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The Post-Modern Rules For Family Living

by R. H. Fee

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<http://viviennesblog.org>

#

It is really quite miraculous being able to sit here and post this. The sun shines through the clouds onto the grey granite bench and this silvery keyboard under my fingers is a marvel of engineering that is as thin and delicate and cold as porcelain. The electrons buzz and flicker unpredictably into and out of existence inside the computer's silicon heart and are alien to thought, yet, from this comfortable green-carpeted, blue-walled apartment, high above the beach with its sheltering palms, they have the intelligence to flow when I press and gather in a storm of meaning that shifts on invisible light to the hub and then is split to packages of almost-meaning, hurled into the phone line and the soup of universal talk and then slung and captured and reassembled into a white page that I appear to be typing on but is itself a reassembly of broken electro-life in this computer, painted on the screen and does not exist anywhere ever yet, like a ghost, exists all the time and is visible if the right séance is held.

I'm only giving the password to you, Callum, embedded in the letter I'm about to send to you. It is a matter of faith that nobody else will get at it. I have little faith in people other than in their unintelligence.

I obey the Rule that I cannot come within fifty metres of you or your dwelling place wherever it may be from time to time until further Order of the Court. You need have no fear of my breaching that, at least. I obey Rules to the letter so it is a letter that I sent to you. The password is embedded in the letter. Of course, you will only know that if you have the letter and know to look for the password. It will be interesting to see if you do.

I share my ancestor Vivienne's name and, like her, I'm Faerie and bound by the Rules. I have no wings, and only a few magical gifts. I'm not tiny, I don't

live at the bottom of a garden. I look and act as human as you do. My skin is not silver; my ears are not pointy – though they were a little when I was young.

This is my story and inescapably this means it is also the story of my Family. Some say we are the descendants of cast down angels, others of the Goddess Don and still others of the Three Daughters of Fate. The truth is secret and unimportant to you. What is important is that you know that I live in the spaces between people and am always watching.

Gosh.

RECONNECTION

#

Dear Callum,

How are you?

Actually, I don't much care about your health. I just care to know that you will feel what I want you to feel. Which is why I'm writing and about to do what I'm about to do. It will become clear soon. What you should know is that I'm going to bring a little magic into your life.

Whether you want it or not.

Let me tell you of one of my gifts. I'm casting its spell now and it is this: I remember the truth. I can remember the thoughts of the members of my Family throughout time as though they were my own. All I do is choose to remember something and it comes to me. You might yourself slip into a daydream and remember things, Callum. Be reminded perhaps by a checked tablecloth of a long ago picnic with me, your lover, on the beach, the smell of the sea that day, the grit of wet sand between toes and sandal, the way hair glinted in the sun, the taste perhaps of strawberries and ham. So am I. But I'm also now reminded by a stone in the wall I'm gazing at now of the forest where Anthred ran barefoot twelve thousand years ago, his heart pounding as he followed the stag, spear crashing against tree-trunks and wrenching where it stuck in the creature's flank. I smell rosemary and recall breathing in the raw tang of wood and dung from smoking wattle walls in a fire lit by my ancestor Dianna twenty centuries ago to protect the village of Orsou. I didn't remember these things until I looked at that stone in that wall outside this cafe and smelled the rosemary wafting from the herbaceous

border beneath the window. It is a gift that has recently come upon me but, like all gifts given to all gifted people, is continuously given - but is no less wondrous for that. Nor less burdensome.

I'm the last of my kind. I'm un-wed, un-partnered, and barren. Doctors have recently looked to see what is wrong with me that I cannot conceive. Surgeons have taken samples of tissue from my lifeless living womb. My eggs are there but they don't have any spark in them.

I'm the memory pool of the Family and now that is almost all I am. Sometimes the waters swamp me with memory like an endless choking sea. Nothing will come living from my depths, as I'm barren. I can only give you the tiniest of sips of dead history from my waters, because there is so much. But I intend to set that much down here.

More later, Callum. For now, just know that I'm around and that I will write again soon and tell you what is about to happen.

Viv.

PUZZLEMENT

#

Today was exciting!

It was lovely to hear from you. I picked open the envelope very carefully with my purple fingernails because I had only just painted them. When I lifted the paper to my nostrils there was a whiff of acetone around the edges which probably came from the polish. Your scent was more astringent than even that, I recall.

Here is what you wrote:

Dear Vivienne,

I was surprised to receive your letter yesterday.

I do understand your desire to be in touch, but you're supposed to get reports only through your lawyer. I realise of course that under the court order you're free to write. But I wonder why it is that you're doing so. Frankly, I think it's best if you don't write at all. I think you should remember what was decided at the hearing and why. I thought that you were under no illusions. Our relationship has been over for years and I took your silence until now as a good sign.

Dr. Pederson has always told me not to contact you, that it wasn't good for either of us and that you had to sort things out for yourself. But I'm a bit worried about you having received this letter.

Mary and I wonder whether you're still seeing Dr Pederson and following his treatment? I rang his nurse and she wouldn't tell me but I

got the impression that maybe you hadn't. So I took the liberty of leaving a message just to let him know that you may be arranging a visit.

I've also tried to contact your father but once again couldn't find any trace of him. I don't want you to write again but I think it would be a good idea if you could get in touch with your father and Dr. Pederson as soon as possible and perhaps show them both of our letters?

There is no need to reply to this letter. Please look after yourself,

Callum.

So puzzled. Yet at the same time, so thoughtful. So caring. So transparent.

AWAKENING

#

Dear Callum,

Thank you for your letter and kind thoughts. I'm sure you're concerned for my well-being and I appreciate it, though it certainly is a liberty that you have taken. Don't be worried, though.

You ask why I'm writing. To tell you some things you have to know. To ease myself a little, though not you (and certainly not Mary.) To let you know I'm thinking of you all the time. To bring you the news, the juice.

My father Stewart, I regret to say, has passed on. I didn't want you to attend the funeral. You couldn't have anyway because of the restraining order. And you never met him or Lindy so it didn't seem a big deal. I didn't want you there any more than I wanted you at my mother's funeral even when you said wanted to go. You know, I wonder now if it was just curiosity that moved you, despite your protestations that you were concerned for my emotional wellbeing and that of my father. You protested a lot. Was it greed, even, that motivated you? It was at about the time that... Never mind. Over now.

You remember, Callum, how I used to be? All business and figures? Counted the bank balance every day and watched the growth and decline of our bank accounts? How I insisted on remaining separate but totalled? You said that led to the problems in the first place. My attitude. You said that this tendency to want to control reality was what caused me to lose that at the end. Maybe so. I certainly did lose it for a

while. My grip on reality slipped through too much grip. But that passed and I took the reality reins and all was fine for a long time after you left.

There is this new thing, though, this tingling knowledge of truth that I've been feeling lately. It has changed me to something entirely different. It is also real but it has all those feelings and empathies that you accused me of lacking. The new memories were at first in patches and clouds and glimpsed darkly. Some days I see more and others less and sometimes the memories seem to change.

More and more often I need more and more wine to remember and to forget. I'm growing a little confused this afternoon for example. Tomorrow will be better. It is clearer in the mornings. But I can give some account and need to do so before I take the next step in our lives for us.

I almost forgot to tell you that have started a blog on the internet. The address I have given you is coded in my first letter. All you have to do is work it out. You can go there and read all about it. I don't see why I should write everything twice.

Yours faithfully,

Vivienne Coroth.

I look forward to hearing what you - and Mary, we must include dear Mary, - think of that.

Do you remember the first time I met Mary, Cal? We were in away in Sydney on our first weekend away together in ages. I hadn't been well. It was so lovely, despite being winter. The didgeridoo sky was bigger than it had any

right to be, with a white haze born of fragrant gums. Buildings sat in sandstone shadows, the trees were dabbed with yellow and orange aboriginal leaves and the air tasted of hope, so still that all sound echoed back and only cold if we moved.

I remember so vividly when you introduced me to her. There she was, suddenly. On the wharf as we were coming out of the restaurant. What were the odds? In Sydney and we bump into your new American friend from work? She was beautiful to look at. It was a surprise to me then that I had never heard of her before.

How just like a human she was. So simple, so sure of herself, so sure of me. Her hair is shiny black and her skin the white of dandelion milk. She was friendly, witty, intelligent, and very social. She had transferred from Massachusetts only a few months ago. Technically your superior, though not mine.

It usually takes me a while to figure out what somebody wants if they are human. I really have to work at it. With Mary Swann that took even longer than usual. I think it is because she is so very good at being human. She knows just what people are thinking. By people, I mean humans. Not those like me. But, she had then, as she does now, the advantage of me.

I do have a list of things that I like to use to persuade and manipulate people to do what I need them to do. This may sound cold and calculating, but it is not. Unless I use this bag of tricks, I get confused, they get confused and it's lose-lose. The way I see it, if I get what I want, it's win-win. Or when, possibly win. But humans like you and especially Mary are just as manipulative. That day was a good example.

"Vivienne, is it? Delighted to meet you! Isn't that whether just so wonderful? I always love Sydney whenever I come here. Don't you, Cally?"

Ah. 'Cally' is it? Trying to stake a claim on him. This is typical of humans. They do want you to know what it is they're about to do to you. They can't resist it.

"Not really. Too busy for me. I like coming here because it reminds me of how busy it is at home as well. If I'm on holiday, it's nice to see other people rushing around."

"Oh, you old grump. That's not what you said last time we were here. Do you remember that wonderful meal we had in Potts Point?"

"Oh? Callum, was that on that last trip to Sydney? The conference?"

"Yes dear, the Magentum one. Me, Josh, Mary, Steve of course and...'

"Todd! Don't you remember, Cally? He was going back to Toronto. I took his place."

"Right. Todd was there."

"Yes, I have to admit, that was pretty good. There were, how many of us, Mary, seven?"

Another obviously homo sapiens characteristic. Callum carefully telling me that he wasn't there with Mary but with a group of people, and, like Mary's statement, assuming I wouldn't know that I was deliberately being told. But it had clearly been Mary's intention to make me think they had been there together. She was scenting him like a dog. Not entirely an apt analogy, as bitches don't scent.

This was easy enough to spot even for me. But some of it is very obscure. What I do, however, is esoteric. Watch:

"I love the sun here. I don't normally like it, but today, this very minute, I welcome it. The way it burns. The knowledge that it has of how to penetrate the skin so skilfully."

Mary's eyebrows raised and she glanced at you.

"Vivienne is possessed of a... poetic nature, sometimes. It takes a little getting used to." You laughed.

Mary uncrossed one of her arms and patted her bare shoulder with that hand.

"Oh, how lovely!"

She looked at me more carefully. I knew that her primate brain was reassessing how to approach someone like me. I, on the other hand, was looking at the way the sun caressed her white vulnerable shoulders with fuzzy white splashes of uv danger and I smiled.

I love the way the future comes visiting in the present at just the right time to grant a healthy dose of karmic radiation. I took this gift of the sun, and I saw it as a little incremental part of one of Mary's possible ends. Time works differently for me than for humans. For me, all the futures of all the pasts are present in the present and it is one of my endless duties to pick the most appropriate. So many futures for Mary occurred to me in that moment. And the one I chose was a long and lingering one that nicely balanced out the small offence she was showing me. I was gentle and didn't want an immediate fate so I took the long term damage option, one that she maintained a free will over

if she just stayed out of the sun. You see, I didn't know Mary then as I know her now. And so I didn't bear her any lasting malice. The sun had balanced out the debt that she had little incurred with me. We were neutral and if she had just acted correctly from her on in her life, she would come to no real harm.

"So! And here we are now! I'm so pleased to meet you at last, Vivienne. How are you? Cally said you hadn't been well? Hope you're feeling better now. You look just radiant! Cally tells me that you're in marketing. Some sort of analyst?"

But there, you see? She went about seizing this new future all wrong, fiddling with my life while her skin burned. We were in a neutral position. She could have maintained that but she chose not to. She went straight back into debt with the tone of her voice, that 'Cally-Cally' and the patronising way in which she leaned her head forward and to the side as though dealing with some form of idiot. The sun continued to shine. It was not enough to pay her back this time though.

"Oh? I didn't know you knew I had been sick. In fact, Callum hasn't mentioned you at all." There. Kapow! That was a good impression of a human's way of doing it. "Yes, I'm in marketing at the moment. But formally I'm a statistician. I work in all sorts of fields. Marketing is just the one I'm engaged in at present."

"Oh. You're from Auckland, too, like Cally, right?"

"Not originally. I'm from many places but I was born in the Maniototo."

"The Maniototo? You told me it was Northland," you said.

“No, Callum. I don’t think I said that. If you heard that, you heard wrong.”

“The Maniototo?”

“The Maniototo. Plain of Blood. Because it was the site of a great battle, they say. Though they are wrong. It is a great circular plain bordered by low hills and it was formed when the Moon dropped a giant drop of its silvery blood from that great wound, the Sea of Tranquility. The gash where the ancient phoenix tore at the Moon after it first rose screaming from the ashes before the Age of Man.”

“Oh! Vivienne! How absolutely gorgeous! Is that a Maori legend?” A creamy hand was clapped to the strawberry mouth.

You looked at me with eyes that were a little concerned, I think.

“It isn’t the Maori belief. She’s playing with you again, Mary.”

“Well, such a beautiful image all the same. I just love it.”

This start set the boundaries of our three-legged relationship. Mary had signalled her interest in you with her words and the way she touched your arm. I had replied with an offensive defence. You told me off for acting weirdly. But we settled back into knowing that this is the way it would be. It was comfortable. I would be me, you would be mine, and Mary would have to look elsewhere. Except it turned out that she didn’t agree.

Over the next few days, Mary tagged along. Assiduously planned spontaneous coffee date the next day, an evening meal on our last night in Sydney. You told me you didn't want it but said that because Mary was alone

and staying on to work for an extra week it was only right as she was alone. I didn't really mind. I actually liked her. I knew that we were destined to see each other a lot more. And I was right.

She came to say goodbye to us at the airport. I didn't think there was anything odd about that. She said she had a free day and didn't know anybody in Sydney. Nothing else to do. She brought me a little stuffed koala bear.

Just a wonderful person.

I, too, had a gift for her when she got back to Auckland. I had arranged for it to rain.

I hadn't been able to go to work that morning. My job was getting stale. They usually do. Such promise in all those numbers, such interest, and it all comes to nothing. The usual humans were in charge. The day before it had been the forty-seven year old thin-faced dullard from the office down the hall. Apparently I was under him though he couldn't have added together the figures I had just massaged for the firm:

"Oh, Vivienne. Would you mind doing this report again? There are a few typos and it ends the third and fourth page don't really make sense. I wonder whether you deleted something. It away, we will be needing it after lunch. Hope it doesn't take too long."

"I would."

"You would what?"

"I would mind."

"Ha! Very good! Shall we say one-thirty? Just give it to Jane. She can do the copying before the meeting."

"I don't think so."

He stood fluttering the papers for a short while, the smell of photocopy toner and laser printing ink clogging his little brain and turning his face bright pink. Then he spun and walked back down the corridor, the corridor of decreasing returns. I like that corridor. It is so long and I love the way that these people got smaller and smaller as they walked towards the square of the end.

I have a very literal mind. It is just part of being Faerie. If I had thought about it a little bit more, I could have worked out what the human wanted. But I didn't. And, in the end, there is no use denying one's basic personality. It just leads to personality crises and trouble. That afternoon it led to the thin faced man and a young HR woman with a face and personality like an axe back to my door, growing larger with each step, and then to some unpleasant words.

So, the next morning I decided it was best if I concentrated on my real jobs – corralling the weather being the chief amongst them – and stayed home until it was time to go to the airport.

I drove while managing storms and droughts through my car radio and arrived just in time to meet Mary at the baggage carousel.

"Vivienne! I didn't expect you here. Are you going somewhere? Or were you on the flight too?" She pulled off a huge tartan bag, a silly pretence at heritage bought in a boutique.

"No. I'm here to meet you."

“Meet me? Why?” She spotted her second case but paused and missed it as she looked at me with wide eyes. “Oh my God! Is Cally alright? What is it?”

“Callum’s fine. Everything is fine. The outlook is fine.”

“The... outlook?”

“Here, I’ve got your bags. I’ll drive you into your office.”

‘That’s so kind. But I’m a bit confused.’

“You can’t help it. You’re only human after all.”

“Vivienne, are you alright? You’re not making much sense.”

“Oh, yes, fine. Come on, this way.”

We chatted about inane things as we walked across the asphalt to my wagon. She relaxed somewhat as the conversation turned to her experiences in Sydney and what you and I had been doing since we came back and so became much less meaningful. Strange race, humans.

“I’m still not quite clear why you came to get me, though.”

“Oh, I was just fed up at work and wanted a break. I was driving on my way to find somewhere quiet to, you know, have a rest and a think and I thought I’d stop in at the café here, buy a travel magazine and daydream about all the exotic places I could go. I like to do that. So I sat with a coffee and opened my diary to see just where in a perfect world I could find a gap to travel. I saw that I had written your flight number in when we were in Sydney. I don’t remember why. You were arriving at just that moment so I thought ‘Hey! Mary! I’ll surprise her.’ Sorry if I shocked you.”

I grinned. I have a great grin. It charms. It disarms. It never alarms – though it should.

I adjusted the radio to a less staticky gap between stations when Mary was looking out her window. Volume at zero but on. Always work to do. Weather is hard and wars and earthquakes abound in the world. And not just persuading my uncle Atmosphere and his sons Tropo, Strato, Meso and his tricky nephew Iono to rein back on the weather, but also the emotional climate and other matters beyond human ken, important to them all the same. The positions of my aunts the stars and the music of the monstrous vacuum, and oh, so much else besides. All must be managed.

“Wow, what a coincidence! Lucky me!”

In that car on the long way back, stopping for lunch in a lovely restaurant, Mary became my new instant best friend. From then on she was always in touch. So friendly. So unashamed in her ‘Your welcome’s. Always over, always around, always available. She wouldn’t leave me alone.

“Oh, honey, you look wonderful in that. Cally will just adore you.

And how about this bag? No? This one, then. So in right now.”

“Are you guys going to the thing on the fourth? Perfect for that.”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“Aren’t you so lucky, Cally is such a nice guy. So supportive.”

“May I confide in you?”

“Will you let help me with this?”

*“Could I just borrow Cally for an hour or two? I’m afraid I’m
hopeless at this sort of stuff.”*

“I just love this country. What warm people there are here.”

*“Oh, Vivienne! I thought you were still away. I was just ringing to
talk to poor Cally, making sure he was taking care of himself while he
was without you. Men!”*

Her beauty, her gorgeous looks, are a matter of official record now. The judge made it so with his binding spell of judgment when he said “I accept the applicant’s evidence in it’s entirety.” He didn’t say he accepted mine. He didn’t say he didn’t accept mine. But by accepting all of yours he denied me where mine differed. And, between the denials of me and lies and betrayals in that rambling evidence were irrelevant descriptions of this woman. How you, in the circumstances, couldn’t help but be attracted to her warmth, her beauty, her kindness revealed in the many ways she helped you, supported you, through this ‘difficult time.’ I’m not referred to in any such flattering terms. In all of that incantation I’m not described physically at all. My dreary drabness is there though for all who care to look to see, lingering subliminally in the lines between the descriptions of Mary’s wondrousness.

I’m so different. Where she is raven-haired, a black-haired white swan, I’m disfigured by bloneness and the burden it carries of the suspicion of stupidity. While she has the palest of skins, I’m apple cheeked and have apple-coloured highlights on my thighs and my throat. Where she is tall and as slim as a willow, I’m dumpy and awkward. Where she is vivacious, I’m Vivienne. Where I smell of me, she smells of roses, even now. But you should know: it is not a real fragrance. It is born in great dead pharmacological farms.

STERNNESS

#

I was delighted and somewhat amused to receive the following just yesterday:

Dear Vivienne,

I'm forced to write again. You leave me no choice since your last letter.

I've talked this over at length with Mary who remains very concerned for you. We have arranged for Dr. Pederson's nurse to ring to make an appointment for you. By the time you get this letter she probably will have. Please, Vivienne, we urge you to keep this date.

I'm so sorry that Stewart has died. I didn't know. I know from everything you told me about him that he must have been a great guy and that he and Lindy must have been wonderful parents, though I never met them. You must miss them a lot and also the support they gave you. Since they are both now gone, I realise that you must be looking for someone to help you get through this.

But it can't be me other than continuing to meet your medical costs. For a start, my job has become a lot more demanding since my promotion (I'm General Manager now), with lots of travel and awful hours, and what little spare time I get I need to spend with Mary and the twins. I'm sure you understand.

There must be someone else you can talk to, even if it is someone from work? What about your old girlfriend Lucy, the one who you always

*talked about from your school? I can't think of any at the moment but
what about other relatives?*

Just get help, please.

Callum.

Ha!

ZONED OUT

#

Here is a copy of today's letter to you:

Dearest Callum,

Again, thank you for taking the time to write.

I did confirm that appointment with Dr. Pederson. He did get me better in the past. I'm not ill now but I have nothing to lose in following your advice and after all you're paying the bills. It is the least I could do. He's a very nice man and I enjoy our chats. I do so want to please you because I know that you're looking out for me in your selfish old way.

I'm less certain about Mary and her motives. Who could blame me?

You continue to have - still have - a profound impact upon my life. Not just because of our relationship or the silly way it seemed to end. I never talk to you, given the Court order. I sometimes teeter on the edge of that fifty-metre radius and thrill to think that with another millimetre I would cross into unlawful territory. But it has its annoyances as well. It even costs me money. Just last week it forced me to pay for my lost specialist's appointment. He wanted to see me, insisted upon it in fact. And so did you. There I was, able and almost willing to go. I set out and went in my car (Ready the Station Wagon – "Ready for a family" you called it) in plenty of time and then you had to turn your car in the same direction that I was going. Sauntered into the

coffee shop with your mate and lolled around. I know you didn't know I was along the street on the other side, fifty meters or more away. You never do. But Callum: Dr. Pederson was within this fifty metre hula hoop, this fifty metre shadow you cast in all directions and was unable to have me appear in his offices, despite my intention and all of your urging me to go. But how could I? I got a call on my cell phone from the snotty nurse five minutes past the appointed time and I had to explain that I couldn't come right at that moment, was held up was only minutes away, when in reality I was seconds away and not held up but held out, held away, held back. Waiting for coffee to go down your gullet and all your superficial words to bubble back up and for you to finish and go.

You see how I obey the rules and what it costs me? More than your money that time. And then the bitch rang again and said the appointment was missed and she would fix another at the earliest convenient time (to her and to him, not to me). She said she had no option but to charge you. She had an option of course but she chose to exercise it that way.

And all the while I could see you there, braying like the donkey you are while the time was being deducted from my life. I hung up on the silly woman, didn't ring back to fix another appointment and ignored the messages. I'm sure Dr. Pederson was disappointed and no doubt you are too. In me! How unfair. I blame the woman too, though, not just you. Women do things like this to me. Like Mary.

*I intend to extract payment from you both as recompense
for this and for other things in my life.*

*I'm tired. I've had too many glasses of wine. I have a lot of
planning to do and action to take tomorrow. So I will close now
and post this letter.*

With all my love,

Your Viv.

I fell asleep from the effects of the wine and didn't post the letter until just now. It was dark outside. The air smelled of the rot of leaves and the piss of dogs. An acrid night-odour. The post-box had a half-full beer can squidged into the slot. Half full of what you can probably guess - it wasn't beer. I had to prise it out with a stick before I could put the envelope in. What sort of mind thinks of doing something like that? Madness.

I hate the world sometimes.

THE GREAT WORK

#

Sometimes (this will amuse you, Callum, or confuse you) I will cry because of what I have with my career and the material things it bought and brought. There is an ancient urge in what would once have been called my bones but now is apparently my mitochondrial DNA. I feel it is still at least the mitochondria in my bones. It sings to me and tells me to deny it all, throw it away, be unsuccessful; to follow instead the paths, the patterns, the Rules.

I do. I do follow the patterns. My work involves this a little with its numbers and its analysis of the risks and fears of the people. But I've always looked further into all the reports that have come to my desk before I send them with a 'yes' or a 'no' on to the higher beings in the upper parts of the heaven of the 17th or 50th floor. I look for similarities and differences between the words that are used by the different underlings and the varied consultants. Is there a rhythm that is unique to each one? Are there common chorus lines between the way they all write, beyond the argot of the trade of persuasion they all adopt? I would rather sculpt these jargon words away, to be an argonaut of their non-argot, to find their true souls buried on the page.

Usually I find little. Stripped away there is sometimes just the merest trace element, the smallest of morsels, but they crumble when I contrived to meet the authors and I overhear nothing but the bland 'I said...so he said...like, can you believe someone would do that...last night she was a bitch...how dare they do that...' of the cafeteria.

I've changed my physical jobs many times. They haven't worked out, though I've always been well paid. The people haven't been up to standard,

really so I've simply moved on. This position job doesn't look any different and I've given up hope of ever finding a proper one.

I haven't any living relatives now. And since you left for that slut, I've had no contact with old friends, even Lucy. I find more and more that I just prefer solitude. There were people at my work then who called themselves my friends during that 'difficult time.' Who rang from time to time or popped around unannounced for a little visit. Not what I called friendships, but their hearts were in the right place, for a while. Not true friends at all because they all turned on me or disappointed me in the end.

No work friends, then. No school friends, no relatives. No one. Alone, but not lonely. I don't miss friendship, intimacy, companionship, you see, because you can't miss what you've never truly had. Everything was just relative to my job or my family or my location. As soon as the circumstances change so that the job, the relatives or the places change, so too dissipated the pretences of friendship.

What I felt once with you was false – not from my point of view but yours. But as I see it if you were false in your love then mine for you was false to because it was based on that sham.

Many months ago I decided on my real job. After hours I would instead devote myself to updating the Family's Rules For Family Living, to supplement my Great Uncle Petrie's Modern Rules edition, to add a Post-Modern post-script. So I planned and thought and talked to myself on nights both chill and sweaty.

And yet I hesitated. I still felt some loyalty and responsibility to the company that was paying me. Thought that I couldn't abandon it entirely in my

mind and still take its money. Until one day I walked out of the door of my office, left all the papers as they were, rode the lift to the lobby, walked out and retreated to my apartment in the city. That was the day I my assistant, a decade younger than I, walked in claiming time for an appointment with an abortionist because the inconvenience of a child in waiting was weighing her down, stopping her drinking at parties, promising to make her hips waddle rather than sway.

“When did you decide this, Deidre?”

“Two weeks ago. Saw the doctor and the psychologist and stuff. Signed up. So, anyway, I need the afternoon off and tomorrow. I’ll be back in after the weekend.”

“Two weeks ago?”

“Yeah. Well, maybe before that. Was never going to have the baby. But like I say, if you could just sign the leave form – “

“Two weeks ago? But we went out the other night to John and Sarah’s farewell drinks and you said that you couldn’t drink because of the baby.”

“Yeah. So what? Can’t drink when you’re having a baby.”

“But that’s because it might harm the baby.”

“Yeah. I know. Christ. Look, Vivienne, I just need this signed, OK?”

“Hang on, Deidre. I have to get this clear. You’re – “

“No. It’s none of your business. You Christian types are always trying to put down people. It’s my choice. So just sign the fucking paper, will you?”

“Now Deidre, I’m not a Christian. I’m not saying it’s not your choice. I’m just curious as to how you’re not going to drink because in theory it might harm a baby and yet knowing full well that you’re about to have it killed and scraped out.”

“Jees-sus! You really are a fucking sicko bitch! Give that here, I’ll get it signed by Jenny Ahipene. Fuckin’ harassment.”

I don’t blame her for this irrationality. She is only human.

That day I realised that despite all my careless sexual acts throughout my life and then an assortment of carefully picked then plastered men, my increasingly urgent attempts to battle my biological clock with you, that the only clock I had was winding down and would never chime with children.

Callum, you were not the first of my partners but you were the last and only one I was betrayed by. I’ve had seven lovers. Seven. Seven could not blow life into my eggs. And I blame you for that more than the others. The original Vivienne, my ancestor who was Faerie, had one lover and seven children. Why if I’ve had seven lovers can’t I have one child?

That was the day I changed my job, the Deidre Day. In my mind anyway. I still go to the office but I care nothing for it from Deidre Day – even as the avocation I had always until then seen these human positions as. I concentrate now on my true jobs and the Rules. Reining the weather is becoming increasingly important in these days of global warming and global despondency. So I skip the office as much as I can – it’s too distracting with all its chatter. Increasingly I go to the mall instead. I take sick leave as much as I can and I delegate everything I can get away with. My underlings are beginning to shine in the spotlight that I’ve trained on them by giving them my work. For a while I

tried to take the credit like all of the rest of them do but I can't be bothered even with that now.

THE BEAUTY OF MARY

#

Callum, my love,

I've been waiting for your reply. But nothing. Why?

Obviously it's Mary, interfering again. Why did you show her the letters? She's turned your mind once more. I've been thinking about it. Dr. Pederson wasn't a good idea at all. Not one you would have come up with either. I remember now: it was Mary who first suggested him before the court hearing. Way back even before you told me you and she were betraying me.

"Viv, you seem... depressed. I wonder if you should see someone?"

"Depressed? No, I'm not. What gave you that idea?"

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. I've had relatives and friends who have gone through it for all sorts of reasons – "

"I told you, I'm not depressed. Why are you saying this?"

"Sorry, Viv. Didn't mean to upset you. Just thought you've been looking a bit down for the last few months and, well, irritable."

"Irritable? Jeez, Mary!"

The more I think about it the more it seemed like she was maybe manipulating me into thinking I wasn't well. To get me out of the way. And what did I know? Maybe I was tired and down. Mary kept telling me my symptoms and in the end I just parroted them back to Pederson who gave me anti-depressants. If a doctor tells you that's depression, you go along with it, don't you? Then he changed his mind and told me it wasn't depression. So I

took the new tablets and all seemed to come right after a few weeks. I didn't much mind about anything. Maybe, though, I wasn't fixed. Maybe I was never broken.

I wonder about Mary, this white swan of New England. Beauty, according to that judicial record, is what is in her. Did you find something in her so much more than in me? Or was it that every part of her being was just better? Or something in me that was less? Is there any part of me that is comparable to her, on which she does not improve? Or can I dare think that there are some things in me that are better than in her, that she just an addition of pluses and minuses that comes out to a better sum than mine? Perhaps she possess qualities of character or person that I simply lack altogether, or lacks some negative quality that I'm burdened with. I need to know but it is unlikely you will ever tell me.

I obey the Rules of the Court but I cannot accept everything that the Court pronounces as true as so. A swan is beautiful, they say. Surely such a rare beauteous being should be intimately studied. It is our duty to see how it is made, the better to model ourselves on it, become like it, improve our selves and the people around us.

What is it that Diderot said? That swans have an air of being proud, stupid and mischievous – three qualities that go well together. Mary is all of these, though she has a cunning that Diderot perhaps didn't perceive.

So what do we see in this post-modern swan? Let us start with the outside. The outside is what we see in reality, it is that first attracts or repels us, it is the first step toward friendship and then love, it is the gatehouse to a deeper understanding of what is beneath.

Get close to the swan. What do you smell but mud and rotting rushes in a sea of uncooked poultry? Take out a feather and scrutinise it meticulously. This thing of exquisite gorgeousness, when isolated becomes different. No longer part of a whole cloak, but a thing in its own form. It has a shape, a point, a softness at its edges. Closer. The spine is hard and hollow. The fletchings are just smaller more flexible versions, artfully arranged in the mirror of single long vertebra. Rub its nub against wood and it sighs. Cutting it and filling it with ink will leave a remembrance on paper with a scratching, rustling tongue - but only if guided; it is itself speechless and thoughtless. A feather is a modified reptile scale which under a microscope is as chilling as a chemical growth.

Turn back to the swan and take off the rest of its lifeless, bloodless, white clothing of deceit. Pluck it clean and throw away its spiky alien camouflage. Is this the beauty of the outside revealed at last? A beaky stumpy thing with obsidian eyes and covered with swanbumps all over its fleshy pinkness.

Pick it up. Feel its membranous skin with its liquid kid-glove underlayers that slip around under your fingers like an old man's scrotum. Not cold and honest in congealed deadness like a chicken carcass about to be roasted, but warm and wriggling and straining with its too-fast heart-beat contractions. Each a sorrow, a tick towards death. One beat away or millions, but always on the verge of seizing as you squeeze tighter and tighter.

Is this the beauty you have longed for? Is this swan what you left me for? Is this the thing that lies next to you when you sleep, its skin flushed and its hair undone and lank on the pillow? Look more closely, Callum.

But beauty, that is on the inside, you might say. But do you really know them, her insides? The gizzard and guts, pipes and organs, strings of blood and sinew that work the wires of its flight. Until it is slit from between its legs up

to the bony breast, it is filled with darkness and a black blood that only takes colour from what it sees around it when released in streams on the butcher's table.

Is this the beauty you saw in Mary? Is her inside so dazzling in its black beauty that you were drawn to it inexorably like iron to a magnet? Was this the origin of Leda's eggs from which wriggled the Castor and Pollux of your new life?

And what of inside further still? What if we look for the beauty you found so reassuring, so generous, so moving that you testified to it in your Court papers, so unnecessarily yet so damningly? What if we examine the heart of the swan? Ride in the vessels that lead to it, disembark in its chambers, walk in the passages between its rooms.

What do we see written on the heart's walls? Is this strange writing scratched here the literature of avian music, of swan song? If we could read it we would see the baser functions of life form its lyrics. And here, what is here, walking with us? Shades of selfish peckings over food. Competition for places to nip the juiciest morsels of choking river weed. Territorial plottings. Jealousy over sibling cygnets now grown and flown. Hurts caused, lies told, mistakes hidden. They are all there in the swan's heart, if you're able read and spy between the beats. This engine of messages that course the body, this swirler of oxygen and food chemicals, this machine that squeezes life to keep going in endless circles around the veins, screams to try harder and whispers to slow down, this lumpen, misshapen ball of gristle, fat, and grit, is this beauty? Is it beautiful to be greedy, jealous and selfish as all hearts show themselves to be? And the heart of your swan, Callum, we know that has shadows that mine does not – the ghost of theft, the theft of a human being from another human being.

Closer still. The cells? Bags of slushy baths and nodules. The DNA, the RNA; twisted rope trceries of some of the past and future. Warm chemicals, but chemicals just the same. Feathery replicants that writhe and turn, split and spit like cobras. Their plans contain poisons and cancers, flaws and chromosomal deficiencies, mutations and broken lines, sentences of nonsense and junk embedded in paragraphs of idiocy and obsolescence; thickets to be struggled through by lonely little genes that create the monster in which they nest.

And how is a swan different from any other bird? Did you know that there are poisonous birds? A milligram from the skin of the beautiful orange and black Hooded Pitohui will kill a mouse with the same poison as a poisonous dart frog. A bird so poisonous that one lick of finger that has touched it will make you sick, as I've been sick. Think of the poison that might reside inside a creature as large and as variable as a swan!

So be it. This is the truth of the swan, Callum. There is no beauty when you look closely, just dead strangeness, chemical sticks and slippery lipid chains, all wrapped around shadows of nasty selfishness. Beauty does not exist in the swan that lies next to you: it is just an ugly little fuckling.

CONCERN

#

Dear Callum,

I haven't heard from you. Is everything alright? I assume the twins are well? Perhaps you're away on one of your trips. I understand. You'll need to find a quiet space to write to me away from Meddlesome Mary. I will be patient.

Did I thank you for your kind thoughts about my multi-faceted father? He was wonderful, it's true.

I've little time to write now. I have to deal with some of the details of the present. There are men from trucks across the road who seem to be doing roadworks, but I'm not sure.

I will write again soon, promise.

Viv.

SINGING

#

Cal,

I woke up and decided to come straight to the mall. Over near your place, actually. I come here frequently these days. I like it, its prosaic commerce and honest brisk mornings. I've made a few purchases today. Some rubbish bags, latex gloves, rope, a few soft toys, a special baby-sized boy-doll, and a Thomas the Tank Engine book.

I've got myself a nice warm fluffy cup of coffee and I'm sitting in the middle of the mall using the café's wireless. Still seems odd to sit out in the middle of a great marble hall having morning tea in the middle of echoes. Still, I have my reasons.

I've always had my reasons for doing things. Or not doing them. Not singing for example, or listening to the radio. The muzak right now is an instrumental version of a Fleetwood Mac song. No singing, thank God. It makes me recall a conversation I overheard a few years ago, when the real song was playing on a stereo in the background:

"Christ, no. Can't go to there."

"Why not? They do a good curry."

"Viv. The singing."

"Yeah? Microphone hog? Voice like a bloody grindstone?"

"No. Hates singing. Embarrasses her. Caws, she says."

“At least she has the sense to know. Not like Bronwyn. Still, she doesn’t have to sing.”

“She’ll just refuse to go. Bit weird like that. Takes it as a personal insult if anyone sings. So no way I can do it unless I say I’m working late.”

“Christ. So....?”

“Yeah... yeah, OK. Hey, maybe I can get Sol. And Mary’ll come along. She’s got a great voice.”

Didn’t know I was in the hall, did you Callum? When you betrayed me like that with your kitchen-beer friend. It hurt.

Singing, songs, singers – they all betray. Think about it: all those love songs on the radio. They’re mostly just made-up crap. Even if they’re true, then they’re telling private failings that the poor person they’re singing about must cringe from in every lift, boutique, or confronted by a radio. I would never make up a song about someone like you.

I’m here, sitting in the sun, watching a mother play with children. The sun. Glorious. Yellow, gold, red – many forms and colours and moods. It is moody, the sun. It brings us life. Though ultimately it, too, is treacherous. Causes storms and waves, freakish tides, volcanoes and earthquakes and all of the other things that are the result of gravity and spinning worlds and circling moons. Oh, glorious sun! all the poets and the songwriters proclaim. The God of the South Americans. God of the Sunbathers. Yet the sun is as capricious to the bathers as it was fickle to those it caused to be bathed in their own blood. Wrinkles, melanomas, live hearts dragged from chests. Death the reward for the worship.

Did you know that the sun sings? It has pressure waves in its fierce heart that run around and beat out oscillations that you can hear if you tune your radio telescope just right. The sun sings. And do you know what it sings? Songs of Treachery. It sings of cancers and heart-ripping. It sings solar eruptions and loud croaking flares of radiation. It causes the auroras that are so beautiful, like your Mary, but are just a sign that radiation is reacting with our air, leaking in through the magnetic curtain and trying to kill us.

The song is a long one. It started four and a half billion years ago and will last another six billion years. The scientists recorded it, Callum. The sun's song. Measured it and calculated that it would get higher and higher in pitch as the sun grows. Until one day the sun will melt the earth before shrinking away into a tiny white glow that has no heat in it and there is no need for heat when there is no life. They recorded it and they released it with its own label, these scientists. The label reads "Enjoy Yourself Now Because Soon I Will Kill You All."

So I hope you enjoy yourself, Callum, when the summer sun hits you. I suspect you won't. Not because of any special relationship I have with the sun. I don't ally myself with the sun. The danger from me is not treachery but vengeance. Summer might be there for others but not for you or for Mary. Think of me as The Little Ice Age, a new minima, the Years To Come Without Summer. I will relieve you of the burden of the duplicity of the Song of The Sun. What I will bring to you is quite straightforward, without perfidy, without seduction and without any harmonies.

Time to log-off and continue the preparations.

FREEDOM

#

Dear Callum,

I have decided.

I have left it all behind.

I have resigned from my job.

I have cashed in my cheques shares bonds.

I have collected my jewellery.

I have sold my old wagon.

I have started preparing.

I have changed.

Yours so very sincerely,

Vivienne.

I had it decided for me in fact because they no longer want my pattern searching and my statistical analysis, my guesses and my knowledge. They said I've lost my edge, my keen sharpness, my sharp keenness, my way. Even my mind, one of the angels from the 17th floor deigned to say when I could not be seen one Friday night in the dim lonely corner I've come to prefer behind the canapé trays, the wine glasses and the curtains.

Now I have freedom. To think. To act. To transform.

PREPARING THE TERRAIN

#

Dearest Callum, I saw your children at the mall. I was waiting for them though not them for me.

I was at a distance. I placed myself amongst pot-plants and columns and kiosks so I remained hidden but had a clear view to where Mary would come, as she always does on a Tuesday.

She always comes and puts the all-terrain pushchair with its two capsules and its space-age Kevlar carbon fibre frame of lightness and black webbing, its three wheels and its tough suspension alongside her table. Then she looks at her watch and waits.

At a precise time when some tick sounds in her brain, she goes to the counter. This counter is made of white wood. Probably pine. Definitely not walnut. It is heavily varnished with a plastic that stops all heat from marring the surface and is easily wiped down at the end of another difficult all-terrain mall day. There Mary places an order. I hear her American songbird tones but not what she says as I'm never close enough but I do know exactly what it is that she orders. She orders four flat whites, one with soy. She gets a bottle of water and she gets four pastries, biscuits or little delicate sandwiches depending on her perky mood. She does all this by crossing the highly polished concrete floor glossy with beige all-terrain paint and passing four tables.

There has until now never been anyone else there at that time. Nine-thirty is too early for the morning tea crowd and too late for the commuters who

have already grabbed their cardboard coffee columns. She takes a number on a little chrome stand even though there is no-one else to confuse the order with.

But that is the ritual because at precisely nine-thirty-five come the other humans. They don't include me because I'm not one of them and because they don't see me (nor know me if they spotted my eyes through the shrubbery and structures.) These other three all work close by, meet en route and take this time out for themselves with Mary, the only one with children of that age. I've heard snippets which suggest one has school-aged children who are never present, being educated in the ways of life in some institution where no doubt uniforms are crisp and values high. They all arrive and purr and pet the twins and kissy-kissy Mary on the same cheek and the drinks and food arrives and all is well for twenty minutes. Then Mary takes the pushchair and fusses as do the others with handbag and watch and promises of this and that flow until Mary goes to worship Pilates and the others their salaries.

But I was there earlier again today. Because I've noticed another ritual has started which could interfere. It is essential that this interfering be interfered with.

Between me and the table where Mary sits with the twins and her coven there are several other tables. They used to be unoccupied, blank and harmless. The last several Tuesdays, though, there has been a youth sitting at one close to me. I've been waiting there on recent Tuesdays to see when he arrives and when he leaves. And the news is not good. He comes with the consuming commuters and he departs with the leaving lunchers.

The first time I saw him there I thought this was a one-off. I came to know more. That while he sits on that chair in the public area, his hands neatly

on his lap, eyes looking around the room at the people who pass and play there, a smile for everyone and everything, he does not sit there but was sat. He is perfectly capable of perfect movement but in an imperfect way. He does not speak and didn't notice when spoken to, pleasant though his company usually is to any stranger who sits at a table near him to sip coffee, bolt a sandwich or enjoy pasta.

I've come to know that in his world, no-one comes and no-one goes. In his world, the only people are the shapes of the leaves in the pot plant flowers, and trees in the spaces between people. He lives in the spaces between people, as do we all, but unlike you, or I, Cal, he sees people only as things that happen to move and make noises; often too many and too loud. His voice is baritone but meaningless, his touch careful and pregnant. His eyes are the blessed brown of a cappuccino monk's habit and his skin the white of milk.

He does not come alone. His mother is also there, though she is much less interesting. She is huge and protective and often wipes his face with one of the many handkerchiefs she carries in her bag along with two pencils and two notebooks. One is pencil is Blue Pencil and other Green Pencil. One notebook is for drawings of Sky Things and one for drawings of Ground Things. Once she had forgotten (in the hurry and worry of leaving Home for The Outside) to check that the green pencil was properly sharp. It was not blunt so much as over-sharpened to the extent that the little green lead snapped leaving a hollow tube that the young man had looked into with crossed eyes from an inch away for fifteen minutes before screaming and flapping for twenty-five.

The question has been: what do I do about him? I decided today then acted, for I take fast action on decisions, as you know. This time I went up to

him after Mary and her followers had negotiated the terrible terrain of the mall away to work and stretching. Not sensible to make a fuss before Mary arrived as it might just carry on too long or backfire.

I went to the protective mother and I interfered with the ritual. I said that the boy was a menace who should not be allowed out in society. I said this with just the right volume to pierce her heart but not enough to carry to the polished counter or the bookshop or the jewellery store. Timed to perfection. I said it with precisely the right degree of indignation, perfect for tuning then plucking the strings of her emotions, a minor chord with a major effect. To bring up the percussion I deliberately picked up the Book For Drawing Ground Things and looked at it not so much to wave in her face to say it was the work of a mad person (which I did) but so as to start the flapping and the yelling (which it did).

Then, quickly, the endgame of the contrivance:

“How can you live with yourself?”

“Pardon!?”

“Bringing that here. Out in public.”

“I don’t...”

“Him. Bloody disgrace. Should be locked away.”

“How dare you!”

“I mean, out in the open like that.”

“Shut up! Don’t say that! He’s not, he isn’t stupid, its – “

"It's not his fault. No. We all know that. But there, look, look at that. Just look at it. How can you ? It's just cruel, that's what it is. God made him that way but its you that's dragging him out to be humiliated, poor boy."

"Go away! You have no right to be saying this! You - "

"No right, dear? No right? I have every right, I have, every - "

"No! You have none! You can't just waltz up and abuse someone like that. It's you that should be locked up! I can't believe this. Can't believe it's happening. People like you are just disgusting."

"Mum?"

"Shh. Its alright, dear. We're going to move now. The library perhaps."

"What, the library? You're going to take him to another public place? With him like that? What are you going to do, pop a book up under his chin and let him drool on it and pretend he can read? Meeting your friends there so you can have a good old goss, I suppose, while the poor boy's gawped at by every old man keeping out of the rain and scaring all the poor little innocent children there for storytime? You should just piss off alright. Just piss off home and put him safe in bed and shut the door, that's what you should do."

