed up her face and scratched at her chest.

My phone beeped: Dad sd u r mad @us bcoz of Laniz baby is it tru?

First Maureen, now Dad and Lani. And a baby to boot.

Families.

Ronnie's father left the day of her sixth birthday. She sat at the kitchen table in her new pink dress and matching shoes, waiting for him to come home for tea, waiting to light the candles on her Barbie doll cake and open her presents.

That's families for you.

While Ronnie was in the shower using up all my hot water and turning my handmade lavender soap to sludge I txtd back: I dont kno u dis isnt funi plse chek yr fone numba.

Where was their real mother? Out on the town kicking up her heels? Kidnapped and lying in a ditch somewhere? I wondered about the sex of the txter too – almost certainly a girl. What boy would say, Mum, I love you, right out loud?

Not that Ronnie's ever said anything like that to me.

After her father never turned up for her birthday the dolls and pink dresses and pretty shoes were thrown in a heap in the corner. Ronnie wouldn't get out of bed and get dressed for school unless I gave her boys' shorts and undies and tee shirts. After her seventh birthday and not even a card she attacked her hair with the kitchen scissors and nearly poked her eyes out. In the end I took her to the hairdresser and got her curls shaved off. Afterwards, she looked like one of those kiddies recovering from leukaemia. When she was staring in the mirror running her palm over her bristles I picked a single gold curl off the floor, slipped it inside a tissue and took it home. The next day I had to ring up the teachers at school and tell them not to call her Rosemary any more.

The txter had gone quiet so I hung out the washing, vacuumed the kitchen floor and wondered if I'd get away with a quick look at a Magnum PI repeat on TV. Ronnie doesn't approve of day time television unless its sport. If she wasn't here I'd put my feet up with a cuppa and a packet of tim tams and enjoy myself. I made a batch of scones instead. I could always take them round to Shirley and Aunty Ethel or put them in the freezer.

Ronnie came into the kitchen just as I was putting the scones in the oven. She was wearing baggy jeans and a heavy checked shirt.

"I've made your favourite," I said, "Cheese and parsley."

"Cheese makes me nauseous."

"Since when?"

She sat back down at the table. Fiddled with the salt and pepper shakers. "Since I got pregnant," she said, staring at the dolls lined up on the top shelf of the Welsh dresser.

"You've slept with a man?"

'I'm thirty-eight, Mum.'

I checked the scones and there was Lizzie's tongue again: a bun in the oven at your age. I coughed. 'Thirty-eight's not old.'

Ronnie slammed her hand on the table, the left one, the one with no engagement or wedding ring on it, and no nail polish either. The vase of artificial violets fell over. A chip flaked off the rim.

'You think it's funny.'

I wiped my hands on my apron and studied my cuticles. 'No,' I said, 'Just surprised. You never said you had a boyfriend?'

I pulled a wire rack out of the cupboard, put it on the bench and covered it with a clean tea towel.

'I'd love to be a grandmother.'

Ronnie got up from the table. 'Bloody typical,' she said. 'Always about you.' Her bottom lip wobbled, the way it did when she was a child, trying not to cry.

She went outside and sat on the wooden bench by the shed. I took the scones out of the oven and slide them off the tray onto the rack. Their tops were golden brown and the hot cheesy smell filled the kitchen. I cut a square of butter, put it in Lizzie's butter dish, the one shaped like Tasmania, and slid it under the edge of the tea towel to soften. Maybe Ronnie would want one when they'd both cooled down.

Another txt came through. Thank God this one was from Shirley. Not that it was good news. Aunty Ethel had had a fall and they were at A&E waiting for an Xray. I txtd back: Neva rains bt it paws. Giv Ethel my luv.

When I got pregnant with Ronnie Lizzie was ropable. She made Ken and I bring the wedding forward three months. The night we told her she shouted and swore like a man. The back door was wide open and half the street could hear.

“I know your sort,’ she said. “Little Miss Stuck-up. Wouldn’t say bum for sixpence but show it for nothing.”

Ken shuddered when spit flew from her mouth and landed on the formica an inch from his hand. His mother never raised her voice. He thought it was because she was well mannered. Lady-like. I thought it was because she was too dim to have any opinions. She died when Ronnie was three.

I went outside and sat on the bench beside Ronnie. The garden had got away on me and the roses needed pruning. ‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘I shouldn’t have said that.’

Ronnie shrugged and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

‘What are you going to do?’

She put her hands in her jeans’ pockets and stuck out her chin. “I don’t want to be like you.”

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘No money, bringing up a kid on my own, crying myself to sleep at night.’

‘It wasn’t that bad.’

My phone beeped: Lani wanz 2 kno if u can cum on Sundy 4 lunch.

I was tempted to ask what they were having.

I put my hand on Ronnie’s arm. The one with the dolphin tattoo just below the elbow. I managed a brisk kind of patting. ‘We had fun too.’

She shrugged me off. ‘I don’t want you showering it in pink things.’ She walked over and inspected the roses. ‘And no bloody stupid dolls.’

I thought of my doll collection, of all the competitions I’d entered over the years and the ribbons I’d won. Best historical dress, best Victorian doll, best contemporary wardrobe, runner-up in hair and make-up, overall winner in all categories four years in a row. I had my own website. A granddaughter might be interested in all that.

I wanted to ask about the father but Ronnie was skulking around the garden, feeling better now that she was pointing out how I’d planted everything in the wrong place. Pick, pick, pick. In her dotage Lizzie carried on criticising me even when she no longer recognised who I was. My brother, Luke, would drop her off for a couple of weeks because he and Caroline needed a break and within half an hour she was complaining I never came to see her and asking why were there so few staff and where was the menu for lunch. Sometimes I thought she was doing it on purpose. I’d get up in the morning and find she’d re-arranged the kitchen, thrown out the African violets on the windowsill, turned on the stove and forgotten about it. It was worse than being stuck inside all day with a toddler – at least you could put them in a playpen.

Seeing how Ronnie was so keen on improving my horticultural skills and I couldn’t face any more cooking, I took her to the local garden centre for lunch. “My treat,” I said.

We sat outside under the awning. Sparrows hopped across the table next to us, picking at pastry and cake crumbs. One of them perched on the edge of a smoothie glass and chirped, its tiny claws making indents in the sticky froth stuck to the rim. Others darted between aluminium poles and chairs. Ronnie stretched out her legs, leaned back and rubbed her eyes.

‘Four generations,’ she said, squinting against the sunlight.

‘What?’

‘Four generations without a bloody father – Gran, you, me and now this one.’

‘My father died in a farming accident, Ronnie, he didn’t just bugger off.’

‘I’m talking effect,’ she said, “Not cause.”

My salmon and mushroom quiche arrived. Ronnie pushed at the rocket salad that accompanied her roast vegetable panini.

She put down her knife and fork and stared at a wedge of kumera on her plate. ‘He’s married,’ she said, looking past my shoulder. ‘Not about to leave her or the two boys.’

My mouth opened like a goldfish. Lizzie’s voice rose inside me like a tidal wave. I clamped my teeth shut. My phone beeped. I jumped. ‘Might be Shirley,’ I said.

Lani wanz 2 kno r u cumin on Sndy or not?

“Wrong number,” I said. “I keep getting these txts from someone I don’t know.”

“Tell them to piss off.”

‘Gee – why didn’t I think of that?’ I put the phone back in my bag. ‘Does he know?’

Ronnie looked at the sparrows feasting on the neighbouring table. She wiped her mouth, crumpled the serviette into a ball and rolled it around. ‘He said he’d pay for private if I wanted to get rid of it.’

The waitress arrived with our coffees, a caramel walnut slice and two spoons. She shooed the sparrows away and began clearing the empty table.

I sat with the sun warming my back. In the beginning Ken was chuffed about becoming a father. Just disappointed his first born wasn’t a boy. More disappointed when I miscarried twice, both times sons. Just after the second miscarriage his mother died. Lizzie

came down for a couple of weeks to look after me and little Rose while he and his older brother , Clary, cleared out the family home and put it on the market. That's when Ken first met her. Little Miss Helpful who'd just moved in next door with two miniature poodles, child-bearing hips, and her father's inheritance tucked away in the bank. Margaret-Mary McCaughley, the surgeon's daughter, a woman of independent means. Common as muck, Lizzie said, when I finally told her. All that money comes from other people's misery.

It was Clary who told me. When Ken didn't come home for Ronnie's birthday I rang to see if he knew anything. Clary was fond of Rosie and fed up with lying for Ken. He'd been lying, he said, for three years.

I broke off a corner of caramel walnut slice. 'Does his wife know about you?'
‘What do you think?’

After lunch Ronnie went for a walk and I had a lie down with a Mills and Boon. Romance, as Lizzie used to say, is best left between book covers. I scrolled through all the wrong txt messages I'd received over the last couple of days. Maybe I'd ring the number and have it out with them.

Once Clary told me what was going on, I looked up Margaret-Mary's number in the phone book. Every night for two weeks I rang and asked to talk to Ken. And every night I got the same reply: I'm sorry, she said, in her hoiti-toiti, private school voice, you have the wrong number. I wrote letters too but they came back unopened with *return to sender, not known at this address*, on the envelope. Who was she kidding? Everyone knew.

Ronnie and I had a scratch tea of soup and scones and she settled in front of the TV to watch the replay of the Rugby sevens. I set the sewing machine up on the kitchen table. During an ad break she came into the kitchen.

‘I saw him once,’ she said.

‘Who?’

‘Dad.’

I stopped threading ribbon through a lace petticoat. ‘When?’

‘On my twelfth birthday – I went to the house.’

I tried to imagine the look on Ken’s face. ‘What did he say?’

‘Nothing, he never saw me. I went round the back and looked over the fence. He was kicking a ball around with a little boy. Spitting image of the old man. Must have been about six years old.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘For God’s sake, Mum. Stop apologising. It’s not your fault.’

Before she went to bed Ronnie came back into the kitchen. She picked up the highland dancing outfit I’d just finished making.

‘Do they have a sports category in these competitions?’

I looked at her over the rim of my glasses and took the pins out of my mouth. ‘No – but there’s an open one, where you can do anything you like.’

‘Why don’t you do an All Black doll?’ She put the tiny kilt and velvet jacket back down on the table. ‘That’d be different.’

Next morning while Ronnie was still asleep another txt came through. Mum, it said,
Plse cum 4 lunch itz laniz brthdy. I punched the number on my cell phone.
'Hello,' I said. My name's Pearl. I'm worried about your mother.'

FLY AWAY

Miriam lifted the hem of the net curtain in the laundry with the broom handle. A black bird turned towards her, its orange beak wide open. It hopped away from the curtain, flapped its wings, flew to the shelf above the window where it perched on the lip of grandmother's green china jug.

'How on earth did you get in?' she said.

Startled by the sound of her voice, the bird dropped from the jug, knocked over a row of miniature glass bottles, ran along the shelf then returned to the jug, releasing a trail of dark green slime down its smooth, curved side. It beat its wings against the frosted window panes, pecked against the glass, paced up and down like an anxious traveler. She opened the laundry door but the bird ignored it, focused instead on the window, trying to find a way through to the other side of the light. In her dressing gown and slippers, Miriam stood in the doorway watching the bird, the palm of one hand pressed against the base of her throat, the fingertips of the other pulling at the straight grey hair of her fringe.

A bird: clawed feet tapping against a wooden windowsill, wings bashing against glass.

Images from her early morning dream resurfaced: layers of white feathers and glass beads and, below her, pine-covered islands where wild horses grazed in the sunshine. She rode on the back of a giant bird, her body flattened against its soft feathers as they rose on a thermal, clutching an undelivered letter to her mother in her hand.

Outside the laundry window her washing hung on the clothesline, coffee-coloured sheets and pillowslips swaying and billowing in the breeze. Other birds, with glossy black bodies, orange beaks and flat black eyes, sat on the roof of the neighbour's shed, flew between camellia bushes and hopped across dew-covered grass.

Pretend you're a bird, her grandfather used to say. On Saturday afternoons he took her to the park and pushed her on the swings in the sunshine. Wind brushed against her arms and legs.

'Not too high, Poppa,' she always pleaded, but he just pushed her, harder and higher.

'Don't be a sissy - make believe you've got wings.'

But she couldn't. She didn't want to fly above the earth, didn't want to see the ground become blurred, the green of the grass merge with the blue of the sky, or have her stomach get mixed up with her head and, when it fell back down again, burn the inside of her throat. She gripped the rusty chain, closed her eyes and tried to imagine something still, something quiet.

The smell of bird shit and feathers. The rush of wings above her head when her grandfather let the birds out. The staleness of the soiled cages, the mustiness of molting feathers and damp birdseed. The laughter of her grandfather.

'Don't be silly girlie, look at the size of you! And it's only a wee little thing.'

He'd whistle and his favourite parrot, Gordie, circled him, flapping its wings. Gordie sat on her grandfather's head, his clawed feet gripping his pink scalp through his thin white hair.

In the kitchen Miriam tore up crusts of bread and put them inside an old shoe box. She slid the box along the shelf towards the bird. But the bird paid no attention and threw itself one more time against the glass.

Wings beat against her face, clawed feet clutched at her hands. Red claws, red scaly skin, something growing and shrinking above her head, something bashing into her face, her heart beating like wings in her chest, beating against her ribs, beating against the window, the rain coming down on the pane, the light outside turning grey, the white window sill smeared with dust and specks of fly dirt, the smell of Jayes fluid, sharp and tart, coming from the bucket in the bathroom, the sour smell of the old, curled-at-the-edges linoleum on the floor. The salty taste of tears in her mouth.

When she was eight she went to live with her grandparents while her mother was in hospital and her father away in Papua New Guinea. He was building a mission station, helping the priests and nuns convert the natives so they could find the one true God. He sent pictures of himself, a tall thin man in a white shirt and baggy shorts towering over groups of small black men with splotches of paint on their faces, wearing feathers, holding their spears and shields upright.

At last, attracted by the smell of the crusts, the bird hopped inside the box. Miriam grabbed a towel from the laundry basket, draped it over the box and wrapped the corners tight. Once she was certain the bird was secure she retreated to the kitchen and leant over the sink.

Her hands seemed to belong to someone else. She waited with her head resting on the shiny aluminum until the trembling stopped. Calm again, she filled a glass with cold water from the tap and swallowed a few mouthfuls. She returned to the shoebox. Her hands patting and soothing the towel covering.

‘I’ll carry you outside now,’ she said, ‘Then you can fly away.’ Her voice took on the sing-song tone of a nursery rhyme. ‘Fly away. Fly away. Somewhere safe. Somewhere you belong.’

She went out the back door with the towel wrapped around the box; the box held away from her stomach. She put the captive bird down on the concrete path, returned to the laundry for the broom and used its long handle to lift up the end of the towel.

The bird remained crouched on the bottom of the box for a moment then it opened its wings and flew straight up into the air. It gave a loud chirp and then a great squawk as it crested the top of the macrocarpa tree next door.

Fly away. Fly away.

Still in her pajamas and dressing gown, Miriam curled up on the couch, her head on a green silk cushion. A litany of words ran through her mind the way the small hard lumps of her wooden rosary beads had run through her fingers when she was a child. Words that were the roots of her childhood, her first language, a language of supplication she’d inherited from her grandparents and father. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; oh clement, oh loving, oh sweet Virgin Mary; Star of the Ocean, pray for us.

She remembered her bony knees digging into the coarse weave of the faded square of carpet in the centre of the sitting room, her grandfather leading the endless decades of the

rosary they said each night during Lent. Praying to a mother full of grace and to that trinity of gods her grandfather worshiped: god the father, god the son, god the holy ghost. Offering up it up for the souls in purgatory, offering it up for the sins of the world.

Gordie, the parrot, squawked Hail Mary in the kitchen. She stood on her own in the dark in the sitting room for hours, a punishment for asking Poppa if they could finish early so she could write a letter to her mother and post it on her way to school in the morning. The sitting room pulsated with darkness, the comforting yellow glow of the streetlight outside the window blocked by heavy velvet curtains, and the ghosts of her great uncles in their khaki uniforms, mysteriously returned from Flanders Fields, rose out of huge glass frames by the fireplace and flapped the wings of their souls in the air above her face.

When she was ten her father returned from the mission station and they moved into their own house, but they still spent Sunday afternoons with her grandparents. Her mother's missal and a big old bible sat on the shelf next to the birdcages in the kitchen. She read columns of tiny print and learnt long tracts by heart while her grandfather and father prayed for her sick mother and all those not converted to the faith. After prayers they ate ham and mustard sandwiches and drank cups of milky tea in the kitchen. She crept outside and sat on the concrete step watching the girls next door playing hopscotch or twirling hula hoops round and round their waists.

Fragments of passages from her mother's missal remained, folded into the nest of her memory. They arrived in her inner ear at odd moments, on the bus on the way home from work when she was tired and crushed into the corner of her seat, or when she was standing at an intersection waiting for the lights to change. Now, triggered by the bird, words rose to the

surface: ‘...Our soul, as a sparrow, is delivered from the snare of the hunters. The snare is broken and we are delivered...’

Those long Sunday afternoons at her grandparents were redeemed by going to university and studying English and comparative religions. A masters’ thesis on religious symbolism in twentieth century poetry helped her gain a scholarship and she began research on the creation mythologies of Polynesia.

One wet, cold Sunday afternoon in the last year of her doctorate, her father phoned. ‘He’s gone,’ he said. ‘The neighbours heard the birds making a racket and broke in. I don’t know what I’ll do without him. He was my best friend.’

That night her grandfather’s footsteps limped across the floor of her rooms, the drag of his damaged hip and knee, the step and drag, step and drag of his gait. Just before dawn she heard him claimed her. He called to her so loudly he could have been standing right beside her ear. She woke with her own name shouting in her head, her mouth dry, her legs and arms frozen, immobile as lumps of stone. He was there beside her, limping, dragging, coughing, wheezing through cigarette-damaged lungs. His claw-like hands keeping her awake. Keeping her paralyzed.

Fly away, fly away.

She fell asleep and dreamed the old dream again: she was an underground creature, slug-like, nocturnal, forced by her grandfather to come up from the safety of darkness and be imprisoned every morning by the light. The glare, the strength of the daylight was too much for her, the world too big and full of birds the size of pterodactyls. They flew at her and shrieked and expelled their sticky green shit on her face and hair.

And even though she was a grey and formless slug, the arrival of the light also meant she had to go to school and recite her prayers in front of the nuns and be asked impossible questions on points of Christian doctrine by Father Brendon who came every Thursday morning to instruct the class for confirmation. To get to school she had to walk past the haunted house on the corner, past the group of boys from the state school who sneered and taunted – *catholic dogs, sitting on logs, eating gutses out of frogs.*

They grabbed at her, pushed her to the ground, threw her satchel and books and pens across the road into the mud. Sometimes, like today, she was transformed from the slug back into the plump, freckled child she had been. In that moment she split into two beings. She bent down to pick up her child self, smoothed down her crumpled gym frock and blazer. Together they collected her belongings from the gutter and walked along the familiar road to school. Step by step they walked even though their bellies were tight and distended and the muscles in their legs so rigid they moved knee-less, as if, like Pinocchio, their limbs were carved from wood.

Later that afternoon, after she cleaned up the mess in the laundry, washed the net curtains and hung them on the line to dry, Miriam drove out past the Department of Conservation reserve to the west coast to see the horses. When she arrived they were out of sight, hidden among the line of pine trees that formed a natural border between the reserve and the long stretch of open coastline. She walked on the firm dark sand below the high tide line until the sun began to set. Banks of pale clouds darkened to grey-blue and the setting sun streaked the sky the colour of old gold. She stood looking at the sky as if it were an artist's canvas, trying to work out how it was the light seemed to come from some inner, unseen place

rather than from the surface. The sky and the sea were lit up, shining like the glowing center of a Rembrandt room.

Her grandparents always left her at home when they visited her mother.

'It's not right for a child to see a mad woman,' Poppa always said.

While they were away, one of her chores was to clean the birdcages. A week before her father returned from Papua New Guinea, she took Gordie's cage from the shelf in the kitchen and put it on the lawn by the clothes line. Gordie flapped his wings and recited Hail Mary, excited by being outside. She threw a towel over him, put him in a box and left him in the shed while she cleaned the bottom of the cage and emptied the soiled birdseed. She poured fresh seeds into the container, sprinkled them with Jeyes fluid, rolled them around until they were coated. Then she carried Gordie and the cage back to the kitchen.

Next morning, he lay dead on the floor of his cage.

Just as the clouds were transformed into smears of sooty charcoal, the horses came out from beneath the trees. In single file they picked their way through the marram grass to the beach, throwing their heads back and shaking their manes, patches of their coats lit up by the last rays of the sun. The sand was cool beneath her feet, the evening air damp with the fresh salt smell of the sea. A white mist came in across the tops of the waves.

The horses spread out and began to canter. She watched their mortal beauty: bone and muscle and quivering viscera moving beneath the darkening sky. And those other, earlier gods she had studied in her youth – Rangi and Papa, Tane and Tangoaroa - rose out of the mist and appeared before her. In a reversal of human history they wrestled with the three-pronged god of her grandfather, drowned his punishing ways and infused the world again. Joined to

them by the innocence of their movement along the sand were the horses as they galloped in the distance.

But even so, the words in her Grandmother's missal came back to her, words which should not comfort her, but did so all the same: 'If I take wings early in the morning, and dwell in the furthest parts of the sea; even there also shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.'

The horses turned at the estuary and galloped back down the beach, their hooves pounding a heartbeat on the sand.

'I have a letter,' she whispered to them as they flew past. 'Take it to my mother.'

The last Christmas Cake

Just before the firm's Christmas lunch, Graham called Janine into his office. He shut the door and loosened his tie. 'I thought you should know,' he said, 'They're talking of closing the Auckland office, running everything from Melbourne.'

She sat down on the leather couch. He moved to the open window and lit a cigarette. On the street, the 'norwesterly caught an empty pizza box and two paper cups. She watched as they flew into the air above his head.

'Don't tell Julie,' he said, 'She doesn't know I've started smoking again.'

'How long have we got?'

He shrugged. 'Dunno. Couple of months - maybe.'

He ground the cigarette butt on the sill, flicked it out and shut the window. The skin around his eyes reminded Janine of crumpled sand. He massaged the frown lines between his eyebrows as though he had a headache. The light from the window blurred the faded print of Van Gogh's sunflowers above the filing cabinet.

