
J C L BRONKHORST

EXEGESIS – Storytelling: Circles and Straight Lines (12,000 words)

THESIS – In Transit: A Collection of Short Stories (50,000 words)

An exegesis and thesis submitted to

Auckland University of Technology

in fulfilment of the degree of

Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

2009

School of Communication Studies

Primary Supervisor: John Cranna

CONTENTS:

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS	5
CONFIDENTIAL MATERIAL	6
ABSTRACT	7

EXEGESIS:

Storytelling: circles and straight lines

(with own title page, table of contents, page numbers)

THESIS:

In Transit: a collection of short stories

(with own title page, table of contents, page numbers)

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP:

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

Candidate's signature

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I have received no substantial assistance from any source or person in the preparation of this exegesis as regards sponsorship, collection and processing of data, interpretation of results, and editing and word processing.

Professor Barry King did however introduce me to the following concepts: “small worlds” (Umberto Eco) and “polyvocality” (Mikhail Bakhtin).

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS:

1. All intellectual property including copyright, is retained by the candidate in the content of the candidate's exegesis. For the removal of doubt, publication by the candidate of this or any derivative work does not change the intellectual property rights of the candidate in relation to the exegesis.
2. I confirm that my exegesis does not contain plagiarised material or material for which the copyright or other intellectual property belongs to a third party.

CONFIDENTIAL MATERIAL:

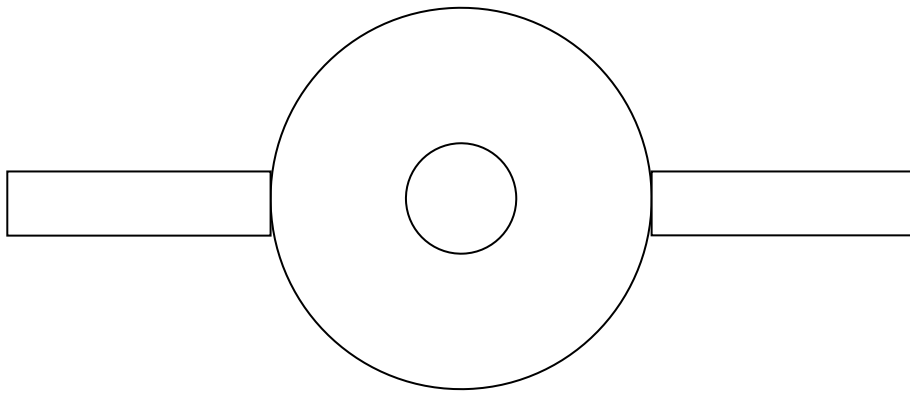
1. The content of the candidate's thesis is confidential for commercial reasons, that is, the possible publication by the candidate of the thesis, or a derivative of it, as a work of creative fiction for sale.
2. This exegesis relates to and describes that thesis and confidentiality is retained in it for that reason.
3. This confidentiality remains until after any commercial publication.
4. For the removal of doubt, publication does not change the intellectual property rights of the candidate of this or any derivative work.

ABSTRACT:

Storytelling: circles and straight lines is a qualitative, retrospective analysis of my thesis (a collection of iconoclastic New Zealand short stories, entitled *In Transit*), in which I define the scope of my creative work by: positioning my approach within the wider contemporary and literary contexts; explaining its conceptual framework; and describing my intention and process.

To these ends, I have drawn extensively on my personal experience, accumulated knowledge, and orientation, supplemented by wide reading. Throughout the text, I substantiate my views, arguments and conclusions with reference to noted writers, critics, language experts, and philosophers.

STORYTELLING: CIRCLES AND STRAIGHT LINES



A Doodle (Eco, 2000, pg. 391)

By
J C L Bronkhorst

©2009

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
STORIES & STORYTELLING	3
ENCODING OF MEANING	5
SNAPSHOTS & CROSS-SECTIONS	7
MODERNISM, POST-MODERNISM & THE ZEITGEIST	8
THE LEGACY	10
TRAVELLING	12
REALISM	13
HUMANITY = MORALITY	16
APPROACH	18
IN TRANSIT	20
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS	23
CONCLUSION	25
ENDNOTES	27
REFERENCES	28
APPENDIX A	30

INTRODUCTION

My creative work in short fiction is the product of my long held conviction that story, in all its variform manifestations, is as necessary to man's wellbeing as it is integral to all forms of communication and discourse. Story has a long history, as old as humanity itself, and as such, it is both the foundation and the core of all forms of narrative. It is, simultaneously, the timeline that connects and encompasses man's experience of life (death) and the world (nature, science, and more recently, technology) from his earliest conscious beginnings to the present day, and the manifestation of his need to describe these phenomena through the only medium he has at his disposal to signify meaning or the lack thereof — language.

It is my intention in this exegesis to explore the enduring nature of story, and to motivate the personal, social, and cultural significance of storytelling as a narrative form. I will discuss the impact of modernism and post-modernism on traditional story, and argue the continuing efficacy and relevance of realism. I will also share my ideas about what storytelling involves and how it functions, and describe my predilection for short fiction and my creative process. In conclusion, I will highlight the overarching theme in my work — a collection of iconoclastic New Zealand stories — which, I believe, not only marks it as a worthy addition to contemporary short fiction, but also substantiates the views and arguments that I will express here.

STORIES & STORYTELLING

There is a great reservoir of myths, legends, tales, parables and fables to remind us just how very long, varied, and enduring, the tradition of storytelling is. Italo Calvino writes of the early beginnings of story: "The storyteller began to put forth words ... in order to extract an explanation of the world from ... spoken narrative." He describes how story began to develop, through accretion, certain characteristics commensurate with humanity's stage of evolution at the time.¹ "It is not possible to imagine European culture without The Tales of Bidpai, nor English literature without the Bible." (Lessing, 2004:282) Moreover, much of the world's ancient and more recent reflection on the nature of reality is preserved

in story. One only has to list a few examples — Greek and Nordic myth, the kōans of Zen Buddhism, the Bible, The Canterbury Tales, the Decameron, Aesop’s fables, The Arabian Nights, and the indigenous stories of the Inuits, Africans, and Aborigines and so on — to substantiate this truth. Storytelling has always been a universal phenomenon, common to all cultures old and new. As such, it has evolved in many diverse forms alongside man’s increasing capacity for abstract and lateral thinking, reflecting always his ever-expanding understanding of reality, from primitive thought and perception, through countless stages of development, right up to the present day. “Tales are seen as a repository of information, used to instruct the young: along with the information *encoded in story* (italics added) comes the message.”² (ibid:275) Thus, the role of storytelling in the history of mankind is deeply entrenched. Moreover, stories function in a uniquely pedagogical way, without overtly appearing to do so.

Ken Benn, a contemporary New Zealand storyteller, travels the country telling stories and sharing their universal relevance. He points out that modern western European ways of thinking are based on a print culture that tends to the use verbal metaphor, whereas indigenous ways of thinking are based on an oral culture that lends itself to visual metaphor. He speaks about the power of storytelling to transcend the analytical, left to right, relational, logical structure of the print tradition, through the substitution of a synthesizing, codified, symbolic structure which induces a simultaneousness of response that appeals not only to the intellectual, but also crosses over into the affective domain; that effectively fuses the responses of both right and left brain functions into a holistic experience. Stories “not only order experience, which for some reason we need to do, but accept inputs from other regions of the mind.” (ibid:274)

Because stories appeal in the holistic way they do, they are capable of eliciting various levels of response — they may be simply enjoyed at a superficial level, perhaps leave a reader (or listener) with something to contemplate, or be thoroughly analysed, deconstructed, and meaning-extrapolated. Thus, they provide a wide range of functions, from entertainment, through the dissemination of knowledge and information, to in-depth social, cultural and political commentary, psychological analysis, historical and philosophical reflection, and ethical imperative. This is perhaps why stories are the most enduring form of

narrative: they achieve a universal timeless relevance that supersedes their particular origins; yet the strength of stories is that they do so by incorporating and reflecting their unique time and setting — the worldview, in short, of their origins — in the most subtle of ways. That story has proved to be such an enduring form, and that it continues to increase in popularity, alongside the groundswell in multi-disciplinary research into its relevance and nature, with many notable proponents continually adding to the canon, is perhaps indicative of the amazing virtuosity this form's special characteristics lend the writer or storyteller, and the continuous contribution it has made to man's evolving understanding of the universe.

My collection of short stories falls very much within the parameters of what constitutes 'story', as defined above. Each story bears a covert message, a message which is incorporated within and encompassed by the seeming simplicity of its telling; a telling which, on the surface, appears limited to the confines of the story, its protagonists, and their particular situation, yet also references the social, cultural, political and historical milieux that have prompted its creation, in which the particular infers the general, and the personal the universal. Thus, my stories address not only the unique, individual and contemporary aspects of the human condition; they also reflect the greater concerns of humankind.³ What makes it possible to achieve this multi-facetedness in storytelling is the encoding of meaning.

ENCODING OF MEANING

The narrative vehicle of the short story is intrinsically suited to the encoding of layers of meaning within the text, delimited as this form is by a structural framework that imposes rigorous constraints on length, subject matter, and scope. This is because written language functions at different levels — above the line (text), below the line (context) and between the lines (subtext).⁴ Thus, because of the requisite artifice demanded of short fiction by its highly compressed and crystallised form, it is capable of incorporating a multi-connotative structure in which it is possible to synchronise many levels of meaning, ranging from the simplicity of story (at the level of the text), through the exploration of individual situations

and specific settings (at the level of context), to the inference and extrapolation of deeply embedded contemporary and universal themes (at the subtextual level).⁵

Layers of meaning in text are dependent upon the polysemious nature of language — “the buried life of words” (Birch, 1996:88) (Bakhtin has called this the ‘heteroglossic’ nature of language). Italo Calvino is supremely eloquent on the semantic and semiotic possibilities of language: “... words, like crystals, have facets and axes of rotation with different properties, and light is refracted differently according to how these word crystals are placed, and how the polarizing surfaces are cut and superimposed.” (Calvino, 1986:40) Thus, the buried life of words and their infinite possibilities of permutation and association render the short story a densely encrypted and encapsulated communicative medium.