"Mum?"

"Oh, we're going alright! Get out of our way!"

"Here! Don't be so rough with his wheelchair. You're not fit to be a mother. I'll have social services onto you."

“Come on, dear, never mind her, never mind, never mind. I don’t know what she’s angry about but it isn’t your fault, Timothy. We’ll just go. Hey! What are you doing now? Help! Someone please help us?”

“What’s the problem here, guys? Can I ask you to keep it down? Or I’ll have to ask you to leave the mall.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling this cow. To leave.”

“Cow? We were just minding our own business getting coffee and this bitch came up and started abusing us and – hey! Leave it alone!”

“Um, perhaps you should leave.”

“Not me. We’re staying. We were here first and we’ve done nothing wrong. Timothy and I come here every Tuesday. It’s our time out. Nice and quiet, not too many people at this time of the morning and we just watch the world go by. What’s wrong with that? Nothing! Nothing and then this completely mad bitch comes up and abuses him and tells me I should have him locked up just because he’s a bit different and causes all of this fuss and then this! I want the police and we aren’t going anywhere!”

“Mum?”

“Come along, now. You don’t want the police, either of you. Just go your separate ways and leave please.”

And that has neatly solved the problem. The young man and his mother will never come back here, not at this time. There is space around me, space necessary for what I need to do. I feel sorry I hurt him and her also, but there

are always casualties, acceptable losses. Though the loss you will suffer will not be acceptable to you.

I stayed of course so they would go. So here I am, finishing my currant bun, my egg-and-parsley sandwich and my third cup of tea, typing up this post. Soon the lunchers will arrive.

ANXIETY

#

Dear Miss Coroth,

We write on behalf of our client, Callum James Ascott.

We have seen and retained the originals of several letters from you to our client – we attach copies for your own reference. We have also copied this letter and all attachments to your own last known legal representatives.

We refer to the Order of the District Court of 27 May last year. We attach a copy of this Order also.

Under the terms of the Order you are to remain fifty metres away from our client. While the Order does not expressly forbid contact by other means, we are of the opinion that any such communication is in the spirit of what is prohibited by the Order.

We must therefore strongly urge you to immediately cease all attempts at further contact with our client, whether in writing by post or otherwise, by telephonic or computer means, or in any other way whatsoever. Failure to do so we will regard as a breach of the Order and we have instructions to take this matter back to the Court, seeking either for confirmation of this and appropriate action to be taken by law enforcement personnel or for an amendment of the Order.

We also note the worrying and threatening nature of at least your last letter which refers to our client's wife and children. This is a most

serious matter. This will be referred to the police along with all other details if there is any repeat of or furtherance of any similar material.

At present we only have this post office box address for you. We would be grateful if you could advise us by return post fax or email of your physical address so that we can be sure that we can deliver messages without fear of any miscommunication on any side.

We should point out that any further Court action, should it prove necessary, can only involve you in additional time and probable costs for at least your own representation if not our client's as well (which we will seek).

Yours,

Anton Naseby

Partner

Ashby, Riley and Jones

Barristers and Solicitors

UNHAPPINESS

#

How could you go to your solicitors? Scared? I expected nothing less, in some ways. You have no compassion, really. Nothing in your heart but brittle misguided practicality.

And now they want my physical whereabouts, do they? Fat chance. All that's happened now is that you won't be able to write to me again. Together you and your legal crows have destroyed that means of communication. I cannot trust the post office box any more.

As for my last known legal representatives, these were not the ones last known to me, just to you. I've had several lawyers since. All soothe and salve but all turn cold when they find out about their predecessors and all, some sooner some later, write me curt letters saying that they think it best if I move on "and the firm we recommend below may suit you better".

Still. I can communicate with you like this in the blog. It's better this way, actually. I've been increasingly unhappy at your lack of any show of turning around.

By the way, I've met with Dr. Pederson. I was there this morning. I wonder how good he is? His office was choked with the sound of traffic – not the most conducive to the sort of therapy he professes, do you think? His receptionist acts as sentry to the barbarian patients at his gate. And his technique is less than reliable. Watch:

"How are you feeling these days, Vivienne?"

"Fine. Dandy. Great."

“Cal tells me that you’ve been in touch?”

There seemed little point in answering. A silly question and framed as a statement despite the inflection. Either I knew it and he knew that, or I didn’t know it but he had just told me so I knew then, or (and this is the one that applies), we both knew that the other knew that you, Cal, arranged the appointment and therefore it must be the case we have been in touch.

He shifted his monumental Pederson bum in the seat. His legs plumped out between the chrome piping and the black leather. The pinstripes on his assaulted trousers were no longer parallel.

“Have you been depressed, do you think?”

“What, recently you mean?”

“Yes. At the moment.”

Well which – recently or at the moment? Really!

“I have not been depressed.”

“And what about any fanciful ideas?”

Fanciful ideas? Does he mean delusions or hallucinations or anything else that I’m convinced are real, in which case I’m not going to answer ‘yes’ am I? Or does he mean fanciful delusory hallucinations that I do know are not real?

“What?”

“Any special feelings that you have that the rest of the world is operating differently to you?”

“We are all unique, doctor. With our own ways of looking at the world. So it must by definition operate differently for all of us.” I smiled my special smile to show I was in control and teasing.

“Ah. Yes. Philosophy. I suppose... tell me. Are you taking your tablets?”

“Yes. I’m taking my tablets.”

This was true. I’m taking my tablets apart. I realised that the tablets made me feel like a pillar of salt, numb and bitter. I don’t want that to be my lot in life. So I take them apart and put the powder into my silver salt shaker. It is just the right thing. It is quite the most beautiful item I possess; it is curved and carved and slender with a little pot belly. On the top is an ‘S’ that doesn’t exist because it is punched out with holes. This non-S represents the blankness the powder causes, the annihilation of self. I keep the salt shaker far in the back of the pantry, buried amongst packets of rice and lentils and chick peas. This immerses it in the seeds of life and muffles the sound the ‘S’ makes after midnight so that I don’t have to put my pillow around my ears.

“Good, good.”

You see? He didn’t ask me enough detail to have discovered all of the truth. I’m surprised and offended by this level of medical care. He is wasting your money. I will go to him no longer.

You will hear from me soon. Perhaps in the post or perhaps by courier or perhaps some other way.

COMFORT AND DESTINY

#

Dear Callum,

I've been silent for the last week for three reasons.

First, I've been very annoyed. I've seriously wondered whether I should be writing again at all, even using email. I get upset every time I look at that crow letter. But then I think again and realise that it is a necessary part of you overall education. Otherwise you wouldn't experience the depth of emotion that I want you to feel for a change when everything is in place and I can continue with the plan.

I've also been extremely busy – almost worn myself out – with managing the vacuum's denizens, solar flares, which have been battling my second cousin Iono. Bad enough in normal times but with the global crisis of confidence, the despair front that has been threatening the financial cities of the world has now arrived. The high pressure has driven the markets low and storms are just around the corner. The outlook is for Worthlessness increasing. This comes on top of increasing ozone hole and carbon dioxide media beat-ups that are spawning the growth of industries that will drain the irrigation ditches of the banking system and cause a low-level depression to settle everywhere. We can expect blood to flow in the dry trenches thus exposed. It is almost too much.

The third reason is of course that I've been very busy with the preparations for what is coming next. I've been cleaning and shredding and selling and giving away.

This afternoon I got a nice woolly jumper and comfortable tracksuit pants and made myself some lovely soup from a packet in a mug.

Nothing fresh here now that the fridge is gone. Hot water from the kettle and an instant comfort portion in the crockery. Much better than cooking the old way.

Viv

HEAVENLY

#

Dear Callum,

I'm now certain that MARY is behind all of your coldness toward me in your letters. She is subtle and manipulative. She was after you from the moment she saw you and did everything she could to pour poison into your ear about me. Look where it led. Look at how you started staying out late at work functions. I soon worked out which functions you were working. You would go to a bar afterwards and drown your guilt in Chardonnay and Shiraz, but the perfume of wine didn't swamp out the pong of your Pinot Peccadillo. And ever since she has fed you a seasoning of poison with every meal.

But whatever the truth of all of that, this I do know. She is a work of God, that Mary. Tells a pretty tale, sings a lovely song. A song-bird. Did I mention that I hate canaries, Callum? She is like one. Mary. Canmary. Can Mary? Yes, she can. Comes up smelling of roses. Why, she hatched a clutch of eggs in the nest that you built. Twin boys.

Birds of all sorts are greedy. One of those twins should really be mine. Two is one too many for her and none is one too few for me. And rightly, one should be mine I think, given that we know they were conceived during the time of our love making.

Vivienne

CALL TO ACTION

#

I have many things that I kept of yours. This was not purposeless, though the purpose has only recently become fully clear to me. I have your skin and nails, your book and CD, your ties and your hair. With them I will weave the magic.

It is not enough however. I need something more. Some other morsel to make the spell powerful enough to be sure. Some morsel. And see how easily the ideas come to me now? This thought comes over a tense wire from my ancestors; the thought that I need. Samuel Morse. I need a Samuel and the one I need is the one that is yours. The one who was born along with Thomas.

I have been seeking them out, your sons. I'm the Scarlett Pimpernell! I seek them here, I seek them there.... But I'm not stalking you. Oh no. Never that. I told you: I obey the Rule that says I cannot come within fifty metres of you or your dwelling wherever I may be from time to time until further Order of this Court.

But this Rule says nothing of Mary. More particularly it says nothing of your two darling children, your Thomas, your Samuel. So here I sit, with a plan written in runes in my head, a carefully prepared spell that is bound to succeed. I know the movements of these three. I know where they go, when they go there and what to do about making three two and one two. When I jump I will become doubled. But it is not that I want your hold for my own. I know that there are poor women who do want that and who steal children. They are very sad.

I'm far more sane than that! Why, what do you take me for? I need Samuel, your little morsel, for the same reason I need your skin and hair and

nails and possessions that contain the words you love. I need him for my spells.

Don't be alarmed, though. I'm not some witch who is going to eat your baby. Or boil him together with these other ingredients into an ointment to smear on your forehead and grease a knife to ease its passage into Mary's walnut-tough fluttery little swan-heart (though God knows I'm entitled to).

I'm just going to use Samuel in his proper function, the reason he was born. He is born of betrayal and is therefore treacherous like his father before him but he has a purpose which does not rely on whether he is currently innocent or not, child or not. It is like my ancestor Gordon who I'm the memory of: I will use the hateful little thing as a canary to protect me.

Funny. 'Samuel Morse.' I like that. Do you know that an anagram of it is "as mum's or else?" Or else what, I ask myself? And I answer: your little Samuel will be as mum's little boy or else as mine. What do you think? Also, "lose a summer". I like that one too. You will lose a summer and many more. The sun will lose its warmth for you and for Mary, won't it, when he's gone? And "sea mum lores" that is one of my favourites. It reminds me of my eponymous ancestress Vivienne who came from the sea. "Us males Rome". That is about twins, too. Romulus and Remus. Everyone remembers Romulus. What happened to poor old Remus? He was killed by his own twin. So maybe I will save your little Samuel that fate, hmm? 'Samuel Thomas' becomes "Mash soul mate". Prophetic perhaps? A little twist on "Sam soul mate" which is what you were to me. "As loathes mum". Do they? One at least will, I'm sure. "Mum's so lah tea". Ha! Mum sings! I hate singers. "ma met ash soul" seems appropriate to what will happen, to what she will feel, too.

But what of Callum and Mary? A lovely, apt anagram of 'Callum Mary' is "may mall cur." Delicious, is it not? She is a bitch, your Mary, this mother, this woman who frequents a mall with your children. And "A mum all cry." And "A ram, my cull." You rammed her with your penis and I'm going to cull the result.

This wonderful wee game would not be complete if I didn't try 'Callum Vivienne.' And what do I find? Providence has given me "me cull vain vine" How fruitful you have been and how proud and yet you will see how my ancestral pidgin words are the instrument of your pruning down to size. And how long my vine of ancestors. How red the blood that flows through us both (and Mary and the boys of course). "Um vain vine cell." I'm barren.

I'm tiring of this wordplay. But one more is needed: From 'Samuel Thomas' comes one more gem. It is one I will remind Samuel of if he grows up: "He; slut as a mom". Completely appropriate for his American mother, Mary Swann.

I like maths and word puzzles, you know that. I love the power of numbers. I like symmetry. I love the symmetry of numbers. I also love that I will take your little twins and put a two-sided mirror between them so that they will see only themselves and not each other. I will take your little Samuel and in doing so turn Thomas into a sole heir presumptive, a king. I will take little Samuel and I will turn this little prince-ling into not a found-ling but halfway between the two. A take-ling. Do you like the sound of that? I do. It tinkles around in the mouth like ice drowning in a deadening cocktail.

This morning was the morning that I went to the mall again. No lovely lady with the autistic son – I still feel a bit bad about that but it was necessary as you know. Acceptable losses, as they say. And only a bruised ego at that.

And there was I, behind the pillar and the potted palms, happily tuning the weather with a radio and earphones and no interference.

Mary was there, so was little Thomas and wee Samuel. So cute! Their carefully chosen non-matching outfits. How un-naff! How wonderfully PC to dress them so dissimilarly that they looked identically un-matched. It's like a big circle, isn't it? You start with identical clothing, change one here, there and then you keep going until somehow without realising it you have created exactly the same impression by the very nature of the reversals.

LOSS OF INNOCENT

#

Dear Callum,

Two letters in one day. Aren't you the lucky one! You will not have received my last one yet. I sent it this just now as I drove past the post office. It says only "Surprise!" Not my usual one. Not one that has any clue to anywhere you will be able to find me. But I feel I can – and should, for you must be worried - be freer and send instantaneous messages. So forgive me that I've now resorted to email. I loathe email – who could not? It is the post-modern form of the telegraph, itself the modern form of the carrier pigeon. Little messages winging their way, spam instead of poo hitchhiking with them. However, the exigencies of the situation call for a more circumspect method of delivery. I can send this instantly from anywhere and you will never track me.

So. This is what it has come to. See what your actions and actions have wrought? I have and had no choice to do as I do and did.

Viv

Today is Tuesday again. This morning I went to the mall for the final time. The morning sun-squares on the floor warmed the tiles so they sweated the fresh smell of disinfecting floor cleaner. The kiosks, the boutiques, the jewellery store were all waiting for me. They had opened that morning with excitement. The pot-plants, the fake columns, the hard cold tiles where the sun didn't yet touch. Some of these no doubt disapproved of what was about to happen. Some maybe approved and some had no firm opinion either way. But

they were all interested and none could interfere for these things cannot speak to humans.

I got there in plenty of time. There was once again no sign of the poor woman with the autistic son. That job was well done. There was just me behind the shrubs. I watched a slant of sunlight move slowly across the tiles, filtered through plastic high in the cathedral space above. I felt the air begin to softly waft over my skin, especially manufactured for consumers in cooling machines that groomed it and dried, warmed and cooled, until it was indistinguishable from all other artificial airs around the commercial world. I listened to the rattle of cups, the gurgles as the coffee machine filled and heated, the distant clangs and crashes of trolley trains.

Then, fifteen minutes before the due time, a movement over by the bakery. I twenty-four pudding ghosts enter in single file. They arranged themselves smoothly along the face of the store front in two rows, those at the back slightly taller than those in the front row. Behind them the reflection in the window of the bakery increased their number to forty-eight. A soft sighing came from them and almost imperceptible synchronised swaying started. I was touched. So moved that my eyes turned hot with tears that this audience had come for the performance.

The whispering between shops and fittings got louder, the sigh of the pudding ghosts raised to a hum, the excitement was palpable. I admit that I was tense myself.

I waited and waited and my waiting was rewarded by your beautiful wife who presented herself on the stage as a distant figure pushing the double

pushchair. At once silence, at once, expectation was both satisfied and started anew as the spectators all watched the scene develop.

And at just the right moment, as Mary placed her order at the counter for the pastries, the soy, the milky coffees, the plain water, I ran in and grabbed your darling little son. I was away as briskly as you please. I was as swift as a falcon. Mary, careless abandoning woman that she is, didn't see a thing.

It was a gorgeous moment. Samuel's beautiful smiling face, his wonderful eyes, his blonde hair so strange that the twins have this from two blackheads of parents), his cute little hands reached up to me! I could have cried. But I didn't. I got a bit tangled with those little black straps and plastic buckles. And the pushchair wasn't braked. It kind of rolled with me as I tried to pull the little fellow out, which was upsetting. You might want to have a word to dear Mary about that. It is the little details that keep our children safe. Not good mothership by the alien mother ship.

My, but he's heavier than he looks! Just the day before I had practiced with a spare toddler at MacDonald's playground I judged to be about the same size. But that was a girl and perhaps they are not so heavy. For a moment I thought it was that Mary has been feeding this little cherub so much that he is chubby. I was shocked at the thought. None of the other mothers who meet at this place would approve. But no, he is perfect. Perhaps it was the little girl who was over-thin, the way it sometimes goes, a childish rebellion when the mother is pregnant with Big Macs and little crunchy chicken pieces. He almost slid in my hands, his sweater slipping on his body. But I coped. I took the stress and I turned it into strength. Dr. Pederson would have been proud.

“There,” I whispered to Samuel as I walked away from Thomas who was asleep and unaware. “There, there.” I had heard mothers do this. “There there,” and I wriggled his teddy into his cheek until he giggled.

As I went calmly out through the side corridor to the sliding walkway up to freedom, the jewellery store winked and showed me a reflection. In it, I could see pudding ghosts and in front of them, a Mary. This Mary was now as transparent as a backward thought that has not yet had the dread of hindsight breathed into it. Her back was to us, one arm was folded and the other outstretched as her talons flicked the pages of a magazine, her back to her remaining child who was watching our backs, and through this translucent Mary I could see, real and solid, beautiful pearls stolen from the very bellies of their mothers.

I walked with Samuel who was chirruping to his bear as happy as a box of birds. I walked as the travelator rose and I stepped off it into the strength of the sun. I walked along the square markings, right, straight, left. I opened the door, stayed calm, laid Samuel into a new, fresh infant seat all covered in eagle rays and parrot fish and buckled him into sea-blue straps. I drove quickly without haste around square corners of white markings in the almost empty car park roof and then and then just before the down-ramp to the road, a man jumped in front of me.

His arms were outstretched like a crucified man, his fingers were spread wide like a falling man, his mouth was open like a drowning man. He wore a uniform as blue as the disappointment of police school rejection. In the bright light of morning I wondered if I should run into him, over him, through him. If I should complete the image he portrayed of imminent death. But I owed him no

death and bore him no ill and so I stopped. Wound down the window. Smiled when he handed me the teddy bear that wee Samuel had dropped.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“No problem. Cute little fellow.”

And I drove down and round and away and returned the wave that ached to be a salute.

SAMUEL

#

Dear Cal,

What a darling child!

Viv.

LIFE OF TV

#

I remember Mary so careless and happy at the mall when she abandoned her children and then lost one of them. So confident, so sure of herself.

Mind you, on the news tonight it was different story. All tears and sympathy for the poor, poor mother. And not so much for you, did you notice? Not a word of criticism of her for leaving her children unattended in a public place. Silly bitch was bawling all over the place and you. You were there with concern all over your face – but it seemed more for Mary than for the child who was watching your fat face on the TV and sitting right beside me.

“Please, wherever you’re, whoever you’re, don’t hurt him. And please, if it’s you that has taken him, Vivienne, please please please don’t keep our child. You can’t look after him. Bring him back to me and to Mary so we can.”

And, may I ask, may I point out to the never watchful gaze of the media, may I be forgiven for stating: where was little Thomas? Not in your arms or the arms of you fair lady wife. No! Just a photo of the two boys with a silly arrow pointing to Samuel. As if all babies didn’t look alike and identical twins in particular. And that Detective Roberts saying in his big blue high-waisted trousers: “So if you see anyone suspicious with this child” – cut to photo with arrow – “then report it immediately to” blah blah blah! Presumably if you see this baby with someone who isn’t suspicious looking, or a different baby with someone who is suspicious looking, why then they don’t want to hear. I’m suspicious, by the way. Not suspicious looking, but suspicious. The man said ‘suspicious’ and didn’t say ‘suspicious looking’ but I’ve corrected that for him in

this little place anyway. I'm suspicious however of the motives behind this television parade.

What can Mary hope to gain by this circus? A kidnapper is not going to suddenly pick up the phone and confess. I know I'm not, but then I'm hardly a kidnapper, am I? A kidnapper wants a ransom and I want nothing that I haven't already got or can never get from you. So what am I? There is no 'non-kidnapping' charge as far as I know. I may be wrong in this but all I've taken is one half of a bundle of DNA and the rest will soon grow up to be more than the weight and volume of what I've taken in any event.

I've done you a favour in all sorts of ways but the one that no-one on the goggle box is talking about is to save your sons from the wretched creature Mary. I, the kindest of non-kidnappers, could and did easily take Samuel. Anyone else and it would have been an evil thing. So I've removed him from that chance. And I've forced Mary to face up to the responsibilities of being a parent; both of you to. She will never let the other one, dear little Thomas, out of her sight, will she? No. Mary will look and look and look and be reminded and reminded and will always make sure the dear wee fellow is safe and looked after. He will want for nothing and there will be twice as much of everything, material and emotional, to spend on him. He will be the benefit of all that lovely sweet concern that will just pour out of you both, will bathe in that increased parenting that I've squeezed out of you like the bitter juice from an endless supply, a lifetimes, two lifetimes' supplies of lemons.

You know your little morsel is gone. But you will have to read this and all the letters I've sent to break the code of Samuel Morsel, to know where he is. And codes and ciphers are so difficult for you, Callum. You're a man of acts

and rhetoric and pragmatics, not mathematics and linguistics. I will plunge on with my own tasks.

You might be thinking at this point that you will get Samuel back then.

Alas. There are many challenges ahead.

EXERCISES

#

This morning I stepped outside and breathed in the scent of lavender and daphne in the cool morning air. Beautiful. Refreshing. I walked to the corner shop and bought milk bread butter the newspaper. Put my nose into the page as I unfolded the paper and luxuriated in the memory of the scent of ink used no longer that used to be live in such pages. Turned into the concrete pathway from the gate to the front door and heard a conversation above me that froze my blood.

“I tell you, it’s her.”

“Tosh.”

“It is. No doubt about it.”

“Tosh, I say. Tosh and piffle. Look at the hair colour. Brunette.”

“Dyed. They dye the stuff, criminals.”

“There’s no child.”

“Look. I recognise her. My father’s friend’s brother’s girlfriend’s girlfriend had a perch up near there and – “

“And what?”

“I had a bit of a crush on her so I used to do fly-bys.”

“Pathetic. You’re five years old, for Pete’s sake. Old enough to know better. What did you think? She’d fancy an old stringy thing like – “

“Stop it. The point is that I knew her and I’m telling you, Dave, that’s her.”

“Knew who?”

“Not sure. The woman?”

“Yes, I think you said the woman. So whaddya gonna do, huh?”

“Bout what, Dave?”

“The woman.”

“What woman?”

“Didn’t you say that woman down there is someone or other?”

“Oh. Let’s take a – Hey! It’s the woman! The one they’re looking for! I’d recognise her anywhere.”

“Let’s tell that detective – Oooh look! Something shiny!”

“Get off, I saw it first.”

And the magpies pecked and fluttered at each other until one fell off the wire. Being Faerie means that I know the language of the birds. Male birds are always like this. Battling and aggressive but too stupid to keep a coherent thought in their heads. I try not to listen to them because of the nonsense they speak but this, this was disturbing. This one seemed to have a bit more memory than most. I looked around and saw a peck in the distance, wheeling and turning against the sky. Damn! The females are the dangerous ones. They rarely talk but when they do you know they are full of the most malicious sort of intelligence. They keep their distance from the action, though. The

further away they are the more freedom they have to move and be flexible and see more of what is about. So they don't often come in close to listen to the banter of the males. But if this one did, she would take an immediate and harmful interest.

I hurried inside, shut the door, looked through the curtains. The stupid things were still arguing over whatever they had spotted on the ground. What to do? I know that Detective Roberts is unlikely to know the language of the birds so I'm probably safe.

I worried about it all day and we didn't go out again, despite the beckoning blue sky and green grass and the apparent absence of black and white painted birds. I decided to sleep on it.

#

So now it's the morning again, two days later. No sign of the birds or anyone else yesterday. But it is time to move to another of the places I've been assiduously preparing. Best to be wary.

Last night I sorted out the boxes I had brought over here with me and get rid of some of the excess stuff I had shoved into the trailer in my hurry.

One small damp cardboard box had still been taped up from my last move so I had just grabbed it when I moved. It was filled with treasures – a dried walnut leaf glued to wallpaper, a copy of a newspaper specially printed dated 16th July 1969 with photos of Michelin Men on the Moon in the phoenix's scar in the Sea of Tranquility, a fossilised sea-shell from 12,000 feet up Mount Cook, a blood-sucking insect trapped in amber 60 million years ago in a tree from what is now Canada and was then sheltering the last dinosaurs and the first mammals – and in this box there were some school exercise books.

Small 1B4s and 1B5s, cute wee soft cardboard-covered things with big lines. And on every page, writing. In the little ones, the writing was oh-so-careful. Dates, lines between entries, no joined up letters. Progression from pencil to dip-pen through fountain pen, ballpoint, to felt-tips. Traces of absent blotting paper showed in some with little bits of twice-reversed words, ghosts of other words now gone. Signs of bleach yellowing the paper with tiny blue tide lines at the edges, eradicating mistakes or sinful thoughts.

Larger, stiff 2B8s with mean lines, tight with a cursive scrawl, with no dates except terse abbreviations of days of the week. There were even some coded sections. Nothing was eradicated in these later books except with careless single scratches or angry thousand-line dressings.

These were museums exhibiting my old thoughts of childhood and adolescence.

I put them aside and worked all today until early in the evening, when I curled up on my couch, stared at the lonely picture hooks and scuff marks revealed on dusty skirting boards, at round dents in the carpet; the archaeology of my habitation. My preferred evening entrée has become fruit and vegetables – peas, hints of strawberry, asparagus. My five portions a day fits liquidly into curved shapes that takes time to consume but which consumes time nicely. I was finishing this and thinking of skipping cheese on toast or spaghetti with nothing when I opened the first of the books. I read pieces at random until I had read them all.

They were my thoughts but not memories. They were my stories, Callum. Like this one in big careful letters in a soft-covered booklet under the fat heading 'My Friends':

I have no friends.

But that had been rubbed out with a rubber eraser that I could smell on the page. A hard, grey one that was cheap and gritty and left little pieces of rolled and blackened rubber-and-paper-shit behind. I seemed to smell at the same time a scented, jelly-tipped soft thing with a rabbit and a daisy transfer on it in a small neat hand that is not mine but at the desk to my left.

On the next row:

I like my friends.

Between these two wide rows is a thin green line and a teacher with slitted blue eyes and a ruler in her hand.

Further on, there are passages like this one, released from teacher's watchful eyes and written under a mean bed that smelled faintly of that peculiar urine and dust mix:

Got spanked again. Sally wanted my toast and I said no and she punched me and she took it anyway. Brian is always on her side it's not fair. It was my toast and even Sister Catherine said that. But I was the one who was spanked because I was the one making all the fuss she said. I was sent to bed without any more dinner. Sally just got told off and she still got my toast. No-one stuck up for me except that new kid with the snot on his sleeves. When I'm grown up I'm going to come back and find Sally and beat her up. She'll still be here. No-one will take her. And I'll come here and take the quietest loneliest girl to my house and then I'll get Sally thrown out onto the streets where she will rot. I will come in and say she stole the other girl's things. Who will believe her over me then? I'll be famous and have lots of money.

Amusing, n'est-ce pas? That story and others just like it go on for page after page in that little book. It is all in my child handwriting. I don't remember

writing it but no doubt I was trying out different imagined incidents to get just the right feel for the story.

And this favourite from the big books in a firmer, more mature hand:

Alison is a complete slut. She and that stuck up bitch Emily are like evil incarnate. All this time they say they're my friends but they are just fucking bitches both of them.

"Hey. Want to go to Frankies? Feel like some cigs."

"Me? I'd like to, yeah. Thanks."

"Not you, ratface. Who's talking to you? Em, Ratface here thought I was talking to her."

"Fuckin' weirdo."

That's exactly what they said. I didn't say anything. Just held my head up high and smiled and walked off. Like water off a duck's back. Sister Catherine was good for that saying at least, the cow. I could kill those bitches. They are the worst of all creatures, the bloody fucking bitches. I wish I'd said something like 'Who do you think you're talking to?' or something. But that would have been lame. Because I'm lame, let's face it. I'm not WEIRD though! How fucking DARE they? They know nothing about me. Nothing. They don't know that I'm as close to royalty as you can get without an actual title. If they only knew. And how smart I really am. It's not about marks or being the cool ones it's about TRUE INTELLIGENCE! Real, deep understanding of the way things work and the way people are. Psychology but far ahead of that. Baby science. I could really fuck them over if I had half a mind to. I could manipulate them and their disgusting bloody skanky friends and twist them up until they were so confused and desperate they'd want to kill

themselves. Easily, I could do that, could force them to commit suicide just with the right word here and there, the right little bit of body language. They'd never know why they felt that way either. I should do it. Only I'm too decent a human being. Beyond human. A new type I think sometimes. Sometimes that is a curse, my innate goodness. I could do it. I just choose not to exercise my will in that way. There is part of me though that would do it if push came to shove so they'd better fucking just fucking watch out. They've got no idea what I could do! Sluts. That bitch Em is just a whore who doesn't even charge her spotty customers and bloody freak slut Alison who thinks she's so high and mighty is a thick shit-faced monkey who gets so drunk she doesn't know boys are even taking her pants off. Not that she'd care because she is just a smelly evil-faced skank like all of them. I'm self-contained and I don't need them anyway. The only one who ever showed me any friendliness was Trish and she turned into one of them six months ago and then PRETENDED SHE HAD NEVER EVEN EVER TALKED TO ME THE BITCH!

All just stories, Callum. Dreamed up to amuse myself in my childhood home, Onogo, where my lovely parents gave me a lovely life.

SEVEN UNCLES

#

Samuel is beginning to stress me. He's a lot less fun now than when I first got him. You'd think an eighteen month old child would have a bit more staying power. I mean mentally. There's nothing wrong with him physically. Lots of running and jumping and pulling off his clothes and drawing on the walls of this place when he isn't eating the crayons.

So today I made up some stories about my uncles for him. They are not true.

"Look, Samuel. Look at these funny drawings Vivienne has made for you! Here is a fat man. His name is Uncle Zeno. And here, here is a thin one and so tiny! That is Uncle Nano. Aren't they funny?"

"Want Mummy!"

"Mummy isn't coming. I told you that. Look, isn't this one funny? He's a soldier."

"Mummy!"

"Cut that out, Samuel. Look at the picture."

"Go away!"

"Now, that's just not nice. Be polite, Samuel."

"Go away!"

"Right. Any more of that and I'll start to get cross."

The child looked at me with a face like a grandmother's bad knee. At least he was quiet now.

"That's better. Now, look at the pictures again while I read the writing to you. Vivienne's made you a book, see? All of your own."

I bent to put him in my lap. But he hung and went floppy so that it was like trying to pick up a bag of overweight jellyfish. I tried again and this time he struggled like a sackful of cats. I gave up and let him sit on the carpet. I got down beside him and lay on my tummy. Uncomfortable. My hip bones stuck into the floor. He calmed down and started playing with the pieces of paper. I put the Uncle Zeno sketch in front of him on the carpet.

“Here, why don’t you colour him in with your lovely crayon while I read to you.”

At last he settled down. I watched him grasp the red crayon in his fist and make big red angry birds nests all over Uncle Zeno.

“Ok. There were seven uncles: Zeno, Banquo, Nano, yes that’s right, Samuel. He’s the really tiny one. You remembered. Clever boy! That one’s Beano, this is Zippo, and Polo, and the one with the pointy hat on is Lacto and the last is Logo.”

Now Samuel was playing with Beano. I took that drawing out of his hand and replaced it with Zeno. Samuel started bawling and ripped the paper.

I have to confess, Callum, that I was angry now. I got up and made a cup of tea while Samuel grizzled. I put sugar in it. I drank it in the kitchen. By the time I had finished so had he and I came back into the living room and sat down beside him and he was quietly colouring in. He hadn’t done too bad a job of Zippo, actually, though I suspect that it was a random thing that he didn’t go over the lines. I decided he deserved a full story:

The History of the Seven Uncles

Uncle Zeno sits at the end of the table and draws on his cigarette; draws on it so hard and long in one breath that it burns right up. The smoke he blows twists and turns and its tendrils fall out over the

landscape, turns grey the green rolling hills and the lush river valleys and sits on the water where it is pulled down to the brown depths. There these wraiths it starts to twist and turn in little wriggly fishes that are eels which Uncle Zeno -

“Sit down, Samuel. There, that's right. Yes, you can have that too.”

- which Uncle Zeno holds up by the tail and lowers into his endless jaw, biting half and then half and half again. He slurps and rubs his enormous belly.

“I don't think I can finish this,” he says, and laughs uproariously sending echoes booming down the mountain and thunderstorms scudding across the plains.

Uncle Zeno is a tangle of unfinished business, of loose ends and logical pipe bends and gets in the way of everyone and everything.

“Let me have this one. No. Oh, alright, you keep it. That one's Uncle Banquo.”

Uncle Banquo is at some times the most frightening of all and at others the least. The visage is ghastly. His left eye is red and black with bruises and blood, his right eye protrudes over his gashed cheek. His sword is covered in gore, his dusty leather armour stained. Gold spirals eagles and lion heads are seen as his filthy cloak surcoat greatcoat swishes to and fro.

Whenever he appears there is the smell of decaying flesh and coppery blood, the sound of guns and the clash of greed and rage, uncompromising principle and religious righteousness. He sweeps his spear his sword his Gatling gun cross the horizon and the plains fill with yells, the passes with crushing boulders, the gentle slopes with cavalry

and boiling oil and the splintering of oaken gates, the flash of sun on distant tanks.

Pale apparition he may be but his presence is palpable and his scream of blood-lust and clenched fists fills me with horror though he can do nothing to me with his wraith-land hands and only bat at his transparent squire batman Chief of Staff.

Now, Uncle Nano, he fits into the tiniest of spaces and spies on all, cackling and whispering things in the dark that no-one should ever hear. Blackmail and rumours are his dreams and he pours poison into the ears of all who heed. The stain spreads from their hearts to their livers until they are as green as bile with jealousy and loathing.

Uncle Nano fits between things, in the spaces between beds, hotels, garden parties. In the gaps between wars and peaces and the emptiness surrounding bits of broken hearts.

“Ow! Don’t you dare do that again! Where was I. Yes.”

Uncle Nano fits between the molecules the atoms the particles and hides in the nothingness that Quantum jumps. He wears little pointed slippers, bells on his hat that never ring and his nose is larger than his mean and bumpy face. His arms are stumpy his legs are dumpy and his stomach is round and taut.

This one, Uncle Zippo, he’s full of surprises. He runs faster than a train, his breath billowing steam and his legs a whirl of wheels and cogs. He is all dressed in shiny brass and copper circuit wires, a nest of copper-plated numbers in his hair. Greasy levers and slippery pistons at his elbows and knees leak steam coal dust oil and his tongue is coated with road paint.

I looked at Samuel, smiling. His little eyes were drooping and a little drool was falling down from the corner of his beautiful red lips. Time to stop. I popped him into bed and opened a bottle of wine.

As I watched the city close down for the evening through the dirty fifth floor windows, the traffic streaming out to the wells of suburbia, I felt quite pleased with myself. I think he liked the stories. I might be good at this. Who knew that children's stories would be so easy?

You might care to read the stories out to Thomas. I'm sure he will be missing Samuel, which is sad. I'm sure that you and Mary will be as well, but that is part of the point, isn't it.

Well, that's all for now. If Thomas does like the story then email me and I will send over the rest, with a roll of Sellotape. Samuel has ripped them up.

BREAKTHROUGH

#

There is much to tell you, Cal, though I dare not risk an email.

I've been increasingly stressed by the neediness of your child. How can one creature demand so much? He demands when he is awake and asleep. He demands when I'm at the supermarket and in the clothing store. Demands requires decrees. His demands are usually demands of silence. A language of need that is just there, in one's head. Samuel needs food. Samuel will need to be bathed soon. Samuel will need a jacket – it is getting cold at night. With his voice he asks for drinks, biscuits, and sometimes for Thomas and his mother. Less now. He has never demanded you.

I have not been sleeping well. I have not been exercising as I used to because I'm exhausted from carrying him up and down steps, in and out of the pushchair car cot.

And then the day before yesterday, a small miracle. I was just so proud as if I was his mother! I know what it is like now to see the first step hear the first word see the first breath after birth: Samuel started to converse, just like an adult. He is growing up! He was sitting in his pushchair, ready to go out, waiting for me to wriggle on my boots. His teddy bear was held by one ear and being banged silently against the front wheel, his woolly hat was down too far on one side and almost over his eye, his face had a smudge of the ghost of a chocolate muffin on the corner of the lip.

"Vivienne. Why do you look so tired?"

"Oh! Samuel!"

"Well?"

"Sorry. I'm surprised at your speaking. And tired from looking after you."

“Does looking after a child involve so much that one’s own life is diminished?”

“Apparently, yes.”

“Hmm. I would have thought it was the reverse. That your life would be enriched.”

“Nice theory.”

“Is it better now that you can talk to me?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Wanna bickie?”

“No. No bickie. You’ve just had a muffin.”

“Teddy.”

“Yes, teddy. There you are. No, he’s just been on the floor.”

“What is it that you want with me, then, if it is costing you so much? Is the prize worth the price?”

“Oh, yes.”

“What, then? What are you looking for?”

“No more questions. We need to get to the supermarket before it closes.”

You see? I could feel the stress leave me instantly, as though hot rocks had been placed all around my shoulders and neck. Bliss.

At the supermarket he didn’t speak. I bought hair dye in three colours. Scissors. Hairbands. A smock for me, overalls for Samuel.

“Aww. How old is he, love?”

“Just over a year.”

“Really? Looks bigger than that.”

“His father’s genes.”

“Probably make a great rugby player when he grows up, won’t you little fella? What’s his name?”

“Jonathan.”

And then we were back at the flat. While I was cutting his hair, Samuel looked up at me and I turned his head away so that I could get the cow lick.

“Jonathan?”

“Yes. Like it?”

“No. I prefer Samuel. Why Jonathan? Couldn’t I be Sebastian? Bartholomew? Peter? Some other martyr?”

“No. I’ve spent the last few months every few days down here, talking about the day my Jonathan gets out of the hospital. Preparing for this. Can’t change your name now.”

He wasn’t happy, Cal. He’s stubborn, like you. He refused to talk to me for two days except to complain in childish language that he was hungry, needing the toilet, wanting Thomas.

“I’ve been meaning to ask; what is that?”

“What?”

“That, thing. By the door. That looks like a big doll.”

“It is a big doll. It is the original Jonathan.”

“Why do you have a large doll you call ‘the original Jonathan’, Vivienne?”

“It is the diverting doll. The doll I used to push in a pushchair – that pushchair – before I collected you from that mall.”

“Ah.”

He lifted his bare feet into the air and fiddled vacantly with his toes.

“Vivienne?”

“Yes, Samuel?”

“Why did you push a doll called Jonathan around in that push chair?”

“I thought I told you. As a diversion. To make people in this little town think you and I had been here for months. So no-one would find it suspicious that we suddenly arrived on the scene. I’ve been coming down at all times of the day and nights and weekends for weeks now and pretending to bundle you out of the car and into the house or taking you out for a walk. Met the neighbours, told them all about you and me. Back story. Very important part of the plan, you see.”

His toes ceased to be as exciting as his fingers in his mouth.

“Bickie?”

“No. Have this apple.”

“Thank you. You’re too kind.”

Odd little chap. He mused for awhile. I waited, expecting more, and more came.

“Did no-one notice that this thing in the pushchair was not a Jonathan but a doll?”

“No. I had a couple of nervous moments once when a postman leaned down to chuck you under the chin but I told him you had a nasty contagious rash and he jumped back. And once an old woman came out and bumped the pushchair when I was coming out of the butchers. She wanted to make sure you were – he, it was - alright. I had to hurry past. Rather rudely actually.”

He considered this as he gnawed and sucked his apple in a spine chillingly gross way. Then:

“It is a loathsome thing, this non-Jonathan, is it not? It is porcelain in the face – a girl’s face too , and has a body stuffed with, what is that, straw?”

“Oat hay and feathers.”

“Oat hay and feathers. Hmpphh.” He sucked thoughtfully and wiped his hands filled with apple pulp all over his new tracksuit. “Well, I don’t like it. I don’t like the way it stares at me.”

“I replaced the original fluffy stuff for just that reason. So it would be filled with reality. And it’s staying here. You never know when we might need it again. That Detective Roberts is out there looking for us.”

He looked at me, a tiny frown on his dear head, then at the doll. “Good luck with that. Toilet.”

Then, just this evening, this:

“Who do you like, Vivienne?”

“Like?”

“Yes. You don’t seem to like anyone. I know you don’t like my mother or my father. Who do you like?”

“Oh, I like lots of things. The way Icelandic feels upon the skin. The taste of camera film as it captures an image of a wedding. The smell of drum beats on animal hide.”

“Not ‘what’ but ‘who’?”

“That’s enough, now. Bed. I don’t want you cranky in the morning.”

I could not get to sleep once again. I had to get up and make myself a cup of tea and then write this. I’ve been falling behind in my posts. And as I sit here, I begin to understand the wisdom of your son. I see now exactly what he meant. Who do I like? I will tell you now. I like the person who feels the Icelandic on her skin, those who taste the image on the film, the one who smells the excitement of the drum beat. I like anyone who feels and tastes and smells these things. Does that include you and Mary? No. Ergo, there is no likeability between us. Dr. Pederson? My school friends? The dead, the gone, the

abandoners? I think not. Perhaps it is Samuel but he gave no affirmation when I said these things.

Myself. I do like myself. Obviously. Who wouldn't like themselves? Vivienne my ancestor. Alice, my antecedent dweller in this land. These and others in my Family I like. And I'm coming to like Samuel, now that his voice can be heard.

THE STORY OF VIVIENNE

#

Samuel has, it turns out, an insatiable appetite for stories. Historical ones, fact not fiction.

“Vivienne. Tell me a story of your ancestors.”

“No. It is not at all appropriate for an eighteen-month old child.”

“Nonsense. The stuff about the uncles was hardly a lullaby, was it? Oh, sanitise it for me if you must. Just give me the facts about your eponymous ancestress.”

“Vivienne, you mean?”

“Of course. Don’t you know what ‘eponymous’ means?”

“Yes, you rude little child. I wasn’t sure that you did.”

“I know you promised to tell you about your family in New Zealand. Get on with it.”

“Oh, all right. If I’ll keep you quiet. I could tell you, as I told your father, that my parents were rich and that I grew up in the wonderful house Onogo, that I went to private schools before varsity but that I have been bravely trying to fend for myself since.

“But I’ve changed my mind. I like you. So I’m going to start earlier. Before my Family – my true family - came to New Zealand. First, though, I should tell you that I can remember everything of my past and also of the past of a direct line of my ancestors. It is because we are Faerie. A gift we have. This is memory that comes upon us in a tingling all of a sudden, and it only occurs when the forbear with that gift dies. It all came upon me when my father died.

“I will paint a picture just so that you have it all nicely in your mind. You will need that. You will have to report this to your father if you ever see him again. He never met my parents and what I told him of my background; well, it is not entirely true. This is my real story Samuel. I’m telling it; just for you. I will not give you the whole history. I will only tell you of our ways in the land in which I’m now. I will not even give you all of that. It all means nothing.”

The Triangulation of Vivienne

The story I remember of how the Coroaths originally came here is strange. It began far away on a great storm on a midsummer’s night, when I was a different Vivienne.

The storm sent great waves crashing on the shores and cliffs of the Island of Lantanesis. My boat glided between and over them, in the spaces between, impervious.

“When I say ‘my boat,’ Samuel, I mean of course the boat belonging to Vivienne, my ancestor, whose story I’m remembering and telling you now. Perhaps it is easier for you if I refer to her as though a stranger, but, like all of my ancestors, it is ‘I’ as well as ‘she’.”

“So you said. Just get on with it.” Snippy little fellow. I like that about him.

Its walnut sides were parts stolen from the monstrous drawers of her father’s bureau, carved and scraped with shells, bent with her own hands in the mouth of a geyser, rubbed and polished with powdered beetle shells and eucalypt leaves. It remained utterly stable at sea. The walnut planks had no treachery in them, none at all. The staves remained

tight against the salt water and shone as they did the day she had sung them together at the bow and stitched them with spider silk at the stern. She sat on a smooth dry plank in the centre, a slight smile on her glowing face, hair streaming wet behind her straight in the wind, a delicate gown clinging to her body like the pale skin of a butterfly chrysalis.

Vivienne did nothing to steer the boat into the beach except tell it this was her will. It stopped, she alighted on Lantanesis and walked without a backward glance as the boat that had carried her that long, long distance was gently lifted into the ocean and vanished into whipping waves.

Lantanesis is in a temperate zone and the inhabitants were as frightened by the savagery of this storm as anything they could remember. The Mayor of the City to the North West issued proclamations that were overdone. The Farmers' Council to the North East took measures that were extraordinary and hitherto inconceivable in co-opting women men children horses oxen carts into a massive army of ants scurrying to carry hastily scythed crops implements animals into shelters. The Hunters of the pygmy elephants in the South ran through the forests and sought shelter in the caves of the very beasts they feared the most; the fourteen-foot sloth-bears and saber-toothed Dalshis, each of which in turn cowered from the storm so far from the entrances that they didn't even know of the presence of Man in their domains.