The print in Graham's office always brought Nan back to her, standing in the kitchen of the weatherboard cottage on the farm, wearing brown and yellow felt slippers and her best apron patterned with giant sunflowers. Nan had liked the cheerfulness of sunflowers and planted a long row of them by the tin fence at the back of the vegetable garden.

She sat on the couch no longer listening to Graham, submerged in Nan's kitchen. The smell of roast lamb filled the house. A bowl of early apricots sat on the table beside wire racks covered in greaseproof paper waiting to receive trays of shortbread baking in the coal

range. All the doors and windows were open to catch the breeze. Nan's calves were bound tight with crepe bandages and her ankles were puffy from standing at the bench in the heat.

Graham stood beside her, his Santa costume draped over his arm. 'You okay?' His hand was warm on her shoulder. 'We'd better get going.'

After lunch they sat together in the corner of the restaurant sipping a final coffee and picking at small neat squares of iced Christmas cake. Graham played with his packet of cigarettes, taking them out one by one, laying them on the table in a row then putting them back in the box.

'Going up north?'

'Tomorrow morning,' she said. 'What about you?'

'Julie's daughter for Christmas, then Coromandel for a week.'

Janine took a cigarette from the pack and put it on the table between them. 'When will you tell everyone?'

'Soon as the board gives me a date.'

In the car park they leaned against the side of his Pajero and shared the cigarette. When it was finished he handed her a small box wrapped in gold paper. 'From Julie and me,' he said, 'Happy Christmas.' He kissed her on the cheek and got in the jeep. The wrapping paper was slippery against her thumb. She stood by her car and waved as he drove off.

That night she wrapped presents for her nephew and niece, sorted food and packed shorts and tee shirts. Before she went to bed she soaked a bowl of dried fruit in brandy and orange juice, in preparation for making the Christmas cake when she arrived at the bach. Even

though it was a hassle carting all the ingredients up there, she still followed Nan's tradition, baking the cake on Christmas Eve.

Her mother and Nan took turns creaming the butter and sugar with a wooden spoon. Once she was old enough they sat her on a low wooden stool by the back door so she could cradle the warm bowl in her lap.

'Beat it for as long as you can with one hand,' Nan said, 'then swap over and beat it with the other. And make sure you stir it from the outside in, otherwise it won't be mixed properly.'

The only time men were allowed in the kitchen was if they had a proper wash, changed their clothes and left their boots at the door. Her grandfather came in off the farm, washed his face and hands with a bar of yellow sunlight soap in the concrete tub in the laundry, combed his white hair off his forehead with water and put on a clean checked shirt before he sat down for his tea every night at 6pm. Sometimes he'd stand at the kitchen door and rub his hand across his cheek and jaw.

'Do I need a shave, Stell?'

Nan would flick the tea towel over her shoulder and go and touch his cheek with her finger. When he put his arm around her waist she made a funny hurump sound in her throat. Then she'd turn and wink at Janine and say, 'Don't want no hedgehogs at my table.'

At the bach, Geoff's cat, Midnight, was asleep in the middle of Nan's old armchair. Janine wiped jellied sardines from the rim of her favourite frying pan with a piece of newspaper. Through the open window she heard the staticky sound of Geoff's ancient

transistor radio transmitting the midday news from the shed. She cleared and cleaned the bench, washed the dishes, unpacked the groceries and sorted them onto shelves in the pantry and the fridge, swept and scrubbed the dirty floor.

From the chillibin she took the plastic bowl of soaked fruit and put it on the bench. In another bowl she warmed the butter and sugar then creamed it with a long handled wooden spoon. One by one she dropped eggs into the mixture, stirring each one until it was absorbed. Then she added the flour and spices. There was a moment of alchemy when she poured the brandy-plump fruit into the bowl and folded it in. If everything was done properly, the right ingredients in the right order, the correct amount of folding and stirring and beating, the cake would be perfect, the centre piece of the Christmas table.

Geoff wandered into the kitchen, his bare feet making paw marks across the cleaned floor.

‘Didn’t hear you arrive.’ He opened the fridge, pulled out bread and ham. ‘Did you bring tomatoes?’

‘Your feet,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘Your dirty feet.’

He looked at his feet then back at her. ‘I’m at the beach, for Christ sake.’

The cold sore on her lip started to sting. ‘I’ve just washed the floor.’

‘Chill out Jan,’ he said, ‘Have a beer. Relax. We’re on holiday.’

He stood by the window and drank from a can of beer. A muscle in his jaw flickered. The skin on his neck was rough, reddened by wind and sun. Ingrained dirt darkened the lines that circled the base of his neck. Oil stained the front of his tee-shirt and jeans.

‘Been cleaning the rifles,’ he said, ‘Pete wants to get in a couple of days hunting.’

In the bathroom the curtains billowed and slapped against the wall. Janine closed the windows and inspected her lip in the mirror. The blisters would split open tomorrow and her skin crack and bleed. She sat on the edge of the bath and thought of last Christmas: Geoff and his brother Pete yarning about hunting trips and their favourite guns while her sister-in-law, Angela, dozed under the sun umbrella and her niece and nephew argued over whose turn it was to throw the Frisbee to the neighbour’s spaniel. Flies crawled over the remains of their lunch and the last of the cream on the trifle went rancid in the sun. Later in the afternoon Angela napped in the spare room and Pete and Geoff took the kids down to the beach. She’d carried the left-over trifle and uneaten Christmas cake back upstairs and washed the dishes.

Every year Geoff said, ‘I don’t know why you bother, none of us eats fruit cake.’ Every year on Boxing Day she cut a small wedge for herself and wrapped the rest in tinfoil to take back to work and share with Graham and the rest of her workmates.

The rim of the old bath dug into the back of her thighs. Her breath punched around in her chest. She leaned over and put her cheek against the cold edge of the hand basin. She wanted to be back among the windbreak of pine trees on Nan and Grandad’s farm. The trees had formed a boundary line between the house and the sheep paddocks. Every Christmas holidays, she and her cousins climbed into the lower branches and dared each other to jump clear of the circle of exposed roots beneath the trees. She jumped again and again to feel the joy of being airborne and for the satisfaction of landing unharmed, rolled into a ball on top of the pine-needled earth.

The last Christmas Eve they spent together on the farm her father drove up in the early afternoon. He parked the car under the oak tree in the middle of the front lawn and swayed as he walked towards the house. Nan stood with her hands on her hips at the back door.

‘You’re not coming into my kitchen half-cut, Joe,’ she said. ‘This is a Christian household. Sleep it off in the car then clean yourself up if you want some tea.’

Janine went upstairs and stood on the landing so she could see out the window. Her father waved his arms about and shook his fist. He was shouting at Nan but she couldn’t hear what he said. Then he wove his way back to the car, opened all the doors and lay down on the back seat.

Her mother was in the guest room having an afternoon nap; she lay on top of the green candlewick bedspread with her hands resting on the swollen hump of her tummy and her feet propped on a pillow. Her toenails were painted red for Christmas. When Janine sat on the end of the bed her mother opened her eyes.

‘Dad’s arrived then,’ she said.

At tea-time her father sat at the table with his face washed, his black hair slicked back from his forehead and wet patches on the front of his shirt. Grandad carved thick slices of lamb and Nan spooned new potatoes and fresh peas onto their plates. Her mother was pale and quiet.

Later, Nan supervised the men: they erected the big tent beside the oak tree, put up two trestle tables, and checked the folding chairs for the next day when her aunt and uncle and cousins came up for lunch.

Nan and Grandad were teetotal. A glass of ginger ale with ice and a slice of lemon was considered proper for weddings and funerals, but at Christmas Nan preferred to make large jugs of cool, sweet, minted tea. More refreshing, she said.

Before Janine went to bed, her father returned to the car for three crates of large brown bottles of beer. He stacked them outside in the laundry. Nan pursed her lips but said nothing as long as he didn't drink inside the house.

She had an earlier memory too, from the year before, lying in bed at home listening to her parents arguing over her grandmother.

'Bossy old cow,' her father said, 'Thinks she's God almighty. Don't know how Bill puts up with it.'

'She's had a hard life, Joe,' her mother said, 'Her father was a boozer; they lived on rabbits and turnips in the Depression.'

'It's 1976 for Christ's sake, not 1932.'

On Christmas morning her father went out to the tent with Uncle Jack to have a smoke and play a hand of euchre. At eleven o'clock he opened the first bottle of the day.

Nan had covered the two trestle tables with clean white paper. The adults sat at one and she and her three cousins sat at the other. On their table were paper hats and crackers and small bottles of cold Fanta and three saucers of liquorice allsorts, one in the middle and one at each end. The Christmas cake sat in architectural splendour in the centre of the adults' table, rich and brown and covered with almonds, decorated with a piece of plastic holly.

It was a hot day and even with the sides of the tent rolled up to let in the breeze, it felt airless. Her mother was still pale and fanned herself with *The Women's Weekly*. She

sipped Nan's cool mint tea, picked a little at sliced lamb and lettuce salad and refused a piece of the moist spicy cake. When she stood up from the table to go inside for a lie down, the back of her sundress was stained and a line of blood trickled down her bare white leg.

'Mum,' Janine said, 'You've cut yourself.'

Her mother opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something then closed it as if she'd changed her mind. She swayed a little, made a funny noise in the back of her throat and pitched forward, like a diver going down into a swimming pool. She would have hit the side of her head on the edge of the crystal trifle bowl if Nan hadn't caught her. Grandad and Uncle Jack carried her inside. Spots of blood splattered across the squashed grass. Janine wanted to go with them but Aunty Kate put her hand on her shoulder.

'Don't worry love,' she said. 'You stay here and help Nan clean up, I'll look after her.'

Nan threw a tea towel over the stain on her mother's chair. Her father, on the other side of the table, drained his glass, pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

'Leave her with Kate, Joe,' she said.

He held onto the back of the chair, a little unsteady on his feet. 'I was just going to get another beer,' he said.

Nan's face flushed. She walked around the table, gripped her father's arm just above the elbow and slapped him hard across the face with the back of her left hand. The three small diamonds that sat upright on her engagement ring scratched his cheek.

There were words between them but Janine didn't understand them. She saw the red welt rise on her father's face. A long moment of silence and heat followed the argument. The smell of the cut Christmas cake filled the tent. She and her cousins sat on their wooden stools

like a row of stone gargoyles. Then her father pushed Nan out of the way, walked out of the tent and got in the car. The engine revved. The wheels skidded on the gravel.

Later that afternoon there was the sound of her mother crying in the sitting room. And, although she wasn't allowed in there, she had a clear image of Grandad and Uncle Jack standing in the kitchen shaking hands with a policeman. He'd come to tell them her father had smashed the car into the big stand of macrocarpas that grew a few miles out of town. He had died instantly.

On Boxing Day the house was silent. Everyone moved in slow motion. She and her cousins sat on the faded couch on the front veranda and swung their legs for a while. Later they went down to the creek and threw stones against the boulders. They walked up and down in the shallow water, looking for cockabillies and squinting their eyes in the sun.

After lunch, when they were supposed to be lying down, she crept out to the pine trees and sat on the ground with her back resting against one of the trunks. Branches rustled in the breeze and, beneath that, from somewhere else, there was a roaring in her ears, as if she stood exposed on a hill in a southerly. She rubbed her hand across the tree bark. Grey-green lichen crumbled in her hands. She lay down on the dry pine needles, put her hands over her ears and closed her eyes.

When she woke there was the hollow sound of a spade hitting dry earth. Across the lawn Nan and Grandad were burying something in a cardboard box beneath the oak tree. They covered it over with dirt and planted pink and white flowers on top. Nan scooped water out of a plastic bucket with an old milk jug and poured it over the flowers. Grandad put his arm around her and she let him keep it there for a long time.

Geoff banged on the bathroom door. ‘Pete and Ange and the kids are here,’ he said.

Janine ran a comb through her short hair, gave the basin a wipe, threw the dirty towels in the laundry basket and hung clean ones on the rail. In the kitchen Pete kissed her on the cheek and Pete junior threw himself against her belly.

‘Aunty Jan, he said, ‘I’ve been good and I want a boogie board for Christmas.’

Geoff, Pete and the kids unpacked the tent and erected it on the wide, flat patch of grass in front of the bach. She and Angela lugged chillibins and bags of fruit and vegetables up the wooden steps into the kitchen.

‘How was the trip?’

Angela poured herself a glass of water and leaned against the bench. ‘Chucked up all the way. Pregnant. Again.’ She turned and re-filled the glass. ‘Two months.’

Janine stared at a spot above Angela’s head. Blotches of colour splintered and shimmied in front of her eyes. She rubbed her eyelids with her knuckles. Grey-green lichen crumbled on a piece of knobbly pine bark. Through the soil the edges of tree roots were smooth, like washed bone.

She managed to say congratulations.

‘I don’t really want another kid,’ Angela said.

‘What about Pete?’

‘Rapt.’

Janine took the cake out of the oven and set it on the wire rack to cool. The rich, spicy smell filled the kitchen. She covered it with a clean tea towel. After she’d made up the double bed in the spare room for Angela she lay on her own bed. Late afternoon light filtered

through the thin curtains onto the bamboo dressing table beside the bed. Face cream, hand cream, body lotions, lavender oil, lip gloss – all to stave off the dryness of her skin. None of it made any difference to the dryness of her womb.

Geoff has always said it didn't bother him. Pete and Ange could have all the hassle while they had all the fun, but she's seen the way he looks at Tracey and Pete junior, how happy he is teaching them to ride their bikes, how alive when mucking round with them at the beach. And she knew, like the pain of a blister forming on her skin, how often he turned away from her when she reached over in the dark and ran her fingers up the length of his thigh.

Once, when they were up here on their own, she sat beside him on the arm of Nan's big old chair, turned the sound off on the TV and tried to talk about it. He'd been watching a fishing programme and, while she talked, he looked straight ahead at images of surf and silver snapper being held up to catch the light before they were weighed and tagged.

'You're always so tense,' he said, 'so insistent.'

'But it has to be the right time.'

'The right bloody time for who?'

Janine washed lettuce and tomatoes and carved slices of ham while Angela buttered bread. 'If you really don't want it,' she said, 'Geoff and I... maybe we could have it.'

Angela paused mid swipe. 'Sorry?'

'You know, adopt it.'

'Bloody hell, Jan. Where did that come from?' Angela piled bread onto a plate.

'Just because I'm not that happy about it doesn't mean I want to give it away.'

Janine bit her lip then winced when the cold sore split open and began to bleed. She grabbed a roll of paper towels from the bench, tore off a section, dabbed at the blood.

Angela put her hand on her shoulder. ‘Let’s have a look,’ she said.

Janine pushed her hand away. ‘I’m fine,’ she said, ‘I’m fine.’

Geoff and Pete and the kids came in, wet, trailing sand and mud. Geoff carried Tracey on his shoulders and had his arm around Pete junior.

‘Bathroom,’ Janine said. ‘Clean up before tea.’

After the kids were tucked up in their sleeping bags in the tent, Geoff, Pete and Angela sat at the table playing euchre. Now that the Christmas cake was cold, Janine removed it from the tin, wrapped it in greaseproof paper and put it out of the way on top of the fridge. At the bench she spread trifle sponge with raspberry jam, cut it into squares and pressed it into her mother’s crystal bowl.

Geoff pulled the tab off another can and offered it to Pete. He shook his head. ‘I never drink when Ange’s pregnant,’ he said.

Geoff banged the can back down on the table, splashing beer down his tee shirt. ‘Holy shit!’ he said. He slapped Pete on the back. ‘You’ve got yourself a good one there, mate.’

The kitchen darkened. The wind changed direction and a southerly gust shook the bach. Janine gripped the edge of the bench. The coldness of the wind shook her. From one moment to the next the world changed shape. She was lying on a bed of pine needles beneath the windbreak and the sky was a vast blue and white arc over her head. Clouds formed into

animals. They morphed into children throwing Frisbees and, just as quickly, stretched into the distorted faces of her friends at work.

She closed her eyes and saw herself walking in slow motion, saying goodbye to Graham and Julie at the airport as they left for Melbourne. Blood and muscle slid from her bones until she was as dry and light as a leaf. The wind picked her up. It blew her above the trees, into the heart of the sky.

Geoff carried on toasting Pete and Angela and the baby in the kitchen. She walked out the door and down the wooden stairs. The door of the aluminium shed was unlocked. She reached for the torch. It swept a beam of light across the cluttered table onto shelves made from old beer crates. The cleaned and oiled rifles lay on the top shelf, out of reach of the kids.

She shone the torch up and down the shelves until she found a box of cartridges; stood on the step ladder and lifted down a rifle. Snapped it open. Filled it. Snapped it shut. Turned off the torch and hung it back on the nail. Stood in the dark, listening to the sound of the surf. Smelt the night scent of the sea, cool and sweet. And the sand was ivory beneath her bare feet.

Nan was there beside her. The oak tree shed its leaves over the pink and white flowers and the wind blew them across the lawn and onto the path. Nan picked them off the flowerbed and walked across the lawn carrying them in the bowl she'd made of her apron. She dropped them on the path and lifted the yard broom from the hook by the back door. Every time she swept them into a pile, a gust of wind came and blew them back all over the path. Nan swept them up again and again.

Janine shouted at the wind and shook her fist. 'Leave us alone. Leave us alone.'

She walked across the lawn to the tent, laid the rifle on the grass and looked inside. Tracey and Pete junior lay on their backs, fast asleep. She tiptoed in, listened to the softness of their breathing, bent down and touched Tracey's cheek.

Outside, she picked up the rifle, tucked it under her arm and climbed the steps. She leaned against the doorway and pointed it at Geoff.

'Get out of my kitchen.'

He got up from the table, a can of beer in his hand. 'What the hell are you doing?'

Her voice rose on the wind. 'Get out.'

Pete stood up, slow and careful, his hands flat in front of him. He moved between her and the rifle and Angela. The wind was blowing and leaves were flying over the flowers and Nan was sweeping, sweeping, sweeping.

'Jan,' he said, 'Jan. What's the matter? Has something happened?'

She waved the rifle at Geoff again. Most of his face had bleached but there were blotches of red mapped across his cheeks, and the lines that circled the base of his neck were still dirty. 'Before you go,' she said, 'Put the Christmas cake in the centre of the table.'

'What?'

'For Christ sake, Geoff,' Pete said, 'Just do it.'

Geoff looked around the kitchen. 'Where is it?'

She pointed the gun at the top of the fridge. 'Unwrap it and put it on a plate.'

Geoff's hands shook as he placed the cake on the table. Janine aimed the rifle straight at him. 'In the centre.'

'Jesus, Jan.' He moved the plate a couple of inches.

'Good,' she said. 'Now get out.' She looked at Pete, still standing in front of Angela.
'All of you. Leave me alone.'

Pete helped Angela out of her chair. She took a gulp of air and held onto his arm.

Janine heard Pete murmuring to her as he walked her down the steps. Geoff stood at the door. He was grubby and stooped, caved in, like an old man leaning on a bar. Nan swept leaves, her mother wept in the sitting room, her father's car screeched on the gravel drive, the firm closed down, there was no one left to share the Christmas cake with.

Geoff looked at her, his mouth moving as he tried to find something to say. She held the rifle steady, resting the butt against her diaphragm.

He raised the palms of his hands, held them out in front of his dirty tee shirt. 'Okay,' he said. 'Okay.' He backed out the kitchen door, his bare feet soft on the wooden floor and steps.

The cake sat in architectural splendour among the beer cans and the playing cards. Smooth brown almonds circled the top. The only thing missing was the plastic holly.

Janine laid the gun on the table, bent over and placed her cheek against the surface of the cake. It was moist, aromatic. Nan would have been proud. She stroked the smooth sides of the cake - a mother, caressing the sweet smelling skin of her child. She straightened up and wiped her hands on her shorts. She picked up the rifle, pointed it at the centre of the cake and pulled the trigger.

Angela drove her to the airport. At the departure gate she put her left hand on Angela's distended belly.

‘Sorry to miss this one.’

‘We’ll send photos, hundreds of them – you know what Pete’s like.’

When the plane took off there was no wind. Nan had put the yard broom back on the hook by the kitchen door and was sleeping peacefully on the veranda. The smell of cinnamon, allspice and brandy had faded from her skin and hair. The plane flew above the pine trees and turned towards the Tasman. She sailed through the heart of the clear blue sky.

Toetoe

Before the disciplinary meeting, Deirdre, the Head of Department, and Magda, the Conciliator from Human Resources, had fingered the material of each other's skirt. Layers of charcoal lace over black satin. Matching skirts from the designer sale advertised in the group email. They laughed about their shared taste, about getting a bargain; agreed they could get away with it, working in different departments, their figures and styles so dissimilar. Deirdre had softened the matt ebony of her pleated top with a crimson silk broach. Garnet earrings offset the angular bob of her grey hair.

After the meeting they sat side by side at a round table opposite an empty chair, the indent of a body still warm on it. A cheap pink cardigan, worn at the elbows and cuffs, lay abandoned across its back. Deirdre smoothed a wayward pleat, checked her lipstick, dabbed a tissue to the corner of her mouth. She removed her left foot from her high-heeled shoe and rubbed the bunion below her big toe. She raised penciled eyebrows.

‘Went well, don’t you think?’

Magda adjusted her leather belt – it was black, interwoven with strands of dark brown. This thread of brown was picked up again on the embroidered lapel of her black velvet jacket. She looked out the office window. Through the glass the pale fronds of a toetoe bush shivered in the autumn wind. Beyond the toetoe, Gina, the administration assistant, just released from the meeting, stood on the wooden ramp outside the cafeteria wearing dark jeans and a black tee shirt, the Institution’s brand screen-printed across the front. Her dark curls blew across her round, brown cheeks. A group of students slouched together in identical tee

shirts and jeans. They greeted her and one of the young men linked his arm through hers.

They moved off the ramp together, clowning, a sudden flurry of black-clad limbs and hair.

Magda twisted the large ring on her index finger and tried to think of the right thing to say. The amber stone of her ring flashed in the sunlight as she ran her fingers through her copper streaked hair. The banana muffins she'd shared with Deirdre before the meeting were starting to repeat on her. A metallic taste settled on her tongue.

The ripple of black on the ramp triggered an image of the breeze combing the sand dunes at Karekare where she'd walked on her own the day before. She remembered the black sheet of creek water she waded through, and the stands of toetoe, torches lit against the dark green of the hills. Her shadow lengthening on the sand in front of her as she walked past the cliffs on the way back to the carpark. The toetoe fronds on the bank turning pink as the sun sank lower in the sky.