Moreover, short fiction, crafted through sound fictional technique, together with an awareness of what it means to be human in a particular time and place, creates the conditions for “resonance” (a term initially brought to my attention by the New Zealand writer, James George). Resonance can be defined as that which makes a work of fiction far more than the sum of its parts, because it has that quality of depth (Hemingway’s iceberg effect) in which both the microcosm and the macrocosm reflect and complement each other. The shape of an iceberg is pertinent here; what lies above the water belies the great size and depth of what is hidden below. When applied to storytelling, the analogy speaks for itself: what has been rendered on the page (or through the voice) in a succinct and compressed form is capable of referencing wide-ranging, topical and apposite themes in the most subtle of ways. “A (written) text is distinguished from other kinds of expression by reason of its greater complexity. The main reason for its complexity is that it is run through with *what is not said*, in other words with what is not manifest on the surface, at the level of expression.” (Caesar, 1999:121)

It has been my intention to demonstrate this layering and encoding of meaning in my short fiction. By employing the techniques of sound story-telling — use of bona fide voice, effective depiction of setting, incorporation of the propelling/driving force of action, rendition of authentic dialogue, staying true always to storytelling mode — and through the selection of subject matter that addresses the complexities and ambiguities of a specific

reality, but also treats universal themes, I believe my stories successfully achieve a measure of resonance.

SNAPSHOTS AND CROSS-SECTIONS

Another distinctive feature of short fiction, very closely related to the above, is its capacity to embody complexity and open-endedness through compression. Its brevity and layeredness lend storytelling the ability to provide a snapshot or cross-section of a situation, what is commonly termed a “slice of life”; yet this in no way compromises the rendition of the whole, just as a photograph or x-ray do not deny their subject’s real-life existence outside the moment the image was captured. Even though stories, within their own internal structure, have a beginning, a middle, and an end, they effectively start and finish *in medias res* — there is always going to be much that has gone before, and there will always be more to follow after. “No story begins at the beginning. The roots of the action extend back into uncertainty, and the known is determined by the unknown and the unknowable.” (Roemer, 1995:42) In Henry James’ words, “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, a circle in which they *appear* to do so.” (ibid:43) The fact is, there is no alpha and omega, only infinity. At best, the storyteller can only hope to represent a minute portion of the whole; otherwise, both writer (speaker) and reader (listener) would be forever lost in the labyrinth of Borges’ library of Babel.

This distinctive characteristic of storytelling is also evident in my collection: each story stands alone, complete in itself, a ‘small world’ (Eco, 1990:64-82); yet each story’s circumscribed subject matter and setting reference a wider reality that remains complex and ambiguous, demonstrating the characteristics of an ‘open text’ (Radford, 2003:39-43). Characters reappear in other stories at different stages of their lives, confronting different situations, living other “slices of life”, new themes are introduced, and different settings are explored. Yet, when the collection is considered as whole, conceptual relationships and patterns emerge which serve to underscore both the interconnectedness and the open-endedness of any semiotic reality.

MODERNISM, POST-MODERNISM, AND THE ZEITGEIST

It is relevant here to initiate a discussion on recent and contemporary literature and the impact that modernism and post-modernism have had on story and narrative, in order to motivate my subsequent argument; that a return to the classic and enduring principles of storytelling is imperative if literature is to continue to meaningfully reflect the human condition, and to retain its proper place in that reflection.

The past hundred years of literary endeavour have seen unprecedented developments in the art of storytelling as it has evolved through many movements, styles and approaches, commensurate with and representative of man's recent history, his ongoing reflection upon an increasingly fast-changing, complex environment, and developments in the 'universe of the mind' (Lotman, 2000:4-6). Many of the highly regarded writers of this period have pushed the boundaries of fiction wide, advancing both the complexity and sophistication of narrative. (To provide a few examples: proponents of modernism such as Conrad, Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Woolf, Mansfield, Faulkner, Kafka, Lawrence, Hemingway, Bulgakov, and post-modernism, such as Marquez, Borges, Nabokov, Eco, Beckett, Bellow, Golding, Burgess, Calvino, Rushdie.)

What consistently marks writers such as these as worthy exponents is their ability to stay true to storytelling mode — the result of their deep understanding of the intrinsic nature of story. This appreciation of the essential characteristics of narrative has enabled them to successfully manipulate its infinite permutations and possibilities to suit their individual purposes. (One example would be Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Although considered a groundbreaking narrative, it is not really so different from *Hansel and Gretel* or Guy de Maupassant's story about cannibalism at sea as far as the horror of its subject matter is concerned, as it is in its increased sophistication of the telling, commensurate with the times in which it was written.) Thus, even when traditional narrative (story) is seemingly absent, its absence tells a story, a story of what is not. Story actually "establishes its validity by acknowledging its own marginality." (Roemer, 1995:386)

What has become increasingly evident, however, is that certain literary trends, particularly in post-modern fiction, have begun to exhibit tendencies that undermine their

contribution. Much late twentieth century and contemporary literature has become preoccupied with intellectual gymnastics, stylistic manoeuvres of the most absurd kind, and a preoccupation with the artifice of literary constructs, to the detriment of storytelling. More disappointingly, recent literary endeavour has also become increasingly lacking in moral or ethical imperative, marked by obsessive self-reference, angst and despair. A further worrying trend has been the appropriation and advancement of 'worthy' literature by an intellectual elite.⁶

And so, post-modernism's distrust of traditional narrative, combined with its tendency to parody man's search for meaning as a futile quest in a world of randomness and pluridimensionality — a world uncharacterised and unmodified by any totalitarian hierarchy of meaning, subject only to uncertainty and relativity — has eventually resulted in its own bogging down in the nihilistic swamps of the kind of absolutism it originally sought to dredge and convert to higher ground. "The death of man" (Foucault), the author (Derrida), and by implication, the reader; the assertion that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*"; and more recently the prediction of the death of the book (a possibility that Umberto Eco refutes [Nunberg, 1996:295-306]) have gradually revealed themselves to be variations of the totalisations and dogmas post-modernism originally sought to reveal and debunk. (Roemer, 1995:367) The irony is that post-modernism may well have proved the opposite: what it seeks to negate it ultimately ends up affirming. "Post-modernism, though it pronounces 'the death of man' may well be a *response* to it. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte* could be read as the assertion of a radical humanism: we *are* the text and we *make* the world." (ibid:364)

In our "salad days", writers and other creatives (like myself) who are now reaching maturity had many role models to articulate our distrust of the intelligentsia, the illuminati, the literati: the self-proclaimed masterminds of academia and culture and their often gratuitous magniloquence, who have increasingly offered up only a time-worn fest of judgementalism and disillusionment. More recently, the writings of visionaries like David Foster Wallace have highlighted the extent to which our civilisation has lost the ability to experience any sincere or authentic thought or emotion that is not derivative of, referenced by, or relative to, something else, unfiltered by and unsubjected to the aberration of meta concerns. (Wallace, 2005:264). The work of one of the eminent literary critics of our time,

James Wood, continues to steer us in the direction of what is lasting and enduring in literature: “to see a world and its fictional people truthfully may expand our capacity for sympathy in the actual world.” (Wood, 2008:130) He quotes George Eliot: “Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowman beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” (ibid:181) Michael Roemer, in his exhaustive, interdisciplinary tome, *Telling Stories* (referred to briefly above and more extensively below), presents a convincing case for narrative’s intrinsic relevance and validity. He bases his argument on an in-depth overview of its long history juxtaposed against recent ideology and philosophy, in which he convincingly postulates that post-modernism’s rejection of traditional narrative has ironically only served to highlight the strengths and enduring nature of story, as well as the necessary and central role it continues to play in man’s ongoing search for meaning.

Moreover, the exclusively academic culture that has grown up around the study of literature, the practice of literary criticism, and the perception of what constitutes ‘worthy’ literature in the last century has increasingly become, in Gore Vidal’s opinion, an environment where “English is taught but not learned”. (Vidal, 2007:117) Roemer also notes that “the attack on ... story has come from an intellectual elite” (Roemer, 1995:365). I too have come to distrust and dislike fiction “that is written to be taught” (Vidal, 2007:149), written by professors for professors, because, as Vidal points out, the “University-novel tends to be stillborn, suitable only for classroom biopsy” (ibid:117). Fifty years of immersion/saturation in post-modernist culture has taught me that the kind of literature I most treasure and admire — the kind I most wish to write — is the kind that is accessible to most; the kind that is born of story rather than of theory; the kind that speaks to everyman.

THE LEGACY

Fortunately, in our time, we have access to countless proponents of this kind of storytelling, both living and dead, who might inform us, and whose work survives on the printed page, encompassing the whole of human history in terms of narrative. I would like to think that, just as the introduction of the mass-manufacture of the piano around the turn

of the twentieth century made music accessible to the masses, so too, writers like myself, and others like me, will bring about a return to story in the new millenium, for literature's sake.

According to Roemer, the reason why post-modernism (and its insistence on human freedom) rejects traditional story is that, like science, story is predicated on a reality or truth that exists outside the text. But narrative (story) has always accounted for and addressed the nebulousness of 'reality' — that has been its sole purpose and *modus operandi* for aeons past. Roemer maintains that, ironically, it may well be that post-modernists reject traditional story "not because they don't believe it, but because they *do*." (Roemer, 1995:372) Anyone who has any idea of history knows that uncertainty is nothing new — it has been the one constant throughout man's history, even in times of relative security and optimism. "Though uncertainty seems emblematic of our time, it has always been central to human experience." (ibid:383) Moreover, uncertainty has been the underlying theme of all story and narrative, from the earliest times. "In narratives that deal directly with the sacred — parables, for instance — uncertainty is not only implicit in the structure but often explicit in the action ..." (ibid:385) Likewise, uncertainty continues to be the dominant theme in much contemporary literature. What more convincing proof of human freedom could there be, other than man's ability to construct his own version of reality through story?

"If we can accept our uncertainty ... story may regain its credibility, and, by affirming rather than distracting us from necessity, recover its *ancient, persuasive and telling role* (italics added). For what we call 'fiction' embodies a reality we cannot afford to face in life, and what we call 'reality' is, in fact, a fiction that allows us a measure of consciousness without casting us into despair. It may well be the reality and contradictions we can only face in fiction that give our lives meaning and shape." (ibid:386) This is conceivable because the nature of story allows for and incorporates all possibilities: the arcane as well as the quotidian, levity and brevity, certainty and uncertainty, horror and beauty, the personal and the universal. "Story decides for neither plot nor action, the sacred or the human, but lets both stand." "If it saw the truth on one side *or* the other, it would be untrue to our self-contradictory situation." (ibid:123)

TRAVELLING

So one journey's end becomes another's beginning: we (writers) today find ourselves at the start of a tentative new pilgrimage towards a redefinition of what literature is and a rediscovery of how it works — post-postmodernism if one wishes to give it a name — with the aim of producing once again a more sustainable literature, based perhaps on what has been found throughout time to be enduring, on what can stand for “life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry.” (Wood, 2008:186).