During this, Vivienne walked inland, following the calm eye of the storm, or it her, still smiling. Where she walked, wildflowers thrust

from the dark soil, roses bloomed on thorny bushes and dandelions and daisies sprang from the rocks' crevices.

The eye of calm expanded in all direction from her until all over the island wind died, the rain stopped, the sun deigned to show its flare, and the people sighed, shook their heads and looked at the damage. They returned to their homes, their fields and their meeting grounds. And in the caves, the sloth-bears and the Dalshis ventured to the front chambers and with the courage of hindsight became enraged when they smelled the odour of departed men.

These things Vivienne knew because she had such gifts.

She came to a small green hill, not far from the sea. She sat under the walnut tree there, closed her eyes, and slept, smiling all the while. There she lay, breathing sweet air, day and night, dusk and dawn, for a thousand years until Joseph Coroth found her and asked her to dance.

Joseph was a map maker. He travelled with a leather satchel over his shoulder filled with papers and instruments to plot the land and list its riches for a king in a far away land. He had arrived in a huge ship with sails of white, a cloud that had dropped to the sea. He was rowed ashore by men who spoke French, a different language to his own, full of florid love elegance peasant roughness. Some were on a mission to plot on men's souls and to change them to benefit a quite different kind of king. Others to trade some things for other things such that each side of the bargains felt they had the more valuable end of things.

Joseph's father was a weaver in summer and a blacksmith in winter and had taught him of things beyond their village. His mother was a teacher of reading. She taught him how knowledge was condensed into books and then inflated again in the minds of readers. Joseph was seized by a need to know more and set off to university.

He didn't know it but he was more than the eye saw. His father had run from his own father and a profligate brother to that simpler life, the second son of an embattled earl who was fighting neighbours and debt collectors and a traitorous spirit who lived in a bottle.

So Joseph, unknowing grandson of an earl and son of a twice-craftsman who pretended not to be a gentleman, set out on a journey to turn from a gentle man into a gentleman of science.

He did very well and when he left his university was commissioned by his king to sail as a mapmaker and scientist on a neighbouring nation's ship (the king had both ships and scientists spread so far around the globe that there were none of his own spare.) Joseph was to be the first to map the interior of New Zealand. The particular route there was the secret of the ship's own king and kept secret from Joseph and his king. All understood and accepted the terms.

I will not disclose where Vivienne came from nor where Lantanesis is. I will say that the people of the island were innocents who had been disconnected from the rest of the world for thousands of years. Likewise, the existence of Lantanesis was unknown to the two kings, the captain of the ship and to Joseph. They came to it by accident; being a miscalculation of their position by Joseph who, in the furtherance of the

design to keep the secrets of one king from another, was given insufficient charts to be accurate. They arrived in the harbour of the strange little city to the north of the Island one dawn to the astonishment of both residents and seafarers, led there by the certainty of mathematics applied to uncertain data.

The people of Lantanesis built their houses of red, black and white stone, dressed their socks with crossed ribbons, wore cloaks like Celts and spoke a language no-one else understood. It sounded like Chinese to the Frenchmen on the ship, Finnish to the Chinese cook, and Hottentot to Joseph who spoke only English.

Joseph Coroth was a forgetful man. He remembered things of the mind but not daily needs. At the end of a week trying to map buildings and geography, he returned to the harbour. He realised only then that he was a day later than he had promised and that the ship had sailed. In fact it had gone two days earlier, for the Captain, one Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse, could do no trade at all with the residents, no and never as Englishman, and following his secret orders designed to foil the English plans, upped anchor and let the Diable take the English map maker (whom he no longer trusted as navigator anyway) and the weird island folk too.

Joseph paid his innkeeper with a few of the small pieces of iron with which he weighted the edges of his maps. He asked him by signs laborious gestures simple drawings to send a messenger if ships came, and then navigated the city's circular canals out into the wilderness. He spent more of his iron to convince men to set up poles and clear branches

from the tree on the hills around the island so that he could sight along the invisible paths and write his tracteries in his map.

I will not bore you with the details of Vivienne and Joseph's courtship, or how they came to build a cottage near the sea, nor of the years of contented marriage they had. It is a story of love and the struggle of mundane living that goes on in such circumstances, though interesting in some stories, is of little consequence to ours. But this all did happen and so did seven children.

Years passed.

Vivienne rose one morning, kissed Joseph on the lips, whispered something he didn't catch (which had to be said but not understood) and, after drinking a mixture of rainwater and golden honey from her hive (the only things Vivienne ever ate or drank), gathered the seven children together on the lawn of the cottage; all as she did every morning. She would always give the children peculiar lessons and draw runes in the air that would shine in silver, as a blacksmith traces red meaningless lines with his red-tipped strips. But these runes were far from meaningless and stayed in the air as long as she required. Joseph would swear to the children that he could hear the runes singing sometimes like crystal bells. Whenever he would come close, Vivienne would fade them. It was a game the family played, Joseph trying to sneak up and peek, which always ended in Vivienne fading them before he glimpsed anything but a hint. The children and Vivienne would all just smile their beauteous smiles and say nothing. Then all would laugh and Joseph retire in mock

hurt dignity at his exclusion whilst he formulated another plan to tease them the next morning.

Vivienne knew Joseph watched from the kitchen window that morning. What she said to their children he never knew because he never asked (and if he had she would not have told him). It changed them permanently in ways that he didn't need to know. He saw her kiss each of them; the youngest one, Alice, she kissed three times.

Late in the afternoon, when the sun was a melted wax dribble on the horizon and Joseph was fiddling with his maps, she surprised him with the touch of her lips on the top of his head. He turned. He set down his glasses and his ruler and stood stretching to see her leave the room in the gown he first saw her in. He followed her out into the sunset, the forest, the beach and they stood watching the edge of the sun blink out with hands held. In the afterglow Vivienne kissed him and walked alone into the sea where a beautiful little wooden boat with no oars and no sails was waiting, rising and falling on the wavelets where the stones frothed. He watched frozen as she stood in the boat and willed it out, until the it was pebble on the horizon and darkness fell like a stage curtain, in two parts, one from the east and one from the west.

"There."

"There what?"

"There is the story of my ancestress Vivienne."

"Well, hardly. Only a bit of it, surely. I want more."

"No. I'm tired."

I put Samuel to sleep after a little stewed apple and a glass of whole milk, and then came to my desk to write this while it was all fresh. Now my hands are cramped at the keyboard and I will have to stop.

SPIRIT

#

Do you remember the first time we met, Callum? I do. I remember it almost as clearly as I remember being Alice, the daughter of Vivienne. Only almost, though, because while Alice, as you will find out, had spirit her first night on the New Zealand beach, she consumed no spirit and remained chaste. While I, on my first night on the beach with you consumed spirit and did not. At the time, I was technically still with Johnno, but I knew that you were the one.

You remember all this of course:

“How come we never met before?”

“Should we have?”

“You’d think so, given Ross is my brother and his girlfriend works in your firm. Your team, I think.”

“Deborah? Yes, she’s in my team. Don’t really know Ross. Nice place, this. He’s in medical supplies or something isn’t he?”

“Imports medical instruments. Still. You’d have thought we’d met.”

Where do I go from there? To boring commentary on the bouncing ball of inane conversation? Or an hour later back to the inside of Ross’s enormous back scratching at mossie bites, treating them with the undiluted vodka you said sure would work and got you a feel of my thigh? Or later still to the moment when more undiluted vodka was diluting my blood and loosening my heart and brain a little too much but no more than I wanted? Perhaps we’ll skip to the guest bedroom romp, and the whirling room afterwards while the bookcase spun past my eyes in the living room, then flicked back and slipped away again, always in the same direction. I realised I may have made a mistake while I was trying too earnestly to chat about this and that with thickened tongue to Deborah

so carefully that it must have been obvious what I was trying to hide even if our mixed smells coming from dark places within my clothing didn't speak directly to her.

A secret, then. You would call, I would drive over. Break appointments with my friends, ditch almost mandatory social meetings with clients, make excuses to Johnno when he was expecting me at restaurants, movies, breakfast. All silly schoolgirl stuff with the benefit of hindsight. No-one fooled in the end.

I wish I hadn't met you. Ah, hindsight. The two Rules of Hindsight are these: first that it is a silly herring, red with ironic rust; and second that with the assistance of memory this fish is swallowed whole backwards and the pointless spines of its fins stick in the throat, often choking.

Vivienne's daughter Alice always acted with perfect aplomb, grace and honesty. I act with something more and something less than Alice. I've learned much since being Alice and some of it is naïveté lost and some gained.

Even back then, later that first night, I thought perhaps it was a mistake to have gone with you when I saw you with your cadre in the corner by the fireplace, the smell of woodsmoke from the bush mixing with the salt from the seaspray and the bluegums on the driveway. Ross, two men with ginger hair who could also have been brothers, some guy called Colin from Australia, and you. I saw you standing like the black-hearted friend of someone in a Jane Austen novel, with boot up on the hearth, hand in pocket, jacket pinned back by the other hand on hip, head up and laughing. Laughing perhaps at a conquest. You turned and looked directly at me and gave me a slow wink, unseen by anyone else and I felt a warmth run through me and I melted in your gorgeous brown eyes. I knew this was no disloyalty except to your fellows. No duplicity then. Except that it was all a betrayal to me in the end. In a way, that wink was

the beginning of it even if it was a secret between just us and both meant and taken then in good faith. Just as I took your hair from Ross's guest room pillow when you were dressing - in good faith but secretly. I have this hair still of course, together with one or two other things that come from you, just as personal and that will shortly be just as useful.

But more of all that later.

What I remember of that night is that you were my Maori and that you came to me in lust disguised as love. You called me "My pakeha". Remember that? Whenever you got a little tipsy with your mates from the office at one of our barbeques or at dinner in the little French or Italian restaurants you love so much you will call me your "little pakeha princess". I'm both pakeha and a princess, of course, but in different ways to that which you meant. I was not the compliant little thing you wanted, was I?

And I will tell you about another little coincidence: Alice too had a chance meeting with a Maori. He was lost, this one. He came into my family home in Onogo in 1819, looking for his raiding party and he said his name was Hongi Hiki of the Ngapuhi. The funny thing was that he was wearing armour. As unexpected to Alice as his Cambridge University accent. Alice took all of this in her stride, to see a Maori in armour talking of a great university on the other side of the world. When he saw Alice, he touched her cheek in wonderment as she had the man so many year before. He touched her cheek and I can remember what he said as though it were yesterday: "Not pakeha. Pakepakeha." He saw the Faerie in her, you see. You didn't see it in me.

I'll tell you another little secret now about that meeting. There is an irony in that armour, given to the man by George IV, the Monarch of England. Hongi Hiki had been shown like a circus freak to sarcastically polite European salons,

was educated by and then educated professors in the vocabulary and grammar of his people, your people, which until then didn't exist except in sound.

He was your ancestor just as Alice was mine! You have boasted of this whakapapa, this wonderful genealogy, so many times and yet I know that he recognised my ancestor as a kind of goddess, foreign to him but a goddess nevertheless. Though as I say, she was chaste and he had learned to be a gentleman and she set him on his way so that he could raid again and take more land from his fellow tribes and exercise more utu than it really appears strictly necessary at this distance.

Those were our respective ancestors when they met, Callum. How different to our meeting and how different the outcome.

INTERREGNUM

#

I have kept worrying about those magpies. What if I was wrong? If they had talked to the policeman and he had understood? I know I am the only Faerie but perhaps I am not the only one to understand the facile language of birds.

So I rang the number at the bottom of the television screen. It went like this:

“Roberts.”

“It’s me.”

“Sorry, who?”

“It is I, Detective Roberts, Vivienne.”

“Vivienne. Vivienne who?”

I wondered for a silly second if this was the right thing to do. It was though because I had decided to do it.

“Vivienne Coroth. You have been asking for me to make contact. I’m the present guardian of Samuel Ascott, eldest child by six minutes of Callum James Ascott.”

“Oh. Yes, Vivienne. Um, I didn’t – I mean, good, good (*Joan. Joan! Get Harry over here for fuck’s sake!*) Vivienne. Glad you rang. You need help with the boy with little Sam on your – “

“Samuel.”

“Samuel, of course, help with him and Vivienne, believe me when I tell you that I understand. You must be lonely and he’s alright isn’t he? Samuel?”

“Alright. Hmm. A question of relativity.”

“Oh. I’m not sure I under - (*fuck, Harry, it’s that....yeah, ok, choice*) um, Vivienne, you want to bring him in or would it be easier if we came and got him? we can bring help. For both of you. Someone for Samuel o course but also, some people to help you. Understanding people.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Now, no need to ... (*yeah Harry I KNOW*) to get upset, didn’t mean, just want to help, bring it all to a nice smooth finish, I mean close, to help you – “

“I have everything I need, Detective Roberts. And now that I’ve spoken to you I know everything else I need to. Time to go. Don’t want you to do one of those traces or whatever. Not that it would do you any good at all with me on the internet and way out here miles and miles away from you and from our hidey hole. Bye-bye now.”

All good. Just a human. Not sure why I woke up last night feeling that I had to check since he could be nothing else but I’m glad I did.

After lunch (cold tongue white bread iceberg lettuce) Samuel played with his truck and blocks until bath time. While he brmmmed and scrubbed the wheels on the carpet back and forth and tipped and built and knocked and tipped and scrubbed and brmmmed I sat and read the last of three books I had started before I thought of all of this but never got around to finishing before I started taking the pills apart. So that’s done now. Complete. Another thing off the list.

After bath time (plastic dolphin plastic milk-bottle top toothbrush) we had dinner (white bread sausages-in-tomato-with-spaghetti) and a story ('Revolting Rhymes') Samuel announced he wanted some history. The true history of the Family, not the made-up vanilla stuff I told you, Cal.

"More. Now."

"Wouldn't you rather find out a bit more about the author of 'Revolting Rhymes'? An anagram of his name is 'A Hard Doll' and 'Had a dollar' and – "

"No. I don't wish to play with words. I don't find it fun. I can't even read yet, I'm only a year and a half old, for heaven's sake. I want the history."

"Alright, alright. Where were we up to?"

"The Vivienne ancestress fairy thing had disappeared out to sea."

"Right."

The Acceptance of Fate

When Vivienne left Joseph and the darkness fell, my memory of her stops. At that instant it changed to that of their youngest daughter, Alice, whom Vivienne had kissed three times. Alice felt a peculiar tingling in her mind, body and spirit. As soon as one of the Family dies, the gift passes to one descendant and the story continues. So it is lonely as there is only ever one of us who is Faerie who is alive.

"You said that already."

"Shh."

The children were supposed to be in bed but were playing games and tell stories when Joseph returned alone. His face, for the first time

Alice could remember, was dead. His hands, usually so alive, hung limp at his side, his shoulders drooped like the seaweed they put on the drying racks.

For a while, none of them spoke.

“Where’s Mama?” said Bruce, always the most nervous.

But their father said nothing. He crossed the stone floor to the hearth and stood with his back to them. Michael and Sarah whispered to each other, then, frowning, made the rest go to bed. There were none of the usual complaints of oppression of the majority of the minors by the minority of the majors. They simply wrapped up in the big bed in their usual positions, aware of the gaps left by the older two and of the gap in the house left by their mother.

Alice woke when the cold moon commanded the wind to silence stroked her cheek told her to wake watch listen. The cottage rustled and cleared its throat and settled to see what would happen next. Two valleys among the Children Hills and featureless silver patches on Pillow Plains marked spaces where Michael and Sarah should have been. The gentle sounds of light breathing (that Alice loved) and the burr in Roberts throat that spoke of the snoring to come (that she didn’t) were in the air. She reached across and poked Robert gently in the approved manner and he rolled onto his side. She eased herself up from between two bodies and stepped carefully around one head to the floor.

She took her cloak and shoes to the outer room. Joseph was in her parent’s bed, lying with his face almost covered. And there beside him was a pile of furs that in the weak light tried to fool her but became

Michael and Sarah. She walked quietly to the door, intending to walk outside for a while. And saw Joseph was staring at her.

“Where is your Mama?”

A moment of confusion, of *How do I know, why are you asking me, what is* – then she knew with a rush things she could not possibly know. A jumble of memories, more and more pouring into her until she could not stand it, could not stand and felt cold flagstones against her knees thighs arms cheek. Somewhere from the depths came her father who reached out his hand like a man drowning but down instead of up, pulled at hers and helped her to my knees.

“Where is your Mama?”

Alice could say nothing. Images of familiar strangers, non-experienced smells and sounds never heard all swum around her, speaking of places and things and impossible creatures, of times and time all stretching around in twists and strips and circles and knots... But that is all she remembered because in that same eternal moment, they each dropped to her feet and faded and the memories belonging to Vivienne disappeared from Alice’s life forever leaving nothing but an odd comfort and a knowledge of something happening now. Her father pushed the hair from her eyes, wiped tears from her face with the cuff of his damp coat. He took her hands, looked down to her eyes and asked again, with a wretched gentleness, in his quietest, lullaby voice:

“Where is your Mama?”

“She is in the sea, on the sea. In a boat.” *What madness was this?*

“And is she well?”

“Is she well?” said Alice. *What question, what polite, neighbour-is-your-mother-recovered-from-her-cold question was this?*

“Yes. Is your Mama well?”

“I don’t... Yes! Yes, I know, I see, I know – Papa! What is happening?”

“Your Mama left you this gift, I think. It is something that might serve you and all of us well. But I must know – what do you see?”

“She, she is as she always was. Standing in a little boat. There is such a storm! But she is well and standing quite still and she is smiling. Around the boat the waves are still as though, as though – as if the light that is coming from her is stilling everything and keeping her safe. The storm, it is what is driving the boat and I think...”

“Yes?”

“I cannot explain it, Papa, but it is as though Mama is telling the storm to drive the boat.” *And now I see no more. She is gone from us.*

Joseph’s cheeks were wet. As he pulled Alice to him in a hug, she saw a smile start, before her face was hidden in the folds of his big, sea-salt coat.

There was silence as Samuel absorbed this. Then:

“So Vivienne has gone, Alice has inherited her memories, sort of, and can experience what she is experiencing?”

“Yes, just for that instant. That is the lesson we learn.”

“Lesson?”

“There is a lesson to be learned from all of these transfers of the gifts from one member of the Family to the next. It is a lesson which must be understood, distilled and written into the Rule book of the Family.”

“There’s a Rule book? Of what, Faerie wisdom?”

“In a way, yes. Wisdom of my human family and the Faerie Family. What is the lesson to be learned here? What is the Rule that we garnered as the Family from this? Simple: that nothing is easy, that nothing lasts, that nothing is as it seems. That the world is too complicated for us ever to fathom it but that we still try. And when we do, we fail but have to accept our rationalisations as best we can.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

JOSEPH TEACHES ALONE

#

I'm feeling for you, Cal. A dear member of your family wafted away like smoke. Your feelings must be so like poor Joseph, the husband of Vivienne, another man who lost someone special to an enigma.

Samuel and I talked about you today.

"How do you get on with your family?" I said.

"I get on well enough with them. With Thomas I have an understanding. Mother is mother and there is no substitute. In a sense that uniqueness makes her difficult to judge."

"And your father?"

He turned his head to look at the cartoon frog on the TV.

"Froggy froggy!"

"Yes. Froggy. You were saying?"

"Toilet."

Toilet comes before conversation. In the end it is always the same. The prosaic parts of us are so demanding that they will have their way before everything else. I wonder sometimes if at the end of life the order remains the same. I strongly suspect that the body requires front-of-house again as it approaches that as well.

Back from the toilet. Back to the TV.

“Give me more,” I say, but he interested only in his coloured blocks – building them up and then knocking them down, building knocking.

And then I saw what he was saying with his Froggy toilet block knock talk.

“Your father is a mystery to you. You have a picture of him in your mind, think you have him clear and then it all changes and you find yourself confused by him again. I know – I feel the same about him.”

He sat, his legs akimbo, one chubby hand around an orange block, the other waving in the air. His great innocent eyes looked at me. He smiled and chortled.

“No, Vivienne. I’m just playing with my blocks. I know my father well enough now. I’ve known him all my life. There is little complicated about him. He is a man as any man. His thoughts are to be secure and warm and fulfilled and loved. His actions are those of all men. He also has the needs and desires of all men in differing degrees. They compete and drive him lurching in silly directions so that his desires and needs are always frustrated by himself. It is simple picture, though, just one in which the mix of colours is always changing and always a little muddy.”

And then he leaned over and slapped the orange block on top of a pile of five high with a sweeping action that destroyed the whole tower, to his apparent surprise. I saw immediately the example he was showing me of his meaning.

So we both know that you’re more alone than you would want to be and that you must be wondering how to colour your picture, which new blocks to put in this wiped out tower.

Perhaps continuing the tale of Joseph coping will be a lesson to you. I will write down what I told Samuel then. I've taken to telling him these histories in earnest. It is good to know that someone will remember them after I'm gone.

The Rules Are Written Down

Many years have passed on Lantanesis.

Joseph taught his seven children the ways of the explorer (to make fire and shelter, of ropes and roots to eat) and the ways of the map-maker (the lines, instruments, and formulae). Of soils and clays, the rituals performed by sands and rocks, the habits of coasts and mountains. He taught them too of life amongst the insects, sheep and horses, some philosophies practiced by plants and the secret wants of stars. He even showed them the caves, ancient bones and teeth of the extinct Sloth-bears, Sabre-toothed Dalshis, and pygmy elephants that used to inhabit the caves and are slowly pried from the jealous clays by rain.

But he taught them nothing of their mother – perhaps because he could not bear to or maybe because they were a mystery him. What was more remarkable to Alice than Papa's reticence in discussing their Mama was the complete silence of Alice's brothers and sisters on the subject. Over the first few days, each seemed numbed by his or her thoughts. There was a faint taste of sadness perhaps but Alice began to wonder if even this was so. When she tried to talk to Elizabeth or Robert about Vivienne, they fell into a silence that increasingly became more puzzled and the subject was not so much changed as slipped sideways into any space between their Mama and what was on their minds or tongues the moment before.

As for Papa, he would smile and talk a little with Alice when they were alone but it was with a far-off nostalgic look as though Mama was a distant person in his lost past, like a favourite grandma gone with childhood. Though whenever the wind picked up silence and tickled it into whispers then shouts, or the rain threw itself down to the rocks below, he would pace the beach and glare out at the line where the sky kissed the sea, and at those times his loss and grief was plain to Alice. But not to the others. Within a month, they had forgotten their mother completely. Whenever Alice talked of her, they would laugh and tease and were tolerant of her 'stories' and told her to write them down, 'they are so good.'

Joseph own knowledge expanded in these times more from his synthesis of what he already knew and arranged in different patterns than from new experiences. He realised that if anything happened to him, the children would be at the mercy of the world. He conceived the Rules for Family Living and decided it was time to write them down for the first time in any history, fearing that if he didn't they might be lost forever.

"He was wrong in this because they exist so long as there is a member of the Family who is Faerie. But it is to the good anyway because I'm the last. For them to survive me, I would have to write them all down and that would make my task very hard. Alright, alright, I'm going on."

He sought counsel from the stream and the sea, the wood and the plants, and listened to the husks of the shucked walnuts as he shook them in his hand. These all advised the same thing. And so he made a large journal from the skin of one of his calves. He found it lying with a

broken neck at the bottom of Walnut Hill. He tanned the skin with the tannin of a strong walnut bark tea laced with a little of Vivienne's honey, red wine rosebuds and wildflowers from the path Vivienne took to Walnut Hill a thousand years before. He spent a week travelling with Elizabeth and Robert, leaving Michael and Sarah to look after the rest and visited the Northern city to buy their marvellously thin and strong cereal paper. He stitched the journal with linen made from flax he had Bruce fetch from the beach where Vivienne's boat had pitched. He waxed the threads and leather carefully with the combs of bees from Vivienne's hive.

Into this large book, the size of an immense bible, he wrote the Rules with a steel pen given to him by his own father and ink made from red, white and black stone ground to a powder in a copper vessel and mixed with walnut sap.

First to go in were the sensible things covered in any manual of life. If something should happen to him, his children needed to look after themselves on that peculiar island where communication with other inhabitants was at best unreliable and usually heartbreakingly comic. He wrote of hygiene and hunting, crafts and of cooking, of building and the way in which babies are made, borne and born. The basics of Latin and Gaelic. Rules for when to plant and how to stand sentry, how to state disputes and methods for resolution. As many things of knowledge and skills as he could remember.

Then he put in Rules that were regulations. He put in the Ten Commandments and the lessons that Jesus taught as best as he could

remember them and then pointed out certain discrepancies and large questions of being for the children to one day ponder over. He commanded the children to look after each other. And, crucially, that they should honour their mother and her memory and to apply the lessons she had taught them whatever they might be (though he didn't know and didn't enquire what those were). From respect for their father, they all agreed to obey him in this as in all else, though only Alice was not bewildered by its meaning.

Joseph didn't stop when he had exhausted his own resources. He put in new Rules as they came to him from memories drifting in strange corners of the world, floating on the air, painted in the landscape. He also consulted amongst his children. If a Rule suggested seemed wise he put in that too. The older ones came up with sensible, practical advice, the younger ones less often but more as they grew. Alice came up with no Rules.

Well, Cal, Samuel fell asleep at about that point. And I'm tired again myself. Hopefully I will sleep tonight. I will not naively send this by email unto I have engineered a way to cover my internet traces. Detective Roberts has, I'm sure, ways of tracking down the ill-prepared. Better to leave it in this blog and hope that one day you will crack the code to its address.

THE SEVEN STARS

#

He is a smart one this blonde son of yours. Where does he get it from? Surely not from you or from the swan? He is jurisprudentially aware. Listen to this breakfast banter:

“Do you think,” said Samuel, cornflakes and milk dribbling onto his bib, “that you had any right to take me?”

“Of course I did. Do.”

“Do think or do have the right?”

“Both.”

“I’m kidnapped. Pure and simple. An offence, surely, in any civilised land.”

“That begs a question, Samuel. Is this a civilised land?”

“This is a civilised country that we live in, yes. But don’t use this method of avoiding the first question.”

“Ah, but I debate that for two reasons, not for avoidance. The first is to ask what country is civilised that allows an intelligent woman who wants to be a part of society, to give birth and be a mother, to marry and be happy, and to live the reality she knows is true while doing no harm to others who do not deserve it, not to be in a position where this is conceivable? And the second is to ask what country we are in?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not and you’re not in New Zealand. I’m a sovereign nation – no, not that, a sovereign universe, that happens to be enclosed by New Zealand. So when you’re near me, you’re in my universe, not in your native land the country of your parents.”

While he considered this I sipped my morning coffee.

“And this means...?”

“That I didn’t kidnap you. You came into my area, the fifty metres which legally surrounds me and so came into my jurisdiction. And here you remain.”

“And if you leave me here and go shopping?”

“Then you’re on your own in your native country. Fortunately when I return you cross my border, relative to me.”

“And so it your contention that the country of my birth is not civilised and that you’re not guilty of kidnapping in any event because when you acted in picking me up you were within your own fifty metre radius?”

“Quite.”

“Interesting. Doubtful but interesting.”

“Do you have a counter-argument?”

“Juice.”

“Juice *please*.”

“Please juice.”

I poured juice into his Tommy-Tippee cup.

“Your argument?”

But there was no more. He was engrossed with his toes once more.

“Story!”

“Story *please*.”

“Story.”

“Strictly, Samuel, this is a history, not a story. However:”

The Family at Sea

In December 1792 another monstrous storm stalked Lantanesis,
biting down with stinging salt-wind teeth and blowing out terrible

eruptions from dangerous ocean regions it had already digested. Joseph rushed his children to the little beach.

“Hurry! A ship might take shelter in the bay and if it does, well, if it does, we might be able to leave this land of heartache.”

Alice’s her brothers and sisters didn’t understand what he meant about heartache in their happy home but were obedient and arrived at the beach wet, bedraggled, and in the middle of the night. They stood in the tussock and spongy sand on the dune crests, saw the angry white edges of horrendous waves attacking and all but Joseph and Alice felt that any heartache was out there, not in their home.

Joseph wouldn’t give in to their pleas to return to the dry home of stone and stout wood but made them take cover under the big trees which were fighting with the weather-beast and had no time to look after children, no matter what their lineage, education or need.

Alice could see by the sour flavour of hope in Joseph’s face as well as his words that he knew this wasn’t sensible.

“A ship would head for portage in the city. Even then, no message will probably come for us. I don’t even know if that innkeeper is alive, let alone will honour his promise after all this time.”

Alice knew, too, by the nerves that danced in his hands and the flashes in the corner of his eyes what he admitted only to the blood whispering in journeys around his bones: that what he truly wished for he knew was impossible. Vivienne, his lover, the forgotten mother, would not appear again just because a giant had decided to poke this sleeping fractious storm with a stick.

“A light!” Elizabeth danced down past the sand through sticky watery darkness and carelessly into the water lapping onto the beach stones, pointing into the darkness of the storm’s chops. “A light! Look!” Her voice was stripped of power by the wind-demon and reduced to a whisper muffled by a pillow.

And they all looked, except for Joseph.

“There’s no light,” said Joseph their father into his beard and knees.

“Papa! There *is* a light. There! It comes and goes with the waves – there, again!” Michael shook his arm.

Joseph pulled himself awake from his half-dream of a barefooted white-gowned smile. It was true. For a wild moment he thought of a lantern in a small, stable boat. But then he saw that it swayed wildly and was a shadow-cross in the light with a smaller lamp high above the square that mothered the cross and knew it for a ship. A cord of Joseph’s heart and a cord of Alice’s strung from the same twine snapped.

Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d’Entrecasteaux had no idea where he was. He had left Brest in the frigate *La Recherche* in September 1791 to find a brave but lost explorer, Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse. La Pérouse had turned down as part of his crew a young man by the name of Napoleon Bonaparte who, had he interviewed better and little earlier, would also have been lost and not have changed the world somewhat. La Perouse also had an order for the inclusion of Joseph Coroth. So when these two men, Bonaparte and Coroth, vied for the sole berth, the world was changed forever in two ways: once with an empire and once with the birth of a Faerie bloodline.

“Something of a stretch, don’t you think? To rank your bloodline alongside a world empire?”

“No. All events and non-events alter the world and in no less important ways than the incidents that historians focus on. Historians are all, despite the best of intentions and whilst trying always to tell the truth, the absolute truth, and nothing but the truth, liars. They try to read coarse grains of sand but these are so small they cannot properly see them from all sides. They infer the story of the whole infinite beach from these flawed interpretations. And these are not grains taken at random but handed up to them only by bullies and tyrants.”

By the time he found the family and they him, Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d’Entrecasteaux had searched and searched and seen wondrous things in many places on this earth. However he saw neither Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse nor the signs of the storm that pounced upon the ship and then tossed it in waves and troughs the size of small countries for days.

His luck was good when he found a gentler patch in the night and he followed his nose (having no way of determining his position and therefore his course other than this way or that from here) risking doom if he foundered on rocks and safety if he found a harbour. It was a harbour and he anchored with a black piece of double-hooked iron the weight of twenty men.

It was not enough.

“Empty the wine barrels!”

It was a sign of the men’s fear by then of the storm that they obeyed without hesitation where such an alcohol-profligate order would have caused mutiny the week before.

“Rope them and throw them into the sea starboard and port, bow and stern.”

It was relief at the efficacy of this act of genius of this that made each man claim to his mate that he wondered why the Captain hadn't had the obvious thought of sea-anchoring before.

Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux knew he'd been lucky and thought they had been swept to the mainland of the Australia he was sailing for. He was a man to be reckoned with, a soldier, a gifted administrator and rigorous in his imposition of order. He was also an emotional man with an ill-deployed but strongly felt poetic spirit. And so, when he touched on the shore, he wrote this in his journal which he later proudly showed the Coroaths:

"...trees of an immense height and proportionate diameter, their branchless trunks covered with evergreen foliage, some looking as old as the world;

"closely interlacing in an almost impenetrable forest, they served to support others which, crumbling with age, fertilised the soil with their debris;

"nature in all her vigour, and yet in a state of decay, seems to offer to the imagination something more picturesque and more imposing than the sight of this same nature bedecked by the hand of civilised man.

"Wishing only to preserve her beauties we destroy her charm, we rob her of that power which is hers alone, the secret of preserving in eternal age eternal youth."

“Except of course, Samuel, he did this in French. I’ve translated it for you, because I know that you have not studied French – or anything - at school. Your father was not good at French, by the way. He could not possibly do better than the Captain in English: he was hopeless too. Had either translated this into English they would have come up with this:

“... the trees of an immense size and a proportioned circle-something, their trunks covered the foliage branchless persistent sheets, a part looking at as old as the world;

“narrowly interlacing in an almost impenetrable forest, they were employed to support others which, being something-something with the age, fertilized the ground with their excrement;

“nature in all its force, but in a state of weakening, seems to offer to imagination something more picturesque and more something-about-strength than the sight of this same nature decorated by the hand with the civilized man.

“while hungry to preserve only its beauties-something that we destroy his charm, steal-with us the this power which is only with him, the secrecy of the safeguard in the eternal youth of the age eternal.

“That is not so poetic. I think you will agree that my version is best, that I know best, that I’m best.”

“Whatever.”

When the Captain agreed to carry the family, in part because of Joseph’s small engineering skills (the Captain had lost his smith to apoplexy after a recent raucous party) and in part because of Joseph’s chart-making knowledge (the Captain had recently lost his cartographer to alcohol poison when his secret lover died of apoplexy), he thought

again that he was lucky. He set sail still under the impression that he had been on the coast of Australia. His misapprehension was never corrected for, when they left the harbour, the same storm which had lurked and waited for him, jumped on them once again and juggled with the boat until, five days, later it became bored and went in search of other amusement.

With much calculation and looking at uncaring stars and doubtful clocks in the calm that followed, the Captain conferred with Joseph and the officers and announced that they had been pushed much further than he thought and that they were in fact close to the new land New Zealand. As this was on the list of those places he was ordered to search for the invisible La Pérouse (albeit arrived at out of the ordered order) he had decided to land and to carry out his duties. Thus he felt able to accede to Joseph's pleas that the family be delivered to that very place.

The Captain was indeed lucky. He survived and was able to describe each new land he later visited and feel the wonder and grandeur of nature undiscovered. (Or rather undiscovered by anyone who wasn't French or English or Portuguese. Those who had discovered these places hundreds or thousands or tens of thousands of years ago seemed not to count in the European variations of 'découvrir'.) His poetic nature always overwhelmed him in the same way on occasions of découverte. There were vague similarities to these new lands so that, bowing to both the poetic and efficient sides of him, he would write what seemed to him to best sum up each new land in his journal in exactly the same way and exactly the same words:

*"...trees of an immense height and proportionate
diameter, their... "*

"And in his luck, one of these descriptions survived and because it was the only occurrence found, became a famous grain of sand to historians. Thus, constant repetition and self-plagiarism can lead to unique and important historical statements."

"Whoopee."

"Sarcasm? In one so young, too."

Joseph Coroth, Alice's father, also known as Papa, was also lucky. He was lucky in love (up to a certain point of departure) and he was lucky in life (up to the point that is the end of life). Who can say whether he was lucky in death? He was distracted and excited by the new seas he was seeing and exhausted too from scanning each new part for a lonely boat. To the rest of the family, each new sea was exactly the same as each old sea. Try as they might, they could not see them for themselves without his help.

He was lucky right up to the moment he was boarded by piratical parasites on that ship, when he caught the same cold that everyone else but was careless with himself. Evil gripped his lungs. Fever lit his eyes and his skin and the children took turns bathing his head. The Captain on the advice of the Surgeon sent him to his bunk below the Carpenter. The hot silence of his tongue was soon intruded upon by the sawing of his breath and the rasping of his cough.

On the fever's fifth day, Michael left Joseph's side before dawn to relieve himself. He climbed the stair and rolled with the ship. He had constructed a little fantasy of a magical and easy new land they were

heading for but knew it would be raw and new and harsh. He was worried about his Papa. But they all agreed they could afford to be hopeful and relax a little now that the Surgeon had measured their father, listened to his blood, and dosed him with life-preserving poisons. Papa had certainly sounded quieter during the night. It was this quiet that brought Michael awake so early and to allow himself to steal away from dimly seen bunks of a Carpenter, four sheet-men and the children's only father.

As Michael fastened his trousers a few minutes later, he saw a dawn shadow moving off to his right along the rail, shadow that turned into his lumbering father.

“Papa! You are better! Be careful, don't over – “

As he got close, he saw that the Papa-shadow was rocking slowly back and forth and on its face, which shone with a glow of the worst fever yet, was rapture. Joseph was staring at the sea and smiling and his trembling hand which could hardly raise its arm was pointing at something that Michael didn't see. And with a word, one last word, a message of no meaning then to his son, a hoarse, whispered “Trace” Joseph collapsed and the light of his disease extinguished as the sun hit him and Michael caught him dead in his arms.

Michael went first to the cabin of the Surgeon, a huge burly man with a giant red beard who looked like a butcher but was as sensitive as a lamb, and then to Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, who was a small man of delicate proportion with fine fingers and a light treble tone who was as ruthless as the Surgeon was gentle. The Surgeon (who had no other name known to the family) went

to minister to the body. The Captain called for the Carpenter (whose name was Jacque) to fetch a plank, a bed sheet and some rope.

Soon Joseph was trussed in white linen on a hard bed and, as the sun crawled upwards from the water, the family came to the deck with the officers and stood silently while Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, who was raised by Jesuits, muttered some words from a bible. Then he cut the rope binding the sheet to the board and Joseph Coroth, known as Papa, the husband of Vivienne the Unremembered, slipped into the sea, pulled by lead nailed to his soles and weighing his pockets; rich with this grey gold of the dead. Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux ordered Jacque the Carpenter to restore the plank to the stores and the sheet to Joseph Coroth's bunk. He coiled the two pieces of rope carefully himself before returning to his mug and his prayers and his bed; and all this before the sun had climbed half-way to the top of the sky.

This, then, was the ending of Joseph the map maker, Papa the wonderful, surveyor, engineer, and, unbeknownst to any, an earl. His father's father had lost his battles, one of which was dealing with the loss of his eldest prodigal son to a runaway horse and one the loss of his remaining well-loved but protesting craftsman son to tuberculosis. Joseph was the title's unaware heir and he had just left it to Michael his unaware son in turn (for Michael was the eldest and, with Sarah, in his twenties; Elizabeth, David and Robert were almost twenty, Bruce was just fifteen and Alice, thirteen.)

"Sarah," said Michael, "we're on our own now. We must look after the younger ones." He turned to the rest, pale in his grief but no

more so than they: “Everyone must pitch in to make what we can together of our fortune in the new land. You and I, Sarah, shall be heads of the family.”

The pomposity of this speech is forgivable in the circumstances but once it had its claws into him, self-importance stayed. He remained in its spell to the end of his days in Onogo. As his first act moving from patriarch apparent to real, he gravely put Papa’s old leather satchel which contained amongst other things the Rules over his head and assumed the twin mantles of Unconsummated Parenthood and of Unknowing Earldom.

And so it was.

“That’s an excellent story. It has all the hallmarks and makings of a buccaneer’s tale of old.” Samuel’s head was lolling as he sat in his highchair.

“Thank you, Samuel. It is however a history rather than a story.”

I took him gently under the arms - I’m getting used to this now - and took him for his morning nap.

The addition to the Rules for today is clear:

Coincidences abound, but they don’t always go the way you want them to. They are not to be commanded by men, not even commanders of boats. But one coincidence looked for and lost (that of finding a lost compatriot) can sometimes but is not always to be, balanced by one that is not looked for, such as a coincidence of aristocrats.

WHAT I HAVE TAKEN

#

Dear Cal,

I've mentioned that I took your hair the first night we met, have I not? It was not the only thing I took. I took your seed within me that night and your smell to my dreams and those I had many, many times since.

I keep this hair in a pottery jar with the word 'Honey' carved into its gray clay when wet. The top is a golden brown with a cute knob on it. I also have in there more hairs (some with roots), the grainy offerings from your shaver, a patch of skin about four centimetres square that I saved from your sunburned shoulder one summer, complete with a freckle-shadow. I have clippings from your nails and from the bottom half of your ties – I'm sorry about that but that is what some women scorned do before they straighten themselves out.

I keep this jar in my pantry beside the toaster.

I have other things too. Your favourite CD, a bow-tie, your best-loved book. I took these long before we broke up though you only thought to ask me for them then and once since. I don't keep these in the jar by the toaster. I store them in a green nylon sports bag which is in the hall cupboard rubbing lovingly against the end of my long winter coat.

I have plans for all of these things.

Yours forever,

Viv.

FLESH RUNES

#

Samuel and I grow closer every day. We're sharing a lot.

"Tell me about your parents."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't like to talk to anybody about them."

I looked out. There were two birds on the wires leading to the street.

They looked like the two that had been discussing me - no. Too small.

"You asked about my relationship with my family. What about yours with your family?"

"I have no family any more. My parents are gone."

"No brothers, sisters? Cousins?"

"None."

"Tell me. It's only fair."

Cal, I looked at the boy, wrapped in his puffy jacket and track pants, his eyes wide and innocent. And do you know what? I couldn't resist him.

"Oh, alright then. Where shall I start?"

"With your father."

"My father was named My Father."

"Cute. I overheard my parents talk about your parents. They said your father was rich. That you lived in a great Big House somewhere in the country. That you had everything but that you gave it all away to be your own person. But you also told me it wasn't true."

"Yes, that is what I told Callum. The truth is a little more complicated."

"You mean you lied."

“No, I didn’t lie. I didn’t intend to deceive but to relieve. Better and easier for Cal and my friends and everyone else to believe a simpler nicer truth.”

Samuel played with the tassel on his jacket and put it into his mouth.

“Sophistry.”

“Don’t suck that. It’s dirty.”

“Will.” And he did. “A white lie, then,” he said, his mouth full of tassel and making gummy noises.

“Whatever, to use your word. Do you want the history or not?”

He sat quietly, if a little moistly.

A History of My Parents

My father Stewart was a complex of a man, possessing many talents, the habits learning and crafts of many men. Often jolly, helpful and wanting to do things. Except when he was taciturn, sour or sullen. Frequently he would be out at work, on business, the pub, on mysterious errands never explained. His words on greeting me were always of this type:

‘Now. Let’s see what we have here, eh? Crikey, you’re tall!

How about sitting down and watching the game while get myself a drink.

Hey, I’m going into town tomorrow. Wanna come along? I’ll be an

hour or two. They’ve got a movie playing at the Odeon you might like.’

“I paraphrase, of course.”

“Of course,” said Samuel, wriggling deep into the sofa.

I realise now that I should have missed him more than I did when I was at boarding school, should have treasured him. But I always had my books and scribblings and boarding makes you self-sufficient.

As for my mother, that was different. Lindy was not my real mother. My real mother was called Ruth, and she died when I was very young. She seems a lovely person (though I'm not naïve – the stories and the single photo I stole from a folder in the desk depict her in a series of still life paintings and one can never see what is behind the velvet tablecloth or the painter's eye; the extent to which the fruit might be rotten at the back).

Lindy the replacement mother was part flighty, part dour, sometimes religious, kind in parts, cruel in others. I was asked to call her mother, and so I always did, being a young lady who followed the rules even then. She was also of many parts, always busy – with friends, sewing circles, church groups, university papers, book clubs, the house; the mixed concerns of any mixed mother of that set. She would always take me shopping as soon as I arrived for the weekends or holidays, the short term or the long.

'This would fit you nicely. There, that's good. Do you like that? You can have it. Don't worry about the cost, we can afford it. It's nice for you to have your own things.. We should go and have afternoon tea. Perhaps with scones and cream? They do a nice one in Delaney's. Would you like to?'

"Again, you paraphrase?" The tassel was so wet it was stuck with slime to his collar. His eyes were closed, his breathing ragged and he appeared to be able to say this with his mouth not moving, open all the time. He is a clever boy, Cal.

"Enormously. Listen."

It was about the time I turned thirteen when I realised boarding was to be my life that I started to think of Lindy as the sham-mother. Why? Because I had the clear impression that she really didn't like or want me. Liked her life and her friends and her routine but I was a necessary nuisance, needed to keep her place in the world so that she could spend on this and that while she shored up her morality by pointing at me. But I was taught to be polite even if it cost my inner self; time would heal, sticks and stones, soon be over. All good advice from the institution of boarding.

It was only when my father died that I awakened to my gifts fully. A tingling came upon me. That is the way it always starts with we Faerie, the tingling. It changes us instantly but takes time to take hold and show itself; like a virus.

"Sounds ghastly."

"Stop interrupting or I will have to end the story here and now."

"Sorry, Vivienne." His face was still a study in innocence asleep.

"Listen. It changed me greatly. It scared me at first. There was this elephant in my head that swelled and pulsed and, I must admit, still hurts my head sometimes. So many memories, so many trunks, this elephant; more like an octopus. And my thoughts. Each followed on from a memory, each came to a fork, each thought could go one of two or more ways. These forks of thought, these thorks. How like the sound of a bird it is. An elephant bird, perhaps. An extinct, grey thing of death. I cannot abide the sound of birds even when dead, and it weighs me down."

"You're getting morose and off the subject. Tell me more about your parents."

"No. I've had enough. I told you, I don't like to think about it. No more."

"Well, another story then."

"Seven Uncles?"

"No. More about your ancestors."

I sighed. "After I've made myself a cup of tea."

When I stood he roused himself, his eyes opened and his hands reached for me.

"Lolly. Wanna lolly?"

Quarter of an hour later I was snuggled up on the sofa with Samuel, a nice healthy banana in his hand, a mug of sweet tea and a drink of milk on the coffee table. Samuel had a colouring book open at a pony with a high tail and perky ears above huge eyelashes and he was colouring in with a red biro and occasional mushy sweeps with the end of his banana.