At a picnic table, she'd seen a woman very like Gina, with the same glossy hair and warm brown skin. She was slicing and peeling pieces of apple for her three children. They threw the curling apple skins on the grass and laughed when the ducks gobbled them up. Now Magda thought if the two women were in the same room it would be hard to tell them apart.

She stood and pushed back her chair; looked past Deirdre's shoulder to a postcard of Venice pinned to the noticeboard. 'These situations,' she said, 'they're so complicated - it's hard to know what's best, isn't it?' The muscles in her lower back were tight. She kneaded her fists around her spine.

Deirdre watered the peace lily on top of the filing cabinet from her plastic water bottle and snipped at a browning leaf with her nail scissors. 'I thought it was obvious,' she said, 'classic case of playing the culture card – she always does it when she's in the wrong.' She re-

arranged a group of family photos on her desk, moving one of herself holding her latest grandchild to the front.

Magda thought of her only daughter, single and working on a two year contract in Dubai. No grandchildren in the foreseeable future.

Deirdre finished tidying her desk and glanced up at her. ‘What?’
‘Perhaps those comments at the beginning,’ she said, her voice toned to neutral, the way she’d been taught. ‘About Gina having the wrong mindset.’ She smoothed the lace on her overskirt. Adjusted the buckle on her belt. ‘Maybe you were a little... over emphatic, when you said she talks too much about her personal life?’

Deirdre opened her handbag and found a mint. ‘Well, you know me. Take me as you find me - *I say what’s on my mind.*’ She sighed and snapped her handbag shut. ‘As if I needed this. But what could I do? Staff have complained.’

Magda’s throat was dry. She coughed and reached across the table for her glass of water. ‘What have they said?’

‘Oh, you know what it’s like – people tell you things.’

‘What kind of things?’

Deirdre smiled and shook her head. ‘Said in confidence - they trust me. We’re like family.’ She moved her laptop from her desk to the table and inserted a memory stick. ‘Did I show you the photos of my grand-daughter’s wedding?’

As Deirdre scrolled through the photos Magda spotted someone in the background that looked exactly like Gina. Or the woman at the beach peeling apples for her children. She was wearing a plain black skirt, black sandals and a white blouse. Her hair was pulled into a pony tail. She held a tray of champagne glasses and looked away from the camera.

Magda fumbled for her glasses and moved closer. ‘Wait,’ she said, ‘Isn’t that Gina?’

Deirdre squinted at the screen. ‘Either her or her cousin,’ she said, ‘I can never tell them apart. They run a catering business at the weekends.’

‘Gina did the catering for your granddaughter’s wedding?’

‘She might be on the phone all day telling her layabout son to bring the washing in, or asking for time off to take her relatives to hospital, but she knows how to cook.’

Magda picked up her diary from the table and checked the time of her next meeting. If she was lucky she’d have time to go to the chemist and get some antacids. Perhaps she would ring her daughter this evening, instead of emailing. Just to hear her voice.

Deirdre’s cell phone rang. ‘Of course I can come and get you, darling. I’ll pick you up at three-thirty.’

She dropped the phone in her handbag, closed the laptop and smiled at Magda. ‘The honeymooners’ she said, ‘I shouted them two weeks in Fiji for their wedding present. It’s so much cheaper now.’

Magda pointed to the pink cardigan on the back of the chair. ‘I can drop it into reception on my way back if you like.’

Deirdre glanced at the cardigan. ‘Ghastly, isn’t it?’ She shivered. ‘I’ve asked her not to wear it - perhaps we should just throw it in the bin.’

Outside the office, wind blew rust-coloured leaves across the grass and ruffled the creamy toetoe fronds. The sun came out from behind a cloud. It changed the colour of the fronds from pale yellow to salmon pink. Their shadows spear points across the grass. Magda held the cardigan to her chest. It smelt faintly of sunlight soap. In the meeting, Gina had sat twisting the sleeves of the cardigan in her lap. Her head was lowered, her eyes focused on the

section of carpet in front of her chair. At the top of Deirdre's list of complaints were too many phone calls and visits from family members; cousins and children cluttering up the reception area at the end of the day. At the mention of family Gina's gaze had flicked to the photos on the desk and the filing cabinet.

Magda closed her eyes and thought how tidy her apartment was now that her daughter was gone. Her face was hot and the breeze cooled her cheeks. Still with her were the dark cliffs of Karekare and, for a few seconds, she stood beneath them again, looking at the shape of her shadow on the sand. When she opened her eyes Gina was standing in front of her.

'Are you alright?'

'Your cardigan,' she said. 'I was coming to give it to you.'

Gina held out her hand. 'Thanks. I wondered where it was.' She put on the cardigan and buttoned it up. 'It's getting cold isn't it?'

They walked along the concrete footpath and stood together outside reception. Gina was silent. Magda searched for something to say. 'Where do you come from, Gina?'

'Hamilton.'

Magda shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'I mean, originally.'

Gina frowned. She bunched the hem of her cardigan in her fingers. 'My grandparents were born in Samoa. What about you?'

'Oh no,' Magda said, 'I'm a Kiwi.' Her phone beeped, reminding her she was five minutes late for her next meeting. She held out her hand. 'All the best, Gina.'

On the way to the faculty meeting she went to the bathroom. She tidied her hair, ruffled a dab of gel into her fringe. The mirror was smudged, grubby with fingerprints. Someone had

taped a notice to it, advertising for a flatmate. Sea views, it said, close to the west coast, twenty minutes to Piha or Karekare.

She'd forgotten to go to the chemist - acid attacked her stomach, rose to the base of her throat. She rinsed her mouth and swallowed, trying to push the bitter, burning taste back down. She straightened her jacket. The charcoal lace of the skirt was beginning to annoy her. The material was too light, it needed constant smoothing down. And the satin underskirt reacted to the wind – it clung to her skin, full of static electricity.

In the meeting room, her colleagues clustered in small groups, chatting, waiting for the Dean to arrive. They discussed their plans for the coming long weekend. Magda had forgotten about the public holiday the following Monday and had nothing planned. She saw herself alone in the apartment, using the extra day to catch up on work, drafting her report on the last month of conciliation meetings, making polite recommendations to the Dean about the Heads of Departments. She sat down, poured herself a glass of water and reached for a mint. The table was dark, polished wood, and, in a trick of the afternoon light, it resembled a black sheet of creek water.

When the Dean walked into the room she was wading up to her knees. A breeze combed the sand dunes. Her shadow was enlarged; it filled the length of the inlet. It was elongated, like a spear. She was as tremulous as a toetoe frond, changing colour in the setting sun. She looked up from the wet sand: there were flames in the distance, burning against the dark green of the hills.

Under a big sky

Camptown ladies sing this song

Doo- dah, doo- dah

Camptown racetracks five miles long

Oh de doo dah day

Banks Peninsula January 2004

I was watching a detective from Christchurch being interviewed on TV. A teenage girl had disappeared, he said, along the banks of the Rakaia River. It was over eighteen hours since anyone had seen her and there were grave concerns for her safety. He had that telltale look on his face that said his mouth and his eyes weren't in agreement with each other. He gave out an 0800 number for the public to ring if they had any information - no matter how small.

I flicked the screen off, poured myself a shot of single malt, went outside and sat on the veranda. The sky was turning aubergine. I put my feet up on the beer crate I used as a coffee table and stared at the glimmer of grey water at the bottom of the hills. For the first time in a while I thought about Carlene Riley.

Carley and me, when we were a couple of skinny kids stuck in Burkesville, a small South Island town dominated by the Freezing Works and Chaney's lumberyard. On a bad day in Burkesville in the killing season the hot, tacky smell of slaughtered animals was thick and dark as Vegemite. Carley's old man used to work with Dad on the chain but he buggered off

when Carley turned eight. Went to Australia for the high life, Ma said, leaving Mrs. Riley with four kids and no money for rent.

The phone in the kitchen rang.

‘Hi Dad, it’s me. What you doing?’

My breath caught in the back of my throat and I coughed. ‘Molly – how’s St Arnauds?’
‘Gran’s out of hospital and walking round, and Mum and me are going riding for a few days. There’s a whole group of us. It’ll be really cool. We’ll ride all day and camp out at night, and on the last day we’re going to join up with the rodeo in Richmond.’

‘Yo’all gunna sit round the campfire singing *Home on the Range*?’

Molly snorted down the phone. ‘You’re so old-fashioned Dad.’

She gave the phone to her mother and after the hellos were over my mind went blank.

‘How are you Matt,’ Kate said.

I flicked the TV on again and pressed the mute button. An old Clint Eastwood film was on the movie channel: there was a dusty main street and a shot of tumbleweeds rolling in the rising wind. Clint’s face, as he rode into town, had that sculptured look, bones carved beneath stretched skin.

‘I’m okay. How’s Nola?’

‘Knee’s healing well– she says hi.’

‘Give her my love.’

Clint dismounted, tethered his horse, walked into the saloon. I watched his back, still trying to find the right words to talk to Kate.

‘Matt?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Don’t drink too much.’

I went back out to the veranda and let the whiskey spread false warmth into my stomach. Westerns were my first love; Carlene Riley had been my second. In the summer of 1970 we were both eleven. The other kids at school called Carlene Lollipop because she was thin as a reed and her curls blazed out from her head like an apricot sun, but I was completely gone on her. She played the female lead in our elaborate scripted games – westerns written by me and her in the tree hut on summer afternoons.

We lived in our own place at the top of Jules St. The Riley’s lived at the bottom in a state house with a weedy front garden and scraggy apple trees out the back. When old man Riley tripped the light fantastic to Aussie Dad organized a concert at the pub and got enough money to keep them going until Carley’s mum found some cleaning jobs and Ray, the oldest, left school.

Ray was big for age and thick as a plank. Carley was small and sharp and sassy – shiny as a diamond. Every year at final assembly she took first prize for math and English. Mrs Riley was worn out, unread and missing her front teeth but she never missed prize-giving. Her face was a punched in puzzle of pride and confusion – you could tell she was wondering where the hell Carley’s brains came from.

For a while I sat there on the veranda in the dark and thought about Carley, then I thought about Kate and Molly and the reasons I was up here on my own, and finally I thought about all the westerns I was famous for and about the new book I should be writing, the one I’d promised the publisher by the end of the year. All week I’d been re-reading my favorite books about the American West, looking at pictures of Indians and settlers, cowboys and

outlaws, listening out for a new story, a new voice. But all I had trapped in my fingers was pulp. I lit the kerosene lamp, moved my A4 scribble pad into the pool of light and wrote down an outline.

Rufus Adams sits alone in the twilight, his feet propped up on his desk, shuffling through the latest batch of 'Wanted' posters delivered by train that morning from Kansas City. His deputy, Sam Wallis, is out on the front porch jawing with Doc Stuart and, underneath his hat, he scans the street for strangers who might upset the peace of the townsfolk of Dodge City.

In the Cottonwoods Saloon, Miss Betty chats to her bartender, Big Mike, and watches the tables fill up as the sun goes down. She keeps an eye on a card sharp from Salina wearing a fancy blue and yellow cravat, playing a hand of poker with some of the locals. The weather is warm and dry and tomorrow is Sunday. Miss Betty wonders whether a slow drive in the buggy alongside the river might be in order and if a picnic in a shady spot in the Smoky Hills might convince Rufus to leave work behind for a few hours. He's been brooding ever since the shootout in Topeka when his uncle was gunned down by the Farlin brothers. He chased them with a posse as far as Wichita but lost them when they crossed the Arkansas River and fled into their hideout somewhere in the Red Hills south of Dodge City.

In a quiet corner at the back of the saloon two men sit talking. Miss Betty recognizes the younger man, Virgil, the reclusive only son of Jeremiah Lowe, once one of richest ranchers in Kansas. Virgil doesn't come into town often, he's not a drinker, and she wonders what business he has with the somber looking stranger and why he's conducting it in her saloon.

I was feeling my way back into Dodge City, just as I did when I was a kid and wrote a new script with Carley. In those days we'd map out the street, turn it into the Ponderosa or Fort Worth or the ranch in Happy Valley. The problem was, over thirty years later, I was still making up the same god-damn stories. I could see the Farlin brothers, clear as a bell: their unshaven faces loomed in front of me like Easter Island statues, the stink of their unwashed bodies and clothes swamped the veranda, a feral scent mixed with the cleaner sweat of horses. They rode all night under a crescent moon the color of butter. They swept past lonely stands of cottonwoods, startled drowsing cattle, disturbed the sleep of cowhands stretch out in their bedrolls by dampened fires and set the coyotes howling in the distance.

After the Farlin brothers disappeared I panicked – all I had left was Rufus, Miss Betty and Big Mike. I poured myself another inch of whiskey, swirled it in the bottom of my glass and stared out past the moth-battered lamp into the darkness. In the distance I saw the vague outline of another figure: Virgil Lowe in the saloon. He shook hands with the tall stranger he'd been talking to. He walked down the main street leading his horse by the reins. His back was towards me. There was something familiar about him. Perhaps it was the set of his shoulders or the feeling I got watching his retreating back - there was a weight in him that made him walk, one step at a time, across the prairie, instead of riding on home like everyone else. After a while he stopped, took off his hat and looked up at the stars. I caught a glimpse of his face then. Dark hair, high cheekbones, shadows under his eyes, moustache over a full upper lip. He stood there for a long time with his head back, the night breeze on his throat and neck, looking at the sweep of the night sky. Finally he mounted his horse, turned in a semi circle and rode off.

More than anything I wanted someone to talk to, someone who'd go with me into the beyond, someone to help make the story real. Someone like Carley.

Burkesville 1967

Dad likes me more than Ray or Mum. I make him happy. Sometimes I just want to read my book before I go to sleep but all I have to do is help him sing *Camptown Races* and play the game he taught me when I was little: rubbing his horse down so it can cross the finish line and win the race. I don't mind playing the game that much 'cause afterwards he curls up beside me, strokes my hair and reads me a story. Mum's not much of a reader. She says each word real slow, sounding it out letter by letter, like the babies in the primers, so she leaves me and Dad alone to do reading.

After reading what I like best is playing in the tree hut with Matt. He's small and skinny and wears Joe 90 glasses but he makes up good stories. He writes parts for me and the other kids. We spend whole days playing our own versions of Gunsmoke or Bonanza. Matt likes reading too. In the summer if my asthma gets bad or its stifling outside we lie on the floor of the hut with the door open and read our library books together. When we finish we swap. The problem with Matt is he only likes cowboy stories. They're always about boys, and they're just the same story over and over - the heroes just have different names. I want to read books like Wuthering Heights or Jane Eyre, or ones about Hannibal taking his elephants over the Alps or Lord Rutherford cracking the atom.

Banks Peninsula 2004

The summer of 1971 was hot and dry as Australia and Carley wore torn grey shorts, cut down gumboots and a tee shirt four sizes too big for her. She walked round with her arms folded across her chest and only came to the tree hut once to help me write. She mumbled something about having to look after the twins. Instead of sprawling on the floor beside me she sat on her own by the door, as if one of us smelt bad, and wrapped her arms around her knees. She looked out through the branches at the gorse bushes that formed a barrier between the backyards and the paddocks and didn't pay much attention to my idea for a new story.

'You sick or something?' I said.

I stood up to practise my cowboy stride, long and slow and deliberate. She looked at me as if she was a grown-up and I was still a little kid. It was only a moment, a couple of heartbeats, but she'd gone somewhere and left me behind. I twirled imaginary six guns on my forefingers and slid them back into their holsters.

'Wanna go outside and race the dobbins?'

It was my trump card. She loved them as much as I did, even though we were both way too old.

My older brother Luke and I had built the dobbins. They were trolleys made out of wooden boxes lined with potato sacks so you didn't get splinters, and the wheels and chassis from two old prams. They had no brakes and the steering worked by pulling on a bit of rope connected to the bar that held the wheels. We raced them down the hill, crashing them into the long grass at the bottom.

Carley stood up and smoothed down her shorts and tee shirt, turned around and went down the ladder. I followed her, undid the padlock on the shed and we pushed the trolleys along the path and onto the road.

Ma saw us from the kitchen window. ‘You kids be careful now,’ she said, ‘Watch out for cars.’

‘Ready,’ I said.

We pushed off with our hands, scraping our palms on the rough asphalt. It was close but she beat me fair and square. We were hauling them back up for another go when Barry Dixon and one of his mates drove up on their motorbikes. They rode round us like Indians circling the wagons, whooping and showing off. Ma came out and stood on the path in her apron and waved the potato masher at them. They laughed at her but they buggered off and parked their bikes at the bottom of the street outside the Dixon’s place.

The Dixons had just moved into number fourteen, opposite the Riley’s place. Mrs. Dixon was short and round with a home perm that frizzed her hair like she’d been electrocuted. Dad told Ma over the tea table that old man Dixon drank most of the money so Verna dug up the backyard and planted it in potatoes and carrots. She bought half a sheep once a week direct from the Works and shoveled mutton chops and stew into her no-good husband and three walloping sons. Barry Dixon was the same age as Ray Riley and almost as thick. Ray’d put in a good word and scored Barry a job at the Works. After a couple of months Barry bought himself a 350 Yamaha and he and his mate Keith started hanging round, revving their engines and drinking beer.

Ma didn’t like motorbikes and she didn’t like the Dixons either. Too rough and ready, she said, when she heard Barry roaring up and down the neighborhood on his bike.

'It'll be tattoos next,' she said to Dad, as they sat at the table sharing the newspaper after tea. 'I know the type.'

Dad just laughed. 'Barry's alright - he's just a kid playing with a new toy.'

Ma shook her head, 'Mark my words, Phil, there'll be trouble. I can feel it in my waters.'

Ma and her waters. I used to imagine a river in her, as if she was a landscape of female nerves and intuition, full of mountains and hills and stony riverbeds and water that flowed up and down tributaries in her arms and legs and settled in some estuary of knowing in her wide soft belly. When Carley turned thirteen she stopped playing westerns and racing dobbins and started riding pillion on Barry's bike. Ma never said a word, she just let me lie on the couch wrapped in a blanket while she mended socks and ironed shirts and I watched westerns on TV.

Nelson District January 2004

Barry Dixon spotted the redhead while his mate, Keith Munro, was snoring like a bull, sleeping off a hangover in the back of the Mitsi. He'd pulled over to the side of the road to have a leak when she came out of the bush a hundred yards up, on the back of an Appaloosa. Long legs gripping horse flesh. She stood up in the stirrups, turned sideways to check the road and, for a second, he had a great view of her arse in her riding pants. After that the sun was in his eyes. He couldn't see her face but the color of her hair reminded him of somebody, he just couldn't think who.

He zipped up, watched her ride past and felt a familiar stirring in his jeans. No problems in that department. Not like Keith. Sour old bastard. Liked ‘em young did Keith, jailbait territory, but even that didn’t seem to do the trick anymore. The years had turned Keith into a pisshead with a bad temper; a millstone round his bloody neck.

This was Barry’s last rodeo. He was sick of being a hobo, kipping down in caravans and camping grounds, going from pub to pub and town to town. The rate he was going he’d end up just like Keith - nothing to show but a hangover and an ache in his balls.

Back at the car Barry reached past Keith for his tobacco and saw he’d pissed himself in his sleep. Christ allbloodymighty! He hauled him out, spluttering and moaning, rolled him over in the gravel with the toe of his boot. Keith sat up on the side of the road, dribbling and blinking like an old man. He hiccupped and looked at Barry.

‘Whaddaya do that for?’

‘Shithead.’

Barry kicked the back tyres a couple of times. Opened all the doors. Threw his bag at him.

‘Ya can fuckin’ walk.’

Keith tried to stand but ended up on his hands and knees, crawling into the bush, wet jeans stuck to his scrawny backside.

In the boot, among the beer cans and dirty clothes, there was a stained towel and a half empty water-bottle. Barry wiped down the back seat, left the car doors open and threw the towel on the side of the road. He should’ve driven off, but he sat in the front on the passenger side and rolled himself a smoke. The grease from last night’s hamburgers sat in his gut,

making him queasy. He needed a shower and shave, clean clothes, a decent meal. And something to wash away the smell of Keith's beery piss.

A bank of cloud dulled the sunlight as a line of riders crossed the road. Rich kids and their minders, trekking along the riverbeds, riding through Richmond Forest Park during their summer holidays. From the other side of the road, out of the ferns and scrub, Red came back. She circled the other riders, making her horse take dainty steps, like in the shows. Barry slouched down in the seat, pulled down the brim of his cowboy hat and watched her. She leaned over and rubbed her hands up and down the neck of the horse. Then she rounded everyone up, as if she was in charge, even though she looked the youngest.

Rodeo chicks. Hanging round the horses, watching the steer wrestling, the rope and tie, the bull rides. Smoothing down tight jeans. Bending over to straighten their boots. Giggling and strutting in front of the cowboys.

Keith came back, looking like shit. He stared at the towel scrunched up on the side of the road. Barry got in the driver's seat and started the engine.

'You coming?'

Keith kicked the towel further across the gravel until it rolled out of sight. Threw his bag on the back seat. Sat there and said sweet f all.

Barry turned off Highway 63 and drove the forest road, the Mitsi rattling and shaking. The body was buggered but the engine was smooth – keeping it going was about the only thing Keith was any good at. At Wakefield Barry parked outside the public dunnies.

'Wanna a piss?'

Keith spat out the window.

Might as well talk to a frigging stone.

They pulled into Richmond late in the afternoon. The sky blushing in the corners like a virgin. Barry booked a double cabin in the motor camp and left Keith there, lying on the bed staring out the window looking at nothing and sucking beer. He dusted off his boots, changed his shirt and drove over to the show grounds for a nosey.

Flattened down grass and cow shit, sheep piss, horse sweat and candyfloss. The smell of it sharp enough to chew. Purple and white twirly-gigs, cheap dolls and teddy bears on the stalls. He tipped some ping-pong balls down the clown's wide open gobs for luck. He'd been doing that since he was a kid, following his father round the A&P shows. The old geezer would give him a couple of bucks and tell him to piss off while he went to the beer tent with his mates. When the cash ran out Barry sat on the fence rails and watched the pony club brats or waited outside the tent with the other kids and played marbles. Keith's old man and his were pretty much the same – bent the elbow every chance they got.