This, because literature cannot be divorced from its historical context, because it is part of a tradition that is derivative of and incorporates everything that has gone before. New beginnings are never solely our own therefore; others have been there before us, have mapped the topography for us. So we find ourselves ‘turning and turning’ in Yeats’ (ever) ‘widening gyre’ — weighed down on the one hand by the baggage of the past and its failings and weaknesses, but also equipped with the knowledge and tools and experience the past has bequeathed us, believing, or at least hoping, that the lessons we’ve learned will provide us with the means to transcend the place we are leaving. (My use of the word ‘transcend’ here is significant to my understanding of post-postmodernism.⁷) Thus, we travel well-charted territory with a certain amount of both foresight and hindsight: the terrain itself remains relatively unchanged, although the journey for us might seem new.⁸ Frank Kermode highlights this truism when he quotes T.S. Eliott:

A new kind of writing appears, to be greeted at first with disdain and derision; we hear that the tradition has been flouted, and that chaos has come. After a time it appears that the new way of writing is not destructive but re-creative. It is not that we have repudiated the past, as the obstinate enemies — and also the stupidest supporters — of any new movement like to believe; but that we have enlarged our conception of the past; and that in the light of what is new we see the past in a new pattern. (Kermode, 1975:673)

But what kind of literature should writers be aspiring to create early in the twenty-first century? How to transcend what has gone before in our recent past without throwing the baby out with the bathwater? How to rise above what David Foster Wallace has referred to as the enfeeblement of today's avant-garde culture by irony, irreverence, and rebellion? As he so eloquently points out, “... irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks”, and he quotes Lewis Hyde, “Irony has only

emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy the cage.” (Wallace, 2008)

REALISM

As mentioned above, reality has always been the central subject of story and narrative, and many modernist and post-modernist writers have addressed the reality of our recent and contemporary situation in the most creative and meaningful of ways. In so doing, they have stretched not only the parameters of fiction wider than ever before, but also the parameters of thought. What has made this possible is realism: as the all-encompassing literary vehicle of the modern age, realism allows for multiple approaches, forms of expression, and innovation, making them eminently possible. “Most major movements in literature in the past two centuries have invoked a desire to capture the ‘truth’ of life (or ‘the way things are’), even as the definition of what is ‘realistic’ changes.” (Wood, 2008:182) Realism endures because it “makes other forms of fiction seem like genres”, because it “teaches everyone else; it schools its own truants: it is what allows for magical realism, hysterical realism, fantasy, science fiction, even thrillers, to exist.” (ibid:186) Wood takes issue with those who decry realism, (Barthes, Rick Moody, Patrick Giles, Cyril Connolly are named and quoted as some of its notable antagonists, claiming that the form has been reduced to a mere set of outworn conventions, reproduced ad infinitum in multiple variations), maintaining that realism will continue to prove itself the dominant literary *modus operandi* of our times, because it is the only suitable vehicle through which it is possible to truthfully describe man’s situation. “Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, or lifesameness, but what I must call *liveness*,” he says (Wood, 2008:186).

As stated above, that literature ought to reflect the macrocosm through its representation of the microcosm is a given, and has always been so, even for those writers whose version of reality is seemingly portrayed by means other than traditional story. Realism provides the means to faithfully record reality, because ultimately, realism is supremely capable of exploiting the possibilities of language. The writer:

“is always working with at least three languages. There is the author’s own language, style, perceptual equipment, and so on; there is the character’s presumed language, style, perceptual equipment, and so on; and there is what we would call the language of the world — the language which fiction inherits before it gets to turn it into novelistic style, the language of daily speech, of newspapers, of offices, of advertising, of the blogosphere and text messaging.” (Wood, 2008:28-9)

One could add to Wood’s list the language of film and television, business, politics and urban myth, email and telephone exchanges, the sound byte, and even the most banal of everyday conversations that might take place in a supermarket, gym, or tavern. Realism allows writers to explore every contemporary argot, situation, and context equally convincingly.

Contemporary writers ought to address the debasement of language and culture that is endemic in our society and reflect this in their work, if they intend their work to be relevant. David Foster Wallace, himself a product of post-modernism, was a writer who “pushes to parodic extremes his full-immersion method” by exposing the “saturation of language by mass media” (Wood, 2008:24). He also eminently captured the elitist spirit of post-modernism — excessive use of qualifiers, footnotes, endnotes, etymological analysis, self-reference, meta reflection, etc., thereby highlighting how its excessive complexity sometimes detracts from its message, resulting in obscurantism and vacuousness. (I am also of the opinion that ‘empty vessels’ often make the most noise!)

Although my writing is very different from Wallace’s fiction, and far less worthy, it has been my intention too, to capture something of the language of the world in my stories. I achieve this through the incorporation of print advertisements, news broadcasts, text messaging, the use of slang and colloquialisms, immigrant English, ‘high’ and ‘low’ registers etc., as befits the situation and the story. In one story, I even include an extract from a sermon.

This is not the place to discuss realism in depth; lack of space would preclude any worthwhile attempt. I would however like to draw attention to certain aspects of realism that are evident in my work; namely, polysemiousness (already discussed above), polyvocality (varying points of view), genre diversity, and the collapsing of the space/time continuum.

My short fiction is characterised by polyvocality. I not only consistently use differing points of view — first person, second person, third person, observer-narrator, omniscient

etc. — but allow my characters to speak and think for themselves, in their own idiom. Polyvocality is very closely associated with characterisation: I tend to create characters who are representational/pastiche-like, using a realistic technique Wood has termed “mnemonic leitmotif” (ibid:107). (This is an old method, exemplified, for example, by Dickens.) One is able to capture the ‘essence’ of a character by having them use a catchphrase, or by attributing to them a repetitive gesture or some other defining characteristic that individualises them, yet also allows them to function as a ‘type’ or ‘archetype’. (It is possible to get away with this in modern fiction because the contemporary reader’s threshold of irrelevancy is so much lower than that of our forbears [Hall, 1989:117]. The need to describe characters’ physical attributes, for example, in minute detail, or for any kind of [unintentional] authorial intrusion — a characteristic of Alice Munro’s writing, for instance — is something I eschew: it’s mawkish, and dated.)

My work also incorporates the reference codes of many different genres, including fable, fantasy, myth, memoir, epistolary, stream-of-consciousness, and magical, social and dirty realism. This is the beauty of realism: it does not restrict the writer to any particular genre; all are fair game, and genre may be manipulated to suit the writer’s purpose and style of telling.

The collapsing of the space/time continuum in fiction is another characteristic of realism that I wholly endorse. In my opinion, story has always embodied this characteristic, and it seems ironic that the term ‘virtual reality’ has only recently become a catch phrase, because narrative and story have always demonstrated the ability to supersede temporality and spatiality. Lotman writes that “in spite of all the differences between the substructures of the semiosphere, these substructures are organised into a general system of coordinates: on the temporal axis into past, present and future, on the spatial axis into internal space, external space and the boundary between them.” (Lotman, 2000:133) It could be postulated that perhaps it is only the advances in physics and the advent of computer technology that have spanned the last fifty years, that have provided modern man with the frames of reference to recognise this age-old characteristic of storytelling.

HUMANITY = MORALITY

To return to Wallace's work, perhaps the most valuable aspect of his legacy is his passionate sense of what constitutes morality, and how very lacking this characteristic is in much contemporary literature.

There is much in Wallace's essay *Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky* that reflects my own opinions on what makes a story truly great — an underlying humanism. He says, "... the fact that Dostoevsky can tell a juicy story isn't enough to make him great." If it were, he continues, many a commercially successful contemporary writer would fall into the same category. To paraphrase Wallace's argument, much contemporary literature fails in the following respects: bad characterisation, or, where excellent characterisation is present, the lack of a believable and interesting plot, or more importantly and tellingly, the glut of work produced by those writers among the academic avant-garde "who seem expert/interested in neither plot nor character, whose books' movement and appeal depend entirely on rarefied meta-aesthetic agendas." (Wallace, 2005:264).

What makes Dostoevsky's storytelling a worthy example, in Wallace's opinion, is that his characters are *alive* (Wallace's emphasis), not in the sense that they're "skilfully drawn", "successfully realized or developed or 'rounded'", "acting within plausible and morally compelling plots", but "because they dramatize the profoundest parts of all humans, the parts most conflicted, most serious — the ones with the most at stake. In addition, without ever ceasing to be 3D individuals, (his) characters manage to embody whole ideologies and philosophies of life ..." (ibid:264-265). (I'm certain that Wallace uses the word 'ideology' here in its purest sense — evidenced by his obsession with the purity of language — as representing 'a constructed system of meaning', rather than according to its more recent negative associations, with, for example, indoctrination or cultism.)

Wallace continues, "... Dostoevsky wrote fiction about the stuff that's really important ... identity, moral value, death, will, sexual vs. spiritual love, greed, freedom, obsession, reason, faith, suicide. And he did it without ever reducing his characters to mouthpieces or his books to tracts. His concern was always what it is to be a human being — that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and

principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal.” (ibid:265)

“The big thing that makes (him) invaluable for ... readers and writers is that he appears to possess degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we — here, today (Footnote: [maybe under our own type of Nihilist spell]) — cannot or do not permit ourselves.” He continues: “I think that any serious ... reader/writer will find himself driven to think hard about what exactly it is that makes many of the novelists of our own place and time look so thematically shallow and lightweight, so morally impoverished ...” (ibid:271)

Concluding with a reference to mankind’s current situation and an attack on post-modernism, he writes, “Part of the explanation for our own lit’s thematic poverty obviously includes our century and situation ... Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity. Such is the modernist legacy that we now presume as a matter of course that ‘serious’ literature will be aesthetically distanced from *real lived life* (italics added). Add to this the requirement of textual self-consciousness imposed by postmodernism (Footnote: [whatever that is]) and literary theory,” and it becomes only too obvious “how effete and aestheticized our best liberal instincts have become, how removed from what’s really important — motive, feeling, belief.” (ibid:271)

Interestingly, Wallace had a particular fondness for the short form; stories, articles, and essays represent his major output, yet his most well known novel, *Infinite Jest*, runs to 1000 pages. He perhaps felt, as I do, that the short story is a quick fix, “a short sharp journey” in Norman Bilbrough’s words (used during a creative writing workshop at Massey University in 2003), in the sense that it doesn’t require a lengthy commitment of time and energy — it is possible to respond to an event, an idea, a situation, a real life character, whatever the spark might be, relatively promptly and contemporaneously. Many short story writers are of a similar persuasion and motivate their choice of form thus.