The Family Arrives

It was early in February of 1793 when *La Recherche*, with its diminishing stores of worm-biscuits and rancid water supporting its fellow travellers anchored off some rugged islands, invisible on the Captain's charts. The Captain, always with an eye to his duty, had Michael take up Joseph's tools and prepare novice partial charts with a sextant of man-fashioned brass and the sun of God-fashioned brass, and with papers clocks compass. The place, though harsh, was harsh with the sort of beauty that stirred the Captain and so he logged in his journal a description which he found he could not improve upon, which began with these lines:

*"...trees of an immense height and proportionate
diameter, their branchless trunks covered with evergreen foliage,
some looking as old as the world;"*

And continued in a familiar way, The quiet satisfaction with which he christened with wine officers passengers this, the Île de la Saint Geneviève, was burst when around the point came a long dinghy, bearing two men rowing, three men standing, five muskets erect and one ensign armorial of the Kingdom of Great Britain waving. Sighing and telling his men to remove the anger from their faces, he laid aside his mug and straightened his wig.

"Welcome!" he cried through cupped hands in shredded English. "What islands is thees?"

After a long pause an answering cry came from one of the standing three, his long-booted-foot on the gunwale, his red jacket buttoned and his man-brass shining in the late afternoon God-brass. Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux had salt spray from the nearby rocks in his mouth and he tasted its bitterness, mixed with the remains of his sour ship wine.

"It belongs to His Royal Majesty, King George the Third of England. These islands are the Chatham Islands, discovered two years past".

"And a bloody hellish place it is, too," said Major Jamieson a half hour later, sitting on the shore in deck chairs with Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux and their respective brother officers. "Full of rocks and crags and bleeding natives. Morioris they call themselves. Savages, I call them, but I suppose God's people too, in

their own way.” Jamieson raised his glass. “You know we are at war again, sir? England and France?”

“No, I deed not know. But it ees inevitable, ees it not? That our two countries are fighting forever?” The Captain sighed again.

“Yes. It is and always will be, I think. No matter. Until I have actual orders that I’m to attack you, or you me, we here on the other side of the world should not fight. Here we are all the same and the only enemies are the sea, storms, natives and the drunken bastards who kill the whales for the riches it brings them. To the King,” he said, throwing back his glass, uncomfortably aware of the bulging papers peeping from his breast.

“To the People,” said Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d’Entrecasteaux, draining his mug, suspicious of the papers bulging in the Major’s breast pocket. “I had best go back. We sail in two days and I have supplying to do.”

The Captain bowed with an elegant French grace, despatched men for water, and loudly proclaimed a party would go inland to trade with the natives the next day. Then Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d’Entrecasteaux accepted a pleasantly delivered invitation for luncheon for the entire crew at 12:00 noon the next day at the British encampment over the hill and furtively sailed at midnight instead.

Which was just as well because Major Jamieson and half his men were at 10:45am the next morning on longboats with muffled oars, bound for the *Eagle*, moored just around the next point. By 11:00am, the bulge in the Major’s pocket had found its way flattened on the chart-desk of the master of that good ship. He had already overseen the quiet loading of

big guns with his crew and half the British soldiers. The remaining British were hidden, squeezed five men and five muskets to a tent at the encampment, waiting as spiders for their luncheon flies – who never arrived.

Jamieson cursed the master of the ship for not having the common sense to keep a lookout on the French ship in the next bay. The master cursed the major for the same. They both cursed the fact that even if they knew the direction to take in pursuit, half their men were stranded on shore hiding like idiots at a surprise party when the guest of honour is away on holiday.

When the French ship crashed into the dawn, many miles from shore, the lookout saw away to the west an extraordinary canoe with three men in it. The big nameless Surgeon was on deck with his glass.

“The boat appears to be made of reeds. The strange thing is that there are more gaps for the sea to wash through than there is material. And I can see are bladders or gourds amongst the crew’s legs.”

“They’ll be to keep the contraption afloat,” said one crewman to another (neither of whose real names Alice never heard – at that moment the first appeared to be called ‘Rope’ because of his job for the day.) “Bloody savages are probably using the stomachs of their heathen victims. I hate ‘em all. What are the crew like?”

“Skin yellow-brown, noses hooked, eyes deep brown. Huge muscles and hair was as black as a Chinaman’s. They have fan-shaped plumes of red paroquet feathers in front of top knots. Two have a thong of seal-skin with a whale’s tooth dangling on it and another a seal-fur cloak.”

The odd little boat disappeared slowly behind them, a curiosity never fully satisfied.

There was little for the girls to do on board. The Captain thought it unseemly that women should be working in any capacity on the ship, and most of the crew were whipped into a lather of fear at the thought by that cat o' nine tails, superstition. So Alice spent more and more time with the ship's Carpenter, who similarly had little to do while at sea, and they each improved at the other's language.

As the days passed, Alice could see the Captain felt uncomfortable in her presence. She saw from his actions and reactions he found the others charming and hard-working, intelligent without being arrogant. And that is proper as it is what they were. But whenever Alice came onto deck he would turn away quickly. His conversation would sometimes falter and, though he was as civil and generous with her as with the others, he would get nervous whenever Alice looked in his direction and often took his leave.

"I'm appalled. He is far too old for this, for forming an utterly inappropriate, romantic feeling for you! You're a child still!" said Earl Michael when she brought it up.

But Sarah, wise Sarah said:

"Hush, Michael. It is not that. He probably doesn't know what it is. But if you think carefully, you will know as I do it is because Alice is different."

Different? What on God's earth could she mean? In what way different? thought Alice. But before she could ask, Michael shrugged.

“It’s true. We all know that. He just feels it as well, I suppose. But I’ll watch him. And you, Alice, you be sure to stay away from him if you’re alone, d’you hear?”

Alice’s astonishment was turning to shame as she thought of her reflection in the mirror and tried to see through the veil of memory the ugly blemishes and deformities that must exist, visible to everyone but her.

“It is nothing,” said Elizabeth, smiling. “Nothing to be worried about. Why, it’s just that you’re more beautiful and more intelligent than we. Then there is the other thing...”

“Other thing?” Alice cried. “Other thing? What other – “

Again wise Sarah, bitter-sweet Sarah: “It is that you’re more... interesting than us, Alice. Your lovely stories of our mother that you make up. Your way with birds and animals. The way you stare into the world and see things that we only glimpse at a little. Your eyes. It makes you a little unearthly-seeming to people, we think.”

Make up stories? Unearthly? How dare she! Alice rushed from the cabin and took huge lungfuls of air at the side of the boat. Then for the next two days and the night between she remained in a huff and in her bunk with the covers drawn over her head, eating and drinking what the others left her only after they went, refusing to talk to anyone. *How dare they say that! What does it mean, my stories of our mother? What stories? What stare into the world? What did I see that others didn’t?*

But she soon enough tired of this self-indulgence and took herself back to the world of water, wood and sail-cloth and no-one spoke of it. And if the Captain still shuffled, well, so did the Surgeon and the

Carpenter and some of the crew. Alice forgave them all in her heart and held her head up and stared in what she supposed must be an unearthly way into the distance until either their discomfiture or they themselves dissipated.

“Elle est très beau. I think it is those green eyes,” said the Captain quietly.

“Vert? Non, non vert, Antoine,” said the Surgeon, “ils sont d'ambre.”

Even Alice admitted that her eyes disobeyed the rules. They changed colour with the weather, the time of day and sometimes just because they wished to. The discussion about them raged between the officers throughout the voyage. Some saw amber like the Surgeon, others green and two saw an icy blue. And whenever two or more of them contrived to stand close to Alice they would each see that the other was right and change his mind, leading to more astonished discussions. It was this, the Captain said one day to her brothers, which made him uncomfortable. There was something of the magic in Alice and it was her eyes that gave it away. Something wild rather than evil but quite un-Catholic and made him squirm so. But like all men he wrongly rationalised this as just to do with the eyes and signalling nothing else.

When the ship was becalmed for three days, Alice came onto the deck and looked first at the Captain and then at the sea. *Silly man*, she thought. She held out her hands, palms down over the side of the ship and sang. The song was wild and calm at the same time with tales of Gods and Men and of Bargains. It was in a language that none knew and yet all understood. Its keys were different to any noise ever made by any

instrument. It lasted for five terrible minutes and not a person stirred throughout the ship or spoke. When Alice stopped, the breeze started then grew until it was a healthy steady wind; precisely what the Captain desired.

The Captain, the Surgeon, and the crew forgot all of this almost immediately of course, as did the family, but some residue remained lingering on their souls because they all stayed away from Alice after that as much as they could. In fact the only one who came near was Jacque the Carpenter. He brought Alice a jug of water or two each day and carried her food and seemed always almost at her elbow. There was something sweet and kind and thoughtful about Jacque. He was just a few years older than she. He had brown hair and blue-green eyes and he needed glasses to read the Bible and the novels and essays he kept the others from knowing he had.

“Not many of the other men can read. I think they believe common men such I sissy if we read like an officer,” he said one night, as the moon glistened on the swelling black water. He was not common, it turned out. He was, like Alice’s grandfather, an aristocrat. The second son of a count but in France one had to be very careful and conceal such things if one didn’t want to reveal the inside of one’s neck. So he had taken his family to the countryside and became a farmer renting the land of a human pig who had stolen the land from someone less careful of revealing his lineage. So Jacque had the physical upbringing of the peasant but the emotional and educational upbringing of grander genes.

La Recherche rolled into the Waitemata Harbour in the Hauraki Gulf and made anchor at Auckland on a bright and blue day. Even the

most tired rushed to the deck and gasped at the beauty and abnormality of the islands they passed, the bird-song they could hear a mile off the coast of each, the wonderful raw parabolic slopes of the volcano the Captain called Rangitoto guarding the final approach. The Captain moved to record of this in his log, in words that seemed apt:

"...trees of an immense height and proportionate diameter, their branchless trunks covered with evergreen foliage, some looking as old as the world;

"closely interlacing in an almost impenetrable forest, they served to support others "

The ship forged around a high headland and anchored in still water. The crew launched two longboats to cross the channel under the direction of the First Mate. The Coroths insisted on going with the first boats and the Captain, knowing of the peaceful reputation of the Maori people, reluctantly agreed.

The startling sight of an enormous canoe broke from the cover of rocks to the south. It was, filled with two long rows of brown men, each with a short paddle. The bow was high, carved ornately and decorated with feathers. Alice was in the same boat as with Sarah and Robert, both of whom gripped the side, their faces pale. Not Alice. She was fascinated.

She could all see the men were similarly adorned. Each black top knot supported a long white feather, the faces carved with black designs. The canoe drew close and shadowed the longboats to the shore. There was complete silence in all three vessels but for the splash of paddles and oars and the occasional grunt.

The longboats touched the beach and the crews hauled them up slowly, hands trembling and eyes darting. The canoe people didn't wait to hit the land but rose in a mob and hurled themselves into the water dozens of yards out. Skirts of tubes of rolled flax, violent in their coloured strips, floated around them at their waists. They rushed to shore avoiding the longboats and joined a group swelling with others like them emerging from the low hills.

The silence remained while the visitors, still swaying with the traces of a million waves, and the much larger group watched each other. Hands clutched muskets and swords, staves and clubs. Then, as the First Mate bravely stepped forward with his hand outstretched, moving slowly, a chanting broke out amongst the Maori. Suddenly a warrior, spinning a long carved stave with a white feather at its neck, danced forward and back and forward again, his eyes staring frighteningly wide and showing his broad tongue, jerking his head and feet and hands this way and that in a disquieting way like a tall bird, all the while stalking forward. The rest slapped their thighs and bare chests and pointed their tongues. The warrior placed something on the ground in the space between the groups.

By now the Frenchmen and the Coroaths were all terrified and clustered together.

"Shoot them," whispered one of the Captain's men to another. The French was beautiful to the ear. "It'll be too late in a minute." And he raised his musket.

The Surgeon pushed the man's hand down. After some general showing of fist shaking and chest-thrusting in the manner of men

everywhere, the two groups retreated cautiously and each considered what it should do.

It was then that one of the sailors, an idiot called Gerard, the one who was preparing earlier to fire his musket, feeling brave now that there was more distance, stepped into the space and picked up the object which the warrior had placed on the ground. It was a piece of green rock about the size and shape of a robin's egg, polished smooth and lustrous. He cautiously stepped backwards to give it to the First Mate, his eyes never leaving those of the warrior.

The First Mate didn't know what to make of this. But Sarah Coroth, Alice's wise sister, did. She whispered to the First Mate. "It's a gift," she said, touching the rock lightly. It was a beautiful thing. "And it seems to me if someone gives you a gift..."

"Then you must give one back, Gerard," said the First Mate, who was no fool.

"What? And risk being slaughtered?" said Gerard.

"You picked it up. Oh, if you don't, then I will," said Sarah and pulled her comb from her hair.

"Wait," said Gerard, who was a fool but neither dishonourable nor cowardly. "I will do it, Mademoiselle." He took her comb with a slight bow and carefully walked back to where the green stone had come from. He set the whalebone comb on that same spot then walked backwards just as the warrior had in his turn. There was a palpable sense of change in the Maori people. A tension seemed to ease and they looked to one another in ways that told of fear leaking away. The chant re-started raggedly. The warrior came dancing forward and picked up

the comb, relief written into the tattoos of his face and the renewed jerking, slapping and brandishing of his fellows. He got back to his men and they examined the comb. After a brief argument, the warrior put the comb into his top knot and pulled himself up with gravity for approval whilst the rest of them nodded and slapped and laughed at him. From somewhere behind the men Alice could hear a woman wailing an ethereal song.

The warriors stared curiously at the sailors who were ordered to stand still. One sailor, as he was examined on all sides, his clothing picked at with brown fingers and his blue eyes pointed at, gave a cry and stepped away only to bump into another Maori and he whirled in a panic, dropping his musket. The first man was looking into the barrel, his eye an inch from the end, a telescope into the soul of the industrial age. The sailor grabbed his weapon back, tripped and fell and all the Maori men burst into laughter. The rest of the visitors joined in while the man's expression turned first from fear to embarrassed annoyance and then grinning.

Then all of the warriors swarmed around, felt poked prodded the sailors' clothing, stroked the muskets, handled caps and harnesses, tried on clothing and posed in mimicry of the Frenchmen to raucous laughter on all sides. No man however gave up his musket or his club. Some of the older sailors, long-practiced with the residents of other island nations, began trading metal buttons from their shirts for carved clubs, sticks or feathers and motioning that two or even three buttons might be forthcoming if women, drawn with curving hands in the air, were to appear.

Over the next few hours, the family helped with the unloading and looked to the practical things the family would need when they set off to find a new home here. Michael alone wore a frown, more worried than the rest as to how they were to proceed now that they were at Joseph's Promised Land and the circlet of responsibility sat heavily on him.

That evening those from the land and those from the sea came to the beginnings of understandings and of misunderstandings. They formed a temporary alliance there, just above the beach. Over the next few hours a tiny regimented canvas settlement formed and then quickly turned into a larger ramshackle town as the local people dragged in cloaks and mats to sit on, knocked tents down so that they could admire the fabric and pegs, and a gentle chaos ensued. Food, hardware, clothing, and the start of wisdom and foolishness was traded. When the women emerged from the bush, and the remainders of the precious spirits and wine released at last from the longboats as the Captain nodded, the mood became jollier, the laughter louder and soon the Corothes were amongst a revelling group of exhausted sailors who were come to a sort of home amongst a family that they were adopting for the night.

The warriors initially turned up their faces at the taste of the liquor, but the sailors insisted and a bravado soon set in to prove they could drink as much of the burning stuff as the Frenchmen. They were soon loud, most with joy, some with anger, and then there were those who progressed quickly through slurred shouts and stumbling steps to vomiting and poisoned sleep.

And it is fair to say that many of the sailors were practiced in the fine art of getting as much of the stuff between the lips of the maidens, the better to get between their legs when those same legs crumpled. This should not have shocked Alice and her family because they had been well advised it would likely happen, but it did, it sickened and angered them. Michael insisted the family withdraw to the edge of the gathering.

When the fires were burning low and there were alcohol-corpses strewn around and disturbing grunts and moans from deep within the bushes, when the night-birds were calling and the waves lapping in arrhythmic music on the golden sand, a shy young man sat by Alice at the edge of the firelight. She admired the hard curled flax of his skirt the feathers of his beautiful cloak, but most of all the lines of his face. His tattoos were like a strange language, both the darkness of the ink and the spaces in between and she tentatively raised her hand to his face. Suddenly she realised as her fingers traced the patterns on cheeks, forehead and chin, that these were a message of ancestors, just like the silver runes her mother had taught her which she had all but forgotten. Alice felt echoes of that same tingling that she felt the night her mother disappeared into the sea. She wanted to read these lines. She asked the young man what they meant but of course he understood nothing and just pointed to her own face, a blank white canvas Alice felt strangely ashamed of.

Alice went to Michael and reasoned then begged until he relented. He withdrew the journal of their father from the satchel that formed part of Michael's pillow, just as it had Joseph's, until the day he too died. It is a thing with unknowing earls, perhaps. He helped her to

sharpen the pen and harden the nib in the fire and then stood with his arms crossed and watched her face furrow as, with a careful script, she added a new rule, the last Rule of Joseph, and the first Rule of Alice, though neither she nor the others knew what it truly meant: “Trace”.

Michael sniffed, put the journal away and patted her on the head. The patronage of an Earl.

The time came when, early in the morning, the Coroths left the beach, the sailors and the people of the land and headed into the Promised Land. They went with a leather satchel, a heavy book, a bag of walnuts, Joseph Coroth’s geological hammer compass charting tools two pots an axe shovel nails given to them by a large and nameless surgeon and a carpenter named Jacque.

As for Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d’Entrecasteaux, we know that he was lucky. He was lucky in life, had been the Governor of Mauritius and master of important explorations. He was not so lucky when it came to finding Captain Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse.

The main reason for this was the the barnacles that clung the wood of his ship to it. Barnacles whisper to the sea as it rushes past. In the Northern Hemisphere, the home seas of both these French Captains, the barnacles and the seas whispered in the languages of Europe Africa Asia, there had been such commerce for thousands of years. There was always some barnacle or other that spoke more than one language and so the gossip that occurred in this way between barnacles and sea would pass from one ship to another and therefore Frenchmen could find each other. But here the South Seas babbled in no known language when

addressed by the arrogant elderly barnacles of Europe that still clung here and there to the timbers of the ships. And these barnacles, set in their ways, did not at that time deign to learn the strange tongues the local barnacles whispered to the new seas and refused to teach them the old languages. And so it would be that Frenchmen would only come across one another in the open South Seas quite by chance and though the Captain was lucky, he was not that lucky.

That's enough, Cal. I've seen the shape of the Rule that I must add and I will give you a glimpse of that:

Historical figures come and go whether they are recorded in history or not. It is nonsense to expect them to appear on the stage of one history just because they are characters in some wider history. Coincidence and synchronicity are all very well in theory. But they are easily and always thwarted by small molluscs who haven't learned all of the languages of the world. And what mollusc ever knows that? So here is the Rule: coincidences of history never happen by chance.

LINES

#

I met a man a year after you left, Cal. He stayed with me for four weeks, each longer than the first. I told him about your Whakapapa. How you could recite your ancestors all the way back through generations until you reached the first waka to arrive a thousand years ago. Your lineage, I said, reached Kupe himself, that great seafaring hero. Do you know what he said? He said “I doubt it.”

And we argued for a while. He was one of those English bank types we’d meet when we were in London, a fucking expert on everything but who knows really nothing unless it has the words ‘exchange’ or ‘Luxemburg’ or ‘put options’ in it. Who was he to question your history, I asked?

He said it didn’t matter much. A thousand years was as nothing, he said. He could trace his lineage easily the same distance because his family still owned the same stone pub in the same street that was built in 1154. His brother still ran it. That was lineage, he said, not some fairy-tale oral history.

“But fair play,” he said, “What do any of us know about the guy’s ancestors? If they’ve been reciting all that time then maybe that part’s true. But come on, a thousand years is no time at all within which magic can have created the land animals birds insects fishes people in New Zealand.. Can’t have been happening in a magical beginning of time way when my great-great-something was pulling pints across the water. How likely is it?”

But he is wrong. The myth mistrals that blow magic blow continuously and there is no such thing as time. The universe is different in different places and there is no inconsistency with between beer turnips squires manure a

thousand years ago in one land and creation gods heroes pulling fish-land with jaw bones in another. It is always happening.

Then he told me about a book. A book by a famous historian, Michael King. A history of New Zealand and in that book, this King of History says that it's all a myth, invented by Europeans.

I bought it. It book is a History of New Zealand, it says. It does not say it is concise. But it is. Too concise because it does not refer to my Family at all, though it does yours. It does not mention the Family despite the enormous impact that it has had despite the wealth and power it has exercised, despite the fact that it existed and despite the fact, the very palpable fact, that I exist. I'm here and have always been here and yet I'm not part of that concise History in any way. I'm in the spaces between.

For a short while I thought it sad that my enchanted history isn't referred to. It is invisible to the concise History. And when I thought about that it didn't surprise me but instead gave me warmth and comfort. The concise History does not say it does not exist and that is enough for me. I realised that my Family is invisible and that is how it has survived. It has outlived the Tudors and the Kings of France, Ozymandius King of Kings and the Pharaohs, dinosaurs and dodos, sloth-bears and saber-toothed Dalshis. It has survived intact against the onslaught of dictators and warmongers and false accusations leading to ducking stools. For this reason we have survived – we don't put our heads up. We stay low and we live, as I've told you, in the spaces between people and that means in the spaces between history. Invisible to the King of History and all who would follow him.

I even thought for a while that it was sad for you that when it does refer to your family it says that its chanted history is founded on a pretence.

But you always were a pretentious prick, Callum. Even your prick was pretentious when I made love to you and it stabbed me back with that friend of mine, that Mary, that Magdalene, that woman who may or may not have been a prostitute but was a Judas to me.

I don't know. I've always suspected that these overblown tales of English aristocrats even though documented in paper rather than tongue, all they give you one half of one half of one half so watered down through generations of dilution and pollution that all you have in the end is water and piss. And even those firm, carefully drawn, royal lines are now different and all subject all along the trceries to some bastard's intervention. And this man was a bastard, Callum. He was a bastard who just packed and left without a bloody-mary word. At least you used that. That bloody Mary.

With my bloodline, there is no watering down. That is just the way it is. But your line – you know what the joke is? That the line you recite is a single line that goes back so many generations that it is a record stamp seal only of what you're almost nothing about. The laws of exponents, squaring, means that the one remarkable thing about the line you identify with is that it is by definition saying that most of you – almost all of you – is not that by which you identify yourself. Where's the rest, Callum? Where are the lines that connected to and linked and polluted and diluted this line? They together form more than 99% of you and yet you insist on focussing on this one ancestor to the exclusion of everything else that is you. What if that tiny bit was taken away? Would you still be you?

The Englishman is as mistaken as you. Defining himself only by beer lines he is betraying the hundreds of others that make him up.

I love maths. I love the symmetry of exponents and squaring. It is about balance. I like things to be in balance. Like clockwork. And I love the way that I can take away a little part of you that you have already given up to someone else. What I have taken away will make you less by such a great amount even though I have not taken away any physical part of you. You will still have your infinitesimal lines of trceries and yet you will be diminished far more than if one of those little lines, the one you name yourself from, was reeled in away from you.

The symmetry I love is amongst the reasons why I chose to cut your ties lengthwise rather than across. That plus the extra time that it gave of the delicious feeling of the snip snip snip. It also reminded me of the proper punishment for adulterous males: not simple castration but mutilation more profound.

ONOGO'S BIRTH

#

We moved again today.

I didn't realise how much I had brought with me during the preparation phase or in the last few weeks. I threw out almost everything except the absolute essentials and burned what I could in a forty gallon drum behind the back shed. I could see memories screaming and writhing in silent pain amongst the billows of smoke.

Everything that I could get into the car I put in while it was in the garage so no-one could see. Then I set the timer plugs on the desk lamps so that it would look like we were still home night after night.

I took a risk by carrying Samuel out in the open by the hand and wheeling Jonathon in the pushchair for a good fast walk past shops school park post office and waved and smiled and trying to be seen as much as possible. Then while Samuel napped at home, I wrote out several copies of an advertisement with my left hand for a Portuguese language tutor and made a lot of good spirited loud and happy requests and fuss about putting them up in the corner shop supermarket service station bookshop. No-one in Tiny Town will respond but everyone will remember the name of the Happy Family is Wilson that its hair is not blonde that is heading for Portugal that its number is three.

Samuel was lulled to sleep by the rocking of the car when I carefully drove away but woke when a semi-trailer almost hit us. I accidentally got too close to the centre line. The fool should have been looking out. Made a huge noise with his oversized phallus-horn.

"More history."

"Please. Samuel, you will have to learn manners."

“Jonathan is just sitting there lapping the stories up and he’s never polite.

Never even asks. Is that fair? Shouldn’t you be scolding him first?”

“Jonathon is a lifeless doll.”

“If you say so. So, please.?”

Onogo

When the seven stars arrived at Onogo, they didn’t recognise it for what it would become. All they knew was that they were tired from their travels and travails and that the point where the two rivers met, with a little hill just at the fork, a papery mulberry tree at its crown and gentle golden tussock on its slopes, looked like it could be a home.

They had followed their noses wind rain, tracing the lines of the bottoms of valleys and the edges of ridges Turned from scared young people into strong men and women. They had The Rules For Family Living which they read nightly like the Bible and found things in it that helped them while things found out along the way were added. They watched from a distance as Maori women stripped the flesh from flax in hot water with the sharp edges of stones and shells. They saw young boys take the large juicy birds from nooses draped around troughs of seeds. They saw the sweet purple kumara tubers dug from the ground - and stole some from a hut on stout legs like a pig, leaving a precious iron nail in their place.

In Lantanesis there were red, white and black stone buildings. Here the people painted theirs with the same colours but built them of wood. On the island there had been runes etched in every rock, and here there were runes on the faces of the people. And as there were there concentric canals surrounding Lantanesis’s northern city, here there were

concentric circles of sharpened stakes around the villages on the conical hills.

By the time they reached Onogo, they were ready to stop.

Their first destructive task on this unsettled hill was to tear down the mulberry tree. All helped but Alice who watched and frowned.

And it was Alice who within an hour of the starting of the building made the first Rule there. When she first spoke the others paused and smiled indulgently. The young men wiped sweat from their brows and the young women wiped hands on their dirty clothes and laughed kindly. Then they continued to talk, the boys of the business of the tree best cut and the girls of the way the rushes were best harvested for the roof. But Alice, she spoke the Rule to them again, in a voice just as tiny and as light as the tree-singers. Still, it was heard above the babble of the physical and they all stopped again, a little annoyed now by Little Sister, the smallest star. They stared at her and they said nothing this time, puzzled. Alice waited. Then Michael called to them to start again because the dark was always coming. Alice spoke the Rule a third time and this time they heard it as a bell that rang over the whole of Onogo, rippling across the slopes and down through the bush in the plain below: cool white wine poured from a heavenly pitcher. They immediately stopped and with wonder that was not quite fear and not quite awe, they remembered for a moment their mother and saw the Rule written in the air above Alice. That night they wrote the new Rule into the book together and obeyed it. No death would be caused in order to construct.

Alice now played her part, though not with back or hands. She sang the seven walnut trees on the hill to grow straight and tall and her song made them grow forty feet over seven days. When they grew she sang them to bend to where they were needed they were woven as living bones into the fabric of the house. Wood was found that had already fallen, sometimes dragged for miles through the bush on flax ropes over the shoulders of the men on a path cleared by the women. Then this was used to dress and flesh the bones. They were clad with clapboard skin milled from naturally fallen timber, the decks and frames and walls and floors all the same. So, following the new Rule, no trees could be killed and Onogo was built only from already dead timber or timber that remained alive.

Their first constructive task on this hill was to plant seven of their walnuts where the mulberry had been. The remainder they planted in neat rows at the foot of the hill. And through the years the walnuts below grew. Their neat rows remained but were mixed in amongst the chaos of younger trees apples peaches oranges lemons gravestones and so remained shrouded secrets. Walnut trees, like Faerie, live in the spaces between.

The seven stars had different strengths and weaknesses. Michael was as solid as the bedrock to which they connected the first beam of Onogo. He knew how to engineer and directed all in their tasks. His dull practicality was decorated by Sarah whose weaving and dyes gradually adorned the house once she had learned to tease flaxen threads and the coloured dusts and saps she smelled and peered out from the land. Elizabeth was the cook who watched the way the fish danced in

the river and made them dance a different jig in the pot, flavoured with leaves and bulked with the hearts of cabbage tree and ferns and soon their kumara. Bruce was able to conjure wood and stone and iron into grace and beauty. He was kept to earth by David and Robert, the farmer and the hunter, who often came when he was away resting and strengthened and bound to reality with their practicality his art.

But Alice. Alice was the silvery stuff that made them a constellation. The others let her be young. She danced between them and lifted their spirits when she came near, renewed their faith in the ways of their father and kept alive, if only a little, the ways of her mother which she alone remembered. She did little favours and left tiny gifts of feathers and flowers twined with straw from the nests of tree-singers. She sang songs of no words and snatches of the most beautiful rhymes came from her lips when needed the most and then were gone as though written in water, leaving the sweet coolness of refreshment.

When it was built it was more than its physical form. It embodied the ideal form of all Faerie mansions. Built upon up and out in all directions, there is a strangeness bound into Onogo, that is discernible but not interpretable by any of its few visitors as the other house that it is.

Onogo grew and all was peaceful. The seven stars were content for a while. But, in time, the older ones became restless. When Michael turned thirty he yearned first for solitude and then for curing it with new love and a new family. He decided to leave Onogo. He wrote a few corrections to the Rules, gave reminders about crops and animals to the men and told all of them that they would have to also find mates. He

packed his bag and walked to the coast. He waited with the people of the land and two sealers he found there for four weeks, then boarded a ship bound for seal colonies.

Michael Coroth came back in 1810 on a strong horse and superior clothes and a fine hat made from a dead seal. Fifteen years before, he had landed in Sydney, saved his wages and then with one toss of a dice at a gaming table, to his own disapproval made enough to become a partner in the ship he had sailed in on. Within a year he owned two vessels, one managed by his ex-partner (who was then happier to be employed and with a little capital for a house). Within three, he had seven and chartered many others. Within five years, from the lonely rocks of offshore islands where the sea froze solid around colonies of fussy playful creatures, he had clubbed himself an empire from blood and cracked skulls and his hat was a symbol of his vast wealth.

He had married but was childless. His wife, who died from cancer three years before his return to Onogo, loved him enough to tell him to see his own family before he too died. So Michael came, with thirty creatures –livestock, four horses and a servant.

Because when Michael Coroth came riding to Onogo with his strong creatures, he was weak and about to die and he knew it. His stout heart had worked too hard and he had consumed too much of the good fatty foods that came with wealth made from good fatty mammals.

What Michael found was not a settlement but Onogo standing alone, and in it Alice alone, except for the tree-singers and some pigs and chickens sent back by David and Robert. He had dreamed, as he watched the creamy wake of his own boat crossing a fierce Tasman Sea,

that Sarah or perhaps David or Robert would run the house. He saw in his progressive mind settlements in the fields. But he saw with his tired eyes nothing of this.

He had found it difficult to find Onogo. His memory had blurred, then and the only map he had was the one he had made himself. He followed his map yet found himself again and again at the coast. He concluded that either that the land had changed or that his map was puzzlingly wrong. He could find no Maori who could guide him and there were still few Europeans who ever went inland for any reason. He found only Jacque the Carpenter. But that was enough because Jacque could sometimes hear a whisper between the hills and trees, telling that his axe had been used only for other than the death of trees and that it was calling him. It was he who led the way whenever Michael's map failed and between them they came to the house.

It had grown. Where once the boards were rough sawn they were now white and smooth – the work of David and Robert before they had gone to seek and make their own fortunes in the timber mills of Tasmania. There was glass in the windows and even wallpaper in the best rooms, all sent by Michael himself from one his Sydney warehouses. Furniture had been carved by Bruce and upholstered by Sarah before they too left a dozen years before.

Bruce had mirrored Michael's success from a different port and on the dead backs of different mammals; the whales his new wife's tribe led him to. He remembered just enough of Onogo to cause seeds and animals, wire and nails, paint and tools to be sent back for years to come

and delivered by Maori who crept in the darkness and tread softly so as not to wake the sleeping spirits inside.

Sarah ran in desolation and in fever the night Elizabeth died and was found and taken by Maori to where the big ships came. She shortly met and married a Lord who sailed in and out of harbour, bachelor and star-stricken husband on the same day, en route from Australia to London (for Sarah was as beautiful as she was talented). She sent back money and pretty things of all origins and styles, sizes and materials, to Onogo, which appeared on the verandas delivered by more of the invisible Maori.

Elizabeth was the sister who by dying sent Sarah first to madness and then to Europe. She died from a consumption that she brought with her from the French ship and which stays buried with her in the ground between the trees of the orchard, her grave marked with a stone, the letters “E” and “BE” still readable amongst the lichen blooms today. She died with fever in her mind and with visions of holiness and spires that lingered with her and then still echoed around the house even after she went in an ecstasy of dreams. The echoes continued to calm the animals and kept Alice company long after Elizabeth’s death.

Each of the members of the constellation thus went from Onogo in their own way and all found wealth or a paradise of a type in their different ways.

Except Alice.

“Alice!”

“Michael!” Her eyes opened wide and her arms flung out. They hugged and danced until Michael had to stop, breathless, his hand on his chest.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just over-tired. It took so long to get here. You know, I had forgotten the way!”

Alice smiled. She would not have expected otherwise given the way magic works. The surprise is that he had found his way back at all. Perhaps, she thought, casting her head to one side and looking at Michael, hearing his ragged breath, seeing his florid cheeks and pale hands, the tremble in his thighs as he sat on the step, perhaps he was able to return because of his illness. It was not hard to see.

“And who is this you have with you? You look familiar.”

“It is Jacque, Alice. Jacque, the ship’s carpenter.”

“Oh, Jacque! How lovely to see you after all these years. You look so well.”

“Thank you, Madame.”

“Mademoiselle still, I’m afraid” and Alice’s laugh climbed the trees and set the tree-singers tinkling again.

Jacque bowed in his way and hid his blush with a quick turn to start unloading the animals’ burdens. She was beautiful as a child but stunning as a woman.

Days and then weeks passed in tales of risk and reward from the big comfortable chair, of the sadness and happiness of home memories from the smallest, and almost silence from the chez lounge where Jacque sat uncomfortably whenever he could find no excuse to fuss with

luggage, fix holes and loose rails, increase the size of enclosures and do what he could to stay out of the burning gaze of the woman whose very look made him nervous and thick-tongued.

Michael spent his last days marking up the Rules with the condensation and reduction of all he had learned and writing letters to far away people whom he would never see again. His letters were matter of fact and settled affairs but each one ended with a message of love and advice, whether to his brokers, managers or captains.

And then came that night when, after a light meal of eggs from the hens he had brought, salads, and a glass of port wine during a long conversation with Alice where he laughed long and loud at memories of his brothers and sisters and of his father, he started to remember with increasing clarity and astonishment their mother. Her beauty and knowledge, of all that she had taught them and of the time she had before she left. The tears that came to his eyes were of sadness and chagrin at having forgotten and treating Alice as he had when she had been disbelieved many times of just this, and of joy at what those memories told him. The night that he went to his bed and died, his bruised heart eased.

The next day Jacque dug where Alice told him to, down in the orchard beside the body of her sister. In the afternoon and into the night he built a coffin from fallen timber he dragged from the bush, knowing somehow that this was the right material to use. And on the following day, in mid-morning, he took the washed and freshly dressed body of Alice's eldest brother, put it into the coffin, nailed the lid and pulled it up onto the cart that good brother had brought from another country laden

with goods. He and Alice then gave him a funeral of their own devising, each speaking from the heart of their memories of the best and worst of him. Then, as future husband and wife, they buried Michael the Earl with a shovel given to Michael and his siblings many years ago by the finest man Alice had ever known, Jacque, a man who didn't know his own brother, then a Count, had also died, childless; Jacque, a Carpenter, a new Count and soon a husband and father, and Mary, the remaining descendant of a line of Earls. For by then every one of the other stars had burned out.

The thirty creatures all remained after Michael was gone, though he never left Onogo again. He remains there now under a slab of whitewashed wood, peeled, blistered and cracked with neither name nor marrow discernible. Made from the heart of a kauri log he had dragged himself years before from the river, from which it had come to them as a gift. The slab was fresh when it was carved and was bled and it was a free man who did it. The man's name was Jacque, a ship's carpenter, then a servant and he had jumped ship ten minutes after Captain Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux had set sail, and became free before his feet plunged into the water.

Over the years that followed Jacque continued to build and rebuild as their family was founded and grew in happiness and with a child, Gordon, and enhanced with fortunes from the cinders of extinguished stars that made their way to Onogo's coffers.

"And that's the story of Onogo's beginning."

"Onogo. That's the place where you grew up?"

"In a manner of speaking. It is my family seat, you might say."

“Manner of speaking? So you didn’t grow up there? Despite what you told my father?”

“Would you like to hear a bit more about Onogo some time? It’s a place that will feature for us soon.”

“Don’t answer, then.”

“I won’t.”

And here is the Rule that these events from history illustrate:

In order for the stories of the ordinary and mundane to be told, we must elevate them to the level of the Great and the Good. But that does not change who or what they are. It does not improve reality to explain it by reference to good and bad, real or not, to embroider it and stitch gold threads of repair into the tapestries of their lives. It does not make the dropped stitches any more dramatic or real.

VEINS

#

Today has been so busy.

First we went to my next prepared hidey hole. Then bussed into a certain town and bought the last of what we need. Then c Samuel's bath and playing with the blocks. I made a scrummy dinner (crunchy carrots sugar peas crispy lamb baked potatoes.) I treated myself to two bottles of a French red, in memory of my memory of the French sailors who brought my kinfolk here.

"Don't you think you've had enough wine?"

"No. Mind your own business."

"It is my business. I'm a minor. An infant. You have the care and responsibility you have taken upon yourself by your actions. You have taken me and put yourself *in loco parentis*. Act like it. Stop this excessive drinking."

"You're safe. Nothing will happen to us here. It is time to sleep soon – what is wine but a sort of half-sleep in glass that can be poured and swirled into dreams in the head? Surely you're safer with me awake but with this lovely glow that warms me than if I were completely asleep as we both usually are all night and will be shortly tonight?"

"More of your sophistry. You drink too much. It's bad for your liver. Its bad for your brain." His face frowned with wrinkles, the ghosts of a future face decades on.

"My liver and my brain will last exactly the same time as each other and as the rest of me. And I'm immortal."

"Get help. You're sick."

"I don't need help. If you promise to leave this alone, I'll tell you a bit more of the history."

“Not much of a trade.”

“Still. That is the offer.”

“Well, I don’t have much choice do I? I’m a helpless infant and you have me at your mercy. Tell your story.”

So I did. I will write here what I told him because I need to tell you too about those ancestors. I’m going to go on despite the thinning maths of genealogy for people. I can because that maths doesn’t apply to me. My genes work quite differently.

I have how the wealth came. Now I told Samuel some of the secrets to the Family’s stability and strength. I will tell you about Alice’s first son, Gordon and his cave. Why? Because it is important to the trip that Samuel and I are about to embark on:

Branching out

Gordon and travelled directly south from Onogo to buy nails and glues, rope and candles. He took supplies for two days and would return to his mother Alice on the third. She was still grieving a year and a day after Jacque’s death and didn’t like be alone any more.

One hour after noon on the first day, he stopped at a clear stream and drank. He sat with his back against a rimu tree and let his horse rest for an hour or so while he napped. He woke to a strange tingling all over his body and suddenly remembered a place he had never been.

Lantanesis came into his mind like a shout. He remembered the Rules that he had read only once and he remembered that his task was now different to anything that it had been. He remembered this knowledge he had for the first time and called to his horse. His mother had died and

Onogo was his and that there was a new task to do before returning home and succumbing to sadness as he would.

They turned east, he and his horse, away from the nails rope candles glue. Gordon felt the sun calling him in the afternoon and again in the morning through the mist as he descended from the hills. He found himself travelling along a series of flood plains and then came to rugged hills, sharper and harder then those he had first encountered. It was difficult work winding his way through bush and rocks. His exploring skills were tested many times.

At last he came from the bush into a clearing on the third day of his travel in the hills and struck a track threading to the east, well worn with red earth wagon wheel ruts. He met no-one on the road for another day and another night and wondered if he was heading toward a place of abandonment.

They crossed a river late in the afternoon and with effort struggled up the other steep bank. Just as the horse, lame from a stone bruise, could be coaxed by Gordon to follow no further, a final twist in the road disgorged a town, dusty and brown with shacks and barns, like a fat, muddy drop wrung from his horse rope.

There had come to the Coromandel Peninsula at that time many pudding ghosts. Perhaps I should tell you about those. One sees them less now days than before. Many people take them for granted and sometimes I truly think they don't notice them there at all. Pudding ghosts are insubstantial, transparent and gray. As tall as a man, with no limbs and huge deep brown eyes with no pupil or iris, two inches across each one. The rest as everyone knows is diaphanous gown all the way to

the ground. No-one knew then, or knows now, where they come from and no-one can divine their purpose. They are just there. Sometimes they crowd around as though curious and annoy like sandflies except they make no mark and have no touch. They can't be swatted away or batted at – they have no substance whatsoever and the hand simply waves through them unaffected. Similarly one can walk straight through them though most people don't. Gordon and I and everyone else I can remember being presumed that people avoid them because the actuality of walking through them is that they are nothing, which is disconcerting. The only thing that affects them physically is the wind. Wind blows them around like forgotten paper dragging and bouncing along the ground.

That night there had been a big wind and a group of pudding ghosts were gathered in drifts alongside the general store, where Gordon and his horse stopped in the shade of a grandfather karaka tree. The keeper of the store, a man named Ralph, stout and short filling his white apron and topping it with a bloody red face as though an iced Christmas pudding, came out and sat beside him with warm water in a clay beaker.

“Fine day.”

“Aye,” replied Gordon.

“Travelling East? North?”

“East, mostly.”

And Ralph, a shrewd judge of the state and integrity of his customers, as only a man who lived in wild places and times can be, asked Gordon to stay and to help a while in return for food, a place to sleep and a few tools and supplies here and there.

Two months passed and then Gordon rose one day, banged open the door of his little shed and greeted the dawn with a stretch and a yawn. He packed his things, spending two hours getting just the right things arranged in just the right way. He bartered with Tom James, an elderly prospector whose gold now all now lay in bottles, and bought himself a tired pack horse for a skillet and three bottles of whisky.

Ralph watched from the store's door.

"You can stay, you know. I need someone and you have proven yourself many times to be filled with the right stuff. Out there, well, out there there's wild men – you've met some of them, but there are many others. Some who are bandits and there are the wild tribes too. They eat men, you know, them natives."

Gordon said nothing but thank you, and smiled and tipped his hat and was gone.

The curious thing was that the pudding ghosts, who had all crowded around when Gordon was packing so that he felt like he was lifting saddle and pick and blanket through a dry fog, all drifted after him out of the town. Ralph watched from his doorway and saw them go and thought again that there was something very different about this man.

Gordon, his two horses and his silent troupe of dedicated transparent followers struggled through the harsh hills and bush for days further. Until, pushing through a particularly tangled growth, the pudding ghosts started crowding around him. He became irritated and tried to wave them away. He couldn't so he stopped, watered the horses from his hat, sat down in the first clear space, ate a lunch of an apple and a pickled fish, then moved away from the crowd to a lightning-struck

kauri stump on the other side of the clearing. A few minutes later the troupe drifted to him as though a blacksmith's filings fetching around a magnet, regarding him with their solemn huge eyes so thickly and in such numbers that he couldn't see through their mist. Frustrated Gordon shifted again but this time climbed into the low limb of a large tree and sat in the crook. Within a half a minute the pudding ghosts had swarmed up the trunk.

Gordon, tired and hot, flung the remains of his apple to the ground, furious that he could not have this moment in peace, tightened the straps on the horses, cinching one too tight on poor Tom's old horse. It screamed and he quickly relented a notch and made soothing noises born of guilt. He walked away from the pudding ghosts. But, somehow, whenever he walked away from them they would change direction and so he would too until they would leave him in peace to walk awhile before renewing their soft assault.

That night he came to a cliff. There was no way around it or, that he could see, up it and behind him the damned pudding ghosts were stopped and spreading around. There were twenty or thirty times more now than when he left Ralph's store. He had no desire and no energy to pass through them again and begin this game of cat and mouse in the gathering dark. He watched them and they watched him and formed a wall of non-substance that got no closer. Sighing, he unloaded and unsaddled his horses and set up his camp. He was soon asleep and dreamed of giant booming birds, bigger, much bigger than a man, and a huge sweeping eagle with wings breadth twice a man's height circling and hunting them.

In the morning the fire was a smouldering mole in the earth's skin. He was still tired. He sat, rebuilt the fire with dried grass and twigs, careful to follow what he remembered as a Rule in a big book his mother had made him read when he was young. And there, thinking on the book, he remembered a single word in it, in a young child's hand. The word was 'Trace' and he remembered from nowhere an impossible memory – that this was in his mother's hand.

At that moment, as the word formed in his mind and he felt a tiny bit of that same tingling that had made him abandon his mission and change direction those two months ago, he was confronted by a sole pudding ghost in front of the cliff. It was the only one to have left the slowly waving and rocking bank behind him. It leaned over towards him and stared with huge black eyes and he saw something in them. A glint, a spark of gold. Then the wind of morning gently blew the pudding ghost to one side and Gordon realised that the glint of gold hadn't been in the pudding ghost's eyes at all – but behind them, halfway up the cliff where the sun was just hitting some crystal in the rock.

That was how Gordon came to set up his permanent camp, there at Pudding Rocks. And it was then that he realised he had been herded there by the pudding ghosts all along.