The first rodeo he ever saw was Easter 1970. Cowboys riding and roping and wearing the gear just like on TV. He'd put his hand over his mouth to stop himself whooping like a baby. He got as close as he could and watched them all day. When they were finished one of them gave him his saddle to carry and laughed like a donkey when he fell over and dropped it in the dust. Barry learnt pretty quick he wasn't any good at riding or heaving gear. Neither was Keith, but they were great at card tricks and bet on anything that crawled.

Once they left school they figured out a system to fleece the pissheads in the tent. Made as much in a weekend as they did in a month at work. Life got sweet: bought the bikes, pulled the birds, cruised the shows.

The bikes had gone west a while ago, traded in for the Mitsi in Queenstown. Keith's crap, as usual. He'd been hanging round the rodeo chicks, giving the young ones rides, feeling them up in the bushes. Shit for brains: never learnt how to get it on a plate. He should've left him that time in Ashburton in '92 and gone off with that rich chick – best head he'd ever had. Could've been sitting pretty now, three kids, her old man's farm, money in the bank.

Nothing much was happening at the show grounds so he walked back to the car. He wondered whether to get fish and chips or have another night of burgers. Red and her mates rode in, about twenty of them, talking and laughing and covered in dust. They dismounted, led their horses to the far corner of the paddock and tethered them to the fence. Took off their saddles, brushed the horses down, fed and watered them. Regular little cowboys.

A couple of four-wheel drives full of minders followed them in. He sat in the car with the door open to catch the breeze, pretending to read the newspaper, and watched them put up tents. They passed around cartons of juice, unpacked fancy baskets of food. Cold chicken and potato salad, hard boiled eggs, tomatoes and fresh bread, thermoses of tea and coffee. Jesus Christ. They lay around on tartan rugs, the girls stretched out, showing themselves off, the boys prissy as fags, passing paper plates to each other, stuffing their faces. Barry sat there on his own like a sad bastard and rolled himself a smoke. Just to top it off, an older version of Red brought out a chocolate cake with a candle on it and they all sang happy birthday to some little rich prick who blushed like a girl.

Keith was half way human by the time he got back to the cabin with the fish and chips. They sat outside on green plastic chairs drinking beer and dunking chips in tomato sauce. A couple of rodeo guys from one of the other cabins came over and they played poker

till midnight. Keith cracked old jokes and yarneed about his glory days and Barry let him win a few hands.

The rest of the night Barry lay awake listening to Keith snore and mumble in the next room wondering who the hell it was Red reminded him of.

Burkesville 1969

Dad wants me to play another game now, a grown-up one. I have to put his horse in my mouth. I don't want to. He grabs me, nearly gives me a hiding, but I put my hand out and start to sing,

Camptown ladies sing this song,

Doo-dah, doo-dah

Mum comes in with my school blouse. He shouts at her, chases her out of the room. Things crash about in the kitchen. The back door slams. I hide under the blankets and wait for Dad to come back and read me a story.

Next morning Mum gets Mrs. Mulholland to mind the twins. She's got toothache. She has to go to the dentist and get her front teeth pulled out.

Mum's not speaking to me. I reckon she's mad 'cause Dad's gone away and I can read properly.

Banks Peninsula 2004

I stopped thinking about Carley and the Farlin brothers and how disappointing it was
Kate didn't like westerns and made it to bed just as the sun was coming up. My eyes were full
of grit and the whiskey was beginning to carve inroads into my stomach lining. I drank a glass
of water, took a couple of painkillers and crashed out on top of the covers, a plastic bucket
beside me, just in case. My brain was a fog of alcohol and images. Molly's delicate face and
red curls appeared, cowboys rode across endless open terrain, police combed riverbeds, Barry
Dixon and Keith Munro swaggered round smashing beer bottles against the Riley's broken
down fence. I saw Virgil Lowe's back as he stood on the platform waiting for the train, then he
and Kate and Molly way in the distance sitting by a campfire under the stars. Virgil had his
head down and he was writing in a notebook. I tried to call out their names but my voice was
frozen in my throat.

Burkesville 1971

There's blood on my legs and on the sheets. Mum says I've got the curse. She takes the
sheets off the bed and soaks them in the tub in the washhouse. She gives me an old towel and
tells me to cut it up into four or five pieces. It's lumpy and rubs against my skin when I walk.
After a few hours it smells like something from the Freezing Works and I put it in a bucket to
soak. I don't go the tree-hut, I stay home and read, in case all the dogs in the neighborhood
smell the blood and chase me. None of the girls in the books I read get the curse. I try to
imagine Jane Eyre washing her cut up towels in a tin bucket at Mr. Rochester's house, or

Cathy roaming round the moors worried wild animals smell blood on her. Books tell you a lot but they don't tell you everything.

Banks Peninsula 2004

At midday I woke with a sense of doom so strong it made my teeth ache. I talked myself into a cold shower, made coffee and toast. The sky was overcast. A 'nor-easterly was blowing over the hills. I needed to walk off the whiskey and woo that son-of-a-bitch character, Virgil, the only one that had anything going for it. In my heart I knew Rufus and Miss Betty fighting off the Farlin brothers wasn't going to cut it anymore.

I took the track behind the house and climbed for an hour, battling the rising wind. I sat for a while looking down at the scarf of water rippling far below. It was the same grey-blue as the shirt and shorts Carley wore the last time I saw her.

Burkesville 1971

Barry Dixon's hanging out with Ray. They drink beer and talk about bikes. They spend the weekends in the backyard working on Barry's bike. They take it to bits and put it back together again even though it's brand new and there's nothing wrong with it.

On Friday nights Barry's mate Keith comes round and they all sit at the kitchen table sculling beer and telling jokes. Mrs. Rasmussen picks Mum up at 5 and they don't get back from cleaning offices in town 'til midnight.

When Ray's got a skinful his temper's like Dad's. But he can't read stories or sing like Dad, and he isn't funny like Barry, who's always kidding around.

Ray and Keith go to the bottle store to get some more beer. I'm stuck at the sink doing the dishes. Barry stretches out his legs and leans back in the chair. He puts his hands behind his head and squints at me. He's wearing Levis and a black tee-shirt; an unlit cigarette behind his ear like that guy in the movies. He puts on this fake accent like he's John Wayne or something and says, 'Gidday Red. Hey, no flies on you, but I can see where they've been.'

I blush. He laughs and I think how much I hate people being smart about my hair and freckles. Mrs. Mulholland says rubbing lemon juice on your skin helps the freckles fade but we don't have any lemons, only trees full of wormy apples.

Barry gets up from the table and comes over to the bench, walking just like Matt does when we play cowboys. He puts his hand on my head and scrunches my curls between his fingers. I hunch my shoulders, duck my head, but he puts his other hand in the middle of my back and spins me round a couple of times. I can smell beer and cigarettes on him. Just like Dad.

'Don't worry Goldilocks,' he says in that funny fake voice of his. 'You're way too ugly to kiss.'

Then he lets go and sits back down at the table. He spreads his legs wider in the chair and scratches the inside of his thigh. I can see the bulge of his horse stretched tight beneath his jeans.

I stand by the sink. It's like I'm stuck up on the ceiling staring down at myself and at Barry and the kitchen. The pot scrub drips soapy water down the front of my tee-shirt. Barry yawns and scratches again.

Banks Peninsula 2004

I remember it was late afternoon and I was in the tree hut. Kids were kicking a soccer ball up and down the street. I saw the flash of Carley's hair. I reached for Dad's binoculars and trained them on her. She climbed over the fence, skirted the gorse and walked across the paddock towards the lumber yard. Her head was down, her hands tucked into the pockets of her shorts. Her legs were slender and freckled. Every now and then she'd take her hand out of her pocket and rub the back of it across her face. Everyone knew she had a hard time looking after the twins and putting up with Ray's temper as well as going to school. But things had changed between me and Carley. Whenever I saw her on the back of Barry's bike or hanging around him when he parked outside her place, my insides squirmed and I retreated to the tree hut.

I watched her through the binoculars until she went behind Cheney's and my view was blocked. I guessed she was taking the shortcut we all did, down to the fish and chip shop on the main road. The five o'clock whistle blew. Men in sawdust covered overalls straggled out of Cheney's. They stood talking and smoking in the car park for a few minutes then got in their cars and drove off. After that, old man Cheney came out, locked up and left in his brand new Holden. It was quiet for a while. I was about to put the binoculars away when I saw Barry Dixon and Keith Munro ride into the yard on their bikes. They circled the empty car park a couple of times. They did a few wheelies then shut down their engines. Barry pulled beer cans out of his back pack, straddled his bike and smoked a rolly. He drained a can and threw it across the yard, hitting the reception sign on the side of the building. Keith laughed and they got off their bikes and began play-acting like a couple of kids. I watched as they

pretended to be cowboys having a shoot-out, drawing imaginary six-guns, throwing empty beer cans into the air, using their fingers to shoot them down. Pow, pow. They were just fooling around but I couldn't help thinking how dumb they were, they couldn't even come up with a decent plot, they just played the same scene over and over: find something and shoot it down.

Ma called out tea was ready but I caught the gleam of Carley's hair again as she came back round the buildings and into the parking lot. She stopped when she saw Barry. Stood there like a blind thing, holding onto the newspaper parcel of fish and chips. He circled her, still playing the fool, and dumb-arse Keith threw a can of beer to her. Her hands were full and she let the can fall. It bounced, split open and foam spilt onto the dusty ground. I turned up the binoculars, trying to get a clear view of her face. Her skin was flushed. She was breathing funny, the way she did just before an asthma attack. Her chest rose and fell as if she was running.

Barry tried to take the fish and chips and give her another can. She drew back, tried to walk away. He stretched out his hand and pulled at the back of her old denim shirt. She shook her head, pushed his arm away. He grabbed hold of the shirt and reined her in like a pony at the rodeo. Scooped her up as if she was a kid, carried her over to his bike, plonked her on the back. She sat with her shoulders slumped forward, arms around the fish and chips. I just sat there on the top step of the tree-hut, watching. The only warm thing in the world was the fish and chips squashed between his body and hers.

Burkesville 1972

Riding on the back of Barry's bike isn't as good as reading but it gets me away from cleaning up after everyone. Matt sulks 'cause I won't play cowboys anymore, and the girls at school are jealous too. Even Louise Mitchell, who spends most of her time getting her friends to comb her long blonde hair so she looks like a model, asks me what it's like. I think she's being friendly until Marie Wilson joins her. They laugh and say, 'Hey Carley, guess that helmet's the only thing that hides your frizzy orange hair.'

Dad liked my hair and so does Barry. When we play the grown-up game he holds my head with his hands and brushes my hair back so it doesn't get messed up.

Being with Barry's okay as long as I get out of the house. Sometimes we go out of town and ride really fast on the back roads that go down to the river. Then Ray's moods, Louise Mitchell's laugh, not having pocket money or real jeans, none of it matters. It's like flying above everything.

Banks Peninsula 2004

Up on the Banks Peninsula hills the first spots of rain hit the warm earth. I heaved myself up and rubbed the dust off the back of my jeans. I beat the heavy rain back to the cottage by a couple of minutes. Out on the veranda I sat with my eyes shut, drinking in the smell of the water as it soaked into the dry soil. I wanted Ma then, wanted to consult those waters of hers. I wondered what she'd make of me: a man in his fifties, still in love with westerns, still trying to walk and talk like a hero, but too chicken to talk to his wife properly.

I went inside and turned on the local radio station. My ancient Imperial typewriter sat on the kitchen table. I tightened the ribbon and put in a clean sheet of paper; polished the shiny black keys that clatter when you hit them hard with the pads of your fingers. Felt the satisfaction of hitting the return carriage at the end of the line. No need for leads or plugs or batteries; you can put it down and write anywhere you like.

The news came on. The usual stuff, wars and rising prices, teenage boys full of beer killing themselves and their friends on the back roads. Right at the end the announcer switched to a reporter on the banks of the Rakaia. A body had been found - a naked girl discarded amongst the gorse about forty metres from a popular swimming hole. A middle-aged couple walking their dogs had discovered it. The woman's voice was tired and flat. 'Her skin was scratched' she said, 'from being dragged into the bushes.'

I turned off the radio, drank a glass of water and put on some Bach to untangle the kinks in my head and shoulders. I sat at the kitchen table and tried to type. My fingers were clumsy, my temples still throbbed. The light was grey-white, too bright. I adjusted the slat blinds. The rain had stopped and the humidity was building again.

I let myself drift, trying to stay afloat in a current of images, trying not to control them as they flitted through my hung-over brain. There was Carley's faded denim shirt, the foam from the beer can spilling on the ground, the Farlin brothers riding into Dodge City while Miss Betty and Rufus Adams sat on a tartan rug by the Arkansas river eating cherry pie on a quiet Sunday afternoon. Ma was in the kitchen, frying onions and pork sausages and mashing a big pot of floury potatoes with butter and cream, and I was in the living room, watching re-runs of *Little House on the Prairie*. Coming in behind all that were Kate and Molly, packing up the car for the drive to Nelson, and me, standing at the window, watching them and doing nothing.

Right after that I saw Virgil's ranch in Kansas. I swooped down like a bird of prey. I flew above cattle grazing on rolling plains and landed outside the open shutters of the parlor. There was a polished mahogany desk, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a rocking chair by the fireplace, a painting of a dark-haired, pale skinned woman wearing a blue dress with a lace collar, striped rugs on the wooden floors, rifles hooked on the whitewashed walls. I didn't intrude. I stayed in the background, trying to see everything, trying to listen.

Virgil Lowe: Kansas, USA: 1898

Pa was ten years old when he first saw the buffalo. In the winter he'd sit by the fireplace in his favorite chair and move his hands in front of him as if he was smoothing out a patchwork quilt, and he'd reminisce about seeing them shaggy, humped-back buffalo spread out and roaming across the plains.

'It was like the waves of the sea, boy,' he'd say, and tap the stem of his clay pipe against the arm of his chair.

A far-off look would come into his eyes, like he'd left the room and was back there, lying among the wild sage with his own Pa, watching them graze on grama grass. Then he'd name a few of the Indian tribes that lived alongside the buffalo: Arapaho, Kansa, Osage, Kiowa, Pawnee and Comanche.

'Those were the days, men were free then.' And a dragging sigh would come right up from his boots. He'd rub his hand across his eyes and pour another couple of fingers of that

too sweet Madeira he liked. Then he'd turn back and stare at the fire and say in a whisper that sent the shivers right through me:

'Those men they talk about boy, those heroes who opened up the plains, they were butchers, they slaughtered them all - only their ghosts roam the prairies now.'

And I never rightly knew if he was talking about the buffalo or the Indians or both.

Some nights, when I'm out here on the prairie with only Cloudfoot, my horse, for company, and the wind picks up, I reckon I can hear the thunder of buffalo hooves trying to get away from the guns and the howling of those Indians as they put on their war bonnets and tried to fight back the white man.

On the nights when the norther isn't blowing so bad, that rumbling out there on the prairies could be the ghosts of thousands of cattle being driven along the old Chisholm Trail towards the railroads in Abilene and Dodge City. Those were the other days Pa liked to remember: the days of the big cattle drives and of cowboys like him and his brothers, men who sat in the saddle for months at a time.

'Kansas was a wild place in the sixties,' Pa said, "and undertakers and saloon keepers did the best trade."

Things have settled down now and the state is filling up with respectable, god-fearing folk. There's wheat fields and farmers now as well as ranches and cowboys, and towns have grown way past the railroad tracks.

Pa's been dead these five years and I don't ride out visiting folk as much as I should. I come out here on the prairie and lie under the belly of the sky to see the clouds go by and keep watch on the cattle. On fine evenings when the stars are shining and there's moon enough to

write by, I take Pa's pen and ink bottle and write down my thoughts in the calfskin notebooks he had bound for me in Kansas City.

Banks Peninsula 2004

I stopped typing and rubbed my eyes, surprised how dark the room was. The clouds were heavy and grey. I was stretched between them and the hills, between Kansas, the tree hut, the banks of the Rakaia and the Nelson district where Molly and Kate were riding. For a moment everything was mixed up together and I couldn't figure out where I was. Whichever way I looked, whatever door I aimed for, I always ended up standing empty-handed on the front step, binoculars around my neck, waiting and watching for Carley.

Kansas 1898

Pa was different to a lot of other folk round here. His people came from Quaker stock – they raised him to read and write, and to think for himself. He believed an education was more important than going to church every Sunday and getting God second-hand from the pastor. It was him that schooled me, taught me my letters and to read the good book and showed me the value of writing things down. He wrote his memories sitting at his desk in the parlor at the ranch, staring out the open shutters into the past. But I feel too shut in there. Being outside is the only place big enough to think in. Big enough for the future as well as the past.

I never argued with Pa about his take on the past. It would've hurt his feelings. It was all around him, in the graveyard just out of town where his Ma and Pa and brothers are buried, in the cross he carved for Ma after she was killed in the raid, in the dirt and rocks that cover her. You can't argue with things like that.

The past's a big country alright, but I reckon the future's bigger. When I'm out here under the big sky with the yellow moon rising and the coyotes howling, a picture of the future starts to come to me, but then the past jumps right back up and settles over everything again. Pa had a library in the parlor, a whole wall covered in shelves full of books his kinfolk had shipped over from England and sent out here in crates on the train. They were all about the past. He said if you read enough about how it was, you could mostly figure what was likely to be. But I reckon all you can do is write down what's happening and wait till something comes of it. That's what I do, out here on the prairie with Cloudfoot tethered beside me, listening to the night-time and the future rustling in on us. Lately I've been trying to get down what it's like right now in Kansas, two years before the new century and some of that future kicks in. It's just plain, old-fashioned words put down on paper the way Pa taught me, but maybe it's enough to give you a flavor.

Another thing Pa used to say was that the past slips right on into the future, but I reckon time's like a funnel and we're all being poured into it, swirling round together, getting squashed and mangled as we go down. In the beginning everything looks open and separate and free, just like life on the prairie used to be, but once you're inside the bowl you realise how slippery the sides are and how much force there is sucking you down that narrow spout.

Every morning I walk up the path to the graveyard by the cottonwoods behind the barn, sit on the wooden bench and spend an hour with Ma and Pa. She didn't get much time in

the bowl, just enough to grow up and leave her Quaker kin and a good life in Boston and come out here to live with Pa. He was twenty years older than her and he'd made his fortune by then. He carried her over the front porch of the ranch in her heavy skirts and plain bonnet and picked a bunch of wildflowers for her every morning he was home. I don't remember much about her, except her dark hair and pale skin. Sometimes, when I was a boy, Pa let me sit on his lap. He read me stories and ran his fingers through my own dark hair. He let me grow it long and braided it like his, and for a time I wore a beaded headband and made-believed I was an Indian.

Every Thanksgiving Pa loaded up the wagon with food and blankets, and medicines he'd bought back east, and visited the reservation. People thought he was crazy helping Indians but he said we owed them. He stayed three or four days and did a bit of doctoring then came back looking older and sadder and sat at his desk and wrote. Those few years they were together Ma and Pa took in half-breeds, the ones nobody wanted, the ones who fitted nowhere. Ma looked after the girls and taught them to cook and sew; the boys worked in the stables or out on ranch with the cattle. It wasn't Indians who raided the ranch and killed Ma and the girls, but left me alive, hidden down in the darkness of the cellar, it was Indian haters and cattle thieves taking advantage of Pa being away in Dodge City doing business. Only after Pa died and I read his journals did I learn what it was he came home to, what they did to Ma and why the past held him so tight.

All that's left of that time in me is a fear of being locked inside, unable to breathe fresh air or see the sky. Every evening I go outside and watch the end of the day. I watch the prairie darken to a shadow and I touch that slippery bowl of time and wonder what tomorrow will bring. Last night there was a shooting star, travelling so fast across the sky it seemed to burn

with holy fire. God's finger in the world, Pa used to say. Maria, our Mexican cook and housekeeper, crossed herself and said it was a sign, but a sign of what she wouldn't say. I shook my head at her but all the same I checked the guns in the library and counted the boxes of ammunition in the safe beside Pa's desk. If strangers ride in looking for trouble I won't be unarmed and peace-loving like Ma. I'll be loaded up, ready for them. Pa taught me to shoot when I was seven years old and every man, woman and child on this ranch knows what to do if something happens.

Burkesville 1973

On Saturday nights Mum falls asleep in front of the TV. I climb out my bedroom window and meet Barry in Chaney's lumber yard. Sometimes Keith comes too. We ride around for a while then park down by the river next to the other bikes. If it's cold there'll be a bonfire and guys in leather jackets standing around it drinking beer. The girls wear tight black jeans and have straight hair with fringes that sweep across their eyelids. Mostly they're older than me and have already left school. Some of them come up and flirt with Barry but I stick close to him and if he's in a good mood he puts his arm around me and I have a few sips from his bottle and watch the party.

The Saturday before my fourteenth birthday I go over to Chaney's but only Keith turns up. He says Barry's running late and will meet us there.

Down at the river one of the guys asks me where Barry is. He lifts up the back of my denim shirt and slides his hand across my bum. 'Hey, Jailbait,' he says, and grins at Keith.

I pull my shirt down and stand at the edge of the fire with some of the other girls. They're smoking and chewing gum, flicking their hair off their shoulders so it runs down their backs like a waterfall. I keep looking for Barry. Keith comes over and gives me a beer. He leans over like he's being friendly and says in my ear, 'Bazza's got a real lay tonight, not a little cock-sucking squirt like you.' Then he swaggers back to a group of guys singing *Smoke on the Water* on the other side of the fire.

I walk along the riverbed. The moon comes out from behind the clouds. I sit on the bank and listen to the water and wonder if what Keith says about Barry is true. Every now and then eels move in the river among the tree roots.

I must've fallen asleep 'cause I wake up and Keith's on top of me. His jeans are down; his horse is in his hand. He rips my shorts. Pushes himself between my legs. His hands over my mouth and nose. It's hard to breathe. I bite his finger hard. He swears and twists my head, shoving my cheek into the stones. Blood from his finger trickles into my mouth.

Something happens then, something I can't explain. I leave the riverbed and go somewhere else. I watch what's happening from a long way off, like it's a movie or a programme on TV. There's just the back view of some stupid guy grunting and pushing and you can't see who's underneath him. She doesn't have a face or a name. The moon comes and goes, her bare feet kick, her legs shine white in the dark. Water rushes over stones.

Kansas 1898

Everything bad that happens in this world is because someone is empty or twisted up on the inside. That's another of Pa's sayings. He wasn't talking about tornadoes or

blizzards or influenza in the winter. Or even of children getting the croup or smallpox and dying. He meant the things people do to each other, the things that go on hurting and destroying year after year and nothing that happens afterwards can make it right. What happened to Ma was one of those things.