Moreover, the nature of short fiction was profoundly understood by Wallace. In his discussion on the frustrations of trying to teach Kafka, he states: “the effect of ... short stories ... often feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long-stuck valve. It’s not for nothing that Kafka spoke of literature as ‘a hatchet in which we chop at the frozen seas inside us’. Nor is it an accident that the technical achievement of great short stories is often called *compression*...” (ibid:61).

My work is an example of storytelling that attempts to address ‘real lived life’ which embodies ‘whole ideologies’, and deals with ‘the stuff that’s really important’. I consider myself a moral writer (rather than a moralistic one), and my work is characterised by a humanism which incorporates, always, an ethical imperative. In my opinion, there is always hope — hope makes the unspeakable bearable, the impossible achievable. However uncompromisingly my short fiction might address contemporary themes of disappointment, frustration, powerlessness, confusion, and despair, it never fails to also uplift the reader in some tangible way, and its message is often tempered with humour or satire.

I would like to end this section with what Italo Calvino believes is asked of storytellers:

... that they guarantee the survival of what we call *human* in a world where everything appears inhuman; guarantee the survival of *human* discourse to console us for the loss of humanity in every other discourse and relationship. And what do we mean by *human*? Usually, whatever is temperamental, emotional, ingenuous, and not at all austere. It is very hard to find someone who believes in the austerity of literature, superior to and opposed to the false austerity of language that runs the world today. (Calvino, 1986:95)

APPROACH

In C. K. Stead’s excellent essay entitled *Narrativity, or the Birth of Story*, Stead also disputes Barthes’ doctrine of the death of the author, and by implication the reader (the “Common Reader”), and discusses what he considers should be an author’s considerations in the production of enduring literature. “The intrusion of the theorist critic in recent years, it seems to me, has been like an auto-immune reaction, the cells of the body of literature attacking and destroying themselves.” (Stead, 2000:91)

Stead goes on to discuss what he considers a valid approach to narrative and states, “... the writer has to make choices, and those choices are made intuitively, long before they become conscious and are rationalised.” (ibid:80) I have found this phenomenon to be close to my own experience — a writer’s work is a product of that individual’s inner being, their life philosophy, and orientation. “Each major work expresses as indelibly as fingerprints or DNA the presence and unique identity of its author.” (ibid:118)

Stead continues by listing and discussing his own four broad impulses — a need “to keep the writing at some distance from ... ‘conventional fiction’ (not to abandon it altogether but never to relax into it)”; a “love of narrative and narrative complexity”; to contribute to a “heightening of consciousness about the nature of language and reality”; and to “push the frame of fiction out wide; to represent not just individuals but a society ... at given moments in its history.” (ibid:80-81)

He also discusses innovation, and how necessary it is to follow Pound’s principle of “make it new”. But he qualifies this concept by explaining that innovation should never be the writer’s goal merely for its own sake; properly understood, innovation means that if the writer does not to some degree make the work new, then it is not authentic. “You are imitating art, not life. The desire is not, or shouldn’t be, to be avant-garde; the desire is to be truthful.” “The literary writer, as distinct from the merely professional one, goes on ahead up the trail, but not so far that he’s out of sight.” Paradoxically, tradition always lives on in the new work, but this is not in practice a contradiction, because, he says, “The tradition is a canon ... of works which have each in their way escaped from the merely conventional” (ibid:81-82). In my view, this is because literature in general, and story and narrative in particular, have always incorporated man’s exponentially more sophisticated reflection on his own journey, from primitivism, through the ages, to the present day. Stead illustrates this point by highlighting that the difference between a classic fairytale and a modern novel does not constitute a difference of subject matter so much as a difference in the style of the telling (as in the Kafka example provided above).

He also talks about shape and form and how integral these are to storytelling. He reminds us how E.M. Forster calls this ‘pattern’: “Whereas the story appeals to our curiosity and the plot to our intelligence, the pattern appeals to our aesthetic sense, it causes us to see the writing as a whole.” (ibid:84) He says, “... in fiction I want to be able to see what I’m writing as a single object ... rather than something linear running away into the distance.” And so, “From phrase to phrase, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, and so on through the larger structure, one is striving to achieve harmonies, dissonances, repetitions, recognitions ...” (ibid:81)

Speaking about Moravia's writing, he mentions the "economy and sharpness with which the scenes are presented, and the consequent symbolic potential, or ... the exemplary resonance, that seems to be released ..." (There is that word again: resonance.) "As one 'sees' visually one is made to 'see' intellectually — to understand — though not to 'understand' anything that could be properly or fully expressed *in any other way* (italics added)." (ibid:86) Stead also admires Günter Grass' ability to explore depth, saying, "Grass taught modern fiction how to elaborate without waste. He is the master of texture, of the 'turbulence of things as they are', of *circumlocution* (italics added)." (ibid:89)

In discussing Borges' work, Stead continues to elucidate that which makes great storytelling rise above the mediocre: "I had never had such a clear demonstration that it's not the material which makes fiction distinct, but intangible, unmeasurable inflexions, quirks of intelligence, turns of narratological sequence, tone ..." "Whatever the author may have learned from what has gone before ... the unique mark remains." (ibid:88-89)

Stead's reflections in this essay summarise much of what I too value as a worthy approach to writing, and whilst I would never place myself in the same category of expertise as the writers Stead has referenced in order to illustrate his points, I trust that something of the approach he has outlined is present in my own work.

IN TRANSIT

I'd like to share a passage from the Preface to Jenny Diski's book, *Stranger on a Train*, and discuss its implications for contemporary writers, and its relevance to my creative work. In this particular passage, Diski is writing about endings — on the surface the end of a real life journey or travel experience (the point of travel is, of course, usually its destination) — but at a deeper level, she's addressing the human experience of being a traveller through life: the endings, and therefore, new beginnings, that all journeys inevitably lead to, the story or stories that journeying engages us in, and the way in which writers immortalise stories through art, or rather, artifice.

There are two kinds of neat endings: the satisfying circle that ends where it began, and the straight line that ends in a point. Our life, we are inclined to think, is like the latter; the world is like the former. Artifice — art, if you must — very often inscribes the circle, taking the straight line to its desired conclusion: *the point* (italics added) becomes a metonymy for the completed circle. Artifice makes the circle the secret pattern beneath the straight line. Very gratifying that. It is as if our brains are tuned to that wavelength; we look for completion like we look for the definitive note at the end of a symphony. Yet, any ending always leaves you standing in the whistling vacancy of a storyless landscape. Any ending therefore exposes the impossible human paradox — the desire for completion juxtaposed against the fear of termination. (Diski, 2004:2)

The reason I was first attracted to this book and its subject matter was because it had been becoming increasingly clear to me that the collection of short stories I've been working on all share an underlying or overarching theme — the universal human experience of always being in transit as it were, from one place to another, from one situation to another, in which travel as a concept, or travelling as an activity, function as metaphors for the inevitable movement and change that each human life encompasses: the journey that each human being is constantly engaged in — a process that takes place on many different levels — internally, externally, through space, through time, and through the processing of experience, ideas, motivation, and emotion.

What Diski is addressing here is not only the nature of the world and our human experience of it, but also the way in which we construct the meaning we place on it, and how the art form in which we're engaged — in her and my case both, writing, specifically creative writing — are equally concerned with a journey that demands the processing of reality, the reorganisation of experience, the selection or even the omission of specific details and events, the reshaping of the mishmash of human life. Storytelling, through the practice of artifice, provides the vehicle through which it is possible to process and reorder reality and the human condition into a structured construct which culminates in a point, like the ending of any journey — a point which, as Diski has so eloquently explained, becomes a metonymy, or symbol, for the circle that embraces the whole.

So the journey of a life, all lives, and the travelling we engage in as writers to record something of that experience, may progress from A to B on a straight line as it were, incorporating a beginning, a middle and an end, in a linear, relational, logical fashion, but it also always encompasses a synthesis of the whole — the circle: and it is in the circle (the Buddhists' call it 'the red circle') that we enter universal territory, the domain of the collective unconscious — the intuitive, affective, symbolic, mythical, archetypal landscape of

meaning, of significance, which of course incorporates the wider yet always particular social, political and historical context. And because we always end up, in some sense, where we began, it's precisely this magical paradox that the writer or traveller is always confronted by — that the world and we who travel through it are at one and the same time, unchanged, yet ever changing; that beginnings and endings are open-ended; that our experience of reality is intimately personal, yet also comfortingly universal.

Diski's use of the word 'point' in this passage resonates for me on multiple levels of meaning. All my characters are engaged, at some level, in this process of moving from one set of life circumstances to another, from one state of mind to another. And each of them, to a greater or lesser extent, choose to, or are sometimes forced to, reflect upon their unique situation, consider where they're coming from and where they're headed, and, through this process, achieve some sort of revelation or resolution, or have one thrust upon them. Thus, each story has a 'point'; a point which functions as a metonymy for the whole.

This brings me to another aspect of the writing experience that I have reflected upon this past year that also very much dictates my style as a writer — the phenomenon of the layers of meaning that it is possible for the writer of crafted stories to encode through his manipulation of language, that I have discussed at length above. This is a phenomenon that each writer confronts every time he/she assaults the keyboard⁹, and is the foundation of my particular interest in the short story: the multi-connotative nature of fiction, made possible by the wonderful secret life of words.