His first task was to find a way up that cliff-face. He beat through the bush to the left and then the right and back again and eventually found a slope he could cope with to get as near as he needed to see what the cliff held.

When he returned to the camp he was full of purpose. He went to the river and brought back many armfuls of fallen flax leaves. He sat

down near the horses and stripped apart flax leaves. Eventually he had a pile twice as high as his horses. He fixed one strand to a tree and then proceeded to plait and twist outwards so that the strands fought to unwind into the centre and thus twist themselves ever tighter. In this way he made ropes enough for his purpose.

Next he bent living saplings (following his mother's Rule) and built himself a little hut at the bottom of the cliff and fixed what he could not weave out of living wood with ties of his flax rope and wove in fallen sticks and ferns to fill gaps.

The next day he made a second room as a shelter for the horses. He found large square stones in the streams and the earth and piled them around the bottoms of the rooms so that the structure had a solid foundation for what was to come next.

Atop his house and stable, he made a scaffolding against the cliff of dead wood (which was light and which he didn't have to kill) and his rope and whatever else he could find. Higher and higher he went, tying the structure in from place to place with wooden pegs he thrust deep into crevices he found or dug with his pick in the rock.

As the scaffold grew and grew over the days that followed he laid platforms at intervals which served as staging points for the real work for many years to come.

Finally he had covered the entire cliff face with scaffolding from top to bottom and from side to side from which the living bushes protruded and would one day tie it still further to the cliff. He then started to adapt and tweak the dwelling at the bottom which until it was

comfortable, thatched, with a beautiful chimney and fireplace made from stone that emerged well away from where the upper structures started.

Then he took his horses and went back to the town of Coromandel.

“Ralph.”

“Hello? Pleased to meet you, fella.”

“I’m Gordon. I worked with you here for a time.”

“Gordon! Of course! I’m sorry, you looked so different, standing there with your long beard and your thin skin hanging on your bones. Come, come, I’m having a meal!”

And so Gordon stayed three weeks with Ralph but would not tell him anything of what he had seen or done. Ralph knew enough about the ways of quiet men not to push and Gordon appreciated that more than he was prepared to voice. After three weeks Gordon asked for his wages in equipment and supplies and silently set off again and this time, Ralph said nothing.

But before he went, Ralph agreed to obtain certain supplies and send them on with the next group of travellers. He also agreed to forward to the authorities a claim for the rights to Pudding Rock. Gordon left him with two gold nuggets the size of pigeon eggs for his trouble.

It was a further two months before a band of itinerant Swiss horn players arrived at Pudding Rocks, with Gordon’s supplies: mining tools a packet of documents cement powdered dyes a caged canary; and their own desire to turn the golden wind of rumour into bank accounts.

Now you must realise that this canary was not purchased for the purposes of song. Gordon despised canaries, as much as I and for the same reasons.

He purchased this canary bird creature thing for several reasons. The first was mistaken. For he had heard of how canaries were used in mining. As you may have guessed and as I know, Gordon was going to be involved in mining. But mining for gold is both like and unlike mining for coal. In coal mining the little canary is used, cruelly one might say, by miners as a gas detection system. If the canary dies, there is invisible poisonous gas and the miners will flee. There is no such gas gold mining. There was however an invisible poison and Gordon knew this. It was his second and correct reason for entertaining the loathsome yellow creature.

One of Gordon's gifts was to remember a scrap or two of the future. And what he remembered is that canaries would be a danger to Onogo starting a very few years from then. Let me tell you why:

From the south, that area called Onogo is a place of lush green; a paradise of bush leading to the low hills of Northland. A gentle series of curves in the nearest of these hills hides much of the shapes of the area until the last few metres. The sky around it is always clouded and there is about it the haze of the sub-tropic humidity that lingers in corners and turns paper from a crinkly percussion instrument to a soft swish when one is screwing up one's notes to adulterous ex-lovers. A sky that looms over like a protecting blanket and as grey as a comforting reheated soup frames all of this.

Below the hills and sitting on that curve are rimu and kauri and karaka trees arrayed in rebel troops. These guerrillas move only as much as soft toys by day but year by year their roots swell and so batter and break apart the very rocks that shoe their feet. Amongst the straggly varieties of native bushes and broad-leafed trees cower disgusting little birds, dirty ferrety animals and rotting wood in muddy streams.

The house, also called Onogo, the place where it all starts and ends, fits into this landscape as naturally as the brown cows and their mirror-cousin mud-knolls. Like the soldiers it appears to be stationary but of course we know that inside its walls it moves. Slowly it's true, but it does move.

Approaching, the house called Onogo grows organically from muddy ground and overgrown gardens to pitched dark green roofs and gables supported by several slabs of grey.

The air is sweet and slightly cloying and smells faintly of the bark in the bush it sweeps down from. Closer, one sees the simple planes of the walls resolve into Doric columns, doors and a thousand panes of ancient glass that have seen so much of rain and mist and death that they are tired and droopy in mouldered frames.

Tying together the woodwork on this side when the Seven Stars built the house, bending the forgiving walnut beams and strapping the underpinning joists to their naturally fallen claddings, were strands of the native mistletoe; Adam's mistletoe, it was called in Gordon's day. The vine was strong and supple and both forgave the growth of the living timbers within Onogo and allowed feeding light and water into the dark spaces that were otherwise hidden from the sun.

This was to change a few years after the canary reached Gordon. He bought it for mining but he also bought it to be cruel to it to be kind to Onogo and cruel because he could not resist taking vengeance upon its kind for the future. He purchased that canary in what he knew was a vain attempt to change the future by removing at least this one of its number as far as possible from the area of damage to come. But who can change the future? All of us do, of course because the future is what happens when our present plays out, but Gordon could see the result of play, could glimpse the suits on the cards in the hands beside him. And this was but one of many canaries being brought to grace the drawing rooms of the settling middle classes of the new colony all along the coast.

This is why we loathe the canary, Gordon and I: The canary does not just die from invisible poisons. It carries others in its blood. And another passenger from European ships, a mosquito, sucked its blood. That mosquito lived then and still does in the sub-tropical Northland. Alice's tree-singers included many species but prominent was the trusting bellbird which, though it still exists in other parts it does not grow there, in Northland, on that side of Onogo. Not since the eve that canaries suckled the mosquitoes that suckled the bellbirds that sucked on the nectar of Adam's mistletoe. The invisible poisons in the blood of the canaries was passed whining to the mosquitoes which passed it microscopically writhing to the bellbirds. They didn't pass it to the mistletoe that helped bind Onogo together. It just killed those blessed Northland tree-singers. So they no longer sucked at the sweet nectars of the mistletoe flowers. And so those little flowers were no longer

pollinated. And though the mistletoe that held Onogo held on for many more decades, it could not renew itself, until one summer the last vine didn't reawaken from winter slumber and became dry dust and Onogo started to crumble.

Then came this from wise Samuel, who saw a parallel:

"What are you going to do with me?"

I didn't have the heart to tell him. I will tell you though, Cal. At Rotorua I will lean over a geyser and with my bare hands curve walnut planks into graceful bends. I will sing them together to form a bow and stitch the ends together at the stern, smooth them with paua shells and polish then with powdered weta shells mixed with macrocarpa gum. I will summon a storm at the edge of the sea and board the boat.

However, I'm not mad. I'm scared because despite my inhuman genes I possess humanity enough and know the value of being sensible about risks. I cannot rely entirely on my state of Faerie or my spell with your leavings to protect me. I'm almost certain that they will, just as any engineer is certain that the tunnel roof will hold and any miner knows that he will not be the one who succumbs first to the gas. But like the engineer, the miner and like my ancestor Gordon, I will take precautions. I will make use of the thing that has no other purpose except treachery. Gordon had his canary that would choke the vines that strengthened Onogo and I will have mine when I hold my walnut staves out into the geysers. I will cast the spell on both of us – see, Callum, how un-cruel I am? I give your son the same protection that I give myself – and I will bind him to it and perhaps I will test the strength of the spell by holding him into the geyser before I risk my own royal hands, the hands of the heir of an embattled earl, a French aristocrat and of a Goddess from far away. It is only right and

sensible a precaution to take (and there is a spare after all in Thomas! A little humour always lightens these tense moments of reality, don't you think?)

Such a versatile thing Samuel is, so talented are his parents with their education and deceits that this canary will surely use inherited skills and survive to move on to the next mine. Protecting me with his little life by testing the water at the bow of the boat, perhaps. Sniffing for sharks in the deep waters of the tropics, buffering my little boat from the iceberg that broke the *Titanic* – really I don't know. I can't read as much of the future as some of my ancestors.

But don't worry. As I say, he will be protected in the same spell as I and I expect he will pass through every danger's beginning. I build my spells well. And if he doesn't? As I say, don't worry. He will have served his function and I will be safe, rest assured for I will know that the particular danger is to be avoided. And the world? Why, the world will be better off for the sacrifice of this canary. It will saved a little of the spread of the lustful mosquito that he would pass to the pure, innocent human females, who, unlike me, could not survive the betrayal that would come and would bring rot to our society. Not forever and not all, for Thomas will still be out there.

My little canary. I think I will dress him all in yellow. Perhaps a polar-fleece jumpsuit. Feed him yellow custard from a can made in a cannery!

But I told Samuel nothing of this. He is only a child after all.

"Hush, now. Don't you want the rest of the history?"

And what of the horn players? As they approached with canary tools dyes cement, creased map and greed, they came into bright sunshine and saw a giant spider web of wood and creepers, painted over the face of a square cliff. In the middle of the web, standing on a platform, they saw the back of Gordon, slowly swinging a pick at the

face of the cliff. To the right and left of the man, above and below, visible here and there through the strands there were dark pockmarks, caves dug into the rock by Gordon.

They hailed him from their horses but he didn't seem to hear, just kept at his regular slow swings. They dismounted, and blew their horns. But again there was no response. They unloaded their pack animals – cows goats donkeys horses – and examined the lower parts of the scaffold until they worked out the way up through steps on the chimney. And one by one they scrambled up shouting to Gordon high above. Gordon stopped, beamed a huge grin, and dropped his pick.

“Welcome! Welcome to wealth!”

“Is it true, sir?” cried the lead horn, a man of golden hair and blistered lips. “The rumours?”

“Oh, yes. Look here,” said the bearded dirty man and, reaching into his pocket, he drew out a nugget of gold that shone with a dull light in the sun. “Plenty to go around.”

And it was that point that in their hearts the horn players, who had been until then the closest of friends bound by music, became strangers to one another.

“Where did you find this piece, sir?” breathed the fourth horn into Gordon's ear late that night when they were alone outside looking at the cliff in the moonlight. “Which hole did you dig it from?”

Gordon pointed to one of the scars.

“And have you found other caves worth me looking further into?” whispered the third horn an hour before dawn when he was with

Gordon hanging a billy of water and native tea over the embers of last night's fire in the clearing.

Gordon pointed to another of the pits.

"Sir, I want to help us all but it seems to me that we should all take a little place in this cliff and find what we can in order to spread the chances and increase it. I wonder, is there a place where I could perhaps start where you have left off which might be a place I could find...?"

And Gordon pointed to one of the craters.

"Sir, I appreciate your generosity. We all do," said the second horn. "Rumour from the birds told us that you have had success. But this, this we didn't imagine until we arrived. It is so wonderful. We will be able to build ourselves new lives in this country, all of us. We will be able to go to the coast and make our ways in the new towns they say are beginning there. I have bigger plans than my friends, Charitable plans that they do not perhaps understand as you and I do. So I just need to ask..."

And they all assented, and nodded to one another as though they were a real fellowship, these players.

The fifth horn took his picks and hammers, his shovels and baskets and staked out a piece of the cliff he was sure was the richest and refused access to anyone else even when he hit bedrock he couldn't dig alone. The first and third horns formed an alliance then fought with each other and did little digging. And the rest became selfish and savage. They eventually cooperated just enough to let each other find wealth and then eyed it all with jealousy. As the nuggets came in they became increasingly secretive in proportion to their growing wealth.

Gordon meanwhile was not interested in the gold he found and would leave the nuggets, wrapped in leaves so as not to scratch, under the pillows of the alphorn players or sometimes, inside the trumpet ends of the seven foot long wooden instruments, and the players would find them and give cries of delight as though children on Christmas morn, before retreating with sidelong comparative glances.

Gordon would rise before the rest (even though he was always being watched in case he jumped his own claim) and would go to bed last. He dug and shovelled and created tunnels branching in all directions, some fat and wide others so slight that he could only get through them naked. Occasionally he would stop and cock his ear to one side and listen to the trills of the canary that he placed at the entrance – not to listen to its health or admire its song, but to listen to the quality of the echoes. Then he might adjust his direction, perhaps backfill a bit here or there, widen or narrow the passage or even change its shape from circular to horizontally oval and on one occasion to put a series of rocks as baffles in carefully calculated positions in the corridors.

At last he emerged on the other side of the hill. A single entrance and exit but in the middle a riddling maze of tubes.

That day he went down the scaffolding early. He unstoppered his last bottle of whisky and there was much cheering, ribald singing and alphorning long into the night. When morning came he got up late and kicked the players one by one until, grumbling at their sore heads, he got them awake and assembled by the coffee pot.

“I need you to come to the entrance of my particular cave. All of you.”

“What?”

“It is too early.”

“I want to rest some more.”

“Its Sunday.”

”

“But what do you need us up there for?”

“You’ll see. Bring your horns. Now.”

At the outcry he muttered “Suit yourselves. In return I will leave you the entire hill for the taking – except the tunnels that I have built which must stay. Remember that all of the hill belongs to my claim and the magistrates in the towns will look dimly upon it if you were to – “

Three minutes later they were all jostling at the entrance.

“Now wait for me to go through. When I call back, start your horns.”

“Just blowing the horns into the entrance, you say?”

“Yes, anything you like.”

“If that’s all it will take. But you will sign over the claim to all of us?”

“Yes. I have already. See here, on the paper. All but my tunnels. But I’m going to take this through with me and you will only get it after I am satisfied with your playing.”

Again there was grumbling and then gasps as Gordon took off his cloths, all of them, and started to slither into the tunnel on his bare belly like a snake. Within a few minutes Gordon had reached the other entrance and his body, following the twisted pattern of the tunnels had been written on with its shapes.

“Start the horns!”

At the entrance, the players looked at one another in confusion. Then number three shrugged, breathed in mightily and blew one long solitary note into the cave. The others joined in one by one, constructing a set of harmonies and melodies that had never been played before nor would again.

From behind Gordon at the other end came a wind of sound that was bent and twisted by the tunnels which played with it so that the sound that emerged was eerie with the magic of the runes the tunnels formed. Gordon listened, went back a way and adjusted two of his rocks and then returned to the exit and this time, his eyes closed and his mouth smiled. Perfect.

He walked down the hill and around the other side back to the hut and waited for the players to come down, eager for the paper he waved in his hand.

Later that day Gordon went back into the tunnels alone and started the long job of backfilling them with dye-coloured sand. When he finished, at the entrance and exit he embedded the iron of his digging tools in rock and cement and so plugged the way, protecting the tunnels and their inky traces and thus creating the spell that would stave off the destruction of the mistletoe that the canaries would bring to Onogo. .

The players ended up unhappy with their fortune and Gordon ended up happy at Onogo setting out his own entries in the Rules.

What do we learn from this? What did he write in the Rules of Family Living? This:

The ties that bind, bind throughout history. They are strong. They influence and connect. They are not easily broken. But be wary: if they should be broken, the knitting that is the story of life unravels and unravels fast.

An important lesson for us all, Callum.

RECIPE

#

Dear Cal,

It is at last time to invoke my magic.

It is well past midnight. I'm still not tired. Samuel is asleep in his cot. So cute, with his mouth open and drool on his lip. He is getting taller by the day, I swear.

I want to tell you now what I've done with the things I took from you.

Earlier this evening, as the sun and Samuel both went to bed, I went to the hall cupboard. I put on my long black winter coat. I took the Honey jar and the nylon sports bag to the kitchen.

Then I took from them the hair, the shaving grains, the dream-memory of the smell of your seed and I mixed them together with a jam made of marmalade, ground walnuts and rosemary (for memory.) This paste I spread on the CD.

I inserted the CD into the centrefold of your favourite book.

I undid the bow-tie and then retied it around the clippings from the bottom of your ties and some of the longest hairs in a love-knot. This I've placed as a bookmark to the dedication page.

At midnight in the non-light of the invisible virgin moon I sealed the book in wax dripped from my beeswax candles until it was covered in greasy yellow flecked with burnt wick specks and my fingers were stinging deliciously from burns.

Then I warmed the book gently by holding it in the heat of an electric fire of wire and clay. I got Samuel's hand print on one side of the

*just still warm wax – yes, I was careful not to wake him, I'm not a fiend -
and my own on the other. I pushed in the nail clippings so they all but
sank, little sharks with teeth barely above the surface.*

*Finally, I took the silver salt shaker from amongst the seeds in the
pantry and from its non existent 'S' sprinkled my oblitative harvest of
powerful prescriptive powder over the sticky wax as a dust cover.*

*This book is back in the sports bag together with the jar marked
'Honey' and is ready for its journey.*

Your only love,

Viv.

LUCID DREAM

#

I still dream sometimes that same old dream. It used to wake me and frighten me. Do you remember when I used to wake not screaming or in fever but sweating and nauseous and feeling bloated as though I were pregnant? I never was of course, pregnant. Dreams are despicable things.

I refused to tell you what the dream was about because it was *my* dream and I didn't want to give it away. It is still the same now. Not a dream of ambition or desire (I only have one dream of that sort now.) No, this was the one akin to a nightmare.

I told Samuel about it, though. I'm not sure why I did. It just sort of happened that I was sitting drinking tea and honey.

"I had a dream last night. One I've often had before."

"What was it about?"

"Oh, that's a secret."

"Why?"

And do you know, Cal, I just couldn't think of an answer. *What the hell, he is only a little boy*, I thought.

"Alright, I'll tell the dream to you. Have your sandwich and milk and listen."

It was nice to tell him, releasing somehow. So I will set it down for you too. If I like the feeling of that as well, I will submit this post.

My Dream Of The Enamel And Wood

In the dream I can see my arms and my legs and much of my body. I'm a child. The floor is rough and smooth at the same time. There is a smell of methylated spirits left from brooms with their

sawdust that some dark figure has pushed after dark each night but there is no sign of such a person or any broom nor sawdust in my dream, just the memory-smell of spirits, methylated and otherwise (everyone knows that ghosts have their own peculiar smell).

I can see my little body in various positions of tumble on the floor and next to me are wooden horses chasing each other endlessly in whichever direction I choose on a dinner-plate sized platter, also made of wood. I merely have to push its equator and the spinning starts and it lasts until it stops. There is a curved tent top covering over the platter to protect the horses, perhaps from wooden rain. The canvas is not canvas but a much thinner wood. All are painted with red, blue and white enamel paint. The paint is battered and scraped. These little horses look very tired and have been futilely racing for many years. The platter wobbles with the distinctive circular limp of the aged mechanic.

The horses are weighted in their stirrups with lead plugs. Some person, no doubt a child, has picked the lead out of two of these and the thing is consequently taken from them the balance the lead was placed there to achieve, both in the horses and the platter. However, if I push hard enough, the spin is great enough to appear to overcome this imbalance and the platter blurs to a circle in near perfection with the few drunken horses compensating one another. Only I know that there is a faint fuzziness when looking from the corner of the eye at the very edge that speaks of hidden imbalance. This both fascinates me and makes me uncomfortable. As it slows, it starts to tilt (more slowly than it is rotating) and that slant becomes gradually more and more pronounced and moves around the circumference faster and faster as the platter goes

slower and slower until it can only be described as violent and then the platter will inevitably touch the floor and there is a scrattling rattling and then all stops. The horses look just as tired as before.

The equator of the platter itself is a delicate hoop of enamelled iron. There is one particular spot where the scraping has been so long ago done that there is rust on it. This is my spot. A little mole or freckle. I didn't create it but of all the children here, I alone notice this spot in this least popular of toys and I own it.

There is a girl with me whose name is Lucy. She is dreamed in mismatched stained corduroy slacks too big for her, with a canvas belt with extra holes punched into it by someone with a much larger waist and a knitted jumper with two big holes, one in the elbow, one in the shoulder seam. Her socks are brown and coarse, just like mine. Just like all the others. Her skin is much whiter than mine. There is always a candle of shiny green snot running from her nostril down her upper lip and she sometimes licks at it.

She is in this room with me. The others are somewhere else. She is here with me and she is staring at me as though I was a toy with a mole. She is fourteen, not nine like me, but she cannot read so I sometimes read for her. She has thick, black hair that smells of cabbage and toast every evening. In my dream I know she has been even more listless than normal lately. She looks at me and I look for my rust spot as the platter spins and then for Lucy and for her the room spins because she falls to the floor. She appears to have become instantly asleep and dreaming in my dream but that is of course not right. I know as I gaze

across at her that she is not asleep. There is a trickle of drool mixing with the snot right where her mouth touches the floor.

In my dream I walk slowly as though in the Golden Syrup we have on Sundays with the porridge and I find Sister Catherine. Sister Catherine runs. See Sister Catherine run. I've hardly ever seen Sister Catherine run before and I notice as her skirt rises when she runs that she has no tops on her stockings which are made of thick nylon which I understand to be cheaper and more Godly than thin silk. I've never seen the tops of stockings before as the children in this dream are not allowed them and none of them have seen adults except fully dressed in shifts and thick stockings and coming onto shifts and locking.

Lucy recovers from this. She is epileptic I suppose. But she and I both share a secret which is why we are dream-friends. We are both special friends of Richard's. He is one of the men with the keys and he lets us play with him. Lucy in particular. Richard smells in the way that all men smell, of sweat and musky things. And he sings. He sings songs from the radio in the van, from the television in the orange and brown room, from the stereo that comes through the windows in his room in the caretaker's cottage where Mr and Mrs Green live. When he sings it sounds like a manly angel and his voice at the end of notes warbles like a bird.

Richard Peregrine has a cage behind the barn, outside in the moonlight. It is filled with birds of all sizes and shapes, some green some red and blue, some a dirty brown, some black some white. There are bits of thin wood sticking out from the wire into the centre of the cages and hanging from the top inside like little swings. The noises and the muck

on the ground of poo and feathers and grain is musty and overpowering..
The birds sit on these and look at us with round eyes.

Richard lets Lucy play circuses with him at night after we are supposed to be in bed. He comes and gets her and sometimes me because sometimes I get to help. Before we go he gives us lollies and fizzy drink but he won't let us have it until we have performed. We sneak out the back way and go to a different cage behind the hay barn. It is tall, large enough for four or five people to stand in. It is round like a big-top at a circus, he says, and he is the ringmaster. He tells us that we are horses and that we must go in the big-top cage. He puts us into it and there are two-legged white horses with red saddles that are too small to ride. There are also some little birds that Lucy says are really trapeze artists, Lucy says, but I'm frightened by them. They flutter and dive, scratch and peck.

In my dream memories Richard tells us to take off our clothes so that we are just in our knickers and singlets "like real trapeze girls" he says. He gets us to put our hands on the highest swing as though we were about to launch into the air. He watches us and sometimes he throws grain in so that the birds all swoop and the horses come running. The second time I helped I couldn't stand the birds and I threshed my arms about and started to scream. Richard reached his hand through and over my mouth and pulled me hard against the bars while I kicked until my face went red and a black mist came over my eyes. His hand hurt and it was so tight that it didn't budge an inch when I tried to pull it away. He is very strong and I'm afraid of him.

Sometimes he comes into the cage too. He has these tricks he does with the cog from an old clock. He spins it like a top – on the floor, on the back of his hand, and Lucy says that when its just her he gets her to spin it on his stiff thingy and he hums a song that gets increasingly breathy and the notes are not pure. She says I'm not good enough to do that and that she is has a big future as a circus star because she can do things like that and this is the way artists are born and trained. It is a secret though and I cannot tell anyone or Richard will take me and put me in the cage alone and leave me there all night.

By now, at the time I'm dreaming of Lucy falling to the floor, he leaves me alone and just takes Lucy and I'm glad. He still gives me the treats though but I can eat them with Lucy as soon as she gets back.

"Disturbing."

"Yes. I don't like to think about it. It's a dream I used to have a lot. It stopped but in the last few months it's been coming back, but there is more to it now."

"Will you tell me the new part?"

"Listen:"

In this new part of the dream I see that I'm wearing a fresh clean smock. It is white but I have a black heavy woollen coat too. There is no-one else around. I'm three years older and I've gone for a walk as twelve year olds are inclined to do. I've gone to the back of the field where the field joins the church-yard. I'm not allowed to leave the field. But I have. I've climbed the unclimbable fence and I'm standing looking at a gravestone. This is one of many, many gravestones. There are walnut trees and green grass and little bushes of roses and even some

stray gorse with its yellow flowers. I see the gravestones, crosses and markers, broken angels and cracked flagstones, of hundreds of people.

I don't recognise any names except one but it is a beautiful place to bury strangers.

That one I recognised was easy to spot as it was the only one not covered with lichen. It has Lucy's name on it engraved into a mean, thin piece of granite embedded in concrete. Her name is followed by 'Jennifer Graham' and two dates fourteen years apart.

But in this dream I can see into the ground and I can see the platter and the horses and the tents and the hoop. Not clearly because it is completely dark under the ground. But I know that it is there because I placed it there three years before. I know that the horses have come adrift at last from their prison, that the tent has collapsed and is eaten by worms and beetles, that the hoop on top of the coffin in the dirt is decaying with the wood and that there is a glittering of red and white and blue flakes that will always be there along with the lead. And I smile when I see in my mind my rusty freckle. It has grown and it continues to grow and soon it will eat up the entire hoop.

I return to the Big House and hope I'm seen by no-one – but realise as I get to the flower gardens that a figure is watching me from the second story in the right-hand wing, the green wing. It is Richard. He is wearing headphones and smiling as he sings along to something that no-one can hear. He will be waiting for me at the front door with Sister Catherine, I know. And I know that despite every argument and lie I can come up with, that I will be sent to the back room for the night. And that Richard will be at the end of the corridor on a chair, dozing,

until lights have been out and all is quiet. Then the circus will start.

Now Lucy is no longer part of the act. Just me and Richard, who will wear a red nose from cot-day. No-one likes a clown at midnight.

THE ONOGO OF MY MATURING

#

Dear Cal,

I thought it time to write again. I've just told Samuel of a dream I had. A bit upsetting. It made me think of you again. It was a recurring one that I refused to tell you about but I feel guilty about it and think it will be alright for you to know about it now. I want you to know that I've posted the details on my blog so if you ever work out the password you will be able to read about it.

Samuel took it well (he is strong) but I was rattled so I spent story time tonight with Samuel going over a bit more of the history of settlement of my ancestors in New Zealand.

Viv

Samuel has become more sarcastic and more demanding.

"Where is this Onogo? Exactly? I don't have it clearly in my mind."

"Hard to describe."

"Try."

Onogo's place in the world

At a distance, from the east, Onogo is a huge domain, a green paradise of grass leading to the crystalline Southern Alps. A thin line demarks pastures from foothills and those merge with their younger snow-capped siblings, no more hazy than snow-melt lake water. All are framed in a sky as large as heaven and as blue as electricity. On that wiry line are poplars and cedars; tiny, green soldiers. They move in the stillness only as much as the stiff toys they resemble. They whisper and creak in dialects of wind and jeer at the mountains and say they are

stupid and slow. This is not true as the mountains talk too, in the sentences of avalanches and the dialogue of rockfalls, but during the lifetimes of trees say little because to speak is to be diminished. They grow slowly, so they bite their glacial tongues instead of responding.

The house, also called Onogo, where it all starts and ends, fits into this landscape as naturally as the white sheep and their mirror-cousins, the clouds. Like the soldiers the house appears to be stationary.

Approaching closer, Onogo grows organically from rocky ground and thriving gardens to pitched grey roofs and gables supported by several slabs of white. The air is clean and sharp and smells faintly of mountain minerals and the earth of the comatose foothills from which it sweeps, who were in their youth also mountains but spoke too much.

Closer still, the simple planes of the walls resolve into Doric columns, doors and the thousand panes of ancient glass that have seen so much of sun and snow and death that they are tired and droopy in blistered frames and cry out in the silent rime writing of frosts.

“Very poetic. Though not very geographically specific.”

See what I mean? He was born a cygnet and becoming a born cynic.

“Glad you like it. I hope you will like it when we visit there soon.”

THE DREAMTIME RINGMASTER

#

I told you of that dream, Cal, the one with the enamel and the wood, with Lucy and Richard Peregrine. I have similar dreams sometimes. Similar in that they involve Richard.

There was the one I first dreamed one night after I made love to a man who was not making love to me, a man not unlike the man whom Alice traced tattoos on two hundred years ago. But this man, his tattoos and pattern were unlike those of his distant relative. They were not true runes but a mess of symbols and patterns that showed he had lost his way.

We were on my carpet and my back hurt when he rolled off me and belched. He got up and blew his nose on his sleeve and fiddled with his hair and left without saying goodbye.

That was you, in case you hadn't realised, Callum. You who had these tattoos you were so very proud of. The tattoos some infauxllectual had told were you were right for your particular mix of ancestry. There is no magic though in those patterns, pretty though they are, Callum. No magic such as your armour wearing ancestor had, or any of the rest. They are just drawings. Never mind though: I will be bringing some magic to you.

Lying there on my carpet, feeling bruised and dead because we both knew that you didn't love me any more, I shut my eyes and somehow fell asleep, there on the pattern of the carpet, and I dreamed it.

The last two nights I've woken from that dream again sweating and greasy, my pulse fast, my throat tight like a trussed turkey. Samuel asked why the first night and today he insisted I tell him about it.

"It is not suitable for a tiny child."

“Tiny child, no. But I’m not that, not on the inside.”

It was true. He was a child to look at, the way he acted, the words he used to get the things that any child dreams of. But inside he was something else, an intelligent midget clothed in a child’s body. And so I relented. What harm could it do to such a psyche?

King Richard

In the dream he is living in the caretaker’s cottage, but he is older and the boss of the Big House now. It is night and the Big House has been abandoned by the two day staff. It is rotting a hundred metres away from him with just handful of scared new ones, all alone but for each other behind an unlocked door. He prefers to be here at the cottage than in that hollow place of ghosts with the little shits these days. His caretaking consists of taking no care.

He belches loud and long on the back lawn by the rusty deck chair with the frayed plastic webbing. The result of too much beer, he thinks. The thunder of his act disappears only feet away. His neighbours, had there been any in the empty farm houses to the east and if they had been outside themselves on this hot night, would not have heard this rumbling weather above the crickets under the rotting porch.

He is a big man, not just because of the corset of fat and his blubbery thighs, the curtains that hang from his shoulder blades or shiver under his chin when he strides around the bulldozer.

“Oh no, it’s appliance-box muscle and bone that makes me tall and bi, always has, always been there, fit and strong, me, ever since I was a tadpole. Biggest fish in the pond, nobody never gave me no trouble. Pure muscle protected by a layer of fat, yeah, but muscle all the

way down to me innards.”

Big Dick, they call him, but only to his face.

Queasy now. Bloody crickets annoying him tonight. Heartburn, maybe. Jeez. Must be the up-sized meal. King-sized. Usually the thought makes him smile. Sometimes he even says it out loud to the crickets and they sing it back to him over and over until he can hear Sister Catherine’s witch voice coming from the orchestra, whinging whining bitching from over the field in the boneyard where she is dead but not gone.

But he’s in charge now; not enough nuns left in the world. He has the job and deserves it with all his experience and all the crap he has had to put with for all those years and years. In charge. Of the Big House, the money, paper-work and the few little boys and girls still sent. Little darlings. They grow up so quickly. Too quickly, he thinks remembering some in particular. Coffin nail would calm the sour belly. Reaches for the pack. King-size. Menthol. Yeah. Clay-stained ham-fist curls around the pristine icicle. Match strikes into oily belch that matches his swamp gas and he remembers (why?) of a lesson from his father at the kitchen table, something about marsh lights, will-o’-the-wisps, spirits, but he cannot recall what and watches the wisp from the cigarette and smiles this time. That’s funny that, wisp. Can’t quite put all together in his beer-steeped head though and gives himself up to the pleasures of the minty palliative.

Is he feeling a bit better? Yeah, perhaps. “A bit” he says to the paling fence. “Guts still bloody rocky, though,” he says to the rusty clothesline windmill by the twisted blighted pear. “Might be crook,” he

says to the chorus under the porch as rubs his belly again and turns to lumber back to the square yellow pool that leads to the kitchen.

“Another fag’ll do it. Hey that’s a goodie! Huh? Suzie, didya hear that? Fag! Get it? Another fag! Just like you, you lesbo spinster!” But she didn’t hear, wasn’t there, just kept whining and rubbing her many legs together, there, in the sod like the slut she was with all her lebbie mates from the fuckin’ sisterhood from days gone by, all sighing and singing like sirens. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

He draws the last cigarette, crushes and hurls the green pack at the mess of paint flakes and borer dust bordering the darkness of the crickets’ home. “Bitch.” Stupid cow choked on a walnut.

But tonight there is little fervour in it and no pleasure at all.

“Fuck, I feel bad,” he tells the veranda post as he leans on it. Reaches for his matches as he rolls the last King-size unlit in his lips, trying to conjure a healing spell from the bittersweet menthol and promise of nicotine at his thickening tongue.

But his gigantic hand never makes it to the depths of his blue coverall’s pocket. Instead, he crumbles like a thin man, slumps like an old one, though he is neither, huddles on the grass and panics as his bladder relaxes. His scream for help is not heard by any but himself and certainly not by Jess who left the place four years ago next Wednesday – it is all in his mind. The only sound he makes, no breath, no heartbeat, is a slight scrabbling of sausage-steeped coffee-nerved fingers tangled in a broken white spell-stick which spills its tiny brown fibre guts on the green, green grass of home.

For the want of that nail his heart stops.

His kingdom fades to grey and switches off.

Things would have been better if it had stayed off but it didn't.

The gristly heart started by itself and the day-nurse found him. The hospital fixed him up, they fixed Richard up and stitched up the family of darlings at the Big House.

"Then what happens?"

"I'm not sure it's right to go on."

"Hey. You made that decision already. You have started the story and you must finish it."

"I'll think about it. Time for beddy-byes. Here's your teddy."

"Mmmm. Nice lovely Teddy."

FEAR

#

I had to take action today to avoid Detective Robert's police. They've hanging around at the corner shops the last couple of days. I don't know why but I took the Jonathon doll out in the pushchair with Samuel (who I call some other name in public that I will not tell you but will use Harry in this blog) and made sure they saw a family of three on the other side of the street. I stopped and pointed to the policemen as though I was explaining what fine upstanding members of society worn to protect look like. It went a bit wrong as one young eager guardian popped across the road. I turned the pushchair with the doll so that it faced the hedge.

"Well! You're a big boy! What's your name? Have you met a policeman before?" He put his youthful protector's fingers under your son's chin.

"He's shy."

"What's your name, young man?"

This from a young man.

"His name is Harry and he's twenty-one months."

"I have a nephew about his age. Harry! That's a lovely name! Perhaps you'll be a policeman like me when you grow up. And what's the other one? Girl or boy?"

Christ! My hands were slippery and knuckles white on the pushchair.

"Asleep. Please don't wake him. I was up all night with him."

A tense moment. Made tenser when Samuel decided to speak.

"You know this is the barking mad woman everyone's looking for? I'm the child stolen from it's mother. That thing in the pushchair is just a thing."

But the policeman was smiling and talking to him as though deaf.

“Right. I’d better get off young man. Don’t want to wake your brother, eh?”

And off he trundled like a puppy dog.

I was trembling and white. Ideas of punishment replaced the panic and came closer to my mind as the house grew nearer.

“Hey. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it? You betraying – “

“He didn’t hear. Couldn’t have heard. I made sure of that. It was only to amuse you that I said it.”

There is something distinctly odd about this child.

“Why don’t you have a nice relaxing cuppa, I’ll have a juice and we can have another instalment of the fascinating saga of your family. What do you say?”

I was numb. I got us inside and hid Jonathon under my bed. I checked the street in case we had been followed but there was nothing there but a rusty red car that I had never seen move. Samuel watched and smiled and waved his blocks and wooden fire engine.

I made tea. I gave Samuel juice. I gave us each a biscuit.

“Better?”

“I’m not sure. I’m still shaking. Don’t ever do anything like that again.”

“Sorry.”

“You should be. It’s not easy doing this, you know. Not easy being Faerie either.”

“Tell me a story. It will help.”

Perhaps he is right.

The Birth Of The Modern Rules For Family Living

Coming into the full powers of Faerie is not at all easy. It is a little like madness descending and some of my ancestors have been diagnosed in that way. But it is not madness, it is the revelation, sometimes sudden, sometimes unfolding like a flower, of the certain presence and importance of some higher reality. Take Great-great-grandfather Petrie for example.

It was Petrie who laid down the Modern Rules for Family Living, a supplement to the Rules themselves. He decided on the need for them gradually and, as far as I can recall (his own memory was not the best and mine can be no better), worked on writing and refining them for around three-quarters of his long life. The knowledge that he had inherited Onogo and the memories of Lantanesis and the Rules came upon him fast and in the midst of a tingling over his entire body. For days he didn't know what to do or to think but lay confounded in his bed and in his armchair and as he walked the streets of his home town. He was a man of rationality and of reason and this, well, it seemed to him then that this was made of neither but was knitted from a nothing.

Gradually however, he came to accept that through whatever means he now possessed both a hitherto unknown property and memories of things he had never experienced. He decided that a man of reason and of rationality would either investigate until he found the answer in a scientific way or just state that there must be one and not bother. He decided that though he was a man of both these qualities he wasn't in fact the man of rationality who actually would do this

investigation as he had no idea of how to go about it and was anyway too scared to even think about it.

The idea of just accepting it and getting on with what to do next metamorphosed into a serious attempt to modernise the Rules. This all came to him slowly. It is recorded in the preface to the Modern Rules in pedantic detail. To read it only once is more than enough. The gist of it is this.

He had been reading “The Compleat Masterpiece Of The Sciences For the Common Man”. The work was neither complete nor accurate but its language is a masterpiece of cruelty in its boredom and as convinced of the finality of its pronouncements as is the Bible. It dealt with light (“A fluid that travels in channels etched by The Almighty in the Void between the mighty Sun and this Earthly Paradise bestowed upon us”) electricity (“A force conjured from moving magnets and wire that has little use but remarkable effects”) and giraffes (“which, with their high necks, are able to hear over distances that Men cannot. This explains their silence as they are always straining to listen for the sounds of the Firmament”).

Neither was Petrie the common man for whom the book was intended. He was one of us for a start, one of the Faerie. He was also a man of intense curiosity, an immense fortune and a huge capacity for neuroses.

Things really began much further back, when Petrie was a young man. He had inherited three things from one of his parents (before the other died and he got Onogo and his memory.) These were: a perpetual calendar, a pocket watch and a wristwatch. He was in the habit of

wearing the two timepieces on alternate days until, one fine catastrophic, spring Thursday morning not long after he had inherited Onogo, he absent-mindedly put on both and set off for work.

Until then, he had always been sure of the time. As he would walk past the cathedral he would check and perhaps adjust a little. The pocket watch only needed a tweak twice a week, the wristwatch once. But the he realised at lunch this day that he had checked his pocket watch on the walk in but had just looked at his wristwatch for morning tea. Curiosity made him compare them. An uncomfortable feeling began to steal upon him. Whereas before he had always been prompt and punctual, steady in his knowledge that he had the correct time and stuck to it, now there was a problem. The second hand of one timepiece trailed the other.

So what was the correct time? The one? The other? The average? Neither? If some time between them, where? Half way? Three-quarters towards the watch because it was slower to become inaccurate or toward the pocket watch because he had set it that morning?

Hurriedly he put on his hat and walked back to the cathedral. But the certainty that this always imposed on whichever clock he had fell apart, for now he saw only three possibilities.

Petrie had read in that awful science publication that experiments had been completed in France that showed beyond doubt that the soul was the seat of consciousness, that it was connected to the brain from the spiritual dimension via electricity and that the brain in turn connected to body parts in the same way. As Petrie believed (contrary to various

statements in the Compleat Masterpiece) that the brain itself was the seat of consciousness, this made things a step simpler. But he nevertheless had been thinking about it all after reading and now he was hit by a realisation of a profound difficulty with the exact nature of time itself.

Now, when a man of Petrie's position and disposition, with a lot of time on his hands and a lot of worry in his head, starts to think, the results can be troubling. And they were. For Petrie reasoned that if electricity had to travel from the eyes, ears, nose, skin and tongue to the brain before the brain could know what those organs were sensing, and if the brain took time to assemble all of this information into a picture of the world it was experiencing, then there was a big problem.

This was the problem: everything we experience is happening in the immediate present must in fact have already happened. In other words, we were all living in the past. A nice little point. Of little concern you would think. Almost a little joke. But Petrie was a man who thought and worried and worried and thought some more. For if we are only experiencing the past, what were our bodies and our minds and our souls doing in the actual present, the one we are not quite experiencing yet? By the time we come to experience the actions of our own bodies and environment, everything has moved on to something else.

Who, asked Great Grand Uncle Petrie, was in charge? Our bodies must be engaged in some sort of blind, senseless automatic movement, the results of which we only find out about a split second later. This was made even worse in fact by the different distances these various signals had to travel to get to the brain in the first place.

The more he thought about this the more bizarre seemed to be the world around him. He looked at his neighbours and saw them not as thinking, feeling human beings gaily conversing about the horse or the crops or the prices in the markets, but as lumps of unconscious meat, lumbering around, totally out of control or controlled from the past. As he must be himself.

He began to fear his neighbours. Isn't that sensible? Who wouldn't do the same? We are living in an asylum, with everyone around completely at everyone else's mercy. The blacksmith wielding his hammer and throwing hot molten metal around horses and men was as dangerous as a Golem whose master was absent. The butcher who hacked and sawed and thrust with his knives and saws and cleavers was to be avoided at all costs. The fishmonger's wife, she could not be trusted to be picking out the bad oysters from the good when her fingers were choosing utterly ignorantly and at random by themselves.

So Petrie withdrew as much as possible from company. He required his servants to keep at least eight feet from him at all times. This he estimated gave a safe buffer so that corrective action could be taken by either the servant or he himself when their respective brains both caught up with the fact that their bodies had just embarked on some appalling course of harm to him and for corrective signals to get back to the limbs concerned. He remained always more than eight feet away from sharp objects, from the edges of cliffs, from water and from fire and any other danger – that is to say, everything. He could barely bring himself to eat and drink and had to take himself unawares to approach the table and gobble quickly.

Then he fell into a great despair, one that lasted for thirteen years. What was the world he was living in, who were the people around him and what most of all was he himself? How did he function? Who or what was controlling his body? Was he in fact doing it, but from the past? How could that be so? And didn't that mean that now, right now at least as he perceived it he had an endless and infinite duty to arrange every aspect of his future? Would he be dead before he knew it or didn't this make any difference as the instant of death would cease all instant thought even if the present could be experienced? These and other questions tortured him daily.

In terror, he turned to other thoughts to try to give his fevered brain a rest. He took up the latest craze of star gazing, spending first a hundred pounds and then two thousand more and then more still until he had replaced his humble first telescope with an entire observatory and a magnificent tube of glass and brass, wood and sparkles. And for a while, for a year and a day, it satisfied him. He found he could go for hours while he peered into the eyepiece and into the heart of the universe through the monstrous instrument, write his notes in one of his many hard-backed red journals, all without thinking once of when he was doing it. The relief was more tremendous than even the rush back of horror when he broke off each night and made his way to his bedroom – all now on the ground floor (for he had forsaken the stairs). Until he realised, reading once more the Compleat Masterpiece, that the light from the stars took time to get to him. That he was looking at stars in the past. That the closest was the sun but still minutes in the past when its light arrived and the next closest was four years away and that most, most

were hundreds and thousands of years older than the light that... and he broke again.

He took to his bed for a whole year, drinking liquidised food and water only through a machine that he had commissioned built to deliver less than a mouthful of liquid at a time. It was equipped with a revolutionary shut-off valve to ensure that if his body betrayed him and choked him before he could register the fact, he would have a chance. In so doing he invented the first machine that worked faster than the speed of sound because it had to work so very quickly. If he had failed to swallow a sonic boom would have deafened him. Luckily he didn't know the science of this or he would have been even more frightened, as it would mean he would be deaf before he knew it and thereafter his pilotless body would be even more in the hands of chaotic forces beyond his control.

He had to do something. He could get no-one to listen to him. He had to do something. He had taken steps to protect himself but now he would have to protect his wider family if he could not save humanity itself.

So was born the task of writing the Modern Rules For Family Living.

He laboured hard night and day. He started to forget for moments the horror and to just enjoy being, much as he used to before he read the Compleat Masterpiece or when he gazed at burning points and globes of light and swirling dust clouds in the sky. He came to love and to hate the Compleat Masterpiece – love it because it opened his eyes and yet cursing it because it had destroyed his world. But he used it, that

flawed book. He used it and everything else he had at his disposal to write new Rules of living. And, though he lost a fortune doing it, he gained another in sales of the super-sonic shut-off valve to the military where it remained pouring royalties out secretly for many years.

Because these are things that bothered Petrie, they are things that bother me too, now that I recall them. That is a part of the burden of my gift. The Rule I will write into my Post-Modern edition is clear on this, as with all things:

Fear is a curse that we cannot escape, that makes us worse in order to make us better. It shapes us, it shapes our lives, and through us it shapes the lives of others. It is a force in the world that is blind and dumb and yet possessed of an intelligence but it is an intelligence that is already past. This is a paradox that is insoluble and inescapable.