When he got back home from Dodge City, Pa buried Ma, took me into Abilene and left me with the Parson and his wife while he and the sheriff got up a posse and went after those men. They followed their trail as it crisscrossed like a drunk back and forth across Kansas and finally found them trying to sneak their way into Oklahoma. They had some of Pa's cattle and horses with them and a half- breed boy of about twelve rigged out in a woman's dress and bonnet tied up to a tree. Pa wrote in his journal that they'd gelded him and the fact he hadn't bled to death was a miracle. But when the Sheriff untied him and set him free they saw there was nothing left of him to save. That boy waited until the sheriff and Pa had strung up those varmints so he could see them die, then he took Pa's rifle, walked into the scrub, and shot himself right through the head.

When Pa came back and got me the front of his hair was white. He kissed me on top of my head and stroked my hair, sat me in front of him and we rode back to the ranch together. That ride's my first clear memory of him. I felt the warmth of his body through his coat, his arms were tight around me and his whiskers rubbed against my hair. He smelt of dust and sweat, ash and pipe tobacco.

I loved Pa with all my heart but he was a mystery to me – how could the past mean so much to him when it was filled to the brim with grief. Everywhere he put his foot there was memory and pain. Every year since he died I think about selling up the ranch, packing up and going back east to Ma's people, or travelling to Europe where all the libraries and music and

paintings are. There's a tonne of fine things to see out there. But somehow I can't seem to leave him and Ma. Who'd visit them? Who'd understand the price they paid for their resting place out here under the Kansas soil?

Richmond, Nelson district 2004

Barry and Keith drove in the showground gates and parked the Mitsi in the same paddock where Red and her mates had their tents. The sun was already hot. The tents were unzipped and the only people around were a couple of old dragons sitting in folding canvas chairs, knitting and gasbagging, acting as security. Easy enough to sweet talk if Keith was off his game and the pickings inside weren't great.

Outside the ticket booth, a bunch of animal right kids held signs saying, *Cruelty to animals is a Crime* and *Rodeos maim animals*. On a wooden sandwich board they'd tacked pictures of injured horses being shot and calves with broken necks. They handed out leaflets and tried to talk to the punters before they paid their money.

Keith sidled up to one of the girls - dyed blonde hair, tight black tee-shirt, studs bloody everywhere - as if he was interested in what she had to say. He leaned over and said something in her ear. Her face flared crimson. She raised her wooden sign and tried to clock him. Keith side-stepped her and laughed. Barry grabbed their tickets, shoved him past the booth.

'What the hell are you doing?'

Keith tucked his shirt back in, wiped spit from his lip. 'Bit of fun.'

Barry grabbed him by the collar, stuck his face right up close. ‘Get yourself into the shit this time,’ he said, ‘and you’re on ya bleeding own.’ He lifted Keith off the ground, shook him like his old man used to when he was a kid. ‘Got it?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Keith’s eyes had that blank look that said he wasn’t listening.

In the main arena the barrel racing had already started. Barry pushed his way through the crowd, saying, ‘Cuse me Ma’am, like the Duke, raising his hat, smiling down at the girls and the old sheilas, fleecing a few of the open handbags on the way. One born every minute. He leaned against the rail. A scrawny girl on a black horse came roaring across the start line, kicking up dust. A couple of people beside him cheered her on as she circled the first barrel and groaned when she hit the second. No prizes there.

The next one out was Red. She entered the pocket sitting deep in the saddle, one hand on the pommel, the other guiding the horse round the turn. Damn near perfect. By the time she’d finished the cloverleaf and was heading for home the crowd was clapping. Keith was squashed beside him at the rail, his face dimpled with sweat, the back of his shirt stuck to his back. He smelt of dandruff and beer and cigarettes.

‘Nice little filly,’ he said, wiping his face with the back of his sleeve.

Barry spat over the rail into the dust. ‘Touch her and you’re dead meat.’

‘What’s eating you?’

‘Nothing – just keep your nose clean.’

Burkesville 1973

Next time Barry comes round I tell him Mum grounded me ‘cause I need to study for exams. He’s come straight from the freezing works and his hands smell of blood and mutton fat. He doesn’t notice the scab on my cheek or the fading bruises. In that fake American drawl of his he says, “Don’t muck me around, Red. A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

I visit the tree hut a couple of times but Matt’s moody and only interested in his Dad’s binoculars – He’s two months older than me, but sometimes he sulks like a little kid.

When Keith and Barry come round on Friday nights I looked after the twins and read. I don’t go into the kitchen unless Ray shouts at me to do fried eggs or bacon sandwiches. I ignore Keith but I can feel him looking at me while I stand at the stove and turn the bacon or flip fat over the egg yolks.

On Friday afternoon Ray’s in a bad mood. He chuck money across the table for fish and chips.

‘Put that bloody book down and move your scrawny arse,’ he says.
I hate being bossed around. Hate being stuck at home and not riding on the back of Barry’s bike. Mum’s useless too.

‘Don’t make a fuss, Carlene,’ she says, ‘and hang the washing out. I’ve got to go to work.’

When I bang into them in Chaney’s car park Barry and Keith are already drunk and it’s joints they’re smoking not cigarettes. I stand there trying to catch my breath. The fish ‘n chips are warm against my arms and chest. Barry’s out of it, fooling round like a little kid. For the first time I realise that even though he’s older than Matt and has the bike, he’s not half as

smart. Keith throws a can of beer at me but I let it fall. Beer and foam spill on the ground and splash my feet. From nowhere I can hear Dad and me singing:

...Camptown racetracks five miles long

Oh de doo dah day...

Barry says he'll give me a ride home but he's really drunk and goes the wrong way. He ends up driving all over the place. I bang my fist on his back to make him stop but he doesn't take any notice. He parks down by the river, gets off the bike and staggers into the bushes. Ray'll give me a hiding for not bringing the fish 'n chips back. I put them down on the bank, take the helmet off and wipe my face. Barry's crashing around and throwing up in the bushes.

Keith pulls up and turns off the engine.

... Goin' to run all night

Goin' to run all day

I bet my money on a bob-tailed nag

Somebody bet on the gray...

Banks Peninsula 2004

The papers reported Carley missing under suspicious circumstances. Ma spent every spare minute looking after Mrs. Riley and the twins. A team of detectives came up from Christchurch and went house to house. I took one of them to the tree hut. He spent a long time

looking through the binoculars and asking questions. They searched the lumberyard, the creek and surrounding paddocks, they went down to the river just outside town with a bunch of local volunteers and searched the surrounding area. Barry and Keith were held for questioning - but they let them go.

The Dixons moved after Ray torched Barry's bike and threatened to do the same to the dog and the house. Good riddance Ma said, although she didn't blame Mrs. Dixon. She thought Verna did the best she could under the circumstances. Dad and his mates put on a benefit concert in the school hall so the Riley's could hire a private investigator. They decorated the stage with hay bales and wore their cowboy hats, their boots and their checked shirts. Dad yodeled fit to burst but it felt like a funeral all the same. Mrs. Riley had put in her new top teeth and wore Ma's navy-blue skirt and short-sleeved jacket. Some of the other women had done her hair and made up her face but she sat in the hall like a carcass of meat. People came up and laid their hand on her shoulder and tried to think of things to say. Nobody in our house blamed her for being too poor to stay at home and watch over Carley.

I grilled steak, made cucumber and tomato salad and turned on the TV again. I told myself I was hoping for a comedy, some light relief. The thought of Kate made me avoid the single malt, so I sat on the couch staring at the screen sipping tonic water. The news came on. The girl from the banks of the Rakaia had been identified and a picture of her was flashed on the screen. Her aunt was interviewed and she said how bright her niece Shelley-Marie was, how she'd been hoping to go on to university once she left school. She looked straight at the camera and in a quiet voice appealed to the public to help find the person who'd killed her. The detective from Christchurch came back on and said they were looking for two men in a

blue Mitsubishi to help them with their enquiries. The last sighting of them had been by a local man picnicking by the river with his wife and kids the afternoon Shelley-Marie went missing. They'd also been seen the day before attending the annual carnival and rodeo in Ashburton. A video clip showed two middle-aged men with beer guts slung over the waistband of their jeans. They were smoking cigarettes and wearing cowboy hats. They'd been captured on a security camera at the Showground's toilet block, hanging round a group of teenage girls. A grainy close up of their faces was magnified on the screen.

Tonic water from my glass spread into a puddle on the polished wooden floor.

Barry Dixon. Barry bloody Dixon and his sidekick, Keith.

I was on my knees, howling and banging my fists on the floor.

The past had slipped right into the future. I was sliding around in the funnel, gasping for breath, trying to catch hold of Carley but she was long gone, disappeared on the back of Barry's motorbike. Out there in Kansas Virgil Lowe sat by his parent's grave, trying to feel out a future not based on his mother's murder and his father's grief. Back in the hall in 1973 my father was dressed up like a cowboy; he sang Hank Williams and Marty Robbins' songs, played the guitar and yodeled. Mrs. Riley sat frozen in my mother's skirt and jacket, holding her hands together in her lap, her glass of beer and club sandwich untouched on the paper plate beside her. The whole street was there, trying to help her breathe.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and sat out on the veranda, thinking about what I needed to do.

Next morning I packed up and drove the jeep back to Christchurch. I went to the police station and identified the two men. I gave them an update on Carley's thirty year disappearance and reminded them that Barry Dixon and Keith Munro were the last two people

to see her alive. The desk sergeant took it all down with my name and contact phone number and said he'd pass it on to the detective in charge of Shelley-Marie's case. Just as I was leaving he asked if I was Matt Mulholland, the western writer. I nodded. He bent down and pulled a paperback from beneath the counter and asked me to sign it for the boys.

I drove down to the banks of the Rakaia. The yellow tape was still there but everything else had gone. I stood and listened to the river for a while. Let the smell of the fresh water and sun-dried shingle, gorse, and mint growing wild in the shade under the willows seep into me. I wanted a sheriff and a posse but I knew I was on my own. Standing there on the banks of the Rakaia I asked Ma's waters to guide me.

In parts of the south, there are still routes where the roads are almost empty and the land on either side is wide open and burnt white-gold. If you're lucky, you'll see a hawk swoop down to claim its kill on the side of the road. If you slow down it will raise its wings, fan them open like the Archangel Gabriel and blink at you as you go past, recording your image forever on some inner camera. And a forgotten, half-starved part of you will resurrect and begin to breathe again.

When Molly was little, Kate and I would leave Christchurch early in the morning, drive out through Methven and follow the Rakaia up to Lake Coleridge. Sometimes there'd be a couple of men standing in the lake in waders, fly-fishing, but a lot of the time we had it to ourselves.

Kate played with Molly on the shoreline, paddling and making pools of water among the stones. I walked and read and fought the desire to lie down in the sun and sleep in the silence that filled the place. My wife and daughter fooled around together, playing hide

and seek, splashing and tickling each other. They were able to be together in the world, side by side, without colliding.

Ma had approved of Kate. She thought she'd stop me being so bookish, push me harder into the physical world. Ma wasn't that comfortable in the outside world herself, but she admired those who were. Her idea of a day in the country was a picnic down by the river with her back against a willow and a magazine in her lap. She never learnt to swim although every summer Dad tried to teach her.

'Don't be ridiculous, Phil,' she said whenever he offered, 'A woman of my size and age.'

This time I left the back roads and the Rakaia behind me and drove up the main drag through Amberly and Waipara to Cheviot. I filled the jeep there, stood in the heat and watched the edges of the highway shimmer. I drove on to Kaikoura. It's all whale watching and tourists now but when we were kids it was just a small town with a stony beach and a good fish and chip shop. I bought groceries and whiskey then headed up the coast towards Blenheim. All I could see in front of me were the grainy, aging faces of Barry Dixon and Keith Munro. I ground my teeth until my jaw ached.

That night I rang Nola from the motel.

'If you're in Blenheim,' she said, 'Will you be joining us tomorrow for the rodeo?'

'I thought I'd surprise Kate and Molly.'

'That's a grand idea, Matt.' There was a trace of Irish brogue in her voice, even after forty years.

'Kate and I... It's not going so well at the moment, Nola.'

It was still hot and the door was open. I sat on the floor, looking out into the motel car park, listening to Nola breathe. I scraped the dull edge of my pocket knife against my jeans.

‘She’ll be happy to see you, Matt,’ she said. ‘We all will.’

Nothing was the same after Carley disappeared. I took Dad’s binoculars and our stories from the tree hut and padlocked the door. Ma listed, like the Wahine going down. I’d come into the kitchen after school and find her sitting at the table doing nothing, or standing at the sink, staring out the window. Streaks of grey appeared in her hair and the soft dough of her cheeks looked papery in the sun.

The private detective was no more successful than the police and after three months there was no more money. Ray hit the booze big time. He lost his job at the Works and went to Aussie in search of his father. The Salvation Army took Mrs. Riley and the twins to board with a family in Christchurch.

No-one talked about Carley at school even though she’d been the top pupil. Once she was gone I got first in English and history but, as usual, I flunked maths. Dad wanted me to play rugby instead of hanging around by myself or scribbling in my room, but I was hopeless at it – taller now but still skinny and short-sighted and irritated by all the grunting and heaving and pushing.

My first short story, *Southern Riders*, was published in an American magazine when I was seventeen. I got \$15 for it. Ma kept the money order on the fridge door for weeks and Dad thought I might make it to manhood after all.

A year later Wild Canyon Press in Montana agreed to pay me for a collection of ten stories and Luke came home from Uni for the celebration. Ma made club sandwiches and

sausage rolls and her pavlova was the size of Texas. The neighbours came round and after a few whiskeys Dad sang and yodeled. He made a speech, slapped me on the back and took most of the credit for my success. And even though it was summer, I wore a long-sleeved shirt to hide the scars and burn-marks on my arms.

One weekend about six months after Carley went missing I walked down to the river, to the place the papers said the parties were held. There were a couple of cut-down forty-gallon drums full of ash, half burnt bits of driftwood and a few empty beer cans. Old cigarette butts littered the ground. I walked along the river bank for a while, looking at the willow trees, listening to the water. Gorse grew wild. The sun was warm. I rolled up my sleeves, cupped my hands in the water and drank. It tasted of mud and sunshine and tree roots. I sat there for a while with my eyes closed, trying to imagine Carley standing round the fire with Barry Dixon, laughing with him and his mates, drinking and smoking. I remembered the expression on her face through the binoculars when she banged into him and Keith in Chaney's yard the day she disappeared. I couldn't make it fit. I picked up a large flat stone and threw it into the river.

Next minute I was standing up, shouting. Heaving stone after stone into the river until my arms ached. I waded into the water. Dived under, held my breath. Beat my fists on the bottom of the muddy bed.

Afterwards I sat on the bank, lightheaded, drying off in the sun. I'd cut myself on the edge of a sharp stone and there was a trail of blood on the inside of my arm. An orange plastic cigarette lighter lay beside me in the exposed dirt. I picked it up and flicked it to see if it worked.

A flame shot up. I held my thumb down and moved the flame back and forward, an inch above the cut on my skin. Then I dared myself to take it closer.

The first part of the drive out of Blenheim to St Arnaud goes through wine country and I stopped at Renwick to buy some of the local wine for Kate and Nola. After Renwick the road goes through the Wairau valley and follows the path of the river. I wound the windows down to smell the bush and the water. Through the speakers Hank Williams sang about cheating hearts and lost highways and in a tuneless sort of way I sang along. The skin on my arms itched and burned. I never carry lighters or matches with me now, but last night I rubbed the blade of my pocket knife over some old scars and cauterised them with whiskey. There wasn't much damage, not like the old days, but it was enough to make me feel hollow when I woke in the morning reaching for Kate and realised I was alone and sore in a concrete block motel room.

What I knew about Barry Dixon would fit on a pinhead. He was about five years older than me, tall, once dark-haired with smooth, almost girlish skin. The only things he read were bike magazines. I knew even less about Keith. Smaller, sandy-haired, he worked as a grease monkey at the local garage. A few months after Barry left the neighborhood he took off too. I hadn't seen them since, yet every nerve in my body said they were involved in the death of Shelley-Marie.

Wondering if your nerves are right can drive you crazy. Ma's waters were never wrong. Right up till the day she died she let them guide her. Her ability to find true north was unerring; mine's been hopelessly flawed.

St Arnaud's is filled with memories. Kate's family has a cottage five minutes from the lake. The mountains are so close you can reach out the window and almost touch them. When we were first courting she invited me to stay the weekend with her family and I watched her

ice skating with her sister, Erika, and their friends. Snow was falling, her emerald green scarf flew out behind her like a fantail, her cheeks were pink from the cold. I stood on the side of the rink with Nola, minding bags and coats and shoes. My nerves told me then I wasn't right for her, she would tire of me, she needed someone to match her in the physical world. Nola had linked her arm through mine and we walked up and down together on the muddy ground to keep warm.

I pulled over at a picnic spot. A couple of trucks carrying lumber roared past then it was quiet. I sat at a wooden table and poured coffee from my thermos into a plastic mug. The air was filled with the peppery smell of the bush and I could hear the river singing to itself below me. The skin on my arms itched in the sun. This afternoon I'd have to face Kate and I had no idea what to do or say.

Richmond Rodeo, January 2004

Red got the highest score in her heat and qualified for the finals the next day. Barry saw her again later in the afternoon, changed out of her riding gear into green shorts and a white tee shirt, walking between an older version of herself and a tall guy in glasses with cropped grey hair and a denim shirt with the sleeves rolled down to the wrist. She was talking and laughing and had her arm linked through his. Her curly pony tail bounced as she walked. They went three abreast through the flattened grass lanes between the stalls. One big happy family. They stopped every so often to look at sparkly Indian scarves, wooden flutes and heavy cotton jackets from Peru. A couple of times people came up with tatty old books and

they stood in a circle shaking hands and talking. Red's old man took out his pen and wrote something on the inside page for them.

Barry sat on a wooden bench outside a take away booth and watched them. The smell of coffee and toasted sandwiches made his stomach grumble. Red and her mother were classic pony club types but her Pa didn't look like a cowboy - too clean, too much of a townie. There was something familiar about him though, like they'd met before or he'd seen his picture in the paper. They walked past Barry and stood in the queue for coffee. He was close enough to Red to see the freckles on the back of her legs.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Keith working one of the clothes stall owners. He was pushing it with this one though. Even from that distance Barry could see she thought Keith was a slimy bastard. They used to have the whole thing down. First day they'd case the stallholders and buy something. Second day they'd come back and return the gear, saying they weren't sure it would fit, doing the speel about needing to see it on them. The women, flattered, went behind the makeshift curtains to oblige and left their money tins unguarded. Barry and Keith on-sold the clothes or gave them away to the girls they picked up.

This time Keith was getting the old heave ho. The miserable cow wasn't having a bar of him. Probably smelt the sweat and stale beer. Barry stood up, tucked in his shirt and hitched up his jeans, sucked in his gut and tightened his belt a notch. Did his Duke walk over to the stall.

He raised his hat. 'This guy bothering you, Ma'am?'

She looked at him over the top of her glasses. Uplift bra, tight leopard skin top. Faded blue eyes. Mouth like a lemon squeezer.

'Friend of yours, is he?'

‘No Ma’am, never seen him before.’

She had a coughing attack and reached into her bag for a cigarette. Flicked the lighter and stood there, sucking on the end of her cancer stick.

‘Piss off the both of yous.’ She said. ‘I didn’t come down in the last shower.’

Keith could look after himself. Barry went straight into the next stall. Pretended he was interested in the merchandise. Bought a plastic key ring for two dollars. Looked over his shoulder then let out his belt. He turned round to leave and banged right into the back of Red’s old man who lurched forward and almost fell, his glasses falling to the ground.

‘Sorry, Mate,’ Barry said, ‘Sun was in my eyes.’

The dude picked up his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, blinking like an owl in the daylight. Barry stood there for a second, looking right at him.

Fuck.

It was four eyes Mulholland – that weedy little prick from years ago. Him and his brother Luke had lived at the top of Jules Street. Spent most of their time stuck in a poncey tree hut. Mulholland hadn’t changed much, just got taller. Still looked like a dork. He was sweet on Carlene Riley and the whole street knew it.

Shit.

Carlene Riley. That’s who Red reminded him of.

Barry legged it. Heart hammering. Bile rising.

He slid down under an oak tree and wiped the sweat off his face with his shirtsleeve. Tried to roll a smoke but the papers kept ripping and the tobacco spilt on the ground. Pain ripped through his chest. A couple of people walked past and asked if he was alright. He

fanned himself with his hat. Mulholland was here in Richmond at the rodeo with a daughter that was the spitting image of Carlene Riley.

The day Carlene disappeared he'd been smoking dope and drinking and couldn't remember a thing. Keith told the cops what happened: after he'd crashed out, Keith took Carlene back to town; she was scared she'd get a hiding from Ray if she was late. Keith dropped her off at the lumber yard, then came back and woke him up.

Barry told the cops everything he knew but they went on and on, asking what they got up to, asking about the parties on the riverbed. Asking if he'd ever forced himself on Carlene. He'd laughed, told them he had plenty of offers from grown-ups. Even gave a list of names. The cops didn't have a leg to stand on.

By the time he and Keith were released the whole street was against them. Ray came after him waving an axe and swearing. Barry's old man swaggered out of the house and knocked him flat on the footpath. That night Barry's bike was torched. Next day the old lady told him to sling his hook before someone set fire to the house.

Barry lay down in the shade with his hat over his face until he stopped feeling queasy and the pain in his chest eased up. Why had he run away? He had nothing to hide. Anyway, Mulholland was so blind without his glasses he wouldn't have recognise him even if he'd stuck his nose right in his face.

It was peaceful lying under a tree away from the crowd. The smell of the sun on the grass and the rustling of leaves above his head reminded him of camping down by the river with his cousins when he was a kid. Every year, after Christmas was over, his mother packed up what they needed for two weeks and hauled out the big canvas tent. They all squashed into

her sister Mae's beat-up station wagon and got out of town. Dad and Uncle Mack stayed home and wasted money at the pub or the TAB.