I was recently required to write a proposal and motivation for my story *Ka Kite Bro* to be made into a short film. (See Appendix A for further reading if interested.) This exercise was extremely valuable in respect of the insights it afforded me. I came to realise that although *KKB* is a fairly simple story on the surface, about mixed-race teenaged twins who have a history of petty arson that is gradually escalating into criminal activity of a far more serious nature, it incorporates numerous themes (I was able to list about twenty-five), so the microcosm that is the world of the story — its context, setting, characters and events — incorporates the macrocosm of its subtext, which references the social, cultural, political and other ramifications of this story, as well as its mythical implications: the archetypal hero's journey, the ambiguities and power play of incestuous/co-dependent relationships, the

neglect of children (a la Hansel and Gretel) etc. The central protagonists, Kitty and Tae, are products of the neglect and abuse they have been subjected to throughout their young lives, yet they have nevertheless retained a sense of their ability to affect their own destiny, underscored by the symbolism of Maori myth. Through the practice of story-telling artifice, I have been able to infer through context, and embed within subtext, these larger universal themes which resonate far beyond the confines of the actual story, its plot, characters, narrative arc, and so on. This covert treatment of wider themes is characteristic of all my stories.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Thus for me, the process of story writing is an ongoing journey in which I attempt to explore what it means to be the product of a certain time and place and background. And the kinds of stories that interest me, the ones I hope to successfully write, are those that continue to resonate, precisely because they function on many levels. Above all, because of the worlds they describe, the realities they explore, and the journeys my characters and I, their creator, are engaged in; because they have a ‘point’ which references the personal and the unique which also functions as a metonymy for the semiotic whole of human experience; I believe they demonstrate my compelling *modus operandi* as a storyteller. As Diski so eloquently points out, what we all fear more than anything is to be left standing in the “whistling vacancy of a storyless landscape.” (ibid:2)

My process is similar to that described by Yann Martel (known for his Man Booker prize-winning novel, *Life of Pi*) as his own. At the beginning of his collection of short stories, *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, Martel describes in his author’s note his early development as a writer, which resulted in his forming the opinion that “the foundation of a story is an emotional foundation. If a story does not work emotionally, it does not work at all. The emotion in question is not the point; be it love, envy or apathy, so long as it is conveyed in a convincing manner, then the story will come alive. But a story must also stimulate the mind if it does not want to fade from memory. Intellect rooted in emotion, emotion structured by intellect — in other words, a *good idea* that *moves* — that was my

lofty aim.” He continues, “I got my inspiration from anywhere and everywhere. Books. The newspaper. Movies. Music. Daily Life. People I met. Memories and experience. And also from that mysterious creative ether whence ideas just popped into my head, unheralded. I put myself into a state of receptivity to stories.” (Martel, 2004:ix) My take on writing stories couldn’t have been better described.

In my late thirties, I completed my first short stories and began to feel that I had finally found my niche as a writer (I had written a lot of bad poetry prior!), and so began a more conscious process of learning and honing my craft, a process in which I am still very much engaged. The short story has always held a particular personal appeal, and some of my early influences were O’Henry, Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, H.E. Bates, W. Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene and Roald Dahl, as well as the classic masters – Poe, Tolstoy, Chekhov and De Maupassant, to name a few. In latter years, I have continued to read widely in the genre, and more recently have been particularly influenced by Flannery O’Connor, Truman Capote, Raymond Carver, Angela Carter, Elmore Leonard, Kate Atkinson, Ian McEwan, E. Annie Proulx and Tim Winton.

When I came to live in New Zealand twelve years ago, I discovered to my delight that the short narrative form is particularly popular in this country, and enjoyed discovering many of its major proponents (other than Mansfield, Frame and Cowley whom I had read before): Frank Sargeson, Maurice Shadbolt, Maurice Gee, Owen Marshall, Barry Crump, Vincent O’Sullivan, Fiona Kidman, Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera. I continue to explore more recent writers who regularly add themselves to the already extensive list. Some of my favourites are Bill Manhire, Fiona Farrell, Norman Bilbrough, John Cranna, Joe Bennett, Stephanie Johnson, James George, Carl Nixon, Damien Wilkins, Charlotte Grimshaw, Emily Perkins, Elizabeth Smither, Sarah Laing and Alice Tawhai.

As much as I am particularly fond of the short story, I have also always been and continue to be a voracious reader of the novel, both contemporary and classic, yet short fiction remains my preferred medium as a writer, affording me the creative licence to deal with multifarious topics, and so, I am able to explore in my subject matter diverse aspects of human experience, crystallising what I wish to express, over many drafts, into the space of a few pages. I also enjoy the freedom of expression and variety this form offers, in terms of

structure, voice, purpose, and genre. Short fiction allows me to present multiple points of view; use different registers; experiment with tenses; employ framing devices, flashbacks and flashforwards; and utilise the reference codes of diverse genres, which permits different treatments as well as a certain amount of genre-blending. Most importantly though, my goal is always to present situations and portray characters that fulfil Wood's requirement: the vitality of fiction is dependent upon "a larger, philosophical or metaphysical sense ... that a character's actions are profoundly important, that something profound is at stake ..." (Wood, 2008:98)

CONCLUSION

To borrow Dickens' great opening to the classic *Tale of Two Cities*, recent history and literary endeavour has seen "the best of times and the worst of times". For writers like myself, who eschew the derision and disillusion that characterises so much recent and contemporary fiction, it has meant a struggle towards the re-creation of a literary style that 'speaks' (as do all our inherited classic stories) from a place of simplicity and authenticity; that replaces cynicism, 'cleverness', and elitism with story. This approach does not preclude the necessity of addressing apposite themes; but neither does it favour brevity over levity. If literature teaches us what it is to be human, what remains for writers now is to put the humanity back into literature. This can only be achieved by returning always to the examples of great storytelling that have endured as lasting artefacts throughout the long story of human history, demonstrating for the contemporary writer how literature ultimately works, and where its value lies.

David Birch refers to Heidegger's philosophy as a guideline for thinking correctly about narrative: "what it means to be in a world is more important than the classification of the world", because language is not only about representing something, "It performs real actions in the world of beings." Therefore, "Language is ... a means of understanding what it means *to be*." Birch concludes, "Analysis sets out to understand the whole of a text from its detail, and the detail of a text from its whole. This is the hermeneutic circle." (Birch, 1996, pg. 5)

In closing, I would like to end with Michael Roemer's words:

Myth acknowledges the absolute power of the sacred without abdicating the role of the human, just as our contemporary stories confirm the commanding power of the community without invalidating the individual. The contradictions are left to stand. Though at story's end the opposites are briefly reconciled, we know that as soon as another story gets underway — and there is *always* another story — the gap between them is sure to reopen. Stories, like history, will not come to an end until *we* do — until the contradictions of being human are permanently *aufgehoben*. Those who proclaim that narrative is a vestige of an irrelevant past are very likely believers in a utopian future; in their understandable eagerness to advance the millennium, they claim for art what is not yet — and very likely never will be — possible in reality. (Roemer, 1995, pg. 123)

ENDNOTES

¹ “Primitive oral narrative, like the folk tale that has been handed down almost to the present day, is modelled on fixed structures, on ... prefabricated elements — elements, however, that allow an enormous number of combinations.” “... the operations of narrative, like those of mathematics, cannot differ all that much from one people to another, but what can be constructed on the basis of these elementary processes can present unlimited combinations, permutations, and transformations.” (Calvino, 1986:4-6)

² “So to look into literature for models, for comment on good and bad behaviour, for instruction, is nothing new: we have always done it. From the animal fables that are as old as we are able to imagine, and the parables of the Bible; from sagas and epics, from the songs of troubadours and trouvères, and all the way to our most characteristic form, the novel, we have used stories and storytelling.” (Lessing, 2004:286)

³ Havel said writing ought to have “a live, penetrative relationship with the social reality of its country and its time and that it attains its ‘timeless’ and ‘universal’ understanding through its concrete knowledge of its place and time”. (Tighe, 2005:28-29)

⁴ Jameson has provided a useful schematic, in which he divides levels of meaning and interpretation into a hierarchy. Level 1 is literal, Level 2 allegorical, Level 3 moral, and Level 4 anagogical. (Jameson, 1996:31)

⁵ “Thus art seems to be a way of interconnecting messages in order to produce a text in which: (a) *many* messages, on different levels and planes of the discourse, are *ambiguously* organised; (b) these ambiguities are not realised at random but follow a *precise design*.” (Eco, 1979: 271)

⁶ “In the end, the spirit of postmodernism is a spirit of rejection, and this is an inadequate basis on which to build new systems of learning. We must admit the limits of modernism while at the same time we salvage what is best and most promising—including the methods of the exact sciences and the analytical tools forged by philosophers since the time of Descartes. We must reject the tendency in postmodern thought to embrace relativism by reducing values to valuation, by denying the notion of greatness, and by paying excessive attention to personal perspectives.” (Curtler, 1997:167)

⁷ “In considering the names that might possibly be used to designate the new era following “postmodernism”, one finds that the prefix “trans” stands out in a special way. The last third of the 20th century developed under the sign of “post” which signalled the demise of such concepts of modernity as “truth” and “objectivity”, “soul” and “subjectivity”, “utopia” and “ideality”, “primary origin” and “originality”, “sincerity” and “sentimentality”. All of these concepts are now being reborn in the form of “trans-subjectivity”, “trans-utopianism”, “trans-originality”, ‘trans-lyricism”, “trans-sentimentality” etc.” (Epstein, 2008)

⁸ “The emergence of something called Metafiction in the American 60’s was hailed by academic critics as a radical aesthetic, a whole new literary form, literature unshackled from the cultural cinctures of mimetic narrative and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness.” But “Metafiction ... was really nothing more than ... (an) expansion of its own theoretical nemesis, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing it.” (Wallace, 2008) And “Metafiction has always existed, but was never so fetishised as it was by postmodernism.” (Kirby, 2008)

⁹ In his discussion on the process of fiction writing, Calvino explains that what happens is “the person ‘I’, whether explicit or implicit, splits into a number of different figures: into an ‘I’ who is writing and an ‘I’ who is written, into an empirical ‘I’ who looks over the shoulder of the ‘I’ who is writing and into a mythical ‘I’ who serves at the model for the ‘I’ who is written. The ‘I’ of the author is dissolved in the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exits within the very act of writing: it is the product and the instrument of the writing process.” (Calvino, 1986:15)

REFERENCES

- Birch, D. (1996). *Language, literature and critical practice*. (4th Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Caesar, M. (1999). *Umberto Eco: Philosophy, semiotics and the work of fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Calvino, I. (1986). *The uses of literature*. (3rd Ed.). Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Curtler, H. M. (1997). *Rediscovering values: coming to terms with postmodernism*. New York and London: M E Sharpe.
- Diski, J. (2004). *Stranger on a train*. London: Virago.
- Eco, U. (2000). *Kant and the platypus: essays on language and cognition*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company.
- Eco, U. (1994). *The limits of interpretation*. (1st Midland Book edition.). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Eco, U. (1979). *A theory of semiotics*. (1st Midland Book edition). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Epstein, M. (2008, November 16th). *Post-postmodernism*. Retrieved December 7th, 2008, from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-Postmodernism>
- Hall, O. (1989). *The art & craft of novel writing*. Cincinnati: Story Press.
- Jameson, F. (1996). *The political unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act*. (5th Ed.) London: Routledge.
- Kermode, F. (1975). Objects, jokes, and art. in (D. Lodge, Ed.) *20th Century literary criticism* (2nd ed.). London: Longman Group limited.
- Kirby, A. (2008, Sep/Oct). *The death of postmodernism and beyond*. Retrieved December 7th, 2008, from Philosophy Now: <http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/58kirby.htm>
- Lessing, D. (2004). *Time bites*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Lotman, Y. M. (2000). *Universe of the mind: a semiotic theory of culture*. (1st US paperback printing.). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Martel, Y. (2004). *The facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Nunberg, G. (Ed.). (1996). *The future of the book*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Radford, G. P. (2003). *On Eco*. Various: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Roemer, M. (1995). *Telling stories: postmodernism and the invalidation of traditional narrative*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Stead, C. (2000). *The writer at work*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.