ROSICRUCIAN

#

I'm exhausted. There was a deluge in Pakistan, high winds in Toledo and snow drifts in Moscow where the gas had been turned off because of a strike. Many are dead. I've been failing in my duties and I have spent considerable time making up for this with miraculous unseasonal warmth and sunshine accompanied by the kindest rainfall in agriculturally fragile African places in order that their crops will preserve lives otherwise lost. It is always a balancing.

Today's most significant conversation for Samuel went like this.

"Your family sounds interesting."

"Interesting, yes. But the Family is not all roses and teacake. Far from it. I could tell you stories. Oh, such stories of horror! But I won't."

"Go on."

"No. I will just tell you some of the tales that indicate what we are like, what I'm made up of."

"Who then? Another battily rich ancestor?"

"No, they were not all rich, or batty. Rosie for example, Rosie who was all sweetness and light when she was young. Whose brothers and sisters abandoned her in various ways, one to the war along with her father so that she became as self-sufficient as she was lonely."

"Ok, tell me about her, then."

"This is what I remember of Rosie:"

The Fabric of Theatre

Rosie was alone in the drapery shop when she felt the tingle and knew things she could not know. With brisk efficiency learned at too

early an age, born of twenty-four hours a day shackled alone to her father's struggling business, she locked the front door, swapped the *Open* sign over, pulled down the blind, then sank to the floor shaking and crying at the distant death of her father on foreign sands.

With Grief came Madness as the tingling that announces the inheritance of Onogo and of memory poured in. Within a few days Madness left but recommended its desolate sister, Depression, whom Rosie gladly allowed to take its place, temporarily. But it moved in and overstayed its welcome.

She was sledge-hammered by this doughy cadaver that lives in the bones, deep and damp and rotten, unrootable; like mould under paint. Forgotten, unasked, masked; a damnable undamable thing.

Let me tell you about Depression. It creeps up on one like unease over weeks. There is no foreboding as of a coming storm. It is just there and ugly of itself. If you don't understand what it is, or if you're looking the other way at a pretty flower lovely child wonderful painting it still hits you just the same.

It is not exhaustion – just overwhelming tiredness. A feeling of physical tiredness that demands physical sleep; of mental tiredness that demands surcease; of emotional tiredness that cannot be escaped. Of spiritual tiredness that is silent and dead calm without being peaceful.

It is not sadness but dreariness. Such mind-bludging ordinariness.

Your body mind and soul are replaced by your demented twin from the world of Gludge. You become banished and tiny and trapped at the back, pale and wan, unable to feel even numbness, too helpless and

hopeless and lazy to wrest back control, your puppet strings enough to make the zombie thing smile a bit and put one foot in front of the other but too thin and too stretchy to pull the golem around like a full person. Days stretch like sickly old toffee covered with grit and lint from under the cushions wet dogs sleep on.

On sunny days near blue sea far from Onogo, Rosie would bend to pick up eleven golden grains. She would pour bits of her beautiful life into them, blow gently, and they would scatter. She'd reach to pick them up – but that day, the day Depression has become a lodger, she couldn't find them. The gleam had gone from them and they were lost amongst grey sand bits.

She started to panic. The sand was damp and she scrabbled and fell to her knees. She could no longer remember what the bits of her life looked like. The sand up close had traces of slimy green stain and smelled like death and her knees were worn and creaky. The sun had gone, the beach was deserted. A bleak and twisty wind blew on her wet limbs. She stood and turned and the whiff of the sea was in her nostrils and it was frightening. She was suddenly alone - this place is strange and she wanted to go home. Not her bungalow. A place called Onogo.

Inside her now there were eleven grains of grey irregular sand. They grated and scraped within her belly. They were the tasks that were her life now. To read and write the Rules, to protect Onogo, to manage world weather and moods, to do eight other things Faerie.

She was wearing her grey flesh like an old tatty woollen overcoat, ripe with the sour sweat and tobacco of a dead soldier; army-heavy, damp and pulling her towards the mud.

This is what it is like to suddenly realise you're Faerie.

Everything was fine, just great, was all rosy, there was nothing wrong. And there wasn't anything wrong. Nothing could be better on this marvellous beach. Except that the part that is backstage can only see and feel the golden sun and sand as grey mud and dead wind. Knows the set is all an illusion.

Out the back she found there were other selves. All watching and criticising and carping. They were not whole like the real her; just little two dimensional scraps. They told her to get a grip, to appreciate what she had, see things as they really were, be a good soldier. But no matter how much she tried, the sets looked the same cardboard from behind and the rational and intelligent, the humoured and the happy, the ambitious could not get the leading part. That was occupied by the ghastly shade and between her and it was a sea of gibbering idiocy and panic and self-loathing waves that crashed and smothered and dragged at the shore. The hauling carcass wanted to be off-stage as much as she and the others wanted her off. But it was fixed there, frightened and stage-struck and wallowing as the others pushed and loudly whispered their prompts that made her seem so real to the audience while Rosie just watched. As much as they cajoled they could do no better and the zombie had to stand out there until they were all alone and the audience was gone. Then the selves all came out and wailed until the next performance. Perhaps – just maybe! – the part would be given to an understudy next time. Would there be a curtain call? Send in the clown, call in the lover, prepare the lectern for the stern orator. But no: only the wailing seaweed festooned woman who drowned them out with her clumsy shuffle and left puddles

on the boards that stunk even after she finally exhausted his own exhaustion and waddled fighting and coddled in smothering hot cotton wool back to the dream room.

Then the audience was there again and everything settled down to a new routine. It was ordered, artistic and crafted show work that had ghosts operating its machinery. But an automaton looks and acts humanly, so was assumed to be. Week after profitable week the show went on. And then the fools in the back started to gain a bit of control. This didn't make it better at all. It put cracks in the performance as the murmurings got heard.

There were glances between the stage-hands and the men and women in the front row, the ones in the drapery shop who delivered and purchased and sought answers to their fabric questions and disasters and desires, thought the act looked tired and sometimes said so:

“How's the shop, dear? Not overdoing it, I hope. It's hard times this war, dear, hard times for all of us, even the King, God bless him. You've done marvellously with your dad away. Gone now, sorry, bless him, bless you both and your poor brother and sister. Why, just yesterday I was saying to Doreen...”

Behind the front row, the audience was dark. It is all voles and weasels, sea-slugs and squid slime, scorpions and dung beetles and they applauded each plod with bile and scorn.

One day Rosie found herself suddenly and inexplicably under the hot lights. She was not ready and retreated after a blunder and hid in the back. The delivery man in the front seats, the one with the limp who was turned down by the drafters, saw the change in the actor and wondered.

He said nothing, then but became interested in the Rosie he had seen.

More weeks past and she was scared still but increasingly found herself wanting to go back on stage when the delivery man was in the audience and all of a sudden, she was there, back in centre stage all the time.

The season was going strong. Behind the glare of the footlights she sees she was mistaken the seats are filled with laughing happy cheering people. There was a new vigour and wit in the show, they all said. She joined the audience and watched herself a little. Yes. It is good. But she could not stay long in those comfortable seats. She was too aware that the zombie might take over so she returned to the stage and kept at it, plugging away at her eleven tasks irritating her and consoled herself with her limping delivering man.

She knew it is only a matter of time before the season was over and the members of the lovely audience would begin to drift into the theatre next door. How she longed to join them and see. But she can't. she was forever locked there. There was work to be done.

C'est la vie. The show must go on.

New memories kept bubbling to the surface sometimes at inconvenient moments when Rosie was counting shillings and pence into customers' hands. A green pasture, a little hill and a huge white house. It waited for her somewhere.

"Nice."

"No need for sarcasm. You wanted the story."

"Yes, but it is dreary and despairing."

"Of course. That's life."

"Not my life."

“Not yet. Rosie’s life was more despairing than yours or mine, to be sure. But it had to be that way. Her life served as a reminder that we will suffer depression when we are members of the Family. She suffered it the worst of all and willingly, though like Job she questioned it. But she bore it and gave her life to it to save us by showing us we weren’t so badly off as her even in our low moments.”

“She bore it because she hadn’t choice, not because of some Christ-like sacrifice.”

“You would say that. You’ve no idea.”

“Nor do you.”

“I do because I remember it, or had you forgotten?”

“You think you remember it.”

“You will never understand.”

And he won’t Cal. Nor will you. Oh, how easy it would be to be human.

EUROPEAN SOJURN

#

Strange things happen to normal people, Callum. You're no exception. You just have to learn to take them in your stride, like those in my Family have always done. Mind you, it is more difficult for you as you're not used to it. That's why things that are strange are strange. Take for example my grandfather's reaction to strange events in his life and the way he deals with them. Can you do also accept the strangeness that has come into your life?

We will see.

Samuel wanted more about King Richard but I still haven't decided whether I should tell him the rest. But the grandfather story, that is a fine one for a young lad with a cynical midget inside.

The Trolley Affair

This is the history of my grandfather when he was living in a certain European city he had run from home to. Not as child but as a young man and not because he was running from anything (he was well loved, well educated and well looked after.) He was running towards something; a life he had read and dreamed of.

This is a strange history, one that still sends a slow cold flutter down my body and into my shoes. It is filled with love and honour, bravery and pride; a parable of comradeship and sacrifice. It is full of twists and turns, of intrigue involving ordinary people and the powerful servants of government. And it is above all a tragedy.

The city was far, far away, beautiful and old upon which had been grafted and glued a series of more modern civilisations like layers of wallpaper, leaving the old intact but dark and hidden beneath the

latest. At its physical and psychical hearts however it remained grand and elegant and proud and thought itself eternal.

The chronicle starts with a routine. Every morning of the working week my grandfather, Simon, strolled down the main street of that fabulous exotic city, whistling cheerfully to himself if the sun was shining (as it was as often as not) and humming if the sun was not (which, by a strange symmetry, it too was as often as not).

When he reached the river he would turn right over a beautiful little stone bridge built by Venetian émigrés a thousand years ago. If there are ducks in sight he would sometimes watch them, but only for a minute or so. He had a schedule to keep that he had adhered to for many months, a position of management and responsibility not often given to a foreigner in those days. His favourite ducks were the beautiful Blue Muscovites. He was also fond of one particular Common Teal drake, which he fancied recognised him. He sometimes threw a bit of ginger nut biscuit to him which, if it was fast enough to beat the others, the drake gobbled down with a jerky throat. Simon always had a ginger nut on him in the mornings. He liked to take two with his morning tea but would not allow more than one company-issued biscuit per person in his office. Otherwise things could fast get out of hand. So he carried the second from home in the outside pocket of his attaché case where it would be safe from crushing and stay dry. He encouraged his staff to do the same if they felt like consuming more than their allotted company share. Simon would not, could not, abide any form of overstepping this important point of principle, even such as where one employee allowed

another his or her own allocation – unwanted biscuits must be returned to the barrel. This was his rule and he abided by his own instruction.

Once across the bridge he turned right again, his route now retracing his steps on the other side of the bridge for fifty paces or so. He stopped there and normally bought a morning newspaper, his second of the day. He took one at home but never finished more than the local section and almost always left the thing on the train. An habitual error he could not seem to break. On those rare occasions when he did remember to bring it off the train, as often as not he forgot he had it in his attaché case and bought another anyway. This could be quite disturbing when he discovered it. As much a question of divided loyalties in deciding which one to finish than as of unsettlement in his tight routine.

Whether he bought a newspaper or not he exchanged pleasantries with the vendor, a man he knew only as Bascard (which was one word more than Bascard knew of Simon.) To Bascard, Simon was just the youngish brown-briefcase man in the dark blue winter overcoat covering the grey pinstriped suits he exposed in the summer. ONCE he had his newspaper, Simon would turn his back to Bascard and carefully watch the cars and occasional horse and cart to the left and to the right as he crossed the street.

Directly opposite Bascard's stand was a tiny lane which Simon walked cheerfully and briskly down, waving to Francois the tobacconist from whom he liked to purchase a small tin box of mints on a Friday morning. Like Bascard, Francois had only a slight acquaintance with the man in the grey pin-striped suits but, as a merchant with an actual lease

over his actual premises, he was a cut above Bascard, whom he too favoured with his custom, and thus had made it his business to be privy to Simon's first name. Though not his last. That privilege was reserved for Tosh the barber two doors down on the other side of the lane who didn't take part in the morning ritual because he doesn't open his doors until ten. Simon had Madame Herchelle of his office make a formal tonsorial appointment for one in the afternoon every three weeks. It was in this manner that Tosh was able to claim both last and first name knowledge. In this way Tosh imagined he had it over Simon as well as Francois as Simon didn't know Tosh's first name. Tosh kept this nomenclatural intimacy firmly to himself and never shared it with Francois over Turkish coffee or heaven forbid Bascard on Fridays when Bascard packed his stand early and headed for the bar, even if he had ever thought about it, which he did not. Any chance of Tosh actually ever talking to Bascard was extremely unlikely due to both the difference in their working hours and, in Tosh's view until the day with which this history is concerned, their class. It should be understood in this regard that Bascard was until then a PhD student working whilst studying at his stand to support himself because his elderly father, the Count of Pascalia, showed an increasingly exasperating inexplicable ability to hold onto life and his fortune despite advanced age and a deep and abiding fondness for excessive nips of gin. Everything changed in the horrors of that day of course, but until then, only on the deaths of Tosh's clients and only then briefly, would the true and full taxonomy of each client in turn become known around the centre of the ancient city by all manner of vendors, merchants and tonsorial artistes.

The lane opened out onto a cobble-stoned square, ringed by four glorious cathedrals, two more glorious than the others and, of the others, one more glorious than the poor fourth. The top two argued often about which of them was in fact the most glorious and had, as one might expect, never been able to agree. What they were of one accord on however is that the other two cathedrals were rather less gorgeous than either of themselves. The third cathedral claimed that the fourth was rubbish and on this the first three would all have agreed if they were on speaking terms. Even the poor fourth cathedral (who had an understandable self esteem problem and could be heard whimpering quietly to itself on still winter nights, about this and certain other personal problems) also privately agreed. The other three often threw baked bricks from their structures and jeered at this one. All four, including the victim, failed to see that this strategy eventually would see him the sole surviving island in a sea of bricks. So the meek would inherit the earth.

Simon would cross this square at a sedate but businesslike pace and arrive at a set of wide stone-block steps, ornately decorated with faux lion-and-vine-leaf at the sides. It was his practice to stop there and bend his head back so that he could sight the tower clock which crowned the majestic government post building, check his own watch and then the four clocks on the bottoms of the spires of the four bickering cathedrals. These worthies all showed different times from the government and from one another with the exception of the pale fourth. It which would not dare to do so and so would choose to be in sync with one of the others. So it was that Simon would always see two cathedral clocks showing the

same time, despite it being a less than majority decision. In all cases, experience taught him, the smallest palest cathedral, which to him seemed the most beautiful, would always be accurate as there was always one other clock in agreement with it. It is this clock which shows, he always decided with satisfaction, absolutely the correct time. But he would always set his watch o the time on the post office clock. He was aware that the time of those professing to represent God's time, no matter how true their internecine debates might ring, cannot forbear against the might of the National Postal Service when it comes to matters of schedule.

He would mount the steps and enter the cool marble foyer. Sound echoed around this chamber as though he were in fact in a cathedral. To him, the Central Post Office (And Regional Headquarters) was a place where the might, the certainty of the state delivered on all of its promises (until a particular day – but more of that later).

He crossed with hollow footsteps through the foyer and entered through a large door with its large steel wheel, always ajar at that time on a business day. A few other people, to whom he only ever nodded, similarly pay silent obesciance to this holy place from cavernous ringing foyer to mahogany desks and counters. There was never any talking in the foyer of the Central Post Office (And Regional Headquarters). There was however lots and lots of marble and loads and loads of mahogany – in the desks, on the walls, forming arched buttresses taming the cool glistening stone. Sometimes in the night, even before this all happened, when he could not quite sleep (though then for different and in comparison to afterwards trivial reasons), Simon wished he were made

of mahogany. He would not be able to explain this to his beautiful young fiancée, who would become my grandmother, nor even himself and didn't try.

And then through enormous mahogany and brass doors, down a corridor under blown glass chandelier to a large rectangular courtyard. There he walked on a raised platform similar to that in a railway station, even to the steel tracks running down the centre of an alley set into the centre. On these tracks ran several Thomas-the-Tank-Engine-style trolley carts laden with bulging canvas postal sacks, each fastened with very official lead seals. Official men in official uniforms unloaded these and disappeared behind official doors where somewhat less official and never seen women wearing somewhat less official uniforms distributed the mail to the reverse side of thousands of numbered boxes, in row after row, column after column, all with little numbered carefully locked doors opening out onto a platform, this platform, the platform Simon went onto on each morning, all as neat as figures on a ledger sheet.

Simon took a moment at this point to breathe deeply of the smells and delight in the heady sight that this perfect sense of unhurried and efficient order always bestowed upon him.

There were always several other people sparsely dotted over the postal platform landscape. They bent or stretched to insert minute unmarked but often worn silver keys into identical looking locks and swung open identical small brightly painted red steel doors. Hands disappeared up to the elbow as they reached for mail like squirrels. They withdrew with bundles, locked smartly and left, popping the bundles into bags, cases, coat pockets, folders.

There was a precisely adequate and sturdy table upon which some sorted wheat from the chaff by opening envelopes and casting unsought advertisements for ingenious new labour-saving gardening implement franchising opportunities, Bona Fide Gold Mining share offers, discreet support underwear, or miraculous tonic into a large canvas bag held open over a metal frame under the table. (This was conveniently emptied each night by person or persons unknown and entirely unthought-of about by the users of this free service before the events of that day and the horror of the week that followed.) When satisfied that they hadguttled and cleaned their haul, these visitors also briskly snap shut briefcases or carry bags or slid slimmer bundles into pockets or handbags then vanished into the foyer on their way to work.

Sometimes a few may have stayed to chat quietly and guiltily, nervously watching their watches, but never for long. They were busy and punctual. Everything was clean, pristine and perfect. Whilst a cool and efficient yet unhurried and unflurried pace was common enough, loitering *per se* was frowned upon by the officials and visitors alike and generally understood to be unacceptable behaviour. Sometimes it was possible to see an experienced office junior pointing out the ropes to a new, pasty faced teenaged recruit, in hushed and reverent tones talking darkly of the dangers of taking this place in any way for granted. Simon was not of course an office junior but an important young executive with management responsibilities. Grade 4. He usually left the later visits during the day to his own juniors, trained and overseen by Madame Herchelle. But he liked to do this job in the morning because he did it on his very first day in the office before his advancement and he liked to

think he still possessed some of the ordinary man about him. He wanted to be able to tell his staff that he can do anything they do and he expects them to do it just as well. He likes to remind them of this particularly when it is time for the Christmas party, annual holidays, when they ask for a raise or when they otherwise get 'uppity'.

As you may have gathered Simon my grandfather was at that time a fussy and pompous prat. He would not come into his own until the tingling that told him his mother was dead and that Onogo was his. But that was later. There was a side to his enormously irritating character which is displayed each morning on this spot for which he can be forgiven him all else. It redeemed him utterly. It occurred in this way:

Every day for more weeks than Simon could count a man, 137 box numbers to the right from his own and three rows further up the wall, visited his box at the same time as Simon cleared his. Simon had no idea of his name, never exchanged more than two words with him, but he was a friend.

That day, exactly as usual, Simon turned his key at head height and yanked cheerfully at the door. It is exactly the right size for its function, but this action which always made him think that the thing is oddly the wrong size and weight - too small to swing properly of its own weight and at the same time too stiff to require anything less than a mighty pull. Somehow it made him uneasy every morning, just a for second. It was the only mar on his mornings. He withdrew the satisfyingly thick bundle on this day and slipped it into his attaché case.

As he brought his hand up to close the door and extracted his key, he looked to the right and sees his man just beginning a similar process.

This was always remarkable, and was made that way by in part a twist of fate. Simon was not sure what particular twist it was.

Something the man's mother ingested during the all important first trimester of pregnancy? A stray cosmic ray perhaps from an overactive sunspot which hit sperm, egg or foetus? Or was it merely the expression of the one in ten thousand chance that any of us could have in coming into this world? He just didn't know. What made it all the more poignant in this case was its interaction with either another blind unfeeling twist of fate or the macabre twist of an unfeeling bureaucrat's knife.

The twist is that man was a dwarf. No higher than three feet tall and very possibly less. Simon on an earlier occasion waited until his friend left and then surreptitiously measured against his trouser leg the spot at which he thought the dwarf's head came to on the rows by his box. Simon then tried to gauge this height with a ruler once he got back to his office. Frauline Whischkler had come in and put a stop to that with a look that simply dripped with suspicion but three feet gave the dwarf the benefit of the doubt, Simon felt, even after making generous allowance for trouser ride-up and the errors inherent in the original spotting estimation.

The second contributor was twist of a bureaucratic knife, whether of destiny or malice, if you're astute you will already have spotted. This unfortunate man's post office box was located three rows above Simon's own, Simon's being at about his own eye level. Each morning was a

triumph of brains mixed with certain athleticism as the little chap pushed a sorting table with a couple of grunts towards his box, mounted it and then jumped three times. The first was to put in and turn the key, pulling the door open on the downward course. The second was to slip out the mail with one disproportionately large hand; and the third jump was to slam shut and lock the box again in one complex and fluid movement. Simon would watch in silent awe.

No-one else ever, ever noticed.

When the dwarf had finished this and slid the table back to its proper position, he would spin to face Simon and give a big grin. He would then bend slightly at the knees and energetically raise both hands high and straight above his head, shouting loudly as he did so in the time honoured manner of Lords: "Howzat!!?" Simon would drop his case to the platform and giving the appropriate gesture would roar out "Out!!" at the top of his lungs, his legs spread and his coat flapping like an umpire's jacket in the wind coursing through the huge Courtyard.

Again, no-one else in all this otherwise precisely ordered and solemnly quiet place would ever take a blind bit of notice.

Without a further word the two men sharing this strange bond would then pick up their bags and trudge off happily through different doors and disappear in their own ways into their own worlds. That was as much as Simon ever said to, heard from, or saw of this man. He occasionally briefly pondered, in quiet times on his way home on the bus or perhaps sitting last thing at night in front of the fire as his landlady prepared supper just before bed, just who this man was, what he did and what a strange, different and most of all, he thought, difficult life must

always have had compared to his own. These short moments of reverie were always cut short as life in the form of a bus stop or his neighbouring boarder calling at the bathroom or his fiancée at the front door with her mother, would intervene. He didn't tell his fiancée or her mother, his landlady or the neighbouring boarder about his minute cricketing friend.

That day had began as any of hundreds of others. The trip to the post office, the grabbing of the mail and then the sight of the odd performance. The table slid across the concrete, its top was assaulted by the three thuds of solid feet and he shout had started to come as usual "Howzat!!?" and Simon already had his own his feet spread wide and ready to cry out his answer.

He didn't complete it. He was struck by an horrific expression on the face of his little friend, all motion arrested, his arms still above his head, frozen but now with his head turned to the side. A terrified grimace spread slowly over the wee face, his eyes popping and his mouth hanging slackly.

Simon swivelled his own head to the edge of the platform. At first he could see nothing out of the ordinary. The alley beneath them was for once not clogged with trolleys or bustling officials wearing their official uniforms. Just for that moment there were no other people at their post boxes. The only sound was the squeaking of a trolley's slow wheels on the track. It took him a second to spot what the little man was staring at with such abhorrence. Then he, too, saw it. The trolley held a bundle like all the others had. Unlike the others, though, which always held off-white canvas bags stuffed with mail, this one held a cargo of a

different colour. From where he was Simon could see plainly the blue uniform with the red trim, the legs dangling over the front of the slowly moving trolley, the arms hanging limply over either side. The official head could not be seen but the decidedly unofficial knife sticking up from the very centre of the official tunic most certainly could. There was a lot of blood. The trolley squeaked on.

Simon felt an unearthly sense of dislocation. The noise of other hidden people, the platform and boxes, the other trolleys, all faded into the background. The only things that seemed real, and they seemed more utterly real as a consequence of the dimming of the rest, were himself, the trolley slowly rolling its way forward and his sporting friend. Time on all other planes stopped.

Then, slowly like a gathering storm that suddenly unleashes with a fury of rain and wind the real world faded back in as others came into the courtyard on this or that business and one by one and altogether caught sight of this... this thing. In a sudden switch, now the only things that didn't seem real now were these same three,: the trolley and its cargo, the cricketing dwarf and himself.

Then with a rush he was back in the usual world, running to the trolley at the same time as other frightened and shouting people burst from the entrances to the platform.

The next hour was a whirl of officialdom. People alternately rushing around as though they knew exactly what had happened and as if this sort of thing was a just another boring daily event and clustering together in puzzled huddles wondering mightily at it all.

Simon was asked to wait and sat on a hard wooden bench on the platform. Eventually the police got around to questioning him. He was in a daze. His mind was numbed his eyes looked into a peculiar middle distance, a place which only he could see and focus directly on. They all tried to get his story from him over the hours and days that followed. But none could shake him.

"Let me try again Chief," said the eager Brown. "It's only a matter of time before he cracks. Yeah. Cracks wide open." The man was a parody of a cop from modern TV show although TV had yet to be invented and the eager Brown was assistant to the Chief of Post, not of Police.

A small cruel smile played on his lips and his knuckles made their own cracking sound as he stared through the one way glass at poor, hunched Simon sitting in the hard chair, a clean dry glass in front of him on the tacky little table, overcoat still on despite the terrible humidity that now gripped the city like the fear that blanketed it.

"Shut up, you young fool! You read too many of those silly books for your own good. I'll talk to him again," said the Chief manoeuvred his lumbering frame through the narrow door. The suspect lifted sad tired eyes.

"Once more."

"I was getting the mail. I left home at..."

"Skip that. Just the part where you say you saw the body. What were you doing then?"

The man was silent, his face lined and muscles taut.

"Come on. One more time. Huh? Then you can get outa here. I promise."

Slowly, reluctantly he started.

"I was playing imaginary cricket with a dwarf."

The Chief's eyes narrowed. His hand went to his truncheon, his huge belly shook and pushed at tiny buttons on his sweaty shirt as he leaned

"And that's where I'll leave it. Unfinished. Mid-sentence. Before the real horror begins, the awful events that cast fear into the heart of a city, caused my grandfather to be deported in disgrace only to arrive to a hero's welcome and brought down a government or whatever it is that really happened."

"What? Why leave it there?"

"Because I choose to. Not your choice but mine. Because that is what life is like – other people make choices for us and we just have to accept them. A fairly gentle thing, to be deprived of the end of a story. But real life is harsher in its treatment."

"But I don't feel comfortable with it. No ending? And the reference to the dwarf – that seems in some way a veiled stab at me. Finish the story, you mad cow."

"Perhaps it is a reference to you. Strange things happen. But I will tell you no more."

Strange things happen, Cal, and you accept or reject them in your mind but you have no choice but to live with them.

THE POST-MODERN RULES FOR FAMILY LIVING

#

I have revived my interest in my own revision of the Rules. I've decided I will absolutely do my duty I have put them in a brand new, thick, leather-bound delicious journal that I didn't make, could not have made. I used no skin that I had killed and cured or wax from bees or linen thread. I bought a leather-bound journal from the supermarket. That is the way of our times.

Here is a copy of the first one, succinct and true:

“Post-Modern Rules For Family Living:

Rule 1. Don't live. It is not worth it. It is too complicated and fruitless and too mundane.”

I remember more each day now. What started out as stories I would use to comfort myself at night in the dreams about an orphanage, or to protect myself with in my dealings with school acquaintances or workmates, I've come to realise have always had a seed of truth in them.

My true father I once thought was imagined but he is real and I only remembered this when the tingling came and it was too late to meet him. How I could have been his so-loved daughter in his wealthy world for so long and yet have no memories of it all for so many years, let alone how I replaced them with made up stories the noises and boiled smells of a children's home and foster houses I don't know.

Sometimes even now those falsities seem more real than the reality of my father, my Family.

I'm sometimes so confused.

CRUMBLING

#

Do you know what has happened to the hill where Gordon wrote his runes and sealed them in, Cal?

Of course you don't. How would you? I do and now Samuel does. You should know too because it is very important:

Pudding Rocks

The hill sat for decades, more than a hundred years after Gordon died, much more. Not as long as it had sat before Gordon arrived which is an unimaginable time. But its only purpose during those eons was to wait for Gordon so that he could do his job, and do it he did.

Undisturbed but for the visits of birds and winds, rain and the occasional lost tramper who would see some of the old workings of the Alphorners and nod to himself that he thought he knew what that was all about..

In all that time it did its job. No action had to be taken as humans understand action. All it had to do was sit there, containing the mathematics of Gordon's Runes. Through that calculus it linked the earth of Aotearoa to the land of Vivienne and to Onogo in a powerful triangle, protecting both Onogo and the Family. This was one of the Rules; that Onogo must stand so long as the Family is to stand and that they live and die together.

I know what happened to it, though. It was at the time immediately before we broke apart, the time that is a little blurry for me. I know of it because I felt it in my own veins as must be expected by one such as me. I also knew it by reading it in the newspapers and hearing it

on the radio and seeing it on the television. Nationwide story – even global in some circles.

The story presented was of a company with new technology techniques tools. Intent on an arbitrage of what gold was taken by Gordon and the horn blowers and what could be squeezed from what they left behind in their tailings and the rest of the hill. This company, this vampire of percentages and fractions of cents, worked out the time it was waiting for had come, that the margins were just right to enable it to open a circus. To this circus came clever men and cunning women. There were acrobats of accounting, tightrope walkers of geologists, fat men and bearded ladies in the board room and strong men in the field. The big cats were yellow with black writing and huge saw teeth, the tents hard-shelled and the bear that danced was about to become a bull in the market, they all thought; and they were all right.

Before any of the local people even noticed the posters that were up around the town, hidden in little plain innocuous-seeming envelopes sent to council offices absentee bach-dwellers naive neighbours, the performance - an event of breathtaking and astonishing speed, precision planning, and outrageous condescension - had begun and the hill was attacked. The cats dug their claws straight through the veins of Gordon and the hill was crumbling. The local audience was horrified and the performance was stopped by the Mayor, started stopped started stopped again while one Court then another decided all fates (including Onogo's without notice to me) and then the matinee commenced where the stuff of the hill with its tiny flecks of gold was sifted and scrutinised by

mercury and who knows what and Gordon's colourful calculus was broken up and cast aside unrecognised as useless dust.

There was grumbling and heated fighting and in the end no-one was satisfied but a compromise was reached: the hill would be put back after the gold was extracted and replanted. This missed the point of the environmentalists of the world and the Tainui people of the area and was lamented as temporary by the local shops and motels a few miles away who suffered no danger but the increase to their pockets.

And it utterly missed the point of the protection of my Family.

I failed in my duty because at that stage in my life I didn't know of it. I should have been part of that protest. I was an *atua* who should have been in Onogo to guard this geography that guarded Onogo in turn. In the unravelling of the hill and the destruction of Gordon's careful Runes, the unravelling of Onogo and the Family began.

This is the Rule that has been added:

Interconnections are impossible. There is no reality in the connectiveness of places and people, events and times. There is no truth in synchronicity. But reality is not real either. And so it is irreality and in irreality all things are possible, all things are connected and when they are, they pull and push at each other.

ONOGO RELEASE

#

At last I've visited Onogo.

I was not alone. I would have been remiss in my duties if I hadn't taken Samuel with me. This caused logistical difficulties but nothing insurmountable.

First, I had to put aside my pride and buy the very type of all-terrain pushchair that I despised so much when one was directed by the soft white constricting hands of your feather boa concubine. I tried encourage Samuel to walk a lot each day but it was clear watching him try to mount the kerb at the supermarket that he wasn't capable of the sort of cross-country work we had before us, I purchased a back-pack and carrying frame but when I hoisted him onto my back in these contrivances they were torturous and so unbalanced I kept tipping like a mad woman.

The next thing was to work out how to get to Onogo. Though I remembered it, better and better every day, I didn't know quite how to get there. It has no address other than itself, you see. And its name is marked on no map. When Michael left it he drew a map. When Gordon went south then east he too drew a map, each drawing on the skills passed down from Joseph. But those maps are gone and in any event didn't help even those two much. When visitors found it, they came upon it by accident and had no way of finding it again back even had they remembered it. When Maori guides took people or messages or supplies there they did so with memory only but memory was lost as they learned to read because that is the spell that Alice put on the place. When European explorers, settlers, and government survey men found it and drank from its wells and stayed for dinner or days, they went from it and somehow forgot to include it in their journals and drawings.

The only map to Onogo is through memory, and it is the memory that is Remembrance and Remembrance of that sort is given only to Faerie. I'm Faerie and I'm the last of my kind, though I should not be. And I had trouble remembering where it was.

For many days I drove here and there searching. I left my new station wagon (a pitiful rusted thing, full of the detritus of other people's lives – used tissues jammed down the seat, coins under the dashboard, a red lighter that was empty of fuel but still sparked in the seat pocket, a moist and pointless map of a different part of the country with pages missing and others stuck together) and trekked on foot and tried every track and byway.

Wherever I went I had to carry the sports bag with its book and the jar marked 'Honey' and push the all-terrain pushchair laden with a small boy with blonde roots showing. It was awkward but I managed. I always do.

One afternoon when, without food or water for two days, lost and in despair, with Samuel no longer talking to me except in purely childish language and cries, his face tear-stained and muddy, I decided to head in a straight line across a ridge of thorns and gorse, down a valley of no path, across a hill of rimu and thick karaka, I saw a certain transparent shape. It had a rounded head and large black eyes with no nose or limbs and it glided on the ground in the distance and I followed the pudding ghost, climbed and fought my way through clay and branch and then I burst through. There it was, Onogo in sunlight.

It was not quite how I remembered it. Nothing like as grand or large. Small. But that is of course because I was approaching it from the north, where is it set in Westland at the foot of abrupt almost vertical hills of rock and foolish mountaineering plants. From this direction, the place known as Onogo was a

black-green thickness of bush leading to wrinkly dense hills through swampy reed beds. Tired rotting vegetation hid some of its shape. The sky around was always wet and there was about it the smell of damp earth and the cry of one seabirds, sounds that reminded me of the squawk of goblin-babies of other people. All this was smothered in a dull, memory-metal titanium sky that drooped over the place as heavy as a wet dead dog.

Below the ghastly hills and sitting on the edge of that swamp and clods of clay were ancient fence posts and two dead cars that are no more warriors than old men in a rest-home remembering dimly battles that never really took place. These are the remains of the old guard and they moved only as much as broken, scraped, forgotten toys. Amongst the struggling beech trees, all in middle age or older and almost strangled by Old Mans Beard, grew varieties of native bushes as well as the broader-leafed trees. There hid the rumour of an occasional kiwi or a heron in rotting wood in muddy streams. Like all rumours but unlike all kiwis these take flight every so often in newspapers and television and radio stories that flap their way into the rallying hearts of the people of the nation.

The house, also called Onogo, the place where it all starts and ends, fitted into this landscape as naturally as the wekas and their mirror-cousin brown clay clods.

Approaching, Onogo grew organically from swampy black water on one side and mud on the other, the only gardens planted there by nature, to a low, dried-blood rusted roof and gables barely supported by grey.

The air was thick and mouldy and took its smell from the dead swamp it swept across in winds. Closer, one saw the simple planes of the walls resolve into weatherboards, horizontal in places, slanting in others and by sheer force of

weatherboard will from lost places in long grass. Bare dark-brown bones were visible in many places, and the scrim skin that should be on the inside was visible hanging through gaps on the outside. Loose doors and the few intact panes of ancient glass that had seen so much of rain and mist and depression could not raise themselves to sparkle completed this paradise.

There were sheep, two of them, but they seemed wild, with a pungent odour of neglect and wool matted with twigs and clay. They approached me either recognising me as Faerie or because they had seen no humans and didn't know their ways with knives and hooks. There were, as I got nervously closer, chickens but they roosted in the trees. There was the grunt of pigs but they distrusted me and I didn't see them in the bush. There were twisted dead fruit trees amongst native bush and I spied but didn't closely examine what looked like the slabs of gravestones.

There was an axle and wheels from the front of an old tractor half-buried in the soil, a wooden shed never painted and now crumbling and collapsing into the same ground, sheep pellets everywhere both old and fresh, and crippled tools and cracked bricks amongst piles of rotting wood entangled with weeds.

The house was silent except for the wasps in the veranda. The sun beat on blistered paint and through broken, cracked dirty windows.

I was not expected. I had no key as my father had never contacted me to give me one and why should he, since Onogo was not mine until he was dead and he could hardly act then. This lack didn't matter, as the front door sagged open. The back door was frozen into place with rust and dirt which gave me my security.

Inside there was dust and more dust. Leaves and cobwebs. A table with borer holes all through it and the dust of its wood in piles in a rectangle around

it. There was rotted lace and battered tarnished silver but little of it. In the bedrooms was nothing. They were completely empty except for one that had shredded damask curtains, once a rich red but now faded to grey and pink. The water didn't run in the taps, the lights had once had electricity in their veins but now were deceased.

There was linoleum on the floor of the kitchen but some had lifted away leaving ragged holes. In one of those holes there was newspaper spread to line the floorboards. I ripped some up and found that it was from 1919 and talked of the armistice, forbidden ships of influenza in the harbours and of Wrigley's Chewing Gum Sticks all the way from a far land. In the spaces between the advertisements and news of alarming things, I found no mention of my Family. Why should I expect to? We live in the spaces between but are not to be found there.

Amid the decay I recognised nothing. But I knew this was Onogo just as surely as I know my own name. I could sense the spirit of Alice and the others all around. I could feel the throb of sap in living walnut trees I could not see but knew to be buried in, bearing up, the walls and ceilings. And outside, in the stillness of summer heat, amongst the crickets, I could hear the strange and beautiful sounds of the tree-singers and I could hear the sigh of the falling dust of dead mistletoe.

I took Samuel from the all-terrain pushchair and placed him in a drawer from a bureau of walnut with his blanket and fed him from what remained of the jars of baby food that he found disgusting but deigned to swallow. I had used up the disposables and was now using the last of the clean cloth nappies.

When he was content I lay on the hard wood of the largest room. To the left and to the right long parallel lines stretched into the distance until they hit

the walls and the gaps between them were smaller there. To the front of me, I could see my feet, my bare toes, at forty-five degrees to the straight of the window's edge and ninety degrees from each other. The geometry, the pattern of all of this, was pleasing. Behind me was a fireplace, filled with unidentifiable scraps of dead wood, collected, I was certain, not cut down, and covered with dust and the excreta of the tree-singers who nested in the chimney.

I slept in the heat of the afternoon and woke in the evening as the sun went down. There were creaks in the timbers. There were rustlings in the walls – of rats possibly but more likely the dying leaves of the walnuts entombed unseen therein. In the bush there was more grunting of the pigs and I heard a goat's plaint. The tree-singers all came to roost and with them the chickens and there was fighting for spots but the sound, the sound of the singing was *gloria in extremis*.

I waited and the moon rose somewhere leaving a pearly glow in the air. I walked outside until I saw the moon, behind Onogo's roof. In this light I walked to the orchard and the trees were alive again, no blacker than the bush that choked them near to death during the day. I walked without fear though a group of curious and gently swaying little pudding ghosts. I cast around and found some stones and tried to read cracks and crevices but understood only that these were runes and that the runes held the names of my ancestors and that these really were the stones that honoured their graves.

I lay down there amongst the graves and slept a dreamless sleep.

In the morning I checked on Samuel who was still sleeping in his drawer in the house. I washed in the river, shivered until the cloud weakened sun dried me of dew aided by a breath of cold air. I sat on the banks and looked up at Onogo and knew it for mine, dusty husk though it was.

The ratite in the cage-maze of my memory has grown huge. It is too big, almost, to stay there, squeezed in too tightly by my skull. I have to write this down. Get it out of my head.

I looked to the trees and saw that the tree-singers were now just sparrows and thrushes and a cawing magpie. And as everyone knows, as the ratite elephant-bird in my brain reminded me, what are sparrows and thrushes but mice and rats who believe in God? The only song-bird there was loathsome chirps and tweedles. The reverse I suppose is also true of Mary. Not a song-bird after all. A rodent with painted wings who tries to pretend. Not a peacock but a peahen, pretending to be beautiful on the inside and the outside. A lyre-bird. Brown and drab but Mary-ish with war paint on the face and sharp heels and cloaked in fine feathers of linen and gold and a strapless bra. But inside no more beautiful than these common birds, these rats and mice. I can see right through their masquerades and into their little shrivelled black rodent hearts.

Then I heard a magpie, its sound ugly and I knew it for a dangerous female, one who would soon betray me to Detective Roberts.

We stayed for three days and three nights, Samuel and I, and I did nothing to tend the house except be there. By being there it took on my life and I gave it what it needed just as it gave to me.

I looked in all places for the journal containing the Rules for Family Living or Uncle Petrie's supplement but there was nothing. This didn't surprise me as much as it hurt me because I understood that the book had been dissolved by Onogo itself and was all around in the house, in the trees and their singers, in the lands and rivers and mountains. It hurt me because I wanted to add to it in my own way.

On the third day I started the dismantling of the only furniture that was

still in a sound (though dirty) condition, the walnut bureau from which Samuel's bed had been made. Its outside was covered in droppings and webs and dry leaf-slivers but it was beautiful and huge. I looked in the junk around the land and found a bit of an implement I didn't recognise but which was rusted and the length of my forearm. Like a solid bone covered with dried blood. I took it and dismantled the bureau until I had the largest planks from its flat back, the part hidden from the room, the part that was invisible to the polished front. I took those twelve planks and bound them with flax into a package and I started to drag it. Dry though the timber was I couldn't move it more than a few inches. So I took what I could drag, protected with dead bark and more flax. I realised I could tie it to the handles of the pushchair and drag it behind me on a flaxen rope and in that way take Samuel and save the skin on my hands any more blistering.

I got the wood all the way to the car. Then I returned. I made two trips and, with the breaks to attend to Samuel's needs, it took me a day and a night. My clothes were ripped, one of my shoes flapping and my skin was blistered and raw. When I took the second trip to the car I took my bloody forearm implement with me balanced on the axle of the all-terrain pushchair. I put Samuel in the car and then I ripped the windscreen washer tank out – it was as dry as bone and had the shells of two dead flies in it. I used its tube to suck petrol and screwed the top back on, stoppered the remaining hole with my handkerchief. My palms screamed with pain when the petrol touched them but it was the beginning of a cleansing and needed to be done. I left the implement there in the back of the station wagon and I took my windscreen washer tank back with me to the house. I laid the two remaining planks on the grass down by my the grave-rocks and stood facing the veranda. I drank deeply of the

setting sun and the smell of the rimu and manuka and karaka. I smelled the good earth enriched by the blood and bone of Coroths both human and Faerie. I felt the chill of the evening air upon my wounds like ice on a fevered face and I felt the tingling in my body and my tired muscles.

I told Samuel to stay where he was, buckled into the pushchair where he promptly went to sleep, and walked into the house. I poured the petrol out carefully on the already petrol-damp handkerchief and laid that out flat in a half-open drawer of the remains of the bureau. I spread the rest of the petrol out glug by tiny glug through the small hole in the screw-top until the fumes made me giddy and I unscrewed the top completely and let the rest of the petrol gush out.

I opened the sports bag and withdrew the jar marked 'Honey' and the book with its powder coating and I placed them carefully in the half drawer on top of the handkerchief. I threw the sports bag into the corner as it contained no magic.

Then I took the lighter that was empty of fuel but still sparked and I made it spark and let those sparks fall onto the handkerchief. When it started to burn it was quick but not so quick that it burned me before I ran from the house.

For hours we sat there on the grass by the grave-rocks, Samuel and I, and watched the darkness be eaten by Onogo, heat on our fronts and cold on our backs.

"Why did you burn Onogo?"

"Because its time is over. Because Gordon's protecting mathematics have been dissolved into sand. Because I have no need of it. Because its walls are too thin to contain the mighty walnut tree trunks that are in them, so that they are thin themselves and withering away as the walls have become

slimmer and slimmer until they are dying. They called out to me, Samuel, with their whispery rustling in the walls those nights when you were asleep. They called to me to release them and send them on their way in a cleansing flame. And if I do, they said, the real Onogo will be released.”

“Makes sense.”

I detected that sarcasm I think but I didn’t answer. There is no point in talking to humans about some things, even those who have swallowed a midget philosopher.

“In releasing it, I’m released too. The Family is unshackled from this country.”

What he could not see was the ephemeral castle that grew as the flames painted it on the canvas of the sky. Wherever they stroked, it appeared and remained, spectral and pale, and with a pale spectrum of iridescence that grew with every lick until, as the house was a crumbled pile of jutting blackened struts and joists, a huge glowing cake with hot white snow lightly coating the heaps, the glory that is the real Onogo rose with its own elvish light soaring with turrets, filigreed battlements and delicate spiral stairs in the shimmering heat, unbound from earthly stuff and fully formed at last. It will be with me always and waiting for me to enter it when my work is done.

THE CHORUS

#

I had another dream about Richard Peregrine. It has only occurred only once, when we were still together, Cal. About two months before you went off with that pretty songbird. Since then I hear some of it here and there whispered in the trees and its memory is kept vivid as if it has coalesced into a nice, clear coherent memory and this is what that is:

The Dream of the Court

Nobody ever loved Richard except one, the bravest of women, this rock, his boss, an old nun called Sister Catherine, whose real name was Suzie. But he didn't love her.

Richard was always the centre of everything. He was ringmaster of all his circuses. And whenever he handed down his preachy pronouncements from on high he would strike his special poses. These would work like magic and as he grew older his power grew greater.

When Sister Catherine got very old, she lost her control and knowledge of things at the Big House, according to the memory in my dream, the backstory.