Mum and Aunty Mae fried eggs and stale bread over the campfire for breakfast and he and his cousins ran wild until teatime. In the evening Aunty Mae boiled spuds and fried tomatoes, and sometimes, if there was moon enough to see by, she took them eeling. They made spears out of branches with sharpened nails tied to the end and used tomato sauce for bait. The eels rose to the surface and it was easy pickings. Aunty Mae skinned them, chopped them into chunks and seared them in the fry pan over the fire like they were steaks. Then she put them in the billy, poured gelatine dissolved in hot water over the top and stuck the lid on tight. The billy was weighed down with stones in the river overnight. In the morning there was jellied eel for breakfast.

Camping was the only time he got a rest from the old man. His mother and Aunty Mae sat on the river bank with their baggy dresses pushed up past their knees and dangled their swollen feet and varicose veins in the cold water. In the afternoon they had a few beers and laughed at everything. Old Mae had been alright, bit of a looker too. Big brown eyes and curly dark hair. Uncle Mack hadn't knocked her around so she still had all her own teeth.

Barry sat up and propped himself against the trunk of the oak tree. In the distance there was the sound of axes hitting wood followed by cheering and clapping. Might as well go over and see if anyone was betting. He stood up and the pain came back. He slid back down. Where the hell was that arsehole Keith when you needed him?

He must have passed out because, when he came to, there were people standing around and a St John's ambulance guy leaning into his face.

'Can you hear me Sir?'

Barry nodded. Why were his jeans wet? Had it been raining?

‘What’s your name, Sir?’

‘Keith,’ he said. ‘Where’s Keith?’

Barry looked at the faces circled above him and saw four-eyes Mulholland standing there. Tall and skinny, the lenses of his thick glasses darkening in the sunlight.

‘His name,’ Mulholland said, ‘Is Barry Dixon.’

The ambulance guy looked at Mulholland. ‘Are you Keith?’

‘Nope,’ he said, ‘I’m Matt Mulholland, but I know Barry.’

He knelt down beside him and looked straight into his face. ‘We go back a long way, don’t we, Barry?’ he said.

Barry’s heart squeezed in his chest. The pain reminded him of the time he was fourteen and his father took a baseball bat to him. Every breath hurt and he wanted to throw up. He tried to haul himself up but everything went black.

The last thing he heard before they strapped him into the ambulance and gave him oxygen was that prick Mulholland talking to the cops on one of those bloody cell-phones.

St Arnaud, Nelson Lakes District, 2004

The cottage doors are open to catch the evening breeze. Kate stands at the stove wearing one of Nola’s aprons, stirring risotto. She looks across at me and smiles, raising her glass of wine. I lift my glass of tonic water and toast her back. The pads of the fingers on my left hand rest on top of the typewriter keys, A S D F, waiting to start work.

Barry Dixon's in hospital under police guard. Keith Munro has gone to ground, but his picture's plastered everywhere – sooner or later they'll find him. One of the Sunday papers has asked me to write a series of articles about growing up in Burkesville in the seventies. They want a story of outlaws versus god-fearing townsfolk, of innocent girls led astray by gold-diggers and gamblers and cowboys. The romance of the old west laid out over a dying town, the Freezing Works and the lumber yard long gone.

Kate thinks I should stay away from bullshit and write the truth of the place. Maybe I will. What really matters is that she likes what I'm writing now. She said it's about time I started trying to figure out what's in the future and what belongs to the past. I sit at the table and write.

Kansas 1898

Pa's nerves got bad as he got older. His mind wandered too. Sometimes I'd find him down at the stables, staring at the horses, wondering why he couldn't saddle up Jasper, who'd passed on ten years before. Would you like some company Pa? I'd ask and, if he was feeling cheerful, we'd ride out on the prairie or watch the men work the horses or rope and brand cattle.

Winter and summer, once the sun went down, he locked the doors and window shutters and checked them every hour until he went to bed. He slept with a loaded rifle on the floor beside him. Maria, our cook, was so nervous of waking him and having the rifle pointed at her she left his breakfast on a tray outside his door.

Some nights when the ‘norther was really bad he didn’t sleep at all. He paced the hallway and the parlor, checked every gun in the house, counted and recounted his stock of ammunition in the safe.

‘Can you hear them coming, boy?’ he’d say, as the wind howled through the cottonwoods and blew in gusts across the yard.

‘Them’s our horses Pa. They don’t like the sound of the wind anymore ‘n we do.’

He got older and sicker and stayed in the parlor more, sitting in his favorite chair by the fire, a travel rug over his legs, pretending to read. Most of the time, he was lost in the past. Sometimes in the afternoons he’d nap. There were times he woke in the parlor and thought he was on the train going back east to visit Ma’s people. In the evenings I’d sit with him and play checkers and if his mind was clear he’d talk about being a boy and coming out west with his Ma and Pa and older brothers. More often than not, he told the same stories over and over, easing his thoughts over the memories he had left, savoring images of buffalo migrations, and of the Indians he admired before they were shunted onto reservations. When he was too frail to come downstairs anymore I hired Margaret, a good widow woman from Dodge City, to help me nurse him.

Pa had a year of dying. He got thin as a stick as the tumor in his stomach ate everything in him. Every morning and evening I’d sit in the rocking chair by the bed and lay my hand across his. All we had for the pain was whiskey and laudanum. Towards the end, I rode into town and begged the surgeon for chloroform just so I could knock him out for an hour at a time. The night before he died the wind was howling and he was like a restless twig, blown back and forth across the bed, twisted and knotted by the force of the pain. If Margaret hadn’t been in the room with me I’d have taken a pillow, held him in my arms and smothered him.

This God of Pa's, he has no pity when you're dying – he doesn't care how long it takes for the husk to be winnowed from the kernel. Those last few nights I felt him swoop around Pa like a vulture, waiting to suck up his soul, waiting to judge what was written on it and decide whether he was worthy or not.

I hated Him then, hated the cruelty of his purpose and creation, but I did the right thing by Pa. After he died I sent one of the hired hands into town and got the Parson to come out and bury him properly.

At the funeral the wind dropped and the sun shone. Our neighbours stood together like a stone wall and surrounded the grave. It was a comfort when we laid him beside Ma. There weren't many left to remember her but one or two pressed my hand and spoke her name.

I learnt the truth of things after Pa died. I read his journals and found out what had happened to Ma. Afterwards I rode out onto the prairie and slept alone under the stars.

Later on I stopped being angry with Pa's god and the Parson's god. Out on the prairie with the night sky above me, what they believed in just didn't make sense anymore. If there was such a thing as God, he took no interest in people and their lives. He concerned himself with bigger things, like making sure the sun came up every morning, holding the stars in place, keeping time ticking over.

Time - that old funnel we're all sliding around in. I just can't get myself past thinking about it. Seems to me it's the only place you can feel the Creator draw breath. He's in the chill of the 'norther as it blows down the back of your neck, the ache in your bones when the first snow comes, the sadness in the evening when the sun goes down.

All I know is we're all equal under the big sky. You have to make your own sense in this world, otherwise there's only the pattern of days, slipping away one by one till there's nothing left. Not even memory...

Burkesville

I see a lot of things on this river. Fishermen, families with fathers having picnics, kids jumping off the bank and swimming in the water holes, the skin on their arms and shoulders goose-bumpy in the wind. Couples come down here and park up at night, and afterwards some of them even walk along the river with their arms around each other or hold hands. Sometimes there's a bonfire and a party, people getting drunk and stoned and singing, boys bullshitting and girls preening, hoping to feel important, hoping to get laid. And there's idiots like Barry who think they're cool, and creeps like Keith who sneak around and wait for their chance.

And there's girls like me. Dumb. Possums in the headlights. With their fathers' voices singing in their heads as they go down.

Down to the river.

Down to lie among the stones.

The Rings of Saturn

When I first met Billy there was blossom on the fruit trees at the back of the garden and jonquils in the flower beds out front. The rich smell of the earth as it started to dry out after winter permeated everything and the bulbs I'd planted were sending shoots to the surface.

At the commemoration service daffodils were woven through wreaths made of flax. The sun was out but the wind was cold. The families and friends of the victims wore dark coats and scarves and hats. From a distance they looked like a flock of birds, huddled together on the wet grass, nesting close to the edge of the cliff overlooking the point where the boat had gone down.

Even though I was late I changed my shoes for sturdier boots. I walked carefully across the open field watching where I placed my feet on the wet, uneven ground. There was a moment as I approached the group when I wondered what would happen if I startled them. Would they suddenly take flight, spread their coats out like wings, scatter across the sky, rising on the current till they disappeared behind the hills?

I stood at the back and listened as the minister recited the list of the dead, waiting till the end to hear my sister's name. When Dava and I were children we played a forbidden game: throwing stones down the old well at the back of the orchard. We always held our breath, waiting for the sound of the splash when the stones hit the water. I held my breath but after I heard her name there was only a long pause and then the final prayers. Halfway through the address by the CEO of the company that owned and operated the boat I began to shiver in the cold wind. It was time to go. Billy came over then and stood beside me.

He held out a gloved hand. ‘You must be Anna.’

He wore a sheepskin jacket, black jeans and lace-up boots. There were flecks of grey at his temples and his eyes were the same washed out blue as the sky. I looked past him to the monument being unveiled by the local Member of Parliament. It was grey stone, carved into the shape of a koru, inlaid with intricate patterns of paua shell.

Billy walked back with me, across the soggy paddock to the side of the road where we’d parked our cars, his hand lightly cupping my elbow, steering me in case I tripped or fell.

We sat inside my car while the others stood in the wind listening to apologies and explanations.

‘How did you know Dava?’

Billy told me he worked for companies who took tourists on joy rides round the harbour. He knew boats. Mostly he did maintenance but sometimes he went out as a tour guide, pointing out the remains of old jetties and early settlements, telling stories he’d heard about encounters between sealers and whalers and the local tribes. Because Davina worked in the tourist office, taking bookings, organizing tours and accommodation, they saw each other almost every day.

‘I’m not much with the paperwork,’ Billy said. ‘I hold everything in my head. Davina was great. You’d tell her how many and when, and she’d organize the whole thing. We even talked about setting up our own show together, her running the business, me doing the hands-on stuff.’

He took off his gloves and spread his hands out in front of him. The skin was dry and rough and there were oil stains under his nails.

I opened the window an inch to get some air. ‘Why was she on the boat?’

Billy rubbed his hands across his thighs. His skin rasped against the denim. ‘They were often short-staffed on the boats,’ he said. ‘The office staff used to help out when it got busy.’ He studied the dashboard. ‘I guess when they hit the rocks everyone panicked.’

His words fell in the space between us, stones dropping through the well. When they hit the bottom they made no noise. There was no deep pool of water, only a shallow puddle with a smear of something shiny across the surface. A shaft of light in the mouth of the well picked out the sheen of spilt oil. Stones shards lay abandoned on the muddy floor.

I looked away from the stones. Billy’s right hand was next to mine, the edges of our little fingers lined up side by side, almost touching. ‘Where were you?’

‘Down south,’ he said, ‘Pig hunting with a mate. Knew nothing ‘til we came out a week later.’

We watched the others walking back across the field to their cars. Some had their arms around a relative or friend. Some walked alone, heads down, hands sunk into coat pockets. The minister stood by the car and nodded at Billy and me. He waited but I didn’t open the door and he moved on.

The next time I saw Billy was at the gym a workmate had recommended. I signed up for three months and the receptionist gave me an appointment with a personal trainer for the following Monday. I didn’t have to go anywhere so I went inside to have a look around. Billy was over by the punching bags, sparring with another guy. They were dancing, bouncing on the balls of their feet, moving toward and away from each other like creatures in a mating ritual. Billy was dressed in baggy shorts that sat on his hips and went to his knees. The other guy wore track pants. He bobbed his head up and down as he blocked Billy’s punches.

Monday afternoons at the gym became a regular thing. Afterwards Billy and I would go for coffee. In the beginning we talked about Dava or the fights he was training for. Sometimes we talked about work. He'd returned to the boat company.

'They're in the shit,' he said, 'all the publicity after the accident.'

It was late summer and the smell of cut grass was in the air. We sat on my deck under the sun umbrella, eating grilled hapuka and salad. I remember the way the shadow of the umbrella spread out across the wooden deck slats, and the way Dava's shadow came and went as we talked.

After Billy finished eating he stretched his legs under the plastic table, took off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes.

'Company's closing down,' he said.

'What'll you do?'

He reached over and pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen across my face.

'Still thinking about it.'

I took his hand and held onto it for a moment, resting it against my cheek.

Once it got dark we went for a walk along the waterfront. I slipped my arm through his and watched the moon rise. The night was warm. There was no breeze. As we walked the colour of the sea changed from blue to silver. A kayaker paddled across the calm expanse of the harbour.

A mate of Billy's got him a job plastering and gib-stopping. He got the hang of it in a couple of days and said he liked his new boss – he understood he hated being stuck inside doing paperwork. The job kept him fit and didn't interfere with his training.

The following spring was wet and cold but when I asked Billy to move in I could smell summer. Billy travelled light, no cartons of books or dinner sets, no boxes of pots and pans. All he brought with him were his clothes, his boxing gloves and a wall chart of the solar system. Within a few weeks it was like he'd always been there. That November I dreamed I was living in a rambling wooden house by the beach. Paint flaked from the weatherboards but the front door stood out like the sun. It was polished kauri with a panel of stained glass. When light shone on the glass a bush scene came to life: tui hovered above flax flowers and fantails darted across ferns.

My dream house was spacious but the only room we lived in was the kitchen. I walked through the empty bedrooms planning how we might do them up. There was a trap door in a corner of the kitchen floor that opened onto narrow wooden steps leading down to a cellar that flooded when the tide came in. I placed a rug over the trap door. There was enough work to do getting the house ready for Christmas without cleaning out the cellar as well. In December I dreamt I woke one morning to find the trap door open and a message from Billy on the answer-phone. 'Gone pig hunting,' he said. 'Back in a couple of days. Check out the cellar. It's dry .The tide doesn't go there anymore.'

Every six months or so Billy chucked in one job and found another. I'd come home from work and find him sitting on the steps, staring up into the sky.

‘Lost your keys, love?’

He’d shake his head. ‘Boss turned out to be an asshole.’ The palms of his hands rubbed against his knees. ‘Wanted me to sit inside all day, shuffling bits of paper.’ He clenched a fist, banged it against the palm of his other hand. ‘Told the bastard to stick it.’

He’d spend a few weeks pottering around the house, painting the spare room, extending the garden, mending the trellis. Then one of his mates would find him another job. I liked him being at home, liked knowing the house I’d once shared with Mum and Dad and Dava wasn’t always empty while I was at work.

If it was summer we’d pack up and go camping for a couple of weeks. I swam and walked and caught up on a pile of novels. Billy fished for hours and at night lay on his back outside the tent and studied the constellations. Sometimes I lay on the ground beside him and followed his hand as he showed me how to find the Southern Cross. Once I could see it clearly he’d tracked bottom left to Beta Centauris and left again to the bigger glow of Alfa Centauris. I asked him how he knew the names of all the stars and the stories that went with them. His Dad, he said, had been into astronomy. When he was a kid they went camping together in the summer holidays and he taught him how to read the stars. They’d look at the sky together then he’d give Billy handfuls of pebbles and get him to map what he’d seen up there onto the sand. If he got it right he’d tell him a story.

‘The best present I ever had,’ he said, ‘was in the March following my tenth birthday. Dad took me up to Auckland to visit the Observatory. Just after dark Mars, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn were all visible in the sky. We looked through the big telescope and I saw the rings of Saturn.’

This time Billy had been out of work for a couple of months. He'd just started going round the gyms when he got six months work, renovating houses.

Three months into the job he was fixing a roof and fell off an extension ladder. He went down backwards, smashed his shoulders, his left ankle and wrist, and his right hand. I remember the punched in look on my boss's face when he came and got me, his hand resting lightly on my arm as we walked the corridor back to his office.

At the hospital the doctor said Billy was lucky he hadn't broken his back.

A well-meaning woman from ACC came round. Billy sat on the couch and stared past her out into the sky.

'There are courses,' she said. 'We can help you retrain.'

He showed her to the door. 'Thanks. I'll think about it.'

He limped into the bedroom and shut the door. I cooked while he had a nap. When dinner was ready he got up, turned on the TV and ate it watching the boxing on the sports channel. Later, when I was putting the rubbish out, I saw the leaflets he'd screwed up and thrown in the bin, and I thought about all the reasons why Billy hadn't told the woman he couldn't read or write well enough to do any of the courses.

At night he lay like a shipwreck on the reef of our big bed.

I'd reach out, touch his arm. 'Is there anything I can do?'

'It's fine. Go to sleep.'

But I'd wake at 3am and his side of the bed would be empty. I'd find him on the couch, the packet of tramadol on the floor beside him.

Some nights when he took a sleeping pill to knock himself out, I sat in the living room with the curtains open, looking out past the streetlights, thinking about the games Dava

and I played when we were kids: hide and seek, find the fairies at the bottom of the garden, dressing-up in Mum's wedding gown, playing near the old well. It took the two of us, heaving and shoving, to push the heavy wooden lid across the well so we could look down and pretend we saw the bottom. Imagine, one of us would say, if I got stuck down there, what would you do to get me out?

There was only eighteen months between Dava and me. We were pretty close until she went to secondary school. That was when she made a whole lot of new friends and, in all the excitement of being popular, left me behind.

Billy went to a place where you took a lot of pills to make the pain go away. Until they wore off and you had to take some more. In the end he had a racket going with five or six doctors who gave him prescriptions and different chemists who didn't ask questions. No one got suspicious; no one checked.

Some mornings, before the painkillers kicked in and the sleeping pills wore off, he'd lie in bed like an old man, his face turned to the wall, his cup of tea untouched.

'I'm off now, Billy,' I'd say. I'd rub his back for a minute and peck the side of his cheek. 'See you later.'

Around then I had this dream about an old woman with white curls framing her face. She lived in an apartment block and sat beside a narrow window that looked out onto the street. She sat by the light so she could sew. Each day she embroidered and beaded tiny velvet bags for a local jeweler. The bags were exquisite but she was poorly paid, her room was cold and at night her fingers and eyes ached. She never looked at me, or spoke, but she knew I was there, watching her.

We'd been together seven years when Billy left me behind. I remember the day exactly – it was 13 September 2001 – two days after the planes destroyed the twin towers in New York. Like so many others, Billy and I had sat on the couch together mesmerized by the news clips on TV, watching repeated shots of planes approaching, the towers collapsing and people running. We went to bed around 2am and slept with our arms wrapped round each other.

In the morning, for the first time in a year, we woke at the same time. He made us a cup of tea and brought it back to bed. I rang work, said I couldn't make it in. Billy made love to me then and it was like the old days when he first moved in. He was light on his feet, like a dancer, cushioned against the currents that surrounded him.

In the afternoon we went for a drive and ended up out at the memorial. I steered him across the lumpy paddock and we stood in the sunshine looking out to sea. Out of the blue he said he wanted to go to the Observatory again and see the rings of Saturn.

Next day, when I was at work, he drove to the supermarket and parked by the fence under the trees. No-one noticed anything was wrong 'til a trickle of blood seeped out the door and formed a puddle on the concrete beside the car.

After the funeral I shut the door on the big bed and slept in the spare room, relieved I no longer had to navigate the sheets, the duvet, the empty space. I had another dream about the old woman. It was winter and she was sitting by the window sewing. Every now and then she'd raise her head and look out onto snow covered streets. I walked up the stairs to her room; asked if she ever went outside. She turned her head at the sound of my voice. She

smiled and handed me a needle and a length of red silk thread. I reached for the needle and brushed the tips of her fingers with my own. Her skin was thin and cold. I picked up a square of red velvet from her sewing basket and stood turning it over in my hand.

Outside her window trees fanned winter bones into a grey sky. I asked her to teach me how to sew but she just gave me one of her exquisitely embroidered bags. I walked back down the stairs and onto the street.

It took me three months to realize I was pregnant. There was no morning sickness to warn me and after the inquest and funeral I was too spaced out to notice the changes in my body. One morning at work I overheard Lucia, the receptionist, talking to the senior partner about arranging maternity leave.

‘Who’s pregnant?’ I said.

Lucia was a middle-aged woman with three grown-up children. She came round the front where I was standing, nursing my morning coffee. She took the cup from me, placed it on the counter and put her arms around me.

I called our boy William Michael. I put his father’s surname on the birth certificate, but I never called him Billy. He was always Mickey to me. Little Mickey, who had Billy’s nose and eyes but Dava’s freckles and auburn hair. Right from the beginning I read to Mickey about the planets and stars, the science as well as the stories. And I made sure he could write his name and address before he went to school.

The March after he turned five I took Mickey to the Observatory for an early birthday present. All his questions stopped and he turned quiet when he looked through the big telescope.

I put my arms around him. ‘If you sit really still and concentrate,’ I said, ‘You’ll see the rings of Saturn.’

Honeybees

Everything fell away and Silver-Jean began to sink. Lime green parrot feathers flashed against purple waves. Like blood, the sound of the sea swirled and pumped in her ears. She searched for seals, for a glimpse of their coats, wet and grey against black rocks.

Outside her window a full moon rose, pulling the spring tide to the edge of the stone retaining wall at the end of the street.

The nightmare creatures of her childhood returned: phantoms riding bicycles past leafless trees; witches with cauldrons made of lilies; priests with horned heads and skeletal faces, raising chalices of blood above the congregation. Bells tolled, fire dropped from the sky.

Beyond the jangling, surface world of sleep, the tide rose and fell, rushing over white stones. Out past the foam the waves, changed now to liquid paua shell, glinted under moonlight. All the possibility of the world rested there, cupped in hollow of the sea, and she knew, even in sleep, the earth was breathing with her in the night.

Silver-Jean turned from sleeping on her back, curled onto her left side and pushed her cheek further into the pillow. From the edge of her dream a wolf came, running fast, a bloodied pup in its mouth. It stopped in front of her and shook its wet fur. The limp body of the pup flopped from side to side but never fell. The wolf raised its head, looked at the gathering clouds and smelt the night currents. It turned east towards a stand of pine trees. When it left her line of vision nothing remained but a trail of red and the vibration of empty space.

Parrots beat their wings, soldiers in torn great-coats hummed dirges as they marched in the snow, their humming swelling until it filled the sky - the world was broken, its seams ragged with morphine and patched with sackcloth. In her hands she held the shadow of the shell of the sea.

At 4.15am Silver-Jean woke, thinking of the paper-thin greyness of moths' wings. Her mouth and lips were dry; her chest sticky with sweat.