Tighe, C. (2005). *Writing and responsibility*. London and New York: Routledge.

Vidal, G. (2007). *Selected essays*. London: Abacus.

Wallace, D. F. (2005). *Consider the lobster and other essays*. (1st paperback edition.). London: Abacus.

Wallace, D. F. (2008, October 22nd). *David Foster Wallace*. Retrieved December 7th, 2008, from Wikiquote: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/David_Foster_Wallace

Wood, J. (2008). *How fiction works*. London: Jonathan Cape.

APPENDIX A

EXTRACT FROM SHORT FILM PROPOSAL FOR *KA KITE BRO*

By J C L Bronkhorst

INTRODUCTION

Ka Kite Bro is a contemporary New Zealand story that deals with errant youth behaviour and explores some of its possible causes and consequences. A human drama of the social realism genre, the story is interspersed with elements of pathos, humour, suspense, and irony. The story centres around two main characters, sixteen year-old twins, who have a history of petty arson that is gradually escalating into criminal activity of a far more serious nature. This narrative unfolds against the backdrop of small town, semi-rural New Zealand, where people's lives are intimately interconnected, and survival is often dependent upon whom you know and the lengths you are prepared to go to in order to shape your own destiny.

BACKGROUND

In late 2003, I read a newspaper article about teenaged siblings in the South Island who had gone on a pyromaniacal rampage in their local district, near Christchurch, and had subsequently been apprehended by the Police. The article discussed at length the randomness of the pair's arson targets, their apparent lack of motivation for the crimes, and their steadfast refusal to co-operate with the police investigation.

This story made a deep impact on me and I started thinking about the reasons why young people are often attracted to this type of destructive and attention-seeking behaviour. I was also intrigued by the collusion of the siblings and their pact of silence, and couldn't help wondering what previous joint trauma the young pair might have been subjected to that may have resulted in their behaviour and their subsequent imperviousness under questioning.

As often happens in the creative process, a number of disparate elements started to meld together over a period of time, and the background for a possible fictional story began incubating in my mind. Characters and plot started to evolve and take on a life of their own, and during this time, I undertook research into the psychology of errant youth behaviour, its possible underlying causes, and the way in which the justice system deals with youth crime in New Zealand.

But the story still lacked something vitally important: a setting. It was only in 2005 when I was working in Wellsford, that it suddenly dawned upon me one day that I had at last found the perfect location. And so, the story finally gelled into a cohesive whole and was committed to paper...

SYNOPSIS

Sixteen year-old un-identical twins, a boy and a girl, who nearly died in a house fire as toddlers, have grown up in a culture of poverty and neglect in the Far North, with a single mother who has gang connections and a history of drug and alcohol abuse. Since the death of their mother and uncle in a second house fire when they were nine years old, the twins have been very much left to fend for themselves. Throughout their lives however has been the incidental and intermittent, yet loving and caring influence, of their 'Aunty' Vai; not a blood relation and also someone of limited means and resources, but the one person who has given the twins a glimpse of what a more stable family life might mean to them.

Having learned at a very young age that fire, although traumatic and life threatening, somehow miraculously seemed to result in their rescue from an intolerable situation, they have resorted to using its 'transforming' power on an ever-increasing scale whenever a new trauma threatens their continued survival and togetherness. Their absent father is a firefighter (so they've been told as young children) and they have subliminally come to connect the setting of fires and other more sophisticated forms of arson with his return. Their father is, in their eyes, the archetypal 'hero/rescuer'.

The structure of the story has been specifically designed to slowly reveal all the above information, as well as some surprising twists and turns not mentioned here, through juxtaposition between the present and the past using the 'slow-burning long fuse' treatment.

The story opens with a present day action scene, then switches alternatively between the past and the present until events reach a denouement in the last scene. Running parallel to the main story (in the film, not in the original short story) is a back-story that crosses over the main plot with its own climax and denouement. It deals with the twins' parents and hints at why they parted in the first place, leaving the mother to bring up the twins alone, the difficulties of which have propelled both her and her children towards their own destinies.

The story opens as the twins are committing their most serious crime of arson to date: the blowing up of the semi-derelict Wellsford Railway Station, only in use nowadays as a cargo depot to service the local timber and farming industries. The twins are now on the run from the law and plan their escape. The next scene cuts to a flashback of their circumstances at age nine and reveals some of the hardships of their situation at the time, whilst highlighting certain aspects of their character development and mutual dependency at that age. The central scene of the story returns us to the present, to the Wellsford Police Station. Police investigators are discussing the case, and it is in this scene that much background information about the twins and their lives to date is revealed. Another flashback takes us back to the house fire the twins survived as toddlers, from which they were co-incidentally rescued by their firefighter father. The final scene returns to the present and the denouement: the twins have now been apprehended by the Police, and are appearing for sentencing in the Youth Court, North Auckland.

It is evident throughout the story that the twins are very attached to each other as co-dependents and function as a strong, if dysfunctional, nuclear family unit. However, it is also clear from the start that the girl is the more resourceful of the pair, as it is she who does most of the scheming and planning for their acts of arson; her twin brother is merely the pawn she uses to execute her plans. Yet it gradually becomes evident that her psychological

modus operandi is her deep familial love for her sibling, once physically weaker and always less intellectually adept. Her underlying subconscious mission is to provide her brother with the parental nurturing he has never received, and to inspire him with the strength, hope, and skills that might ensure his continued survival; traits that she has somehow discovered within herself despite the fact she has suffered the same neglect, and possibly even more damaging kinds of abuse, than he. This dichotomy in her psychology makes for an extremely compelling character: at the same time hard, defiant, cunning and delinquent, yet also compassionate and resourceful, with a burning vision of redemption that inspires her brother. The boy twin is also an interesting character: physically strong yet emotionally weak, outwardly macho yet inwardly stuck in a permanent state of arrested development – until the final scene.

The back-story deals with the twins parents, as stated above. As young adults, they worked together as partners in a circus act: she as an erotic dancer, he as a fire-breather. During one of their shows, something goes horribly wrong: he ends up burning her by accident, this ultimately being the cause of the ending of their relationship. He returns to the profession of fire fighting to assuage his guilt, and she, discovering that she is pregnant, forges ahead with her life as the single parent of their twin children.

THEMATIC EXPLORATION

Many topical and contemporary themes are alluded to in this story. Although a typically New Zealand story in many respects, it incorporates universal themes, particularly in the sense that it is about people, their individual stories, and their modus operandi. Everyone has a 'story' which is unique, yet grounded in their personal circumstances and social, cultural and political context. *Ka Kite Bro* is about how people deal with the stuff life throws at them in order best to survive, as well as the nature of the bonds that are forged with others in order to do so, and the hopes and ideals that might provide the courage to survive difficult circumstances. Various aspects of the universality, topicality and relevance of this story are detailed in the list below:

- An exploration of some of the possible underlying causes of certain types of errant youth behaviour and its consequences.
- Lack of effective parenting and how it impacts upon the next generation.
- Cultural and generational conditioning and inheritance.
- Child abuse and neglect.
- The impact of poverty on families and its results.
- The impact of drug and alcohol abuse on families.
- Broken families and the damage it does to children.
- The influence of the primary caregiver on the quality of life of children.
- Absent parents and the myth of the hero/heroine who will return to 'save' the children perpetuated by young people who are being raised by single parents and/or find themselves in difficult situations.
- Lack of one parent's influence on a child's upbringing and its results.
- The emotional co-dependency and collusion that grows between individuals in difficult circumstances.
- How children and young people sometimes fall through the supposed safety net of the social services (CYFS).
- The role of the Police and Youth Court in rehabilitating errant youth in New Zealand.
- The cross-cultural nature and diverse genetic inheritance of the New Zealand population.
- Identity issues for people of mixed race.
- The prominence of the existent drug culture in New Zealand and its effects upon the population.
- The influence of gang culture and its associated *modus operandi* on New Zealand youth and the New Zealand population in general.
- Small town New Zealand syndrome: lack of resources, falling away of essential services (e.g. the railways), lack of jobs and opportunities etc.
- The relatively high incidence of house fires and related deaths and injuries in New Zealand and the raising of public awareness of the dangers of smoking, cooking, and heating, combined with lack of vigilance.

- Fire as a symbol and motif of power and transformation (Ref for example Biblical connotations such as *“the refining fire of God’s wrath”* (Malachi 3:2) and *“When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you.”* (Isaiah 43:2) etc.)
- Elements of the Maori creation myth used as a metaphor for having the power to affect or change one’s destiny.
- Symbolism inherent in the use of the metaphor of the Maori cloak of feathers (*korowai*): *mana*, protection, adulthood, leadership, resourcefulness etc.

(Please note: This is not an exhaustive list and the themes are not rated in any particular order of importance.)

⁹ In his discussion on the process of fiction writing, Calvino explains that what happens is “the person ‘I’, whether explicit or implicit, splits into a number of different figures: into an ‘I’ who is writing and an ‘I’ who is written, into an empirical ‘I’ who looks over the shoulder of the ‘I’ who is writing and into a mythical ‘I’ who serves at the model for the ‘I’ who is written. The ‘I’ of the author is dissolve din the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exits within the very act of writing: it is the product and the instrument of the writing process.” (Calvino, 1986:15)

IN TRANSIT

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

By

J C L Bronkhorst

©2009

CONTENTS

UNDER THE POHUTUKAWA TREE	1
DEAD BALL ZONE	13
GOLDEN GIRL	27
JEANNIE, JEROME, THE PUBLICAN AND POPE JOHN PAUL TOO	35
KA KITE BRO	44
TERROR AND SELF-LOATHING IN TE ATATU	53
LOVE ME TENDER	64
MEHICO	71
QUEEN OF THE NIGHT	76
ASIAN TRIPTYCH	91
TOO MUCH OF NOTHING	96
THE JOURNEY	110
THE APPLE OF MY EYE	119
SKULDUGGERY (UNFINISHED)	122

Under the PohutukawaTree

Although I am white — Pākehā — I never knew my family, or any other tribe, other than Ngā Puhi. Left for dead on the steep tangled slopes of Tama Hunga, where Ngāti Whātua had attacked our small group of settlers travelling overland, I would have perished there, on the slopes of the mountain where I fell from my mother's arms as she fled, screaming, from her attackers — amongst the fern fronds, deep in the undergrowth of the forest wild — were it not for Old Marama who rescued me later that fateful day, whilst grubbing for huhu under the rotting bark of ancient fallen trees. Old Marama found me, and picked me up, cleaving me to herself like some special kind of treasure; and so, the only life I have ever known continued...