Isn't it peculiar how the mind can make up things like that in dreams, Cal? Backstory, details so real and so intricate and so full of a story yet to be presented with fill plot twists turns in place so that they surprise you, terrify often, and yet it comes from your mind. Or does it? It must come from somewhere but it is the most unbelievable thing of all that they can come from you so meticulously planned and painted and prepared, rehearsed filmed edited canned and threaded onto the projector, all faster than the time you take to experience it in dreamland. Like death, it all happens before you know it. And like life as Uncle Petrie pointed out.

The poor old nun would do whatever Richard said when he stood over her, with his misdirecting finger raised high over the Church's lawyers' letters. From the Big House's fields would come sheep and cattle and to the Big House's fields would come the farm agent. Richard would pretend obesciance to this pontificating prince when creatures were examined by the agent there or at the sales yard but in the eyes of everyone else Richard needed but to spread his arms and cut the air with his hands to countermand. Other farmers would nod silently when he gave them his advice on the best way to cut the throat or dock the tails or which motor was best suited to the new shears. You could see the pressing dignity of family war decorations on his chest even though they came from Sister Catherine's father and were locked in the walnut sideboard unless he borrowed them in the night.

There was a boy, a boy called Andrew, who was sometimes in the enamel and wood dreams. He used to be a friend of Lucy's at the Big House. He had red hair and freckles like a speckled fool. But he was motley with mettle. He and an older girl called Robyn would ride on Mr Green's tractor when they weren't supposed to, take Lucy and Luke Green and Robyn (I would sneak along and look at them through the door) into the barn and they'd throw hay at the chickens in a game I couldn't follow the details of but it was neat. Luke Green was too old and cool to do anything but tolerate Lucy or, of course, me. Luke'd go off fishing with Andrew his other mates without us and gut and cook their prey between two bits of fence plank on an illicit bonfire, eat the charred flesh and suck the caramel bones. A party we'd never be invited to. They'd talk and wrestle, swear and holler dirty stories around for hours after dark until Mrs Green would shoo them all off and hiss at Luke "Ya faa-ther'll be home! Ya faa-ther'll hear!"

Robyn was wonderful, full of mischief and as bright as a penny, Sister Catherine would say. Pretty too. At least when she was young, before she became shadow-haunted. She had gold and brown hair cut into a page-boy style surrounding a neat little nose that turned up a bit at the end in the middle of her delightful tanned face. And her eyes, they were as big and brown and soft as a doe's. Slim body, long arms and legs that bewitched the pond's water to part for her like a hot fish in butter sauce. Andrew loved her. Everyone did – every cool, steaming, panting boy. Boys from school came to the Big House to see Andrew or drop by on the way to Luke's dad's cottage at the edge of the fields just to get close. Andrew used to hope she'd marry him one day. Pretty weird. She was two years older. Against the Rules to fraternise like that at the Big House anyway even if it was within the law of the land. The love he had for her was like the love I had for him. So he was just as hopeless as me in my dream.

Robyn was going to be an air hostess and Luke was going to join the navy. Andrew was going to be a doctor. He really was. He was bright and loved books and his marks were good, best in the school. He even won a science competition. Of course after what happened he ended up with a trade. Printing. I suppose it's close to books but it's far from medicine.

They had great times, that lot. My dream-self would wish I was one of them. They would sometimes get in with the other neighbourhood kids. Down at the pond, all kinds of scrapes behind the school library, up at the dairy and in the fields wading and through rasping waist high grain that tickled hands and crunched in the distance as I crushed the delicate dry stalks and dream-watched.

Sometimes I would not notice that the others had gone and I would be called for by Mr Green or Mrs Green or sometimes Sister Catherine find that I had been feeling the stalks for hours. I would stop daydreaming and run back.

If it was Richard, I would dip down below the tops of the stalks and hide as quiet and frightened as a bird with a broken wing.

Most memorable of all were the long summer nights at the Swagger. Everyone from all the neighbouring farms, Mr Green and Mrs Green from the cottage, and Richard from the Big House (though never Sister Catherine) would all come together in the early evening and stay until long after the sun had gone down. Worn old workboots, jandals and high-heels would scuff the dull floorboards and make a heavenly scent of beer-patches and ash rise up to our nostrils as the kids darted after each other in shorts and t-shirts through the forest of grown-ups legs standing or chastely crossed on three legged wooden stools. I would just watch and smile, part of neither group.

Andrew, Luke and the others would gather in the back room and emerge on daring forays to steal half-empty abandoned glasses of beer they saw as half-full, some stained with lipstick, some with peanut-oil. They would swing them past on the adults' blind-sides and go back, fish out any fag-ends and pour them together then bet each other they wouldn't drain the mixtures down. It always seemed to be Luke and Robyn who would.

Outside in the soft country air would be the murmur of low voices and chuckles, the faint clink of bottles on old-timers' glasses on the veranda. I watched the moths hang around the coachman porch-light and the crickets in the field while inside the cricket replay on the radio would form the harmony line of the hum of loud shorts-and-singlets male laughs and delighted tinkles of the coiffed females, their arms folded under cardigan-draped shoulders and lip-painted cigarettes daintily pinched between painted-nail fingers.

Richard had a special pose for stories there at the Swagger too. His feet were always planted square and firm like the twenty-year pine trees in his back-

block. The conversation and laughter would turn and twist around the circle of men. But when he started the other men (four or five or six, all big and earthy) would quieten down and small silences would drop like curtains on their own bit parts and they would become instead the Chorus of his Court. The special stance would suddenly demand, and receive, much more space and the men would form an amphitheatre around his stage.

His movements would become exaggerated; jerky and over-deliberate, a pantomime pirate rather than a clown. He would loom, like a shadow cast by the fiery alcohol glow in his own belly, a fire that somehow also lit up his crumply face. Richard's face would raise its black lint brow above the glasses with mismatched screws. Tanned crow's-feet would grow into gullies. His chest would swell to the size of the old rusted water tank in the paddock; lumpy cheeks stretch and yellowed snappers yawn wide. The eyes and mouth would move this way and that in rhythm with the curls of the tale as it poured and grumbled and growled from the bottom of his chest.

As the climax approached and the voice lowered, the old room itself would stop to listen. His back stiffen like a stalking animal, his thickened waist and scarred knees bend a little and his gumboot hands, so nimble with a tiny brass cog and spindle, would gesture large and sweeping; beer swilling and foaming and falling from a forgotten glass held like a cutlass.

The Chorus's many eyes would be fixed, its ears strained and its bodies leaning forward with half-smiles to catch the rise and fall, rise and fall, each courtier with one hand of crossed arms holding a glass that would only be brought to the lips at the delicious hilarious end.

The punch line was preceded by an important pause and when it came was the quietest thing Richard would say. The room would stop its creaking, the

air its breeze, the crickets' rhythm would beat a pulse: the envelope, please. His eyes then would half close slyly, his head turn a little so that he was looking sideways at the nobles and his finger would point to the ceiling from a half bent arm. Then the pearl was dropped before these swilling swine.

There would be another pause as the men stood in the finger's grasp, time slowed down until a huge wave revelation crashed and sped it up again and it would all over, the winner announced to adoring applause. Richard was in his element and the Chorus of the Court would see that it was good and all was right with the world.

An instant later and Richard would metamorphose into just one of the back-slapping crowd again, where some bent double, some leant back with mouths gaping at the ceiling, all guffawing and then gulping and refilling.

It was well recognized as the same hypnotic pose that appeared again and again. He sure had something, the men would say. It was the same pose that he used at the council meeting where the good old boys asked him to represent their views in favour of the irrigation scheme and a month later against the tussock and rabbit control levies.

And it was almost, but not quite, the same pose that he used most Friday and Saturday nights back at the Big House when Sister Catherine went in to stay overnight at the convent town for her masses. His back and waist, feet and knees, all took up those same marks. His face was again a mask, though a different one, his fierce belly-light still there. His hands still swept in large gestures but were changed. This was the knotted pose like a prize boxer he used to ram points home, to bang fists onto the table, to stab the air, to convince. This was the pose when he needed to knock the sense into and out of some of the children. Usually it was Robyn, Luke and Andrew. The light in his face was

more like lightning then, his voice more like slurred thunder delivered on a reeking wind. Time slowed down then too, while the children's world-walls collapsed like a deflated balloon prison around them and around him into a little world of their own as he delivered his punch line.

There were moments of silence then too. But the noise that toppled into them were screams and grunts and the regular thump of knobbly hard gumboot hands on children's flesh, bone and tiny lives.

I think he hated the boys because they would one day be men and he hated Robyn because she refused to star in his night-games, because I remember in the dream that he hit me once, too. It was when I was in the room at the end of the corridor he guarded and I was too frightened to play his game. He hit me hard on the cheek and a bone split, just a little, not enough for Sister Catherine to take me to the hospital, but the bruise, the bruise from where I 'fell against the bedhead' lasted for weeks and was coloured and shaped like a bullseye that the kids as well as Richard used to use as a taunt target.

That was all before the Big House burned down of course. (That was another dream, a vision, a shining wonderful bright one. But I was telling of this dream.)

Then came that terrible morning in the hayshed when Andrew had bunked school. It was a Wednesday, double maths. A Wednesday when Richard came into the dorm and found him alone and just laid right in. A Wednesday when Andrew just stopped crying and screaming and was soundlessness. Wednesday's child is full of woe.

Nothing was ever the same for him after that.

PEN-ULTIMATUM

#

Dearest Callum,

*I've travelled and travelled and searched until I found deserted,
dusty Onogo. I've taken my father's enormous bureau, built with his
hands from the walnut tree he used to play in before the lightning cut it
down. I took the largest lengths.*

*I've left my wonderful shining belongings to whoever took them
from a garage sale in return of a pittance. I scraped together the
miserable savings and the cashed-in little life insurance policy and I
boarded planes and ships and trains and buses. I'm on my way to
geysers.*

Nothing you could say could make me change my mind.

Nothing you could write would sway me from my course.

Nothing you could want could force me to want you to stop me.

Your love,

Vivienne

SAGE

#

Dear Cal,

It is our last day here. Tomorrow Samuel and I leave.

Samuel has stopped talking to me.

Outside our window an elm is on a duck. Its umbrella branches shelter its host from rain and sun. This is perhaps why the feathers on the duck remain snow white and not rose red or dirty brown.

Past the yellowing blistered wooden frame I can see other but tiny elms dancing in a fairy circle around the pair. They one as green as this gigantic sister but young and sweet and are, I know, as tender on the tongue as baby green peas and as snappy to the teeth as new-born asparagus.

The duck remains motionless except for frightened wide staring eyes which cast about for the Hunter and appeal helplessly to me through the pane.

And the little elms are singing in reedy squealing voices:

“The elm is taking its sustenance from the duck

It is symbiotic

The duck gets shelter

The elm gets life

The elm sucks the duck

The elm is above the earthly muck

The duck is protected from all but the Hunter

But is sucked by the elm

Life is unfair

The duck is screwed.”

I have no idea what all this means, no thought about it at all that can help me make sense of it, because the Man in the Bowler Hat who is sometimes Samuel has not told me. He just sits in the red overstuffed wingback fiddling with its gold piping. Just sits and ticks.

As I take all of this in, look around the room and outside of the room, I wonder. This is what I wonder: Am I mad because I see all of this? Or am I sane because I know it is all crazy?

Just after my last meal tonight I will post this letter in a large pink envelope I've made from several smaller ones with tape which will also protect it from the rain and the wind that is to come.

The small pink envelopes are like those that you once sent me your love letters in. Do you remember? But these are ones I bought to send you replies in. These are the envelopes left over when we stopped sending those letters. They have sat, empty vessels gathering dust and they will never be filled with love. What they will be filled with now, broken apart and sliced to pieces and reassembled in a jigsaw, is not love. It is my proof and reminder to you that I'm important. I will post it to you, Callum. The sender's address I put as Vivienne, Island of Lantanesis. I thought no other note would be necessary.

We will go now and seek out Lantanesis. We will go to Lantanesis and find a small rounded green hill crowned with a walnut tree. I'm Vivienne and I will find there my only true love and found my own lineage two hundred years ago with Joseph. I will drink rainwater and honey,

teach our seven children my ways and how to read Runes, and I will leave them in a boat in storm.

You will not be able to find me, Callum. Not even if you set sail from your beautiful home and your beautiful poisonous Madonna today in your launch. No barnacles cling to your sterile modern hull and anyway no barnacles on my walnut will talk for they don't gossip, they are not treacherous.

That is why there are no Rules or a magnificent dwelling to be found at Onogo and why you will never find it, Callum, nor will anyone else. They are yet to be made.

Vivienne

CAPTURE

#

I haven't got much time. I think the magpie has spoken and been heard. The lady at the shop on the corner told Detective Roberts that we were here. She didn't tell me this so but her whole manner has changed and she is looking at me with the mixture of fear and triumph of the matador. She put my change on the counter not my hand. She tried to stare at Samuel and me at the same time. She didn't say hello and refused to say goodbye and her hand was shaking and near the phone all the time she was trying to put two scoops of jubee-delishus ice-cream on Samuel's cone.

I kept my pace even but outside I put Samuel into the pushchair and buckled him with fingers that were suddenly thick and clumsy and I walked as fast as a middle aged woman being watched through a shop window can without actually running. I slammed the door of the house open and grabbed everything we would need and pushed Samuel into his car seat. I abandoned the pushchair behind the garden shed. I drove in the opposite direction to the corner shop and I didn't stop until I came to another town after many miles of twisting roads and changes of direction.

I hadn't had time to prepare this place as I had in the past. I hadn't reconnoitred, not introduced the town to Jonathan and Harry – though that ruse was probably unmasked now. It was late and Samuel was crying when I went to the motel reception. The woman tried to make small talk and I was rude which was stupid. Her eyes squeezed to slits and her mouth to a prune and she slowed everything up in processing. She looked carefully at the cash and said it wasn't enough and I used my EFTPOS card. I was tired and wasn't thinking.

I left Samuel in the room and parked the car in a side street under a tree and took off its number plates with a screwdriver from the back. Stupid again. It was this that caused the suspicions of the police. They found it and they found the plates under the seat when they broke in, thinking it had been stolen.

That led to the information being picked up in the town I had abandoned and that led to the news report on the TV I've just seen. And that has led to the woman in the reception twitching her curtains. And as I write this on my laptop, I see that the twitching was really a form of witching which has conjured police and

HOSPITAL

#

Dear Callum,

I'm writing not to annoy but to apologise to you.

I realise now how silly I've been and of course how hurtful. What can I say, except I'm sorry? Sorry for my behaviour. Sorry for the stress I've caused. Sorry most of all for putting little Samuel in danger. Sorry, too, for myself and the life I've ruined.

Vivienne

The drugs they give me have gradually calmed the wings beating in my brain. They made me lost at first, then numb, then pleasantly happy, and now they make me normal-seeming. Not normal for me and not normal as other people are, but an ersatz kind of normal, which is a good stand-in and better than nothing.

I also need to thank you for refusing to allow me to be prosecuted, persuading Detective Roberts or his superiors to let me out of the forensic unit that first night. I don't remember much about it. I felt sick from whatever sedative they put into me but that was a day or two later when I was already out and in the public hospital. There they gave me anti-depressants, anti-psychotics and six weeks of care. That was the day I started to feel better, two weeks before they referred me all the way down here, my third hospital in six weeks.

This place is nice. Should be at the rate it is draining your bank account. A private clinic. It is late spring, the perfect time to be here. The air is still and warm enough to sit in the garden on the lawn in the day and cool in the evening so that it is enjoyable to come back inside and lounge in the remains of the sun

from the west until the curtains are drawn and the smells of institutional dinner drifts in. There are all sorts here. A mummy who needs 'just a little time away' from her children or perhaps her husband, an old man who is silent, calm and grim who barked corporate orders for thirty years until he was stopped by a Christmas shop window for hours, a young man who is worried and surprised about things the rest of us cannot see (who has periods of activity that are violent in intensity but not in intent.) Two young women with rich fathers, one with shivers that come and go in and out of sync with her moans for more drugs, the other with a maths book and full of jokes that are outrageously funny, but not to her. The smell of urine comes from one bedroom, potpourri comes from the hall tables, and the rich smell of mown grass through the doors into the garden. Radios are not allowed, newspapers are never seen, and television is only in the living room frozen to a music channel with the remote locked in the cupboard.

There is a little library full of books no longer in print. All carefully chosen for banality if fiction and industrious pictures of baskets, woodwork or embroidery if not. The staff are lovely. The exception is a night lady who is fat, sullen and will not change the bedding of the old man with the urea and rubber sheets. It is her phone that I have sneaked in order to connect to my blog.

My room is that special yellow that they make vomit from and otherwise reserved for hospital waiting rooms and golfing jackets. There is a bed, a small table on which sits a clock with garish red numbers, an ill-qualified reading lamp that does not cast quite enough light to read, and in the corner is a hard chair with a seat that is upholstered to the eye but not to the bum.

There are a dozen of us in my block, all scrambled. It is the job of Dr. Faulkner, Dr. Singh, Nurse Thornton and others to persuade us to persuade our

eggy heads to unscramble. And how do they do that? They poach them in gentle chemicals. One, it is whispered, will also be fried in the clinic's connoisseur kitchen (but which egg noggin? The whispers don't say.) And they speak to all in the lilting magical incantations of hypnopsychotalk that gradually allow us all to see things sunny-side up. Some are more scrambled than others and some, like me, are just pretending. It is great fun to sit in the Circles of Quirk and listen to the nonsense from every chair, patients and therapists alike. My favourite, who is never boring, is Chattering Joe whose legs cannot stay still and in whom the whispers would confide.

Some time ago I had a visitor. A special visitor, one that I was expecting. A letter had arrived. Annabelle brought it to me in the garden one afternoon. She is too young to be a real Integrated Mental Health Worker as her badge proclaims, it seems to me. She has become as close to a friend as the staff are allowed. She brought it with a professionally blank look, far from her normal smile. The letter had been opened. All my letters are. I think I asked them to do this or maybe that is just what they do. Maybe it is the police. I'm glad for it because Annabelle tells me that there are all sorts of letters they screen for me and don't bother me with. Some she says are funny, some are junk and some are nasty and accuse me as I should be accused. This is one of the few that got through the web of the Bureau Of Protection that serves me in this way.

The envelope was white. I thought afterwards that if I had known what was in it I would have expected it to be manila. Too old fashioned perhaps.

It had a little window in it and my name – all three parts of it – was written looking out for all the world to see. What it saw, my tripartite name, when it came to me in the garden was the shadowy interior of Integrated Mental Health Worker Annabelle's smock pocket. Then it saw a giant hand and felt a pinch

and the hesitation of the slow reveal. It saw the lips of the Integrated Mental Health Worker it was staring up at move, stop, move, stop, smile, sadden, dredge back the smile, talk and talk but, knowing no English except the written word, it understood nothing of this. It saw the sky with white clouds, the tops of trees and then it saw new, older hands and then temporarily lost sight in a whirl as it was slipped from its white cover and then it saw me, its rightful owner, on a green-painted park bench in the gentle curve of an elbow of garden clothed in hydrangeas and protecting the boundary hedge that imprisoned the rest of the world in a different reality. It knew me for its mistress but didn't know my face was whiter than it had been, was slack at the mouth and tight at the eyes and there were veins throbbing in my forehead. My hair was unwashed, my make-up still in jars and my breath was irregular as it warmed the white of the paper.

"What are you talking about?"

"Just read it, Viv. I'll sit over here and when you're ready we can talk."

This was not the voice of Integrated Mental Health Worker Annabelle but of Dr. Singh who appeared at Annabelle's shoulder. Annabelle said nothing but twisted her hands and looked from me to Dr. Singh and back again. She didn't want to stay and didn't want to leave, I think.

The letter started at the top with a blue and grey logo which itself housed a smaller orange spiral and white words. Marketing itself, an arm of the government, but for what reason I don't know. No point in marketing officialdom that does a job whether anyone buys its services or not. There was a reference number, a telephone number, an email address and a name of a social worker. The white words on the logo said *Child, Youth and Family* in a casual style and the letter said it was from *Adoption Services, Child Youth and Family, Te Tari Awhina I te Tamaiti, te Rangatahi, tae atu ki te Whanau*.

It referred to the Adoption Act 1955 and to Sections 7-10 of the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985. It referred to a nameless mother. It invited me to open an envelope that was enclosed. An envelope that bore my first name in careful blue ink on its reconstituted lilac paper, right at its centre, which whispered to me of many other attempted drafts of what was inside and several tries at making this envelope the most it could be. An envelope just barely pregnant with sheets that would be creased precisely.

“This is good news, Vivienne. Hard to take, perhaps, but there’s no hurry. Good news.” Dr Singh’s mouth and eyebrows had their licensed information-certifying looks.

“Vivienne? Are you alright? Would you like some tea? I’ll get you some tea.” Annabelle’s healthy integrated legs walked quickly to the sanctuary of the path and disappeared behind a camellia bush.

“Just the sort of thing that you need. A new start. Something else to concentrate on.”

I turned the lilac envelope over and over by diagonally opposing corners and watched the way the paper started to wear a little.

“Tell me what you’re feeling.”

I didn’t. I didn’t know.

“I’ll just leave you here, then. I can see you probably want to open that letter by yourself. Very exciting, this.” He shot his cuffs. “I will be over in my office for about an hour. I’ll check in on you before I go.”

His steady psychiatric legs, too, went up the garden path.

The shadow from the sun moved a little and then a little more. Annabelle’s tea went cold with half a cup left. A light brown scum settled on it and a midge drowned in its mud. A slight breeze stirred innocent new and

unknowing shoots and buds. Dr Singh came and muttered that the weather was nice, said "Good, good," and went. Annabelle came twice more and hovered, saw the sealed envelope each time and disappeared behind the camellia again. Once there was the whirl and woomph and gravel crunch of Dr. Singh's car from behind the hedge on the world's side of the garden. A drab brown bird held its head to one side and then the other with stillness then instant movement then stillness, then hops. I shifted uncomfortably on the bench and realised my buttocks were numbing. Walked the long way around to the back door. Through the laundry and the rear hall to my room. Lay on the bed. Plumped the pillows. Placed the letter and the envelopes in strict formation on the yellow candlewick. Waited. Promised that when the fly landed, when the sun reached the table, when the cook arrived, down the corridor, when the clock struck five, when the sun went down I would reach out and take the lilac envelope and give its perfect pages a caesarean birth.

And it happened, somehow. I don't remember what staging point was reached but suddenly the envelope was ripped and white paper unfolding my fluttering heart.

My Dearest Vivienne it said. *wish I could reverse time* it claimed. *no choice*, it said. *my parents...* it excused. *know things have been hard. For me too...* it said *want to meet again you at last*.

And that is how, after three more weeks, sleep-interrupted weeks of surviving and regretting that left me exhausted, the visitor – *my* visitor – arrived.

She was not what I expected. I had drawn and redrawn her in my mind five hundred times. Only when I saw her did I realise that I had made her too tall, too large, too sunny in every rendition. She was shorter than I, by an inch and a half. Her hair was expensively cut though thin and greying. Her bottom

teeth were slightly crooked in a way that matched mine, I saw in the mirror only after she had left.

“She’s just like you except older!” said Annabelle and Sally the Occupational Therapist that night. “Uncanny! Her gestures match yours. The way she leans over. And her laugh! My God! Exactly the same!”

“Did she laugh?”

“Why, yes she did! Several times. She was lovely, wasn’t she Sally? I’m sure you’ll like her a lot once you get to know her better.”

I couldn’t remember much of anything she had said and her face in my memory was a jigsaw I couldn’t put together.

“What did you talk about? What did you learn?”

What did she talk about? What did I learn? A haze of the same words as the letter, verbalised and punctuated with earnest expression and tears and scrunching up of a stranger’s face with my nose, and an angry, sick pain in my heart that felt like poison.

She came again the next day. And the next. She was addicted and her need came in a rush after being dammed up for all those years. I saw her, heard her, wondered about her as she did me. Didn’t love her as she said she loved me.

“Vivienne. Oh, Vivienne! How I’ve longed to be able to be near you. How many nights and days I cried myself to sleep or woke up dreaming horrible dreams where you were... I know I don’t deserve this. I did a terrible thing, even if I had no choice. It wasn’t my fault. I was sixteen. I didn’t know anything.”

I was stuck in a cliché.

“Who was my father?”

“He was just a boy. My age, a year older. From the boy’s school across the road. He has nothing to do with this. Nobody. He never knew. I didn’t tell who it was, not ever, only my mother and she wouldn’t tell my father – your grandfather – because he would have tracked him down and killed him.”

“Tell me.”

“I might. I will, one day. But not now. It’s too... there’s too much, it’s just that I want to get to know you, really get to know you first.”

“He’s somebody to me.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. But he isn’t anybody special to me, is all I’m saying. I don’t honestly even know where he is, if he’s alive, even. The last I heard was twenty years or so ago and all I know is that he was married with several children then. Living in England. When you’re well, when you’re ready I mean, I’ll help you find him. We can do it together. I promise.”

“What about my grandparents? And your family. My half brother and sister?”

“Dad’s heart’s not good but Mum’s as lively as ever... Look, plenty of time for that later. I don’t want them to find out – “

“Find out about me? They know I exist, don’t they?”

“They know you existed, yes. But they don’t know I’ve been looking for you. Have found you. And I don’t think it would be a good idea just now to tell them.”

“No? Why not?”

“The, ah, publicity. About you and the wee boy... The news and so on. Best if we give it time to blow over and get stale. I wouldn’t want them to get to hurt.”

“Hurt? Hurt!”

“Shh, dear. You have to understand that my parents are of a different generation. And my husband and my children – my other children – they wouldn’t have wanted me to look you up anyway let alone find out that you were the woman on the TV, that you were you, if you see my point.”

“*Looked me up?* Like I’m some old school friend you’ve just remembered? I see you’re point, alright. And I’m scum, it seems. You wouldn’t want to bring *that* into your family, even though it’s mine too.”

“Look, I didn’t mean... That didn’t come out right. Yes, you’re right. I’m wrong. I’m sorry. This is all new to me, too, you know. You’re not the only one who is having to deal with it. I’m having to keep this from the ones I love, my family, other family I mean. It’s not easy all round, is it? Maybe it was all a mistake. Maybe I shouldn’t have come at all. Look, I’ll just go. You don’t need this right now. I’m upsetting you. You need some time for all of this. I can see that.”

“No you don’t! You’re not going to fly away again. You can’t come here and sample me, see what I taste like and then spit me out and change your mind. It’s a one way trip, I’m afraid. You’re my mother and I have no other and you must accept it.”

Ruth looked at the door.

“And another thing. There’s no way you can keep me out anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Her eyes went wide.

“I know about you, now. All about you. Enough anyway. You can’t hide from me and if you don’t let me in the front door I’ll just come in the back when you’re not expecting me. I’m going to meet my family and that’s that.”

Her eyes widened, like a rabbit seeing a hawk.

“Now, Vivienne, you’re not well. There’s no point in stressing yourself in this way or being rude. We are practically strangers after all. I didn’t have to come here.”

“You have been coming here since you were sixteen years old. You just took your time. And now you’re here, in my life, you have arrived, and so have I. You have to get used to it as much as I have to get used to you even existing.”

Ruth looked at her hands. At the door. At the clock. At the window and at her shoes. Not at me.

“Understand? I want to be part of your life.”

Now she looked at me and then away.

“Well. I understand. I have to go now.”

“Fine. Off you go. But you will be back. Tomorrow?”

“Of course I’ll be back. Maybe not tomorrow. No, not tomorrow.

Perhaps Thursday. Or Friday. Hamish might want to go to the bach for the weekend, though so I can’t promise that.”

“I could come.”

“What?”

“I can leave here anytime I want to. It is not a prison. I can come and go as I please.”

“Oh, I’m not sure that would be a good idea, not at all! No. No.”

“Why? Because it is important that you have a few days away in your lovely bach with your lovely real family? When do I get that?”

“Now, Vivienne, you know we can’t be like an ordinary mother and daughter.”

“Why not? You’re my mother and I have no living relatives that are not related to you or the father that you refuse to tell me about. Surely I’m entitled to this!”

“I have to go. We’ll talk about this when I come next week.”

But she didn’t come the next week, or the one after.

Three weeks passed where I wondered about it all and turned it over and spoke in the off-centre circle and it was no longer fun. Three weeks and then she came again. But not alone. She came with a man who was younger than her and I wondered for a moment if this was Hamish, if she had married a younger man. But no, this was her lawyer. A twenty-something called Nigel who proceeded to lecture me on the rights I had, or didn’t have, as an adopted-out child. I lost control for a second.

“Piss off.”

“Now, Miss Coroth. No need for that. All my client – Ruth – is wanting to do is to make it clear that you have no real entitlement to – “

“I said piss off and I mean it.”

“Let’s calm down, here. It is important that we get this clear. Now, as I was saying – ”

“Last warning. Want me to get the police? You’re now trespassing. This is my bedroom, for the moment. I didn’t invite you, I’ve made it clear that you’re not wanted. Now. I want to talk to your client – Ruth – *my mother* – alone. If you don’t like it, talk to the man in the blue uniform who will soon arrive. I suspect they’ll come as soon as they hear my name.”

He looked at Ruth, sighed and said “Well, there’s not much I can do. I’ll send a letter, then. Are you going to come with me now?”

Ruth didn't look at him but at me and saw my tears. I saw something relax about her eyes and the lines of her mouth.

"No. No, you go on. I'll grab a taxi. She's right. I shouldn't have brought you. I was silly."

"I'm not sure that your right about that, Mrs. – "

"I am. Thanks you for trying. I'll pay whatever your bill is of course. Sorry to be a bother."

We were alone. Ruth sat down on the yellow bedspread. I stood clenching and unclenching my fists. She patted the bed beside her. I stood and stared and then relented. She put her arm around my shoulders which stiffened at her touch.

Then she told me about her family. My family. Her father the postman, her mother, the kindergarten teacher. Her grandfathers were a builder and a wharfie. Her grandmothers were housewives, one of whom was unhappy and the other too outwardly happy to actually be, Ruth said. Further back and her ideas of her ancestors were vague. One great-grandfather was a farmer or perhaps a musterer and another was born in England and worked in a foundry though that might have been the brother. Otherwise, nothing.

Her ancestors were dull or didn't exist.

I said nothing but I seethed. This was all wrong. She knew nothing because she didn't a have special heritage like me. She was lying, maybe – she had shown herself to be a callous abandoner of daughters in the past so why wouldn't she be a callous abandoner of the truth or of the past?

But gradually over the weeks, I came to understand that she was honest. Correct, even. Her ancestors were not Faerie. There was no Vivienne in her

deep past, no ancient bare-footed Anthred, no Joseph or Alice. There was just humble mundanity.

Five more weeks. Weeks where I wondered and worried and once even spat at another patient and was sent to my room for hours until I apologised. Weeks where Dr. Singh and Dr. Faulkner and some pale-faced young registrar talked at me and made me pretend to talk to them, changing my song bit by bit until they liked what they heard and left me alone.

I stole a book from the fat night nurse for a few hours of light reading and learned a lot about psychology and psychiatry. About the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders. A book of such arrogantly correct knowledge that it acknowledges within its title DSM-IV that it has been wrong several times before. I've learned of the five axis model of disorders and disabilities and how they think it applies to me. It seems they have me strung out along Axis 1 with depression and with psychosis. They thought for a while that I could be stretched out on the rack of Axis II with untreatable underlying pervasive personality disorders For a couple of nights I felt it me who they might be planning to fry in the clinic when I read of the mix of ingredients that they could salt me with: a suspicious pinch of grudge-bearing paranoia, a lonely cup of schizoid emotional coldness with a dash of narcissistic superiority leavened with a delicious dessertspoon of metaphoric fantasy, carefully floured in borderline personality disorder before being put into the frying pan.

I'm however much cleverer than that. Forewarned by this tome is forearmed. I've managed to persuade them by changing my tune to show them what they want, even done it nice and gradually so they pat themselves on the backs and tell themselves and me that their talking is working and that by definition must mean they were wrong about the Axis of Evil. They are content.

And most importantly, five weeks during which I was stuck in the circle and had this bizarre exchange:

“I’m interested in your choice of Samuel rather than his brother.” Dr. Faulkner has lovely lips. His eyes could do with a shot more colour and his face has gone to hell and back but his plump lips move like delicious juicy fruit slices.

“Are you?”

“Vivienne, if you’re going to help yourself you will have to open up a little.” The fruit started to dry up into wrinkles.

“Yeah yeah yeah” said Chattering Joe.

“Shut up, Joe. None of your business.”

“Vivienne, be kind please.”

“Sorry, Joe. OK, I’ll play. Samuel was just the right choice, that’s all. They’re identical but they are different people after all.”

“Yes, of course. But did you think about your other son when you – “

“He’s not my son. Neither of them are mine.”

The lips sagged into plumpness again but the face looked sad and confused and the washed out eyes looked at the file on the shaky old knees and then Nurse Thornton. Nurse Thornton leaned over and whispered something to the good doctor who then turned to a different part of the file.

“Sorry. I had been given to understand that the child, the children, were yours? That’s what the father Callum, I think it is – said to the police? Yes, here it is. The referral note from the forensic unit up north. That’s why they didn’t regard your behaviour as culpable.? Have I got that wrong?”

“Yes, you’ve got it bloody wrong! Not my kids! You’d think I’d know for God’s sake!”

“Know know know.”

“Shut up, Joe.” I left the circle and went to my room. A few minutes later Nurse Thornton sat on the bed beside me and put her arm around my shoulder.

“It’s Ok, Viv. We can talk about this later. Just rest for a while.”

You told the police to release me from the forensic psychiatric place because the twins, you said, were not Mary’s but my babies.

How could this be so? That I was a cuckoo who laid my eggs in Mary’s nest for her to bring up? Unthinkable! Not true! Inconceivable that this undoubtedly unvirginal Mary didn’t conceive. So why did you lie? It’s only a matter of time until the police come back when the truth is found out. How did you think you would get away with it?

You know the truth, that the twins were conceived upon Mary in your disgusting lust. That you conspired with her to drug me and pass the foetuses to me. It was I who was the cuckoo! I who had to do all the work of bearing these things in my barren nest while you ran off with that woman. I who had the suffering of whelping and then you came and took them away, you and your harlot. Took them back with a Court Order because you said I couldn’t look after them. Well, why should I? They weren’t even mine! I did the work and took the pain and was used like a breeding cow and Mary swanned in and took them back with her figure intact.

And I, I have had to perpetuate this falsehood in my serenade of the good doctors in order that they leave my thoughts in peace.

And now, after all my good work, after all the chemicals bathing my brain, all the new-found perspective, have had everything chopped around again so that I’m waiting out a race between my cure and the van that will come to transport me back to the locked forensic unit.

Then came the day that Ruth brought in photographic proof of her mother and father and grandparents and showed me albums and loose photos. The day I had to accept these images were records of what really had been swimming in my gene pool. As I sat staring at those grey and silvery black papers with yellowed borders and later washed-out Polaroid colours, I heard a sob. I looked up to see Ruth with her hands over her eyes, her elbows tight against her breasts and she was slowly rocking back and forwards on the edge of the uncomfortable chair, it of the treacherous upholstery.

“It’s my fault! It’s all my fault. You poor thing! It’s all my fault!”

And before I knew it I had my arm around her and was drawing her in because it was true.

What is it like to be someone’s fault? Someone’s blot in their exercise book? A rip in the canvas of a perfect painting, a black cloud in their sky, the dropped stitch in the tapestry of their life?

It is strange. It is partly abhorrent as you become aware that you’re, as you always suspected, unwanted and ugly. But you’re released also and things make sense again. If you’re someone else’s mistake then how are you responsible? What hope did you ever have? How can you be right or made better? These thoughts soothe one at night and ease the twisting scapulars rump and claws in the head.

So I’ve accepted her truth. Just as I acknowledge that I was wrong about Samuel. He should not have been plucked like that from his nest. He was not at fault, could not help me, didn’t deserve any of it. I hadn’t been thinking straight. In the last two weeks, though, I’ve stopped asking Ruth about my father. I know that nothing will be served by this. I’ve been neglecting my work, too, let things slip. So I’ve redoubled my efforts to try to clear the backlog.

There being no radio and with distrust of a TV stuck on music that must be too frivolous to work well, I've been searching for newspapers. The fat night lady brings an illicit one in and leaves it carelessly around. For three nights I tried to get hold of it but then I discovered Chattering Joe had an arrangement with the woman which left him in charge of shredding it slowly into a rubbish bin every night pretty much as soon as she got in. So for the last week and a half I've been having to use the patterns of words I discover in the ancient magazines from the waiting tables to handle the weather. I'm uncertain how long this can last. I need access to modern equipment. I did hide in the hedge for a few precious moments and got some relief when Dr. Singh raced that car in and had his radio blaring but as soon as he got his briefcase out of the back seat and pushed his remote key, the signal went off with the rest of the car. At least I averted a possible hurricane in Kansas.

I've had a lot of time to think, too. Ruth will never tell anything about her brief lustful episode with my father that could help me now and truly doesn't know anything current about him. To ask just causes her pain and heartache so I've ceased. I don't need to ask, either, because I see now. Ruth isn't descended from Faerie. The idea is laughable. How could she be? It is a sheer impossibility! How badly must I have been mixed up, even a week or so ago, even with medication, to have even contemplated that? I put it down to the stress, the shock of Ruth suddenly entering my life.

I now know of course that it is my father's side that is of Vivienne. It must be. How could it be Ruth if I've inherited the tingling? She would have to be dead. So this is another reason why it is pointless asking to find him –he must be dead.

And as with Ruth, so with Samuel. How mad I must have been to have thought I should take him! I will not seek him out again when I'm released from this place. It was so right to put me in here where my thinking has been allowed to crystallise once more. I just have the wrong one. It is Thomas that I should have been after.

And so I reached a new decision. I took a long look at Ruth. Her wretched expression, her devastated eyes, the weight of her years. Then her manicured hands and her beautiful leather handbag. The houses behind her in those photo albums.

"Ruth – I feel funny calling you Ruth, could I perhaps, maybe one day call you Mum? – Ruth, I have been turning a lot of stuff around in my mind. I realise that all along what I missed most in my life was family. To have it suddenly filled like this is a dream for me. It's taken a while but now I know that there are links between us. Not just in looks but maybe somewhere deeper down. Memories of birth or genetics, I don't know. All I know is that I feel close to you and I just want to be a part of your family, even in a small way."

And as she opened her mouth and gasped as though she had won a prize, I leaned over, took her hands and smiled my best sun-smile at her, the smile so bright that that no-one can see through it.

GOODBYE

#

Dear Cal,

It is time, I think, to say goodbye.

For years now we have tried to patch things up. God knows, I've done my best to make amends. To return your love. But there is just nothing there. There is no point in you continuing to have hope. You cannot live your life like this, hoping that I will return. It is time you got over me.

I have a new life with my mother now. Ruth is everything I could have dreamed of. She and I have a relationship of immense satisfaction to us both. I need to concentrate all my efforts on her now. She needs it more than I knew. Her husband, her other children – all out for what they can get and it is up to me to protect her from them and to make sure they stay away from her. As the eldest child I think that is my responsibility, even if the others don't see it quite that way.

So, this is it. Goodbye, Cal.

Viv.

MY FAMILY

#

I've been gone from hospital for several months now. I've travelled a bit as they said it would do me good (not that I took any notice of them but it was good).

I formed a close relationship with my mother Ruth and my step-siblings in the weeks following my release. There were tentative meetings with each in turn, then short outings in public places and then, after six weeks, I was finally invited to Ruth's home, my family home:

"Hamish, take Ruth's coat. Do you want a drink, Viv? Glass of – oh, perhaps you're not allowed...?"

"Just one glass won't hurt, they said. Yes, please."

"How's the new job?" said Hamish. "Media company, isn't it? Interesting?"

"Oh, you know. Has its moments one way and the other. Statistical analysis isn't the most thrilling of careers. Still, it pays amazingly well. Can I help, Mum?"

"Oh, no, dear! You just go on into the living room. Susan's here with Doug, and there's Bernard too. Wendy's already helped with the potatoes and she's just on the gravy now. You relax. Peter and Julie are due, oh, here they are now."

"Hello, Viv! Good to see you looking so well. Giddy, Mum."

"Hi, darling. Oh, I love that dress, Julie. Where are the boys tonight?"

"James is at karate and then he's staying over with a friend watching some ghastly DVD. And Bobby's at school camp for the week."

"Go on through. Wine?"

And that is how these things go.

The dinner was just how a family should be. The potatoes were crispy, the peas minty, the pumpkin just so and the gravy was gluggy and delicious.

“You haven’t got any meat, Viv. Sorry, Dad, could you pass... thanks, here you’re, nice bit right there.”

“No. No thank you, Susan. It’s chicken.”

“Sorry?”

“I don’t eat chicken or any other disgusting fowl.”

There was silence. Then Bernard said:

“Now, Vivienne, that’s a teeny bit rude to Mum. She makes a wonderful roast chicken.”

“But you’re not vegetarian,” said Julie. “You had a hamburger with us at the beach.”

“No, I’m certainly not a vegetarian. But poultry is scum.”

Susan set the chicken down in front of her and said nothing. Ruth looked surprised. Peter and Bernard exchanged looks that said ‘Here we go. Nutter.’

“Something else, then, Viv?” said unflappable Hamish. “We’ve got a bit of ham in the fridge.”

“That would be better.”

“Hang on just a minute, Vivienne,” said Doug. “You can’t just swan in to the family like this and – “

“Swan? I don’t ‘swan’. You should apologise.”

“Stop it. Stop it!” cried Ruth, standing and spilling her fork with its gravy onto her dress.

“Now look what you’ve done,” said Susan.

“I did nothing.”

“Alright, let’s all calm down,” said Hamish. Come on Ruth, let’s go into the laundry and clean that up.”

He’s nice, Hamish. I wished just then that he were my sham-father. Nobody said anything until Ruth and Hamish returned. We ate to an archipelago of cutlery and china notes. I finished my wine and took more.

“Sorry, everyone, just got a little upset. It’s very hard, this, I just want everyone to get along,” said Ruth.

“It’s not you fault, Mum,” said Susan.

‘Leave it,” said Bernard.

We ate for a little longer. My ham never arrived. Hamish did not move.

“Nice chicken, Ruth,” said Doug.

Bernard and Peter exchanged another of those looks, but this one said ‘Prat.’ I felt familial bonding with them.

I helped myself to more wine from the sideboard. I felt eyes upon me.

“Christ, she’s just helping herself,” I heard Susan whisper to Julie.

“That’s enough of that, young lady,” said Ruth. “Vivienne I as much a part of the family as you’re. You’ve helped yourself to whatever you want in this house you whole life, and still do.”

‘Yes, but - ”

“No ‘buts’. In fact, Hamish and I have something to tell you all.”

What was this? Eyebrows went up all around the table and the clinking stopped.

“What is it, Mum? You, Dad, no-one’s sick, are they?” said Peter.

“No, no. Listen. I’ve been thinking. Vivienne is the eldest of you all. And I’ve neglected her – “

“Mum! Came from several places at once.

“Listen, I said. I know it wasn’t my fault, but she was abandoned and I can’t shake the feeling that, well, that what she has, gone through, is hard and her illness, that I, that in part... I’ve changed my will. So has Dad.”

“I knew it! shouted Bernard and Susan at the same time, faces screwed up, but eyes and mouths wide open.

“Sit down! It is none of your business. Like it or not it is the situation we are all in. Vivienne gets the same share as everyone else from our estates. But because she has had the history she has, we have also decided to give her a sum now.”

“What!?” this time the scream was from all the children and their spouses. “That’s not fair!”

“We have decided. It is quite fair – you have had fortunes spent on you while you were growing up,” said Hamish mildly. I could have kissed him.

“How much?” said Doug?

“Well, now, Doug I don’t mean to be rude but that’s our business,” said Hamish.

“Well I have a right to know and Doug’s my husband. We all have the right cos we’re all affected. How much, Mum?” said Susan.

“Not much. Fifty thousand. Vivienne, I had hoped to tell you the details later but this has gone sort of wrong,” said Ruth, leaning towards me.

Silence while everyone looked at me. I put my knife and fork together on the plate carefully. I picked up my serviette and wiped my mouth then took a large sip of wine. Delicious. I dabbed my lips again.

“Yes, it has gone sort of wrong, hasn’t it? Fifty thousand. And an equal share with the rest of your children when you’re both gone?”

“Yes. Now, don’t say anything silly or refuse or anything. We really want to do this and – “

“Refuse? I wouldn’t dream of it! What I would dream of is having more.”

More silence. I thought there might have been laughter. The next bit was so much easier without that.

“Fifty thousand for all that happened to me? On top of what the rest of the brats have had? It’s just not enough. The equal share of the will is what I deserve but only if I’m adequately compensated for being abandoned and mistreated and denied all my life. No I’m afraid that I have to insist on much more. A minimum of half a million.”

“Why you ungrateful cheeky fuckin’ bitch!” cried Susan.

“You fucking selfish cow!” shouted Peter.

Julie said nothing but her open mouth said plenty.

“You don’t deserve anything! You were never part of this family, never, you’re just a bloody stranger who happens to share some genes – “ said Bernard.

“I don’t share your genes,” I said and swirled the red in its glass. It really was a fine wine.

Ruth was collapsed into greasy chicken bones and gravied peas on her plate, unmindful of the effect on her silk sleeves. Her shoulders were heaving and I could tell by the length of the pause that the cry that would come would be enormous.

“Get out,” said Doug. “Go on, fuck off!”

“Vivienne, you’ve upset Ruth,” said Hamish. “You obviously have no idea how much this situation is hard for her. Perhaps you should go into the other room and I’ll bring her through and we can calmly – “

“Upset *Ruth*?” I said, rising in my chair. “Hard on *Ruth*?! She has upset *me*! All my life! She had her fun, got caught out and then left me with no regard for my welfare, not a second look back. Ever. Time and time and time again she could have tried but she didn’t because she wanted to keep safe in her little suburban hideous paradise with her claustrophobic malicious hypocritical family who mutter on about family values but treat me like dirt! And you, Hamish, you seem like the perfect father. Except you’re not. You can’t be because you’ve raised these foul things who didn’t even bother to finish their education while I was out scraping together degrees to better myself. And you did nothing in all your married life to encourage my dirty mother to look after me. You have all upset me and you all disgust me as much as a flock of birds.”