The wind rose. Outside her window cherry trees swayed and bent. Branches scraped against the side of the cottage. Shadows crawled across her bedroom wall. She sat up and switched on the radio; struggled with the dial till she found the world service. A programme on the disappearance of hedgehogs in Britain was followed by an investigation into the state of refugee camps in Kenya. She half listened, her mind drifting from and returning to the images of her dream. At 5.45 she got up and made jasmine tea.

Outside the kitchen window moth-coloured light outlined untidy lawns and vegetable gardens. In the distance, cell phone towers and satellite dishes were etched across a line of blue hills. She nursed her tea between her breasts, feeling the warmth of the liquid seep through the cup into her skin. The muscles in her shoulder blades quivered, sending tremors into her neck and jaw.

Joel was gone and she hadn't said goodbye.
They had argued all day when Joel decided to rejoin the medical search team.
'You've done enough for other people,' she'd said. 'We need to make our own plans now, look after ourselves.'

He sat at the table scanning old Conservation Department maps.

‘What if people are still out there?’ He said. ‘Stuck in the bush, sick or crazy?’

She stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. ‘You don’t have to be dropped by helicopter into dense bush to find sick people, Joel. There’s plenty of them here.’

He reached up and took one of her hands. ‘When we first met, you said you admired the work we did, the risks we took.’

‘I did,’ she said. ‘I still do – but this time...’ She took her hand away, rubbed swollen fingers joints.

He folded the maps. ‘What’s different this time?’

‘Why is it so hard to stay?’

That night they’d lain awake. Silent. Not touching. In the morning he packed his clothes and phone and camera, rolled medical supplies into his sleeping bag and put on his hiking boots. She had stood like this at the window, clutching her cup, her silver hair still in the plaits she wore at night. At the last moment he had touched her, brushing the tips of his fingers against the back of her neck. Then he kissed the top of her head and said her hair smelt of nutmeg. She turned from him, reached into the cupboard and gave him a small jar of her precious store of honey.

‘How will I know where you are?’

‘I’ll phone.’

‘What if you can’t?’

‘I will.’

She stood on the front step and watched him walk down the path. No one was about. The habit of staying indoors between sunset and sunrise remained even though the government

had lifted the curfew six months ago. At the corner he turned and raised his hand in mock salute. She put her knuckles into her mouth to stop herself crying out to stop him. In the east the sky was pale lemon above unlit houses and empty streets.

When Ruth reached the highest point of the hill she surveyed her territory. Yesterday, for the first time in two years, she'd heard the *thud, thud, thud*, of helicopter blades in the distance, but this morning there were no signs of human disturbance and her fences and traps were intact.

Rain clouds rolled in from the west. She breathed in the lush smell of the undergrowth and imagined steam rising from her garden after the rain had passed and the sun returned.

The bush and her patched green and brown clothing camouflaged her. She sat with her back against a tree trunk and closed her eyes. The absence of human sound signalled safety. She was at one with Wolfie, who lay at her feet, with the birds who skimmed around her, and with the bees who had their hives in the heavy green canopy above her. This morning all she could hear was the buzz of worker bees searching for pollen and nectar and, further in the distance, small creatures rustling in the undergrowth.

Joel did phone but reception was bad. His voice was distorted, as if he was under water, and Silver-Jean's kept echoing on the line. He said they'd had a lead - reports from retired helicopter pilots had come in: three or four years ago a small number of women

infected with the honeybee virus, along with some experimental beehives, had been dropped in dense bush just below the mountains.

‘What good will it do if you find anyone?’ she said.

Between the time-lag and the echoes his voice had sounded disappointed. ‘You’re a better person than that,’ he said.

‘I just want –’ she said, but the line went dead.

Once the sky lifted from grey to pale blue Silver-Jean put Joel’s raincoat over her pajamas and pulled on gumboots. The backyard was still muddy from the heavy rain that had fallen the night before last. That afternoon her older sister Barbara and brother-in-law Martin had hiked across the peninsula to spend a few hours with her and, once the power went off, they sat together in the darkening living room listening to thunder and watching lightning strike over the western hills. They left in between showers, walking hand in hand, their identification papers pinned inside their oilskin jackets, hoping to make it past the checkpoints without incident and reach home before the next downpour.

Between the shed and the clothesline was the vegetable garden Joel had dug for her. Clumps of silver-beet shone dark green beside the duller leaves of comfrey plants and the blue-grey of lavender bushes. The large rough comfrey leaves were being eaten by snails. She bent over and inspected the plants, wondering how to kill the slugs without damaging the leaves. Joel was the better gardener and would have known how to keep them at bay. She ground her gumbooted heel on a snail and her nerves shrieked when the shell scrunched and the slug was crushed. Insecticides were still banned so it was either soapy water or killing them one by one like this.

At the end of the garden six beehives sat encircled by manuka bushes. They'd been empty for almost five years. She ran her fingertips across the moss-covered wood of one of the hives. Colony Collapse Disorder the experts called it, CCD for short. Nine years ago, worker bees started leaving hives and abandoning their queens and drones. At first, the dying hives were isolated in pockets along the east coast but within a few months CCD had spread. By the end of that year the largest honey producers on the west coast were affected.

Along with other local beekeepers, she and Joel went to public meetings organised by Horticultural Security. No-one agreed on the cause of the problem. Some argued it was pathogens or parasites, others suggested environmental pollution or the closeness of cell phone transmitters and satellite dishes to hives. They were given a month to consider options. The vote was 51 to 49 for aerial spraying.

But all the spraying did was destroy more hives.

By the end of following year less than ten percent of the country's hives had survived. The asthma rate was up forty percent and fruit and vegetable production was halved.

An emergency government was approved, food rationing began and all insecticides were banned. Territorials walked from door to door, inspecting every garden shed, taking away container loads of toxins. Just in case they were confiscated too, Silver-Jean had hidden her jars of honey and royal jelly in cardboard shoe boxes and put them in the basement behind broken chairs and file boxes full of photos and notes from her years of study in Japan.

She and Joel had stood together looking out the kitchen window at their own and their neighbours' backyards, listening to the radio while an official from Horticultural Security announced a long list of new regulations. These new rules were followed by a message

requesting anyone suffering from recurring skin rashes to report to their local health centre for treatment.

Joel put his arm around her shoulder. ‘You never know,’ he said, ‘It might just give the bees a chance to recover.’

She imagined great piles of chemicals in plastic containers, sitting outside the iron gates of Horticulture Security Headquarters. ‘How will they destroy them?’ she said.

‘They won’t,’ Joel said, ‘They’ll bury them and pour concrete over the top.’

For weeks afterwards Silver-Jean dreamed of wading through underground bunkers that looked like covered swimming pools searching for honey. But the pools were filled with a skin destroying phosphorescent poison. Giant bees swarmed above her head trying to find a way to the surface.

She never reported her skin rashes or the fever that accompanied them. She treated her outbreaks with an ointment made from comfrey, lavender and honey. During fever attacks she retreated to bed with ice packs and drank manuka tea.

Silver-Jean wiped the squashed snail from the sole of her gumboot onto the wet grass and went inside. In the bathroom she filled the hand basin with warm water from the kettle and washed her face and hands. Once she was dressed she checked the clock. At 9.30 the power would cut off for six hours so she cooked potatoes and eggs and boiled more water. When the potatoes were done she chopped them into quarters, poured a little oil over them and sealed them in the wide green thermos she kept for food; with the hot water she made another pot of tea and poured it into the blue thermos she used for hot drinks. This morning her hands

shook and her craving for sugar was so bad she added to her tea a teaspoon of honey from her dwindling supply.

The image of the wolf running with the dead pup in its mouth refused to fade. She reached above the sink to the row of hooks that held their cups and chose Joel's favourite apple green pottery mug. The rough glaze was lumpy against her twisted fingers. She closed her eyes and rubbed it against her cheek. She heard his voice: you're a better person than that. She turned and threw the cup against the wall.

On the way back from her lookout Wolfie leapt into the creek hoping to play, but Ruth gave a low growl and continued down the track. The weather was closing in. She whistled again and Wolfie followed, shaking his thick brown and white coat free of water. She veered off the track into denser bush to check her hives and traps: three plump wood pigeons and a small comb of honey. She broke the pigeons' necks and threw them into the bag she carried around her waist. Wolfie barked at the smell of blood and circled her, wanting breakfast. Ruth growled again and walked on.

Back in clearing in front of the caves, she lit her cooking fire, boiled water, plucked, gutted and washed the birds. She threw the offal to Wolfie, chopped the birds into quarters and put them into her only pot. Out of one of her flax storage baskets she took onions and carrots to make a stew.

Rain came down across the hills in the afternoon and she retreated to the sheltered entrance of her sleeping cave. Memories of Marta nudged at her as she sat on the wooden log she used as a work seat and stitched together a pile of rabbit skins.

Her parents named her Silver-Jean because she was born with hair so pale it was silvery white. In contrast, her skin was a deep brown, as if someone had whipped cream into chocolate. She was the physical opposite of her much older and taller sister who joked she was adopted. Her smallness, and her darker skin and long pale hair always drew comment.

When she was three the operations to straighten and strengthen her crooked hands and feet began. Every summer until she was fourteen she lay on the couch in the kitchen with her hands and feet in casts and filled the long hot afternoons reading books or listening to the radio. Inside the casts her stretched joints screamed and her skin crawled and itched. Every four hours her mother administered the sticky pink medicine that took away the pain.

After each dose she fell headfirst into a dream landscape so vivid she never thought of it as sleep. Images swooped on her like magpies, diving through the ceiling to land inside her head. They erupted out of the earth beneath the wooden floorboards of the kitchen, shouting and jangling like puppets. She learned not to scream or cry and have her mother run from the laundry or the vegetable garden back to the kitchen to sit with her. She learned to look for the image of seals sunning themselves on the cluster of rocks that rose out of the surf, their long whiskers twitching as they lifted their heads to receive the sunlight, their grey pelts glistening against white foam and the shining wetness of the black rocks. While phantoms with grinning faces and deformed limbs flew, shrieking and cackling, on broomsticks around her head, the seals remained untouched and unharmed on their island of rocks, their barking calls to each other somehow peaceful in the crisp, sun-filled ocean air.

For her last birthday Joel had made new frames for his favourite three pictures from among her many watercolours of seals. In one of them an old man with white hair blown back by a strong breeze stood on a rocky beach looking at a colony of grey seals. The bull was sunning himself while the females suckled their pups. The model for the old man had been her Uncle Jack.

Jack had spoilt her as a child. When he came to visit he took her to the beach and taught her how to swim and fish. If she was too tired to walk back she sat on his shoulders and was carried home. At night, before she went to sleep, he told her stories about pixies and elves who had magical powers and whose hair shone silver and gold in the moonlight. When the casts came off at the end of each painful summer she used the crayons and coloured pencils he bought her to draw the seals. At sixteen, it was her watercolours of seals that gained her a place in art school. And it was Uncle Jack who helped her parents pay her accommodation and tuition fees.

It was Jack she wanted to talk to now. He'd spent thirty years at sea and another twenty mucking about in his own boat and building up his hives. He'd seen whales and dolphins and seals in the wild, while she had only seen them in picture books and her imagination. He would have listened. But he'd died ten years ago, two days before his ninety-third birthday, his frail hands locked around hers. The day before he died she had wheeled him out to sit in the garden so he could watch tui flit between the thick stems of the bird of paradise plants.

'I'm worried,' he said.

'There's no need.' She adjusted his straw hat so it shaded his eyes properly. 'I'll look after you.'

‘No,’ he said, his arm quivering as he pointed to the hives nestled among the manuka bushes at the bottom of the garden. ‘The bees – there’s something wrong with the bees.’

Silver-Jean peeled a hardboiled egg and cut two slices of her sister’s homemade bread. She sat at the kitchen table and made herself eat, chewing each mouthful slowly, feeling the muscles in her jaw stretch, her teeth tear and grind the bread.

A dead pup, its neck broken, carried away in the wolf’s jaw.

When she finished breakfast she cleared the table and opened the polished wooden box that sat on the bench beside the empty fruit bowl. She rubbed a five centimetre area of skin on her arm with cotton wool soaked in alcohol and picked up the syringe to inject her daily dose of morphine, but her hands shook so much she laid it down on the table. Joel was a doctor as well as a gardener and beekeeper. He had authority to order and administer the drug she’d been addicted to since childhood. Every year the pain in her hands and feet increased and her dreams intensified. Every year it grew harder to draw and paint. Without Joel all she had left to bargain with were her watercolours and three small containers of royal jelly. The black market price of the jelly would buy her less than two months’ supply.

She sat at the table and injected half her normal dose. In the distance she heard her neighbour’s dogs barking. She closed her eyes to conjure up an image of seals but they remained hidden. Instead, she saw the wolf, running alone across an open plain. Feathers fell from the sky like coloured rain. She went to the bench, opened the blue thermos and poured herself half a cup of honeyed tea. Uncle Jack’s last words came back to her: there’s something wrong with the bees.

Ruth woke before sunrise and lay motionless, listening again for the thrumming of helicopter blades. She rose from her fur-lined bed and pulled aside the heavy sacking that curtained off the entrance to the cave. She stepped outside to watch the sky lighten and searched the horizon for movement. A faint, almost full moon was setting in the west.

She whistled to Wolfie and set off, as she did every morning, to check her boundary lines, beehives and bird traps. Barefoot, she climbed the rough track that wound through the undergrowth and around the sides of the heavily wooded hills and crossed the stony creek that ran the length of her eastern border. She bent down, cupped her hands and splashed water over her face and hair. The water was cold and stung the left side of her face. The skin on her right cheek had no feeling and she rubbed at it with wet fingers to make sure it was washed.

Memories returned when the moon grew full. This morning she'd remembered the pungent smell of soldiers' sweat as they, the ones contaminated with the virus, were herded into helicopters. The blades beat above their heads causing a storm of wind in the nearby trees. The branches of the trees were bent almost to the ground. She and Marta had huddled together in the bowl of the machine, holding onto their back packs and bedrolls. Inside her quilted, waterproof jacket she hid the tiny brown and white pup she'd rescued from the mongrel bitch the soldiers had drowned at the holding camp the day before.

The helicopter pilot checked the drop off points against the map the soldiers gave him and released the women in pairs. She and Marta were the last. When they landed in the clearing a soldier gave them blankets and hunting knives and basic food supplies – seed potatoes and kumera, flour, salt, sugar, oil, dozens of packets of vegetable seeds - and a double

ration of the sticky syrup that looked like honey but smelt muddy as if it had been mixed with coriander. It had a bitter aftertaste that neither she nor Marta liked. They only used it when their bird and rabbit traps were empty. In the end though, it was all Marta could keep down. Ruth had diluted it with water and trickled a little into her mouth every morning and evening. It kept her alive for another few months, but in the end Marta refused to swallow even that. The first winter had taken her.

After the smell of sweat, the thrumming of helicopter blades and the tainted honey, she remembered the sound of Marta talking to her. Sometimes she'd talked for hours at a time. Ruth knew Marta talked because she needed to make that strange, cooing human sound, not because she'd expected her to reply.

Now it was almost full moon. Ruth's time to bleed. Images and words rose within her; voices called to her, disturbing the safety of the bush.

After the helicopter dropped Joel in the bush it took three days of solid hiking to find the campsites. The pilot had drawn him a rough map from memory and said he'd come back in a week to pick him up. He warned Joel to be careful of the last site. There were rumours from other pilots who'd worked the supply run a couple of years ago that one of the women shouldn't be approached. They said they just flew in low, dropped meager rations and got the hell out of there. Initially, hives had been dropped into that site too but the terrain was rough and it wasn't considered worth the risk of trying to check them.

"Mind you," he said to Joel as they shook hands and agreed on the pick-up signal, "I'd be surprised if anyone was still alive. Apart from being sick with the virus, it's pretty tough country up there."

On the first day Joel walked past a deserted campsite and the remains of five empty hives. The evidence of a shallow grave and picked over bones told him a clear enough story. On the second day he entered the remains of another campsite. Two graves had been dug side by side but only one was covered with soil and rocks. He took photos, made notes and sketched a better map. Further inland he discovered more hives. They looked in better shape. He could hear the faint buzz of worker bees in the distance. He imagined the smile on Silver-Jean's face when he told her bees were producing honey again.

Even if none of the women had survived, finding the hives made the trip worthwhile. On the way back he'd collect a little honey and take it to the government laboratory for testing. He checked his compass, added the location of the hives to his new map and recorded the details in his notebook before it got too dark to see. He didn't want to light a fire and announce his presence. If there were survivors, twenty-four hours of quiet observation before contact would be prudent.

Ruth lay down the night before the full moon with Wolfie close beside her. Her sleep was disturbed. There was fire and shouted orders; a line of women being inspected by army doctors because they had the tell-tale rash on their skin; infected men in the camp approaching the women's tents with knives. She tossed, feverish, on her bed of rabbit fur. Whenever she woke Wolfie's eyes glinted back at her, a comforting glow in the darkness.

The following day, after her morning ritual checking boundaries and traps, she heated water and carried it to the entrance of her sleeping cave.

She stripped and washed, using a clean rag and a tiny slither of precious soap. She scooped warm water into a can that had once contained oil and poured the water between her legs and over her thighs to wash away the first stains of blood.

Drying herself on a piece of worn blanket, she compressed her lips and began to hum a tune her Russian grandmother had sung to her when she was a child. It was an old peasant song conscripted soldiers sang as they marched across the snow-covered steppes. Pressure built in her chest. Words buzzed in her head like bees and swarmed into her jaw and throat. She needed to get to Marta.

To the entrance of the third cave she dragged branches of wild honeysuckle and formed a rough circle with them. She sat cross-legged inside the circle facing the opening of Marta's permanent dwelling place, banging on a hand drum she'd made by stretching wild pig skin over a wooden frame.

She swayed from side to side. She struck the small triangular drum, alternating heavy and light beats, building a pattern of sound to fight against an avalanche of words and images. She remembered. But she would not speak.

A pale full moon rose in the darkening sky.

At midnight Ruth allowed her throat to open. She uttered a howl that raised the fur on Wolfie's back. He retreated to the entrance of the second cave. The howl grew and Ruth watched it balloon to form a thick shield around her. Encircled, she listened to a high-pitched wailing. She pushed herself upright and followed the sound, trying to find its centre and hide there so the voices wouldn't touch her.

In Marta's cave, she held her drum above her head. The wailing dropped to a plaintive whimper.

She stood facing the darkness with the moon behind her.

'Marta,' she said. 'Mother.'

Voices entered the cave. She swirled to meet them, teeth bared, drum raised, ready to strike. Sound began to grow in her mouth, pushed there by the waves of her breath.

She sucked in air, drew energy into her burning throat. She chanted:

Ruth is wolf

Ruth is tree

Ruth is fire and stone.

She stamped her feet and beat the drum against her thigh. Her blood flowed, a current of hot energy that ran down her legs to splatter the ground.

Moonlight streamed through the entrance of the cave. Ruth turned towards Marta. The remains of her body were wrapped in the grey blankets given to them by the soldiers. Stones were piled in a protective fence around her. Her journal lay on her chest.

Ruth circled Marta and her book of words. She picked up Marta's hunting knife and slashed the inside of her left arm. Blood bloomed against her damaged skin. The beating of the drum echoed in her head.

She held her arm over the journal and let her blood drip onto the cover. Marta contained the words - and Ruth's blood still flowed. She was safe.

The voices retreated, marching out of the cave like a platoon of soldiers, humming her grandmother's tune. With them went the flash of knives above her head, the flicker of moonlight across her face as men held her down, the sound of soldiers laughing.

The light from the full moon kept Joel awake. He lay in his sleeping bag on top of a waterproof groundsheet breathing in the peppery smell of the bush. He listened for wild pigs and thought of Silver-Jean, asleep in their bed back home, curled up on her side, her long silver hair bound in two plaits, her twisted fingers curled into loose fists. When she slept her small body twitched and jumped, her nervous system damaged from all the operations and the morphine she'd taken since she was a child.

He'd met her when she was a student in Japan studying calligraphy and he was on his first holiday in four years after working in refugee camps in Africa. Concerned for his health, his parents had shouted him a month of respite in the Miyako hotel in Kyoto. He spent the first week in an exhausted haze, avoiding conversation, sleeping and reading, absorbing the simplicity of the white gravel and green moss of the Kasui-En Annex, the hotel's private stone and gravel garden. During the second week he noticed a small woman with long silvery hair sketching the garden in her notebook. He saw her again when he visited Murin-An, one of the famous stroll gardens in Kyoto. She stood on her own, admiring the trajectory of the stream.

She felt his presence behind her. 'They say it's best in autumn.'

'I've seen you at the hotel,' he said.

The next day they travelled together to hills on the northern outskirts of Kyoto to see Shoden-Ji. They paid their entrance fee and took photos of pruned azelas among a river of white gravel.

'One day,' he said, 'I'd like a garden.'

He returned to Africa for his last assignment in the camps. She finished her year of study in Japan. They wrote and, when he could, he phoned her. His tiredness seeped out of his body down through the telephone lines and was held in check by her. She sent him miniature watercolours: zen gardens, men fishing off rocks, seals sunning themselves on southern coastlines.

When clouds finally covered the moon and the bush softened into shadow Joel fell asleep and dreamed of Silver-Jean dancing to the sound of drumming. Her hair was unbraided, spread out in a luminous veil over her thin, dark shoulders. The bones in her hand and feet were smooth and straight. The deep lines between her eyebrows and around her mouth had vanished. She swirled past him, laughing, but the trace of tears still glistened on her cheeks. She called his name and beckoned him to follow, inviting him to dance with her. Her hands moved in circles in front of her body, as graceful and delicate as falling leaves. When he caught up with her they sat together on a simple wooden bench in the Shoden-Ji garden. She laid her hands within his and said, ‘Uncle Jack was right. There’s something wrong with the bees.’

Ruth stood outside the cave, watching and listening. The wind was cool on her damp skin. Her mind was quiet now, empty of sound and image. She walked over to the rest of the honeysuckle branches and dragged them inside. She made another circle, behind the stones, around Marta’s bed.

Now she could sleep.

Joel woke at first light with his mouth in the dirt and a crick in his neck. As he was packing up his gear, a mist of fine rain cobwebbed the bush. He shouldered his pack, zipped his jacket, turned up the collar and pulled the brim of his hat further down. Fern fronds glistened above his head as he climbed to the final campsite. Two fantails followed him, darting in and out of the bush, playing hide and seek then returning to swoop around his face and shoulders.