I did not learn the significance of these events until I was much older, or how they were to play a part in my future. Moreover, from whence my own people had come, and bound for where, who they were, and how many were close family — these were mysteries I would never discover, for I was but an infant when Marama rescued me. Had she not found me there, where I lay curled like a shining shell on a bed of fern fronds, wet with dew in a shaft of moonlight, I would have joined the others of my kind lying dead nearby; for it was mid-winter

— Matariki — and the days were short and dark, the nights long and bitter, and the cold wet breath of death was close.

And so, my journey towards my destiny continued once more in the arms of my saviour, as she hurried back towards the coast carrying the news of this latest Ngāti Whātua attack to her own people. Supported by her hip, growing warm again, and dry, under the shelter of her whakatipu, my life continued as she made her careful way back down the steep bush-clad slopes that I had travelled with my birth family only a few hours earlier. And it seemed to me, in my innocent infancy, as if a tall tree had gathered me up in its branches, for I had never laid eyes on a dark-skinned person before. And, as I clung to its rough trunk, its dense fibrous foliage folded all around me, it was as if this tall strong tree carried me out of that forest of darkness and horror and death, into the only future I would ever know.

When Marama reached the foothills, she made her way by the light of the moon to a jade river's edge, where she pulled a small waka from the undergrowth on its banks. Stowing me in its hull, she allowed the current to drag us downstream to a magical place where the land met the sea; , the place that unbeknown to me was to become my eternal home; where her people lived on the shores of the selfsame ocean from whence my own had come.

Because Marama was childless, the colour of my skin didn't concern her; she saw only that I was human and alive —a wonder of sorts — and that was enough for her. She had no milk for me in her sagging hollow breasts; they had long since dried up, even though she had many times suckled the babies of other Ngā Puhi women, those who had too many to feed and care for. So she nourished me with slippery soft huhu that she pushed down my throat, as a tui would feed its young, sweetened with wild honey bee nectar, that I would suck with great gusto from her fingers. She carried these life-saving victuals in a little sack made of cured stingray skin that hung from her waistband by a thong, alongside the tools she used to prize molluscs from their shells, and dig for kumara. As I grew, she pressed morsels of soft, raw fish into my mouth that she had softened in hers — pipi and kina too, and when my teeth began to develop, she gave me strips of dried muru to chew on to ease the pain. But for her, I might

never have lived the life I have; I probably wouldn't have lived at all. So, she was, for me, the light of the world; the light that shone in my eyes for many years to come.

And so, in the arms of Old Marama, I grew into childhood, and learned the ways of Ngā Puhī. She called me Atarau — meaning moonlight, moonbeam — and the love she gave me shone through me like her own light, even though I was as different from her as a feather is from a stone. And the people of her tribe revered me as a treasure, as she did, — for my skin that shone pale and iridescent like the pearly inside of an oyster shell, for my white frothy hair that seemed to them like the flotsam and jetsam that rode the waves of the ocean, and for my olive-greeneyes that glistened like precious polished pounamu.

In spring and summer, our whanau roamed the seashore and indented bays Te Kāwau harvesting kai moana, and we slept under the shelter of giant pohutukawa, where the beach fringed the bush. We tamariki spent many hours playing in the clear blue shallows of the sandspit, where three rivers flowing from the foothills of Tama Hunga converged to meet the sea, as stingray as large as ourselves glided silently past beneath us, and schools of small fish nibbled at our fingers and toes, causing us to laugh with delight. The tepid tranquil waters of the tidal estuary washed the grime and stiffness of winter from our bodies and our hair, its saltiness healing any sores or sickness that afflicted us, and so, we little ones grew strong in the sun, on the bounty of the ocean. The young men of our tribe paddled the deeper channels of the natural harbour spearing the small spotted shark – muru – that were so plentiful at the time of the full moon of the summer solstice, and returned to shore laden with huge catches, which the women gutted, filleted, and prepared for drying, stringing them out on manuka poles across the sand. The sharp bitter smell of muru meat drying in the sun was the smell of summer; the scent that guided our warriors home from occasional regional scouting trips inland or up and down the coastline. And it was the scent that stayed with us through the long, unforgiving winters of our lives, when the dried meat of the muru was our sustenance, for often there was no other.

When the sun moved higher in the sky towards its zenith, Marama would call me away from the other little ones, and take me with her into the cool shade of the bush, for she saw how my pale skin grew red and sore in the heat of the day, and she was ever afraid that the sun would take her moonbeam from her. There, in the dappled shade of the shelter of the forest canopy, she would bathe me in deep green pools, and teach me the names and uses of the plants of the forest that she foraged for. And in the gloom of green, the little faeries that danced on fields of velvety moss — the tiny colourful orchids of the bush — became my playmates, and the whistles and calls of birdsong, my waiata.

In the evenings, we would return to our whanau on the beach, where we prepared for sleep by digging hollows in the warm sand to nestle into; and as we lay there in the silence of the brilliant shining night, utterly content, replete on a diet of kai moana, the kaumatua — the old ones — would speak of the language of the stars and the story of all creation, until the lulling of the sea became our lullaby, and the smoke from the meriwana pipes of our elders the stuff of our dreams.

Soon enough, the long, lazy, carefree days of summer would pass, and the waters of the bay would grow colder, greyer, as the season of cool mists came down upon us. When Rehua, the great red star, began to move northwards across the night sky, our whanau would begin preparing to move to higher ground, and the shelter of the bush. Thus, we spent the shortening days preparing for the coming dark of the year, repairing our winter camp of raupo huts under the shelter of the great, ancient, forest trees, laying in stocks of dry manuka for firewood, and planting kumara and taro in the clearings. At the darkening time of the year, we lived on a diet of kiwi and kereru, using the feathers we pulled from the hot cooked bird-flesh to waterproof our winter cloaks, and feather our beds of fern and bracken. And when winter set in, and the cold grip of frost held the earth fast, a hoary chill falling down upon the land from the air, rain became the subject of our instruction; the sound and feel of rain in all its modes of being — spitting, lashing, trickling, splashing, blinding, falling, running — keeping us close to each other as we hugged the smoky fires in our shelters, all through the short days and long nights of the dark of the year.

Thus, blue and green were the colours of my childhood; the paua shades of sea and sky, the greenstone gradations of bush and forest. And always, the ever-changing mystery of the blue-green riverine waterways that crisscrossed our territory, flowing endlessly to the sea that welcomed them, collecting every drop of rain that fell, reflecting, always, the colour and mood of the bush that grew alongside them. And as I grew, through the endless changing seasons of our lives, the long history of my tribe, the story of her origins, and the names of her enemies became mine. So too, in time, I came to understand the significance of the events surrounding the death of my birth family. All too soon, as the end of my childhood drew near, the time was to come when my fate was to twist and turn again; when I was to learn that the colour of the blood of man was the same bright crimson as the pohutukawa flowers that fell to the water in full bloom, to be washed out to sea on the endless tides of the ocean. And it was to be coloured by the growing understanding that water washes away all things; life, laughter, love, flowers, fairies, succour, safety. Tears. And blood.

In the year of my birth, 1821, Ngā Puhi from the north, including Marama's own iwi, had conquered Ngāti Whātua at Te Ikaa a Ranganui under the leadership of Hongi Hika, and driven them and their various sub-tribes from their ancestral homelands. Ngā Puhi had settled the area henceforth, coming to dominate the region as far south as Pūhoi, controlling access to the plentiful fishing grounds of Te Kawau Bay, and occupying the offshore islands, defending the region from attack by sea. But small groups of marauding Ngāti Whātua warriors had continued to raid the area, particularly from hideouts and strongholds to the west, slaughtering the unwary for muskets and other supplies with which to sustain themselves, in order to further their land battle against Ngā Puhi's conquest of their territory. This is how my birth family had come to perish. They had been white settlers — missionaries perhaps, or gum diggers, or even escaped convicts from Botany Bay — I would never know; it had been their sad misfortune to have been travelling overland at this time, and to have crossed the path of Ngāti Whātua. But these random attacks by Ngāti Whātua were to grow fewer and fewer as our Ngā Puhi warriors continued to drive them further south, and so my tribe had entered a time of

peace and plenty as I grew to adulthood under the shadow of Tama Hunga, on the shores of Te Kawau Bay.

When I came of age, Marama gifted me the taonga she had taken from my dead mother's neck, the night she had found me lying near the bodies of my own kind. She had kept it hidden all these years, wrapped in a little parcel of flax that she'd buried at the base of a pohutukawa tree. Now it became clear to me why Marama had often taken me to this tree, at the headland where the harbour met the sea, telling me that it was my special tree, and would always be. Even though she had been my mother since infancy, there had been no afterbirth to bury which was the custom when a woman birthed her own child, and so, she had buried my mother's taonga there instead, on the advice of the elders of our tribe.

Hard and cold to the touch, not carved from shell or bone or stone but from some foreign substance unknown to us, and of a strange colour, like the shine of the sun if you look directly at it, only deeper, brighter; it was strange and ugly, and didn't look like anyone else's, and it reminded me of my otherness, making me feel uneasy. But my people pressed around me, comforting me, saying that the gods had sent me to them to bring them the magic of the white man, and that the magic of the white man had held them safe; that I, Atarau, was tapairu for Marama — the first born female of a high-ranking family — and that from this day forward, I should wear the taonga my birth mother had bequeathed me with great pride, knowing that I had a special destiny.

I did my whanau's bidding, but from the moment the taonga touched my skin and was fastened around my neck, for the first time in my life foreboding became my constant companion. I fell ill with a clammy fever; my head felt fuzzy, there was a constant gnawing pain in my puku, and a weakness and weariness in my limbs. Soon I began to bleed from between my legs, and it felt as if my very life force was draining away from me. I couldn't leave my pallet of fern fronds, and lay for many days and nights under the dark forest canopy with Marama weeping over me, saying, "Mauri tu, mauri ora, mauri noho, mauri mate — When we stand up and strive the desire to live is strong, when we give up or lie down we are more prone to sickness and death." But my head was full of the whispers of my own dead; like ghosts in the

trees, they were near, calling to me endlessly, and I was lost, helpless, the fear of the unknown darkening my world like an eclipse of the sun.