“I think it would be best if you left, Vivienne. And I’m not sure that it would be a good idea to be in contact of a while. Don’t call. If Ruth ever gets over this, she will contact you. I’ll get your coat.”

MY FATHER

#

In many ways I know that my childhood as I described it to you must have seemed ideal.

I told you I grew up in Onogo. A relaxed privileged life. By then it had existed in changing form for two hundred years. A farm, district, a house of many rooms and three wings, of slate roofs, carved garrets and copper spires.

My parents were usually kind people. Stewart was busy with all sorts of jobs. And Lindy was always hurtling around charities of one sort or another. Her descriptions of her life before marriage was always a golden age of plenty and fulfilment. All of this brought in money which, even without the family fortunes, would have allowed them precisely the same lifestyle.

My clothes were from all over the place, the rich ends of the city and sometimes even from France and Italy.

I always resisted the impulse to give in to your pleas to ask Lindy and Stewart for help when we were stuck in that vicious mortgage interest rise. We cancelled the phone, risked red power bills, and you cashed in the policy your parents started for you when just a little boy. It was better to cope by ourselves than to accept what would have been a false hand. It made me stronger, I said.

You know now that this was a white lie. Lindy was my sham-mother and Stewart my sham-father.

I say 'sham-mother' because Lindy was made up of all the foster mothers I had and I don't mean the bitch-mother whose name was Ruth Lutin. I refer to my true father whose name is only 'Unknown' written on the paper in the Birth Registry and the wrinkled rubbed stinking copy that they handed to my foster families each time I was sent out, covered with the grease and grime of a

thousand well-meaning or grasping paws and which I burned I forget when. I don't know who they are. 'Unknown' is the correct name for my father because it speaks of unfamiliar and exotic and alien and all of those things that Faerie are to human birth and death registry officials.

The bitch-mother could not be better named. Do you know, Callum, that 'ruth' is a word in the English language? It means sorrow, remorse for having done something wrong. I sometimes used to say Ruthless would be a better name and that would be right but also wrong because she should be sorry.

I'm getting a little confused as I write this. There are pudding ghosts all around the place and they are distracting me. Other people always just ignore them – I guess they have learned that pudding ghosts can only be ignored and there is nothing to fear or do about them. I get annoyed though, when they look over my shoulder and try to suggest things when they have no voices. But I've learned a little trick. I just blow gently and they move with the wind. I have to stop every so often to clear the area around my computer.

I was treated well enough by Lindy and Stewart. There was sometimes a cooked breakfast available of eggs, bacon, and toast. Sometimes I would not be offered this but have a simpler meal of toast and jam or cereal.

"Better for you, dear."

Sometimes it was more modern, trendy food, something light and healthy such as muesli and yoghurt. Porridge added in the winter. Stewart would sometimes wink at me and slip a sausage onto his plate while Lindy the sham-mother wasn't watching. She always knew though and sometimes scold; usually in fun.

Lindy and my sham-father would sometimes eat separately. Sometimes they would go out for a meal and usually hesitate before deciding I would be all

right by myself or with someone to look after me, and sometimes, if I was very lucky, I would go with them. But the conversations we would have after dinner ranged the entire universe of thought during those long and lazy evenings. Lindy and Stewart would argue about all sorts of things and I would sit quietly and listen while I pretended to read. I've never been happier.

Of course, when I wasn't there, my sham-parents just continued without me.

I have mementoes from my sham-parents. The sterling silver and tortoiseshell brush and comb you admired so much first originally belonged to one of my sham-great-grandmothers and that Lindy's need was less than mine. I also have a diamond broach and earring set from pre-revolution Russia, a pearl necklace from I don't know where and several gold bracelets. My sham-father contributed cuff-links, a gold watch that does not work and once, a pipe (which went missing from the house not because I wanted a keepsake but to stop the smell).

I made my own way in the world, to practice the lessons my sham-parents had taught me in self-sufficiency before I could claim Onogo.

All the while in the house, Onogo, the clock on the mantelpiece ticked. It was part of me, my father, my grandfather Simon, funny old Petrie, and of Alice and Gordon and Sarah and the rest and it ticked to mark time until I arrived.

It is time I told you the truth about my true father.

Sometimes I thought him one of my stories but that makes him no less true.

My true father loved me. He did. Loved me more than the mother that left. But I remember now clearly my true father, though Ruth knew nothing of his and I have no clues other than the Faerie memory that is mine by birth-right.

My father was a genius.

It took him a long time to overcome the start that life in its twisted way had given him. His strangeness left him only when he inherited Onogo but it didn't leave him all at once. He had to start to grow from then as though he were a baby. He came to fruition late in life, and he bore his fruit, his Vivienne, me, early in his life. That is to say, precisely when he was ready.

He was a genius and he invented many things that made a lot of money. Many of these thoughts came to him while he was in prison for the manslaughter of his brother. And by the time he was released and they'd all realised that it was pesticide he committed that put him in that place, not fratricide, or should have realised, he built his inventions and obtained patents and made the sort of money that would shock our nation. Of course, he kept it all very quiet. No-one knew of this.

When I was born he was not told. The bitch-mother and her parents kept it from him and therefore him from me. That is why he never contacted me. It was not his fault that he left me with little, that the he became a broken machine at the end of his life. Broken machines cannot invent any more things and the flow that was a trickle was a drip and then was dry. There was no more invention left in him and no more money. Nor gave me anything other than my heritage at the end of his life.

But inside because of his powers of Faerie he knew I existed. Ruth the bitch-mother was irrelevant to him then as she was to me. He knew what I was doing and was correct in his decision to leave me to learn the lessons of Lindy and Stewart and that you and others taught me. He knew that to be Faerie one is alone, the only one of one's kind. It is necessary to face hardship before the

Faerie comes upon one in order to prepare properly. Too little preparation and Depression gets you as it did Rosie, or Madness as it did Petrie.

LONELINESS

#

I've come to regret asking for more in quite that way. I blame the wine. Things have not been going well in the last few weeks.

I've been successful in material ways. I've had a good career. I'm well paid. Over paid. A reflection of my ability to help corporate employers to gouge money from the earth of the salty people around them. I spend my money though. I spend it on the 'good' things of life. Never the cheap seats, always the best. Never the rack when the designer will make something just for me. Never champagne when Champagne is there to be plucked and sucked in return for a deduction of points from my game card.

What am I? I'm not a star or planet, nor a moon or mountain. I'm not a rock. I'm a pebble, a grain of sand, one among millions and as a human I would mean nothing.

I tread the pavements for exercise and interest. I like to free drab plastic shopping bags, foodwrap, and cellophane from trees and let them loose again (but I don't like to be seen doing it; I'm careful). I look at cracks in the concrete and wonder what has given birth to them: a colony of troglodytic weeds making invasion plans, the heaving bosom of the Lady Frost as she hugs each night and melts away each morning, the tinkling chatter of the million who walk and talk straining the ground. Or is it just people like me that caused them, legs as heavy as stone? But if there is a type like me that can pound out cracks, where are the others?

At work, the gym, in the streets I see women who were girls and men who were boys and all were babies who tug at my heart but they still slide their eyes past my invisible and unknown disfigurement of my inhumanity and don't

catch on the hook of my longing. But I'm not lonely. You can't miss what you've never had.

At work functions I have as usual stayed on the outskirts, outside the tight circles. For the first week or two of the new job I was invited in but always refused because I knew they didn't really want me. The proof is that they stopped asking. I'm always cut off when I speak by someone who inserts his back toward me. Always outside these henges which are too sacred in their discussion of cricket rugby ratings marketing to allow me in. At one event recently I saw Peter from one of my old jobs. A client now. I missed the full grip just got the end of the fingers in my sweaty hand. I reminisced about the old firm but he denied memory of me three times with a firmness that made even me doubt its truth, as did I knew the other menhirs that erected around him in the solstice, sacrificial client position.

I reached home four nights ago and undertook my spinster duties. Washed dishes, turned out lights and heaters; read until my eyeballs drifted around the page seeing only flakes of a writer's dreams. Put down my book, plumped my pillow, and snapped on the darkness. I slept well. Perhaps I dreamed my own dreams. Perhaps I woke in the almost-black and turned over the meetings of that day and the next.

The next morning was fine, the tree-singers refreshed, the trees moved shadows against my brocade curtains. I showered with no-brand products, dressed, got the newspaper as I backed out. I enjoyed my drive that morning, though not as much as the day before - a touch later, no mist.

On the ride in I realised that all stories existed at all times. Like tiny tuning of the radio, like the incremental changes I make to the weather,

changing perception changes the story. I switched from news to Breakfast Bonanza with Phil Daniels and Jackie.

The tyres felt the little bumps and transmitted them so my hands didn't get dirty. I parked and the car on its perfect safe tyres twittered and flashed 'have-a-good-day!' in response to my fob.

I used the magic tag. Panels lit, motors whirred, counterweights fell and I was hurled upwards to the dungeon above. In the elevator I sighed and it must have been loud because Betty from accounts smiled. It warmed me. I liked her. I stepped out into neon day. Nodded to Wendy at reception with her prisky red suit and certified smile, Bert Bakker with newspaper on his dark blue knees, light blue paunch squeezing the sports section against his keychain.

Morning Ann. Naveesh. Howzit Brian, catch the netball, Carol. Entered my cubicle.

Night-elves had moved piles of paper in order to dust and irritation rose like bile: how dare they. I swallowed it down with over-boiled water-coffee from the hall machine, hellos not necessary now. I stared at the first report. Right then the Kraken Awoke in me and sent nausea and heat to the face and a tremble to my hand. My innards bloated and pushed at my flesh. I read and read, was on the same paragraph again and again. The panic climbed the gorge of my guts. The sheaf of white crawled with ants of exemptions specials persuasions. It slipped to the floor.

I was early for my ratings meeting. I felt dull and un-alive. Heard the words, spoke the litany of responses, and otherwise completed the earthly rituals as always; wearing my paisley stole and Armani vestments. But I thought of nothing but a misty road.

One of the Three Wise Men didn't like me. His eyes burned my flesh to reveal the sin that rotted and riddled its wormy hole though my heavy gray bones. I promised obeisance to The Agency. The Burning Wise Man stared and didn't say goodbye.

I wanted to go home to confess to Father Formica in the shower stall. But I stayed. I was cheery on my tapes, beautifully rehearsed in my spontaneous banter, slick in my infiltration of brands into my ready responses. My stomach was tight and electricity spiked along my arms and legs, and bile rose in my throat. No-body noticed.

Lunchtime. What if the radio scripts were all written on white bread tablets, the words in indelible edible ink? The words would be slowly absorbed by consumers, so they would understand what they were offered; instead of just crawling into them through their ears. But we're a media company not angels, a business for God's sake – Wise Words would come from the Wise Men.

Somewhere Doug would be telling tales of weekend football and of Deidre's sexual skills. Whispering again with sly eyes of how she feels in the back of his old blue-grey Toyota that he sold last year to Naveesh. He kept a key he uses on Friday nights during drinks to commit adultery with Deidre. It lives two cells closer to my car for bad behaviour.

I slammed the spreadsheet book to the desk. I started to staple things; stationery then pages I ripped from scripts, turning things into new mixed-up things.

My scissors then, not the stapler. I cut clauses from radio scripts. A pile of sound bites. Time disappeared.

I stood and knocked over my chair.

A knock.

"You alright?" Ann looked and went.

I couldn't understand what I was writing, bent over the desk, though the ratings equations were my invention and the figures plucked from inside my brain normal normal variance I'm of normal variance, equation spells will keep them out

Then Ann, Liz and Jeff were there.

"Do you want a cuppa?" Ann had never offered this before.

I held my head and screamed "Of course of course!" my mouth surrounded by ligaments tight like ropes called sheets on a three-masted ship lost in a storm but she knew I didn't mean it, that I was just watching myself.

"Did you hit your head?" Liz touched my arm. "Jeff, don't just stand there." Jeff picked up my chair .

Ann took my hand. "Oooh, you've gotten a staple in it. Jeez, that must hurt.

"Yes. There was an accident. Just a little bump. I didn't burn myself."

"Oh God," said Ann or Liz or maybe it was me. The burned clock in my inherited house ticked for a while.

"Here." Someone dabs a paper towel and wraps a plaster.

"Looks a bit better now, doesn't she, Jeff? Bumped her head. Gone a bit wonky for a while, eh? Maybe we should stay... Are you sure you'll be alright?" said Ann.

My head was not bumped.

"Yes, fine now."

"I've asked Bert to get you a taxi. I really think you stay home tomorrow. The place'll get along fine without you."

"Ok. May do."

“Look after yourself. Honestly, don’t come in tomorrow. You know how these things are. Hit you later.”

“I’ll just stay to clean things up. Sort out this embarrassing mess...”

“No problem. Just rest that head. Take no chances.”

But I never bumped my head or burned myself.

I put on my jacket and picked up my briefcase. There was a little sticking-plaster on my left hand. How did it get there? Smoothed the daily wrinkles from my suit. I left my island. I travelled smoothly past Wendy’s desk, that long isthmus to the world outside. She had vanished along with her hat and her too-red coat.

Bert Bakker was there, bent over asleep. His hat was askew with no reason to be skew except to show his badge and there is no-one there to see it. His newspaper had fallen like the spittle on his lower grey-pink lip. I leaned over and checked his tie which was awry but I didn’t touch it. Didn’t touch this bent over Bert. It had been a long day for him and he deserved his bent over rest. He would awaken though and do his rounds and shake his keys and swing his chain and turn out the colourless lights that make our skin sallow. I leaned closer and I whispered, I breathed, I mouthed “Goodnight. I will take no taxi.” So close I could have bitten off his hairy boar’s ear.

The lift transported me from the high dungeon to the low, one world to another. Machinery does that. No need to wave my magic tag because nice, quiet, and unquestioning Li Sun from Technical already has.

Naveesh’s backseat-stained blue-grey Toyota has escaped and so does my beautiful, safe, clean car.

The Afternoon Show Hour With Jonty Samuels and Bobby. I noted sports results, to have them up my sleeve, at the ready, in case Doug asks tomorrow and I can pretend to belong.

I watched from my leather sedan chair carried by fossil bearers as Knowledge Valley drove past me and turned into Industrial and decided to become Eastway on a bend that floated toward me through my window. There was absolute silence from this tableau. No sound at all except the radio and my breathing.

Then I all was at normal variances, normal tolerances, suffused with homeliness and the ticking of the clock. I left my briefcase propped open and dropped in my keys. There they will stay together as husband and wife until tomorrow when my lunch will enter the briefcase, a daytime lover while the cuckolded keys will reside in my pocket.

I took off two days of loneliness that seemed like madness.

JILTING

#

I've lost my job again and I've been ostracised by the rest of my dear, dear family.

Ruth, Hamish and the other children not only will not speak to me but deny me, even when there is no cock crowing. Only yesterday I was in the cinema on High Street and I saw Susan.

"Well, hello!"

She turned to me with a smile on her face which dropped off as though cement had been fastened to its shoes as it was thrown into the river of my life. She turned away.

"Susan? Come on," I said, and I put my hand – ever so lightly – on her shoulder.

"Get off!" She shrugged and shivered and her companion, a woman who had a face like an axe and a personality to match, said:

"Excuse me. Can we help you?"

"No," said I. Because she really couldn't.

"I think you have the wrong person?" said the bright shiny axe.

"No. This is Susan."

Susan said nothing. Her arms were folded and her mouth was as tight as a red balloon. She was glaring at the ticket office to my right.

"Yes, her name is Susan. But she doesn't seem to know you."

"Come on, Susan! Don't be like that. We are sisters after all!"

"You're not my sister. Fuck off, Vivienne. Leave me alone. Leave us all alone.'

"Susan? You *do* know this woman?"

“Know me? Of course she knows me. And I her. How would we not recognise our own sisters?”

“Sister? I’m sorry, but Susan has no... I’ve known Susan since we were four years of age and I can tell you – “The axe raised its head and it gleamed with the righteousness of crusades.

“Leave it, Emily. She’s right.”

“I don’t understand!”

“That’s better, now, Susan. I just want to say hello. Catch up. I haven’t seen you for ages. Or Ruth or the others.”

“And you’re not likely to. Look. Don’t you get it? Haven’t we all been plain enough? No-body wants to see you. You’re not part of our family. You’ve done so much damage and now we can all see through you. Stay away from us. Go back to your life and leave us alone.”

“Now you know that I can’t do that. I’m your sister. I’m Ruth’s daughter. And I think the time has come for you to accept that you’re not the eldest child. I know this is difficult to accept, having had it all your own way for so long, bossing the other kids about. I perhaps know a thing or two more about life and the family than – “

I will leave it there. There is no need to report the scene that followed. Ruth will have been given a different version of it all, I know, but I urge you to think: is it likely that I, who was the one to initiate a civil greeting, the one who told the truth about being related, could have been responsible for the violence? Or is it more likely that my little sister, jealous perhaps, the little sister who was dethroned by my arrival on the scene after having it all her way for so long, the sister who returned my greeting with refusal and then obscenity and denied my very existence to her childhood friend, who would have reacted in that way?

MAKING HAY

#

The dreams go on. One in particular I need to tell you about. Cal, I want you to read this out to Samuel. You might not think he's old enough but you're wrong - and it is a recent continuation of a story I once promised to complete:

Making Hay

There is a girl called Amy. She doesn't come to the Big House until after Andrew had changed. I ran into Amy one day, quite out of the blue, in this dream. Twenty-years had passed in dream-land. This is the way of dreams. She told me in Queen Street, in Smith and Caughies, under the unnaturally bright glare of lighting that is made especially for cosmetics departments, told me while choosing Elizabeth Arden, on a trip to the city, told me she saw Andrew almost every day.

Amy disappeared from Smith and Caughie's cosmetic glare and then I saw Andrew too, in the video that Amy sent me the next week. He – they – were at a wedding. He looked pretty ordinary. Different of course, more grown up. But he wasn't in the video much so I couldn't tell anything really. Everyone looked so different and so much the same. When Luke rose for the toast to give away the bride he looked pretty much like a youthful Mr Green. His speech had more finesse than his father's though, in its way. It was ribald and raucous, with disgusting references to finger-licking good brides and limp grooms. His speech was hated and yet loved by all – embarrassed and strangely twitchy bride and laughing guests, confused groom and polite visitors from America who got only half of it.

I sent the video back south and time passed, as it does, in mundane things which are sometimes in dreams. A few dream-years of work, home, and walking.

Then I heard that Luke was having his fortieth birthday bash the next month, a real production. Amy received an invitation. I wasn't invited of course. Amy liked the invitation so much she sent it to me in the post. Stupid cow. Was it supposed not to twist and turn in my stomach acid? A pretty tawdry looking thing anyway. Ugly-pretty it is, like you used to say about those Easter eggs all decked out in frilly pink and white and pale green icing. Yuck. All gilt and rosemary and forget-me-nots on the border and incongruous balloons and party hats and streamers in the middle. On the front a chubby baby Luke. Luke's wife's idea, I thought. Rachel something. Mousy.

At some point the dream maker in my brain had me make a decision after seeing a notice in a newspaper: to travel to Mrs Green's funeral. So I did. What choice did I have? The director of dreamland always gets what she wants. I travelled by plane and train, then hired a car. I drove and came to the town from the side that the Big House was no longer on. I didn't want to go to where the Big House used to be, not right then.

When was this? In the dream it was only the day before yesterday.

And who was it that I first saw when I pattered into town in the little car, the little car with a boot too small to hold even my dream-case? Andrew was right there, right where Amy said he would be, outside the Post Office, counting and recounting change in his hand, standing and

thinking about what he was supposed to do next, even though Amy said it's always the same: to go straight back down O'Connor Street to the Ashby Home and wash for dinner.

Funny, his face reminded me of Richard a bit. Kind of lumpy. He has his own pose. And his feet and hands gestured in a vaguely similar way to Richard's. His face, though, had no light and no mask. What little there is to see is right there in his blank, treacly dribble. I didn't talk to him. Instead I parked the dream-car in a five-minute park (imagine a time limit in a dream-town with only a couple of hundred ghosts living in it – the director is eccentric). I left my case on the back seat and locked the door.

Five minutes later I was again watching Andrew, still trying to figure out what to do, through the grimy window of the Bellbird Tearoom. I dream in colour, Callum, but there was precious little of it in this town. I dream in taste and smell and touch, too and the director got me to order a pink sugary bun and down tea through my suddenly dry and sandy throat, and stared at the maidenhair fern on the Formica table for an hour pretending to read. Then I got back into the spluttery poppy car and went to the funeral.

The director of my dreams has never told me what last straw broke Robyn's back. She said some stuff in her very last letter, the one they found on the kitchen table, but I didn't know what exactly. What the director did tell me to know and feel every day of the dream is that Robyn is not around any more. Her nerves jangled too loudly to drown out with divorce and a hundred men in her bed in cities around the world; too shrill to be outmatched by the cries of two babies adopted

away and one culled from her womb. She cut herself on the jagged edges of these same nerves and bled to death in a scratched plastic bathtub in Spain. I didn't get to say goodbye.

And Luke? Well, Luke was at his mother's funeral – the dream was sensible in that way. Saw me alright. Stared at me from across the church with his fish eyes. Never said anything. Just sneered at the weirdo even in his grief. Tall and strong and ruddy-faced. He wore the old stained suit and thin tie favoured by farm agents and old broken rugby players when he wasn't working the back blocks farm on weekends. His face was always bright and happy and alert and expressive and he was the life and soul of the party, everyone said. A storyteller at the pub. A man of real drama and presence. Everyone's friend.

Not one of the buggers even talked to me at the funeral, not a one. Amy was still on her holidays.

In the dream I had never wanted to go back there because it was so close to the Big House. Not to see that awful Chorus, those noble bastards who knew what was going on and did nothing, that echoing feel that everything is still the same, that everything is being repeated. I wish the director didn't make me remember the awful look in Richard's eye late in the afternoon on the day of the funeral. Somehow I was one moment at the funeral and walking to the little car and the next I was in at the site of the long-gone Big House, where my left cheekbone still ached in the cold like a bad memory.

If anything all I remembered was that I was angry at all those bastards in town - the old boys at the Swagger who knew and their

wives, the councillors who listened oh so very carefully to the big man and nodded – they knew too. The reason that all of the children in the town were always still and watching when Richard is in his pose. Even the neighbourhood little-ies and the new kids from the city and even from dangerous America: they all knew somehow, had always known, I think. These men, they were the ones I was sorting out for not sorting Richard out. The director got him though. The dream director got Richard good for breaking the Rules. Surprised myself as much as Richard. I wasn't planning it.

What could I do? I'm soft and warm and oh-so tender, Callum! I was awkward and still Vivienne the Weird in the dream though inside I had gradually changed and come alive since the tingling of my father's death. I was as afraid Richard, old as he was now in this dream, as afraid as I always had been. I wanted someone to do something though, someone to stop it all. I reckoned those bastards were as much to blame as Richard. They knew alright.

I parked on the road outside in the gravel. Walked past the poplar trees. Saw the expanse of oats that stretched like gold to the mountains. Saw the cottage, the hay shed, the other decaying sheds. Saw the gap in the air where the Big House used to be. I strode into the field of oats and remembered the lesson with Sister Catherine's caring ruler on the knuckles that gave me the Latin names for all the crops of the area including these oats, *avena sativa*. I walked to the shadow of the Big House by lifting my knees high amongst the prickly, dusty wholesome stalks. I looked along the rows carefully for evidence of the Big House. I walked up rows and down columns of this cereal

spreadsheet which contained the debits and taxes of my childhood and left me with a nil balance in the credit column.

Above the golden oats, coming from the sun, a lone bird of prey floated far off but coming nearer, looking for lost children.

I turned at right angles and waded through the invisible walls, pushed aside doors of wheat to enter recreation room and kitchens, Sister Catherine's sitting room and with a thrill of daring thrust through the kernels to enter the Holy of Holy Ghosts, the inner study which saw in the flesh one evening when Richard was alone in charge when Sister Catherine was in hospital. And in it I squatted like a witch and looked at the Hansel ants and Gretel beetles lost in the trunks of the oat forest that marched now down the memories of lost corridors. I squatted and looked at eye level across a million million grain heads like the fibres of a rug that children are looking at when they are face down on the floor and being rode like a circus pony.

Then I stood and stretched and floated above the oats, in the dormitory and the staff bedrooms and the bathrooms. From up here hovering on the second floor of the field I could look down and see the oats ripening as little eggs that would soon bear fruit and multiply if they were not cut down with death's scythe and processed into little boxes on the hillsides of suburbia.

Then from up there with the help of the country goodness below I could read in the rune marks in the oats that only the Faerie can see that one anagram of oats and *avena sativa* is 'Viv, a satan oat sea!' and another is 'to a vast avian sea' and another is 'avian ova as a test' which were all sinister messages of meant for me about the hawk and the oat

corridors (with my Faerie powers in full glorious lightness I became a ‘savant via oat sea’) and I needed to float back to the earth and run crashing through the waves until I was outside the hay shed and recovering.

I saw that the old circus ring had become a chicken coop, white with corroded zinc, tufts of feathers and chicken droppings, and the white horses with their red saddles had been replaced by still quick, still quick stalking white hens with red combs and wattles. I backed away from this horror and found myself in the shelter of the hayshed doors.

So there I was that day, in the hayshed, (‘a sane Viv, oats at a’ distance) remembering in my dreamtime. The smell of the hay dust and manure in my nostrils and hot tears on my face and praying for Andrew as though the beating had just happened, and there was Richard Peregrine himself, all of a sudden, his face red, drunk, disgusting.

“Who the hell are you? Waddya want here? This is private property. You from the Press?”

I was so startled I took a step back and he came forward, his eyes flashing and coming at me like it was me who had almost killed Andrew.

“Eh? What do you want?”

He was older and his skin hung looser but he was not frail. He was as though someone had taken him from his skin, shrunk him a half-size down in a dirty washwater and then put him back in. He was the same mean hard prick he always was and he was curling his fist. His odours of stale beer and tobacco and sweat mixed with the honest smells of the hayshed.

My director gave me my lines. “I’m Vivienne. I used to be at the Big House. Lived there.”

“Eh? I don’t remember you, do I? Or do I?” He peered at my face and then at my breasts and legs. “Maybe I do. You were one of the girls here, eh? Maybe I do. Vivienne, you said? Sounds familiar.” He scratched his unshaven chin. “You remember me? I might have looked after you. You would have been here, what, when the nun was around.”

The director made me braver than I wanted to be.

“Yes. Yes, I remember you, Richard. I remember you and what you used to do to young defenceless girls. And boys. Andrew for example.”

“That’s a lie! I did nothing to anyone. Nothing. I had to punish them a bit sometimes, you and the others, course I did. Different in those days. No kids stay here now anyway. But I did nothing to no-one. Especially that fuckwit Andrew. He fell out of a tree, he did, but if you ask me he was half stupid before that anyway. Ha!”

I started trembling and my body felt weak.

“Hey! I do know you! You’re that crazy bitch who burned down the orphanage all them years ago then ran away!”

But I said nothing. Admitted to no dream-crimes.

“What are you here for anyway? You haven’t told me why you’re here.” He stared at my breasts again and rubbed his chin, pushed his hair back, straightened his back. “Unless you and I have a little unfinished business perhaps? Maybe you remember your good times with big Mr Richard, eh? Been dreaming of some more, maybe? Never got me out of you mind?” He put his left foot forward, his hand brushing

his crotch as though accidentally. “Is that it? Ben in the city, played with some of those mamby pamby suit boys and all you could think about was Big Dick, eh? How he was a real man?” Another step.

His hands opened. His stance was knotted. His mouth opening. A moment of pause. The envelope please.

I didn’t even think. Got down low and pushed up with the strength of a thousand volcanoes, up and up and up in black and red in my closed eyes and my rushing ears and my screaming flapping mind until Richard fell away suddenly and my cheek hurt like blazes.

I got my balance and the fear hit me and I shouted out something or other and thought *he’s gonna get me now, I’m going to end up in the hospital now*, closed my eyes and covered my face. But Richard didn’t get me. Not then or later. He just lay there with his big ugly head bent backwards into the harrow, as still as a doll, his chest decorated in red stars.

Nobody ever questioned Richard. Except Vivienne the Weird in her dream.

CLEANSING

#

I cannot go on as I have been. I'm on a new course of action. I'm taking steps now, starting today, the day of my Final Cleansing.

I've abandoned my work on the Rules. I threw my notes into the kitchen sink and washed them through the garbage gobble with hot water. Of what use were they to anyone? I was already the last of my kind and the Rules, the Modern Rules and all of my ephemeral workings were just so much irrelevant material now.

I started at dawn by washing twice, dressing in my best suit, scenting myself with rosewater. I ate a spare breakfast of dry toast and orange juice and shut the window so that the bacon smell from the next apartment couldn't distract me from my purpose. I sat quietly on my couch and read *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe*.

Then communion in the form of a perfect lunch. I took no guests, wanted no company. I was all that is necessary and pure enough to accompany myself.

It was a beautiful, clear, windless day. At the restaurant there was a small magnolia tree, rising from good sweet earth in a terracotta pot beside my basket-weave chair and little round table. There was a delicate blue vase, with fish skin-thin walls, the glass too delicate to have been made by human hands and lungs. It was right that it was in the precise centre of the table.

There was a posy of green stalks and leaves in the vase, tied with a golden ribbon, standing in water. Half of them are things I don't recognise though I'm sure they are herbs that have nothing natural to do with seafood – I do recognise Vietnamese mint. My father would have been appalled at this

incongruity though not my bitch-mother (she who abandoned me twice is an invisible and always dissolute poser).

The waitress surgically removed a second chair and cutlery when I became 'the garden table for one'. I was nervous at this because that symmetry was destroyed in its making but another is takes its place I realise as I sit at one point of the table and face the absolute opposite. The magnolia watched on from its bed of good country earth, serene with its huge too-green leaves and cartoon lily-trumpet white blooms. I didn't count these blooms as I would do normally, refused myself the right to do so or anything else there, deliberately didn't notice the odd arrangement of its branches because I'm on holiday. My last holiday. But I saw that these flowers are made from the same white china that the waitress inserted at my place moments later and can never be ruffled by wind.

I was like a farm girl eating a corn cob, but I was not. I was a farm girl once and did scrape corn with my machine teeth from many cobs but this is not what was happening today. Today I leaned over the plate with my mouthparts gorging on the insides of a crayfish. With my own articulated joints I was cracking and tearing and destroying the broken back and black-stippled red egg-shell, the spiky sticks. I sucked the sea marrow from its non-bones, the dead life from its once living straws to put pure meat in my own maw; white wet meat and I was transforming it alone.

I froze. Allowed butter-salty juices to run down my chin to be caught by fine Irish linen tucked over my silk blouse. Could it be right that this strong and large ancient spider fish, this slow proud ambler of sand under its fluid air, should end up chewed on by humans, let alone Faerie? It is not that it is such an ignoble death. Creatures of the deep should prey upon and be preyed upon

by other creatures of the deep, not overdeveloped monkeys who have found cunning ways to come from the trees, poke with sticks, and invent things to plunder the depths then simply eat whatever alien thing they find. Living things should not be hunted with machinery. One cannot so callously take life.

My eyes swivel as though on mollusc stalks and it hurts to make the comparison. They take in the herbs, the iron weave of the tabletop, the group of pudding ghosts that now follow me constantly. They take in the salt the pepper and, nearer, so near I cannot focus properly, the napkin and finally, only accomplished by creaking my aging articulated joints, the devastation of flesh, the nightmare of realisation of what a glut of carnivorism we are engaged in. But also the close proximity of so many things that are not natural neighbours and none of which belong here. The magnolia is certainly not native to the soil that it is standing in. The mint and the iron are from half a world away. The ersatz weave in the table and chair are a mimicry in iron of something else that is from somewhere else and the napkin, the glass, the waitress.

Horror dawned when I realised I was never to be cleansed.

I was outraged. I threw the whole mess and plates to the hard tiles where they mix in splinters and splatters.

I stumbled through the restaurant, napkin choking my neck. I forgot to pay (an accident, an unfortunate accident). And was surrounded by increasingly shrill monkeys that until then had been my efficient, if somewhat cool, servants. They reminded, then cajoled. But I argued, pudding ghosts swarming around us all.

“Did I not,” I said, “come with good intentions? Was I not enjoying the sun and the peace? I’m on a Cleansing for Christ’s sake. And then you serve me a killed thing! On iron. Me, the last of my kind!”

They didn't know what to say (why should they?). They frowned, looked at one another, yammered in the way monkeys do.

Frowns were on their faces.

"There's no need," said one, but another shushed her.

"The correct answer is 'Yes you were here for that Cleansing and we are sorry.'"

"But," said the one who had served me, spreading her paws palms up, "you seemed to have taken offence, but at what?"

"There's no room," cuts in another, "for this sort of silly discussion. I have to ask you to pay and leave,."

"I will do no such thing. You enticed me into this place and took me up to a great height of expectation and then dashed me and so now I'm much, much further down and hurt than when – ".

"Listen, lady. I don't know what your problem is. Just pay and go. Ring the police, babe."

"I've been swindled."

I came to myself enough to fling my credit card, waited outside while they processed it and brought me the chit to sign, then I left, my coterie of ghosts in my wake.

FALLOUT

#

Dear Ruth,

A year to the day has passed since I cut myself loose from Cal.

I see now that I should never have done so.

You tricked me into saying goodbye to him. You indicated with your laughs and kisses, by your hugs and in sharing your dreams, that I would be looked after. And look what it has come to: nothing.

You led me astray. Promised to save me but here I'm in the wilderness again. You were going to be my saviour but you have turned into one of the enemy. I'm not welcome at your house, you say. I cannot ring or even write – though how you will stop me I don't know. You have set that little terrier lawyer onto me again and he hounds me with notices and notifications and threats of the most cold kind.

I cannot apologise for speaking the truth at dinner that night. If I'm to be treated fairly I must be given the same as my brothers and sisters have been given as well as an equal place in the will.

I plead with you, Ruth: as a friend if not as a mother. As a fellow traveller on this road that you set us both on when you had your sordid little tryst with the boy from the school across the road. Don't leave me like this. Don't shut me out again.

Please write this time.

Please.

Your loving daughter,

Vivienne.

#

Dear Miss Coroth,

We write on behalf of our clients Mrs. Ruth James (nee Lutin) and her husband Mr. Hamish James.

Mrs. James has asked us to advise that she will not respond in any way to your continual attempts at contact. This situation is no of her making and she is finding it extremely distressing. We urge you to consider her feelings and the feelings of her family.

Mr. and Mrs. James do understand your position and the hardships that you have gone through. Mrs. James in particular feels some responsibility for your situation and for any grandchildren that may issue from you.

Having considered the matter carefully and consulted with us about the provisions of the Family Protection Act, they have confirmed that they will leave their respective wills as they are, leaving an equal share to you as to their children. There will be no settlement on you personally in their lifetimes.

They have also asked us to set up a small trust that will be settled with \$50,000.00, the sole beneficiaries of which will be any children that you may have for the purposes of their welfare and education. The trust will be administered by the trustees who will be the James's themselves and in the event of their deaths, their children.

Copies of the relevant documents will be made available to you shortly.

They wish us to make it clear that they don't wish to have any contact with you whatsoever, whether you have children or not.

We hope that you understand and suggest that you seek independent legal advice.

Yours faithfully,

Nigel Brownlee

Partner

Brownlee, Smithell & Brownlee

Barristers and Solicitors

EPIPHANY

#

Dear Cal, Dear Ruth,

I've been consumed all my life with mother-hunger. Hunger to be mothered. Hunger to mother.

But on second-thousandth thought, I don't want a child like Samuel or Thomas. A cuckoo which lacked my special DNA and mitochondria and all that I've inherited that makes me me, and me what I am. It would never feel a tingle and would lack access to the memory pool. Its DNA is foreign, its mitochondria an invisible poison that would replace me in my legal name and my inheritance with itself in killing me off, the last of my kind. It is just another canary bearing its cuckoo poisons. A Mistletoe Cuckoo suckled by a blood-sucking insectoid lying Madonna. Offspring of the Canmary – more foul than fair, more foul than fowl. A disgrace to avian kind.

And so I realise that all I wanted was a lover and, still, a mother.

But these have been taken away from me by you both. My chances are gone. I blame each of you equally. True, it was Ruth who persuaded me to leave you alone, Cal. It was she who abandoned me once again. But Cal, your repeated intrusion into my thoughts were the reason I thought Ruth was a better person for me to be with.

I've been callous for too long and now I'm ruthless too.

Time to fly.

Viv.

THE AVIAN WAY

#

Symmetry

Dear Cal, dear Ruth, dear lover, dear mother, dear mourners, dear celebrators of my life.

There is a beautiful symmetry about life and death. Born on one side of life, dying at the other. In between is a rollercoaster ride. And what, we all wonder when we are on it, is beyond either end?

I could tell you now.

I'm coming to you in your dreams. What is more fitting than that? After pigeons, telegraph. After telegraph, email. After email – dreams. It is more pure than anything that has gone before but more uncertain. Spam and poo are replaced by snippets of unreality and far off myths. But the truth comes in the dream that has winged its way to you too.

The symmetry is exquisite in my case.

I was born when borne by a stork, mythic bird delivering a bundle of bliss. I died when I dived from a Stork Fokker, metallic bird delivering a death kiss. I was carried in on a sheet under a bill. I was ushered out under a sheet that spilled. My life was a corridor guarded at its ends by twin birds: one a prenatal bird who stood with closed and one legged tucked up. The other a postmodern bird who stared at me with one round blink-less eye while I dodged and slunk my way along the corridor as slowly as I could.

And you're left wondering: how did this end come to be? I will tell you.

I arrived by taxi. There were several cars in the weedy shingle car park beside the low, white building. Weeds grew up around the back door and I entered, signed in and took my place amongst young men wielding plastic coffee cup holders. There was the usual chat. A new guy and his supporting girlfriend stood with arms folded, silent and one bad comment away from leaving. Three old-timers were sizing up the others. Several who were enrolled for mid-level stages in the course were loud and brave and ignoring the new guy while eyeing up the girlfriend. Two more older men were without fuss checking lists and equipment.

One looked familiar. He looked at me longer than he should have.

Two hours passed in a haze of theory and equipment handling.

The new guy and the brave boys went up first. The rest worked on and chatted about nonsense and then when the jump was due went outside and looked up when someone spotted the shining dot. We watched and criticised and counted and looked through the instructor's binoculars all in turn. Listened to the radio instructions. I was tempted to harvest the signal for some weather control but resisted – lives were at stake. I watched the girl friend and tried to deduce from her black boots, her maroon lip gloss, her wavy died blonde hair and her camera that she forgot to turn on whether she was his true love. Was she being cheated on? He had looked like a decent man but then so did you, Cal. And I knew this man could cheat – he was cheating death as he floated in the air.

There was a break and hugs and slapping of backs and tales of bravado up there as though anything they could do would change anything this band of merry men. And the new guy was suddenly not the new guy. He was one of the brave the fit the surviving warriors and his girlfriend was an angry woman who rebelled when he said he was hooked.

“You said you just wanted to get it out of your system!”

“Yeah, but Jill, I didn’t know what a rush it would be...”

Then it was my turn. I went up with the experienced group because experienced was what I was now. No radio for me no static line no tandem instructor turtling on my back and cupping my helpless breasts with his nerveless gloves while he laughed.

I waited and I talked and shouted over the thunder and hiss of the aircraft. I waited and I planned and I watched the doorway to see where my right foot left foot hands and head would be. I listened and nodded to the instructor who repeated baby instructions. I took my place and I launched into space.

I dived and I swam and my fingers spread into feathers. I adjusted my balance trimmed my physical list checked my internal list and then I pulled at a cord and felt a jerk.

And felt the icy wind over my face still as fast as ever and it crept into my arms and then my stomach and my legs and my heart. I looked down at my cord and pulled again but it was already triggered. I looked up and the wind blew at my chin and propped it up my chin and I saw my parachute above me, hanging on cords stretching above me. But it

was flapping and straight and as thin as nervosa and the cords were tangled.

I looked out and saw huge white daises with men dangling from them and they were shooting up fast from me into the sky. I looked down and the earth seemed still except at the edges where the horizons were moving. I saw things get bigger and then I couldn't see them as I began to spin and I lost my sense of up and down as I lost my balance and clawed the air.

I could do nothing. I had no radio to summon a tornado to whip me to safety (I hadn't practiced my natural unassisted talent for so long that I could not do it in time - (such is the way of the modern world).

And so the earth rose up, hit me and I died.

But perhaps I'm mistaken. Dreams are like that. Maybe it was like this:

I dove from the aircraft and spread my arms to the sides, my fingers feathers. I straightened my legs behind me, toes stretched and pointing away. A perfect dive with a graceful curve. I opened my mouth and swallowed air. I felt the sun roll on my back as I rocked in the wind.

I screamed but the wound was wind-weakened. At the last possible moment, when my speed was highest and my chances of recovery slimmest, I pulled at my rip chord. The jerk pulled at my thorax. I reached up, behind swept my arms around and above and squinted up and saw that the lines were as tangled as my careful packing had promised. Insured perfection.

I got back enough control to put my head down as though entering water. I pulled off my round bird eyes and the goggles were ripped from my hand.

Below me on the top of the insubstantial glowing castle of Onogo, standing in a perfect ring as in a circus, were dozens of pudding ghosts, all looking up. And in the centre was one, the ringmaster, and even from here I could see that his face was the face of Richard Peregrine, waiting for me.

Beside me I saw then another pudding ghost. It was unaffected by the vast tearing wind and then I realised that this was my own pudding ghost. It had been behind me all my life and now, at the end, was there beside me, my spiritual twin. I smiled and the wind carved rippling wrinkles in my cheeks.

And then I started to hear a roar above the roar of the air and I screamed as I knew this was the sound of the earth applauding me. And then the good earth met my lips.

Or maybe this:

As the parachute opened it felt strange. Different. It was not right. I twisted and turned so that I could look up at all of the ropes. There, and there, in the folded, trailing handkerchief lines were knots I could see. Knots that could not have come naturally.

And then I remembered: Susan. Her husband, Doug, he was the quiet jumper in the corner of the room before the jump. He who had stayed inside when we had all gone out to look at the beginners. He whose wife was bent on expunging me from the family and who would have everything to gain if I was gone. Was it him? Had he done

something? Had he taken advantage of my absence to make a present of some little love-knots in my tracery?

Was I so awful that they felt the need to kill me just to save a share of the estate? Was this what was really happening? Or was I imagining it all? I had only met Doug twice. Why do I think that he was the man in the hut today? When did I decide that? I couldn't remember thinking that before I boarded the plane dove from the plane left the plane soaring away from me.

As my lips hit the earth I reflected upon my life. This is what one is supposed to do as one dies. As my front teeth ground into my throat I wondered if I had been as human as I might have tried to be. To have assumed not the worst but the best of people, to have taken from people, yes, but also to have given. To have loved and not demanded love in return. To have accepted my faults as well as the faults of others. As a shock travelled through my brain faster than my synapses could fire I was left with the thought that I was not a nice person and I asked for forgiveness. I asked myself for this because I had no one and nothing else to ask for it and I was dead before I knew it.

These are things you see vividly in this dream of Vivienne. But what do I see?

Now that I'm gone, you must carry on. Plough on. Row row row your boat. Life is but a dream. I will be with you.

And that's all I remember of being Vivienne.

I'm fourteen now, and this is the first time I've used the password to this blog. I've known it since I was a toddler. I remember the day it came to me

clearly along with everything else, with colours and flashes and sounds like a circus all around me.

My step-mother Mary used to shout at me whenever I raised anything to do with my new memories – she denied she was my step-mother at all and Dad would just clam up and sit in that damn chair by the window. I went on with growing up, competing with my human brother Sam and being beaten by him in every endeavour until I ran away this week. Sam always laughed at me too. He even says he remembers nothing of any kidnapping – which is probably right as Vivienne maintained that legally there was no abduction.

Until ten days ago when I visited the citizens advice place. Told the woman I was sixteen. She hunted around for me on some database she said she had illicit access to and told me the truth was what I remembered. She even gave me a copy of the certificates.

When I showed them to Sam in the cloakroom outside Room 43, the man who was taller braver smarter better than me became a weak boy who blubbed and ran out.

I went home and looked in Dad's secret place, under the bottom drawer of his walnut bureau. That's where the letter, the first letter recorded in this blog, was. The password was there, buried in the encryption that is obvious to those of the Faerie. Proof that my memory was accurate. I spent days working out what to do, packing stuff I'd need and hiding it behind a nail-box in the shed. Took some money from Dad's emergency stash my money box (almost empty) Sam's (almost full) the step-mother's purse the ashtrays in the cars. Then I took the bus train walked bus walked until I was here. The first thing I did when I got to town was find a place under an old house. The second thing was to go to this internet café and use the password.

I know now that my job is to take up the various tasks of Faerie and to add a new layer to the Rules, a pseudo-modernist varnish through which to read them. I will have to do this myself, individually, and not allow the humans to dictate my life and my death as they did my ancestors including Vivienne the Second. And I will therefore use the inheritance that she left me in her life insurance as soon as Dad and Mary can no longer keep it from me or try to get me to promise share it with Sam. I will build a new culture, on the site of Onogo, a perfect culture under the gaze of the Faerie mansion.

Until then, until I have independence, I will concentrate on working the weather with the internet instead of the radio and on finding a mate. Or I will be the last of my kind instead of the only.