He reached the ridge above the clearing around midday. The mist lifted and through his binoculars he saw a well tended vegetable garden, a fireplace made from a circle of stones with a heavy pot beside it, and sacking and skins sewn together and stretched over wooden poles in front of two low caves. A large brown and white dog lay by the entrance to one of the caves chewing on a bone. He didn't see the woman at first. Her clothing, patched together with fur and feathers, camouflaged her until she moved across the open space between the shelter of the caves and her garden. Because of the feathers woven through her hair and stitched onto her upper garments his first thought was that he had seen an enormous bird.

All that afternoon from the safety of the ridge he watched the woman and the dog move in and out of the caves and around the campsite. She worked in the garden for a couple of hours, digging and weeding. Her only tools seemed to be a short-handled spade and a hunting knife. Her back was turned to him and in spite of the strange feathered and furred clothes that covered her from shoulder to knee he could see how strong and fit she was. When she'd finished gardening she retreated to the awning stretched out in front of the cave nearest to him. She sat on the ground with her back resting against something he couldn't see, the dog

sprawled at her feet. The dog was a complication. There was no way he could get close to the camp without alerting it. None of the reports from the helicopter pilots had mentioned a dog.

Joel thought of Silver-Jean, alone and unwell in the cottage, waiting for him to return. The woman in this camp was strong, self-sufficient. She had survived the virus, had shelter and enough to eat. And a companion. He put down the binoculars and rubbed at the three day-old stubble on his chin. From the outside pocket of his pack he took out a plastic bag and scooped up a handful of cashew nuts and raisins. The small jar of honey Silver-Jean had given him was nestled in the corner of the pocket and he took this out too. The nuts and raisins and a mouthful of honey would give him the energy to decide how to approach the camp. All he really needed to do was check the woman wasn't suffering. He unscrewed the lid and balanced the jar of honey on top of his pack. In the distance he heard the dog bark.

He turned back to the camp and raised his binoculars. The woman was squatting by the fireplace, skinning a couple of rabbits and the dog was circling her, excited by the smell of blood. For the first time since he'd been watching her she was facing him and he caught a glimpse of her face. The skin on one cheek was red and puckered, as if it had been cut and then burnt, and the side of her neck and forearms were crisscrossed with scars. She looked up towards the ridge, as if she sensed someone was there, and, instinctively, he took a step back. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. For a moment, the buzzing behind him didn't register.

The first bee landed on his wrist. It was the size of his forefinger. The sting went deep and he shouted in surprise as much as pain. He brushed his arm against his leg. The second bee attacked the inch of exposed neck above his collar. The sting burned into his flesh.

His skin began to swell. He swung around. Dozens of giant bees swarmed around the open jar of honey.

‘Shit,’ he said. ‘You bloody idiot.’

He staggered over to his pack and tried to kick the jar of honey onto the ground. His hat fell off. Bees flew at his face, stinging his eyelids, his checks, his lips. He screamed. One entered his mouth. He dropped onto the ground; rolled over and over. Bees covered his head. They burrowed into his ears. Above the buzzing, the pain, and the sound of his own cries, he heard the barking of the dog.

Ruth stood quiet and still in the bush and let the bees crawl over her. They settled on her arms and shoulders, a silken cloak. Their frenzied attack was reserved for strangers. Wolfie sat a few feet away, guarding the body. It was face down in the dirt.

When the bees left her and returned to their hive Ruth tied Wolfie to a tree trunk and rolled the man over. His body was still warm. His face was a bloody pulp of swollen flesh.

She removed his binoculars and hung them around her own neck, took his compass and pocket knife from his jacket pocket and put them in her pouch. Into his sleeping bag she rolled the ground sheet, the spare tee-shirts, socks and packets of dehydrated food she found in his pack. The cell phone, notebook and hand drawn map were of no use to her. These she left beside the body. Wolfie watched her as she put her new belongings in the intruder’s pack and hoisted it onto her back. She untied him and together they walked back down the track to the safety of her campsite.

The power came back on an hour before sunset. Silver-Jean washed her paint brushes and turned on the radio. She chopped and steamed kumera, cooked a pot of rice. In the garden she picked silver-beet and watched the light leave the sky. The phone rang. She hurried inside.

‘Joel?’ she said.

‘It’s me,’ her sister Barbara said. ‘Any news?’

That night Silver-Jean’s sleep was disturbed by dreams of giant bees swarming through the bush. She woke to the sound of trucks and barking dogs. Once it was light she saw her neighbour’s house was empty. On her back doorstep was a cardboard box tied up with string.

Inside was a black and white puppy, asleep on an old jersey.

‘Conscripted up north for hand pollination,’ the note from her neighbour said. ‘They wouldn’t let us keep the litter but we saved a pup for you. Will write once we’re settled in the camp. Take care.’

The woman who dreamed she kidnapped children

Elaine stood in a supermarket queue. Ahead of her was a woman with two boys, one about six years old, the other two or three. The younger one was stocky with spiky brown hair that stood up on his head like a toilet brush. He pulled at the red plastic shopping basket his mother carried. She emptied her groceries onto the counter, sighed, and handed it to him. He laughed and waved it around.

‘Gently, Paul,’ she said.

He swung the basket again and hit his older brother in the back.

Elaine reached over and lifted the basket from him. He started to grizzle. She and his mother and the checkout girl exchanged raised eyebrows and half smiles. From the shelf in front of her she picked out a chocolate bar, opened the wrapper and offered him a piece. His hand shot out and grabbed it off her. She offered a piece of chocolate to the older boy. He stared at her and then looked back at his mother. She nodded. He reached out, rolled the chocolate between his fingers and popped it in his mouth. When he thought nobody was looking he punched his younger brother on the arm.

In the car park Elaine sat in her car and watched as the woman lifted the younger boy into the child safety seat in the back of a dusty Toyota covered with sticky handprints. Wobbly stick figures were sketched all over the rear windows. She belted him in. He squirmed and wriggled, kicked out with his legs, striking his mother’s face with his foot. She grabbed his legs and he began to howl. The older boy opened the car door, climbed into the front

passenger seat, curled up and put his hands over his ears. Elaine shook her head at the noise and turned the key.

When she got home and unpacked her shopping she discovered confectionary she didn't remember choosing or buying. The items were packaged like marshmallow Easter eggs, six figures laid out in a row, each nestled in their own section of clear plastic. The body of each one reminded her of a sweet she had loved as a child, Eskimo snowmen she thought they had been called. Every Monday she had walked to the local diary with her pocket money held tightly in the palm of her hand. She bought seven snowmen, one for each day of the week.

That night as she slept Eskimo snowmen stood packed together in rows like penguins huddled together on an Antarctic ice-shelf. But their faces weren't bland and featureless as they had been in her childhood. Each one was contorted, a mirror image of the little boy screaming at being strapped in. She woke in the darkness with the image of Munch's painting, *The Scream*, pulsating in her mind – the mineshaft hole of the mouth a psychedelic swirl, drawing her in. Her body was so tense it took a few minutes before she was able to flex her fingers and wriggle her toes. The dream began to recede as she stretched her arms and legs. She rolled onto her side, switched on the bedside lamp and sat up.

Towards the end of the winter term she went home early to mark her Year 12 history class's essays. She had missed her treat, a long walk in the park with her two year old Labrador, Bruno. It had been fine most of the day and she'd put off the walk, thinking she had plenty of time. The rain started just as she was finishing her comments on the last essay – a dismal attempt to fudge the fact the writer hadn't read the required texts.

Guilt at keeping Bruno inside all day made her put on her raincoat and boots but she only walked him round the block. He whimpered when she dried him off in the garage with an old towel. His dark brown eyes were liquid with disappointment.

‘Sorry, Bruno,’ she said, rubbing his ears, ‘Tomorrow, I promise.’

She threw a tennis ball around the small garage for five minutes. When she stopped playing with Bruno and went up the internal stairs to the kitchen he barked his disapproval and stayed below, growling at the ball.

The rain got heavier and by the time she went to bed there was lightning and thunder. Bruno howled and shook if he was left alone in a storm so she let him sleep on the mat beside her bed. The thunder retreated around three am.

The corners of her street were elongated, stretched at either end by giant, invisible hands. She stood on the kerb outside her house with Bruno, waiting to cross the road. He was obedient, waiting beside her until she was ready to move. She looked right then left. The road was clear. She and Bruno stepped from the kerb. On the other side of the road a small boy appeared. He had blond hair. A heavy fringe shaded his eyes. His brown shorts and tee shirt were covered in mud. In his hand he held a bunch of yellow balloons and a parcel wrapped in glossy green paper. Bruno trotted beside her as she crossed the road. She looked up and down the street searching for the boy’s parents or an older brother or sister.

‘Hello,’ she said, ‘Are you going to a party?’

The boy shook his head. He put his hand out to pat the dog. Bruno licked his fingers.

She and Bruno and the boy stood together on the deserted street. The sky was overcast. There were no cars. All the houses had their curtains or blinds drawn. The only

movement was the yellow balloons bouncing in the air between her and the boy. Beneath the mud that covered most of his body were patches of creamy white skin.

‘What’s your name?’

His face crumpled and he started to cry.

‘Daddy,’ he said.

She took his hand and led him back across the road. Her mother’s face appeared in the kitchen window. Elaine waved and lifted the child up to show her mother. In the bathroom she washed his face and his hands. In the kitchen only traces of her mother remained: a lipstick smudge on a coffee cup, a lingering smell of patchouli oil on a crumpled tissue by the breadbin. She sat the boy at the table and gave him a bowl of Neapolitan ice-cream. He traced the pattern of colours with his finger before he scooped a mouthful onto his spoon. When the bowl was empty he fell asleep at the table, head resting on his arms, blond hair spread out over the tablecloth. Bruno lay on the floor beside his chair. The steady rise and fall of the child’s breathing filled the room. She should ring the community constable and report a missing child. She needed to find his father. Instead, she went to the linen cupboard and took out sheets, pillowcases and a fresh duvet cover for the single bed in the sunroom.

The following afternoon when Elaine was walking Bruno back from the park she saw a child very like the boy in her dream. She leaned against a tree and watched, her hand pressed hard against her chest. He was standing on the footpath beside a dark blue jeep, holding two red balloons in his left hand, and a parcel tied up with green ribbon in the other. His father lifted him into his arms and swung him around. The boy laughed. His blond hair fanned out and caught the sunlight. Father and son crossed the road and went inside a house with bunches of multi-coloured streamers tied to the letterbox.

That evening her face was hot, her throat dry and scratchy and her hands and feet were cold. Tony, the new chemistry teacher at school, rang. They chatted about school for a while, then he said, ‘There’s a French movie on at the Academy – would you like to go?’

‘How about next weekend?’ she said. ‘I think I’m coming down with something.’

She made an omelette and picked at it while she watched the news on television. Bruno was curled up on his sheepskin by the unlit potbelly. She didn’t have the concentration to read so she channel-surfed, trying to find something that would hold her interest.

‘I feel sick, Bruno,’ she said.

His ears twitched and his eyes opened but he stayed where he was, stretched out on the sheepskin. She made herself chamomile tea, lay on the couch with the remote beside her and dozed.

The blond-haired boy was playing with Bruno in the garage. He no longer asked for his father. She’d washed and dried his clothes and cut his fringe. In the sunroom a tartan teddy-bear and a green plastic dinosaur lay on his bed. The police knocked on her door.

‘Have you seen a blond-haired, four year old boy?’

She was polite but firm – she’d seen nothing.

Her cold turned to bronchitis and she had a week’s sick leave. Tony popped round one afternoon with flowers and two cappuccinos in cardboard cups. She’d spent the day lying on the couch listening to the radio and reading. She was in her oldest pajama bottoms, a shapeless tee shirt and a bobbly dressing gown. Her hair needed washing. She sat on the edge of the couch running her fingers through her hair and blowing her nose. Tony grinned at her and chatted about school. He asked her opinion about the behaviour of a couple of difficult students.

‘You’re so good with them,’ he said.

She licked the froth from the lid of the paper cup. ‘Most of them just want attention.’

Bruno put his head in her lap and wagged his tail. ‘Poor Bruno she said, ‘he hasn’t had a walk for days.’

Tony offered to take Bruno for a walk and when they left she showered, washed and dried her hair, put on clean pajamas, her best robe, and a smear of lip gloss. An hour later, Tony stood on the front doorstep and handed Bruno back. ‘You’re looking better already,’ he said. He ruffled her hair and kissed her on the cheek.

That night she dreamt she was in the school hall. She was waiting for the end of year concert and prize-giving to begin. Tony was beside her. Groups of teachers and students, their friends and families filled the hall. The school orchestra was tuning up. Her mother sat at the back reading the newspaper. Her large leather handbag was open on the empty seat beside her. Gary, her younger half brother, sat on her mother’s right side.

Rust-coloured velvet curtains parted. Frank Benny, the headmaster, walked on stage. He tapped the microphone. ‘Good evening everyone,’ he said. ‘If you would all just take your seats, please.’

There was shuffling and coughing and the scraping of chair legs on the polished wooden floor. Tony slipped his hand into hers. On each of her fingers she wore a silver ring.

‘Before we begin,’ Mr Benny said, ‘We have a child backstage who seems to be lost.’

A wave of whispering spread through the hall. Someone at the back called out, ‘If it’s mine, feel free to keep him.’ Everyone laughed.

The headmaster smiled at the audience. ‘Good try, but it’s a little girl, about five years old, light brown pigtails and a blue skirt. Asking for her Daddy. Please come and collect.’

Elaine turned and scanned the hall. No-one moved. Her mother and Gary had disappeared, leaving three empty chairs at the back of the hall. She squeezed Tony’s hand, stood up and walked to the end of the row. She raised her hand.

‘Headmaster,’ she said, ‘I’ll look after her.’ The stage lights caught the silver rings on the fingers of her upraised hand. Each ring reflected a rainbow of light back into the room. ‘Until her father comes and gets her.’

She went backstage. The little girl stood with her thumb in her mouth. Behind her was a middle-aged man. He was dressed in faded jeans, a black suit jacket and a cowboy hat. He smiled and she saw tobacco-stained teeth. He raised his hat in greeting. His eyes were the colour of dirty ice. The child looked up at her. The children’s story about the soldier who met the dog with eyes as big as saucers entered her head. The dog had guarded something important. She’d forgotten what it was. If she looked into this man’s eyes she and the girl would be in danger.

From her little finger she took a thin silver ring. She slid it onto the girl’s thumb. She bent down. ‘Come with me, sweetheart.’

At home she took a spare pillow from her wardrobe. She put it at the other end of the bed in the sunroom. The blond boy was asleep at the head of the bed. His hands curled round the legs of the teddy bear. She tucked the girl in at the bottom; kissed her on the forehead. The children were small: there was an empty space in the bed between their feet. Bruno lay on the floor between the door and the bed guarding the children. ‘Good boy,’ she said.

After that dream Elaine began to keep a dream journal, waking early in the pre-dawn light to record whatever images and scenes she could remember.

During the next two months she had four dreams about buying silver rings, three about seeing the man with cold grey eyes walking away from her in the park with his hat in his hand, and seven about children. The most disturbing dream involved a scene in which the clown she'd hired as entertainment for a children's birthday party set fire to a pile of balloons he had twisted into animal shapes. The instant the balloons caught alight they changed into real animals and began to scream.

She'd woken from that dream early on a Saturday morning. She was crying. Tony was lying beside her, curled up on his side, fast asleep. They'd been to the Cirque de Soleil the previous evening and had talked on the way home about the clowns, who had been funny and sad in equal parts. In the beginning, the clown in her dream flopped around in oversize shoes and a bright orange wig. He made the children laugh by sitting on a whoopee cushion in the shape of a duck. But when he set fire to the animals his happy-sad mask dissolved. His face was as enraged as the little boy she'd seen in the supermarket car park, strapped into the car seat for his safety, but against his will.

The following weekend she and Tony and Bruno travelled to his family's beach house outside Coromandel township. Bruno chased seagulls on the beach while Tony went kayaking. Elaine walked in the bush and read through all the entries in her dream journal. Late Sunday morning they drove into the township for brunch. The wind had changed to a southerly so they sat at an inside table looking out onto the street.

Three four-wheel drives pulled up and disgorged parents, kids and push bikes onto the main road.

‘It used to be such a backwater,’ Tony said.

She opened the newspaper. ‘You mean in the good old days.’

He grinned. ‘Not so much of the old, thanks.’

Their eggs Benedict had just arrived when she turned the page and saw an article on the small South Island town of Burkesville her mother had grown up in. There was a photo of the author, Matt Mulholland, the writer her mother always talked about, the one who’d been at school with her, although he was two years her junior. He wrote westerns for an American publishing company and was Burkesville’s claim to fame. Her mother regularly mentioned how well he had done for himself. ‘Who would have thought,’ she said, every other time Elaine phoned, ‘that someone so ordinary, and from such a one-horse town, would write books that got turned into Hollywood movies.’

There were other photos accompanying Mulholland’s article and a section on the Burkesville girl who had gone missing in the 1970s. Many of the people mentioned were contemporaries of her mother. One of the photos was of a group of local teenagers camped down by the river. Elaine stopped eating.

‘Look Tony, it’s Mum.’

Tony put down his fork and squinted at the black and white photo. ‘Is your dad there too?’

Elaine smoothed the newspaper. ‘Who knows,’ she said.

Tony raised his eyebrows.

‘Mum got pregnant with me when she was eighteen. Small town, lots of boozy parties on the riverbeds, nothing else to do. Her parents tried to get her to adopt me but she ran away to Auckland.’

Tony reached over and took her hand. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘You never said - I didn’t realise.’

‘Things turned out okay. Mum married Gary’s dad, Noel, when I was five.’

‘You ever met your real dad?’

‘Nope.’

They spread the newspaper article between them and studied the rest of the photos.

‘Recognise anyone else?’

Elaine looked at a group shot of four teenage boys. They must have been seventeen or eighteen and were standing beside their motorbikes. The caption said: Raymond Riley, Keith Munro, Barry Dixon and Mike Dawes.

‘Not really, although one of them looks vaguely familiar.’

After they returned to Auckland Elaine rang her mother. ‘Did you see the article on Burkesville?’

Her mother coughed. ‘I’ve always liked Matt Mulholland,’ she said, ‘His parents were good people, but this time he’s gone too far - he should stick to writing westerns.’

Elaine opened the freezer and took out a tub of frozen soup. ‘It’s not true?’

Her mother’s voice sounded frail. Much older than her fifty-three years. ‘What’s the point of dragging it all up again? It won’t do any good.’

‘Did you know the girl who disappeared, Mum?’

‘Burkesville’s a small place, Elaine.’

‘So you knew all those people too, the ones in the photos?’

‘It was a long time ago.’ Her mother’s voice took on the firm tone she used with children who misbehaved. ‘How was your weekend? When am I going to meet Tony?’

That night Elaine returned to the school hall. The wooden chairs were packed away. On stage the drama class rehearsed a new play. She was looking for Carlene Riley, the girl in the newspaper article who’d disappeared thirty-five years ago. The girl her mother wouldn’t talk about. She went backstage. She searched among the costumes and the props. A clown’s mask fell off a shelf onto the floor. It began to laugh at her. She picked up the mask. Tears sprang from the empty eye sockets.

In a corner behind some bamboo screens there were four more children. They were older, between eight and ten. The man with the cowboy hat and the cold grey eyes was behind them. He watched as they put on stage make-up. One of the girls saw her and smiled. She reached out to her. The silver rings on Elaine’s fingers were heavy. She couldn’t lift her hands. The weight of the rings increased. She was falling through the floorboards. Down and down, falling through each floor of the building. She landed beneath the concrete foundations, face down on damp, musty smelling earth.

When she woke she was lying on the edge of the bed, clutching a pillow to her face and chest. The quilt was on the floor. The alarm was ringing and Bruno was barking.

That evening she rang her mother. ‘Did you see the news?’

‘You know I never watch television.’

‘There was a piece at the end on cold cases. Matt Mulholland was interviewed about Carlene Riley. Looks like they’re re-opening the case.’

'I'm not interested in digging up the past, Elaine,' her mother said. 'It won't do any good.'

Elaine thought of falling through the multi-storied building, about the children backstage she needed to rescue, about the man watching them with dead eyes. She rang her mother back the following evening.

'You can't avoid this,' she said. 'With all the publicity the police are bound to want to talk to you. Tell me what happened.'

'Gary and Rae and the kids are coming over from Brisbane next week,' her mother said. 'Everyone wants to meet Tony.'

'I won't give up on this Mum.'

Elaine unfolded the newspaper article about Burkesville and spread it on the kitchen table. She read it again, looked at all the photos, especially the one of the four teenagers and their motorbikes. The more she looked at it the more one of them seemed familiar. She wrote down the 0800 number Matt Mulholland had given at the end of the article in case anyone wanted to contact him with more information. When Tony came round that with a bottle of wine and Chinese take-aways she showed him the photo again.

She pointed to the one of Barry Dixon as a young man. 'Does this remind you of anyone?' she said.

Tony looked at the photo for a while. He rubbed his chin and looked back at her. He put his arm around her shoulder. 'He looks a lot like you.'

That night she was in the park with Tony. They threw sticks to Bruno. He caught them in his mouth mid-air. Kids on bikes and skateboards sped past. The adventure playground was full. Kids climbed over ropes and snaked through tunnels. Fathers pushed

little ones on swings. In the distance a group of teenage girls stood together on the grass beside a willow tree. Their faces were pale, their clothes covered in leaf mould and mud. The youngest one was crying. Pear-shaped tears rolled down her cheeks, splashing the collar of her denim shirt. Watching them from the curved wooden bridge above the pond was Barry Dixon. He wore jeans, a black suit jacket and a cowboy hat pulled down low. It covered his eyes.

Elaine raised her hands. The sun caught the silver of her rings, briefly blinding her. Between his eyes and hers was a shield of light. She could no longer see his face. His shadowed outline was suspended above the earth like the outer ring of an eclipsed moon.

The girls moved from the shelter of the willow tree to the edge of the pond. They huddled together watching swans and geese glide across the water. She left Bruno with Tony and walked towards them. The closer she got the more transparent they became. She reached out to the crying girl, wanting to grasp her hand, to take her home. But her hand encountered nothing but a wisp of cold air.

She turned to go back to Tony. Her mother was standing at the foot of the bridge. Barry had disappeared.

‘Father,’ she called. ‘Father.’

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