One day, the voices of my flesh-and-blood dead were drowned out by the louder and more insistent calls and shouts of my whanau, as they ran to and fro in a state of panic, preparing to flee to the protection of the fortified pa, Pukematekeo, at the top of Tama Hunga. The news had reached them that Ngāti Whātua was returning with massive reinforcements from other iwi in the south, to win their land back.

They came from the south and the west, from the plains and from the sea. They came to reclaim their ancestral territory. And I knew in my heart that they came for me. Their oars cut the water in huge swathes of foam, and their feet trampled the bush towards our stronghold from every direction. Like I had once seen the muru do, their large decorated war waka taua beached themselves on our shores in their hundreds. And the birds of the forest announced their arrival, screaming deafeningly in the forest canopy overhead, as they swarmed ashore like ants and came down upon us, numbering in their hundreds, killing and plundering everything in their path, leaving a wake of destruction behind them.

The warriors who hacked Marama to death as she tried in vain to protect me had sharpened teeth and short hard third legs between their thighs that tore at my body and pierced me all over. Battered, bruised and bleeding, they threw what was left of me into a waka, and took me to Te Kawau Island. That whole day long I hung from a stake that looked to me just like my mother's taonga — two straight branches lashed together in the middle — that they had planted like a tree in the sand, while they built a great fire. And when they took me down at sunset, they threw me into a cooking pot with some of the other notable members of my tribe, "To kill the spirit of the white witch from the north; to quell her white man's magic," they said. "And to make the meat sweet."

When my spirit left my body, as Marama had told me it would, I travelled to Cape Reinga, to the place of Hine Nui Te Po, Great Lady of the Crossing, Gate Keeper of the Longest Night, seeking entrance to the spirit world on my journey home at last. As she came to

welcome me, her seaweed hair flowed in waves behind her, and her red eyes glittered, reminding me of my own pohutukawa tree; yet her sharp barracuda teeth and her nails that grew long and twisted, to the ends of the earth, were like those of the men who had killed me.

“Where do you come from?” she asked. I recounted my tribe’s history, my life with them on the shores of Te Kawau Bay, and our recent bloody demise.

“And where are you going?” she continued, testing me. “Where is the place of your ancestral origins?” But to these questions I had no answers, for I had no known home.

“Then you must return to whence you came, until you figure out where your home is,” she said.

And so, having no choice, no direction home, my spirit returned to the shores of Te Kawau, where I have lived to this day, close to where my bones lie still, deep in the sand at Bostaquet Bay.

When I first came back to the sandspit, only a remnant of my tribe remained, and Ngāti Whātua dominated the region once more. I reincarnated myself, and tried to live again as before, joining a whanau at Mahu Rangi. Soon strange vessels came from the sea, like floating meeting-houses, and white people started coming ashore. Ngāti Whātua was brokering land deals with the English, and these newcomers trekked inland, up the river, with many possessions, and animals that I had never seen before; horses, oxen, cows, sheep and goats, where they settled on land they had ‘purchased’. What this meant, I did not understand. I saw them take shiny round pieces of rock from their pockets, so like the colour of my taonga, and hand it to others who looked pleased, satisfied. Then, these new settlers began to fell the great trees of the forest, and build houses. And while the women arranged the strange things they unpacked from their many wooden boxes in their new houses, the men floated the best kauri logs down the river, to the waiting houses-on-water that would carry them away.

The dark people now lived differently, covering their skin with white man’s clothing and adopting the white man’s ways, no longer lords of their own domain. Illness spread among them; strange diseases that they had never before been subjected to, and their quality of life suffered. The men left their whanau to fend for themselves and went to work for the white

man, mining copper on Kawau Island, and stripping the forests bare of every tall tree to build boats. Soon the land was laid waste of every green and growing thing, and the white people began to plant their own strange crops in the clearings. It is difficult to skin kumara when your fingers are cramped and curled with cold, and you are dying of starvation. I called the young boys to help me but they laughed and said, “No, old lady, you are a witch; a white witch from the north. We do no work for witches.” And so, I became an outsider, unwanted, uncared for, the butt of their cruel jokes. I went to work for a white family who had started farming here, at a place called Warkworth, and on Sundays, I accompanied them to a building high above Mahu Rangi that they called ‘church’. There I saw and recognised, for the first time, the symbol of my birth mother’s taonga; others like it hung from the neck of the man in black robes who spoke to them, the ‘priest’, and from many of the men and women gathered there. Thus, I came to dedicate myself to this new religion, because I hoped that perhaps in this way, I’d gain knowledge of my own people at last. But when I approached the preacher, asking for his help, he told me I was unclean, a heathen sinner who had lived among the natives, and that I would never be accepted into the Christian Kingdom of Heaven.

Time passed, and I reincarnated myself again and again, living other lives, seeking always the answer to my dilemma, trying to find the key to my destiny, searching for my way home. But at every passing, Hine Nui Te Po turned me away once more from the Gate to the Spirit World, sending me back, always, to Te Kawau Bay. Many years passed; many changes came upon the land; and I was witness to them all. Eventually, when I had returned for perhaps the fifth or sixth time to Cape Reinga, Hine Nui Te Po said:

“You have done much travelling, Atarau; it is perhaps best to forego your quest, for the time has come for you to reconcile yourself to your fate. From this day forward, you will live forever as I do, as tipua — a being who is only at home in the place that exists between worlds; the place of the shape shifters, the nether region that lies between the world of the living and that of the dead. This is a special honour, a mark of your unique destiny. I am granting you the magical powers of kai ure: you will be a light in the darkness to travelling humans who have left

their birthplace far behind, offering them ritual protection and blessings, setting them free from their memories, gifting them their new home here in Aotearoa.”

She sent me back to Te Kawau Bay as a great white mythical seabird, for I had well learned all the ways of flying, she said. My immortal task would be to fly swiftly to the help of humans in need, and to meet them in their dreams, in order to offer them comfort and hope.

High above Sandspit Harbour, there is a ridge where I often stop for a moment to survey my territory. Herons roost here in a row of beech trees that borders a vineyard which slopes away to the northwest, down into the evergreen Matakana valley. In the distance beyond rises the densely forested sprawling torso, hunched shoulders and radar-crowned head of my dwelling place, Tama Hunga: the mountain that rears up like a shaggy beast from the sea to shake itself regularly and violently free of the water that rains plentifully down upon this verdant landscape. In the other direction, to the east, undulating pasture-covered hills fall away sharply through bush-tangled gullies down to the water, where rivers and streams converge to meet the ocean beyond in an eternal dance of tidal advance and retreat. And everywhere the eye roams — as if superimposed upon this natural canvas — signs of the white man’s world: houses, barns, fences, livestock, orchards, and an arterial tangle of roads that link the clustering townships where people’s paths cross daily for business or pleasure. And out on the ever-moving water of this deeply embayed and indented shoreline, all kinds of sea vessel, sufficient to thrill every kind of sea-dog.

Whenever I pause here while passing by, the scene before my eyes presents itself in subtly different ways, depending on the season, or the time of day. In spring, fresh viridescent leaves tap against each other in the salt-laden breeze, sounding out the whisper of a new song. Later in the season, around Christmastime, the sweet-sour smell of silage curing in paddocks permeates the air with the pleasure of a good harvest, and the promise of sufficient winter feed. Along the shoreline, the carmine crowns of prolific Pohutukawa shade picnicking families and friends, whose summer playground is shared alike by crake, bittern, shelduck, teal, oystercatcher, all kinds of gull, and increasingly, the endangered dotterel. In-shore, in stands of native bush, as well as in cultivated gardens, tui, fantail and wood pigeon entertain with song

and dance, as people fire up their barbeques, whilst pukeko foraging along the roadsides nod and bow to passersby. Later in the year, as Easter approaches, the extended, shining days of late summer give way, suddenly, if grudgingly, to early morning mists, and the quickening dark of autumn evenings, and the foetid smell of ripe grapes still hanging on the vines awaiting harvest drifts sulphurous-like up the valley to accost the senses. And as the winter solstice rolls around, bringing in the dark of the year, the earthy scents of wet clay underfoot, manuka wood smoke and coffee on the brew combine to draw people indoors, to share the comforts of hearth and home in the companionship of those whose lives intersect with theirs.

Ten years ago, when I first returned to this place from Cape Reinga as tipua, a mother and her three young children had travelled to Aotearoa, compelled by tragic circumstances to start over again, far from the continent of their birth and heritage, on the antipodean side of the world, the opposite side of reality. And I, Atarua, was close to them and could see how far they'd travelled. And so, I started to carry out the work that Hine Nui Te Po had assigned to me. This family had come from Johannesburg; that sprawling, industrial, pulsing giant of a city, situated on the high dry savannah of south-central Africa, where mountains are mine dumps, and cold steel and concrete substitute for grass and trees; where the acid rain that falls from smoke-filled skies quickly dissipates in the polluted gutters and pot-holed streets of shame; where what needs rescuing are not hedgehogs crossing the road, or fledglings that have fallen from their nests, but ragged street children who sniff glue to dull the pain and trauma of their daily lives. From this, they travelled to this gentle green place, where people know your name, life is lived on the human scale, and day-to-day survival is not a game of Russian roulette.

But it wasn't easy for them; they had some hard times and difficult adjustments to make, memories to rise above, and new experiences to digest. It took them some time to settle and to feel at home here. Yet, knowing that they were not alone, that others from all over the world had made the migration to Aotearoa before them and would continue to do so after them rendered the journey less daunting; more bearable. But the boy continued to suffer greatly, both the loss of his father, and his homeland, long after his mother and sisters had settled here; and I, Atarua, knew how he must feel, and understood the burdens he

carried. I flew to this boy in his dreams, and invited him to mount my back; to accompany me on a journey. I carried him out over Kawau Bay, out over the water where he loved to fish and swim, and then, turning back towards the land, I swooped up the Mahurangi River, to soar high above the streets of Warkworth. Down below, people stopped to look up and wave at him, to welcome him to their land, to tell him that he belonged here. Then I flew him to the top of Tama Hunga, where I came to rest in a flurry of folding wings on the pinnacle of the mountain. From this vantage point, he was able to survey the whole of his new territory, and here, his suffering fell away from him to be washed forever away, as the realisation came upon him in an illuminating flash that this place was now his home.

So, whenever you hear the keening cry of gulls, see the sudden swoop of a hawk on the wing, or find yourself startled by the rustle of a pheasant in royal plumage; when the dew-tinselled fan of a fern frond brushes your cheek, or when you, windblown and winded and wet to the bone, return home after a winter walk; whenever you witness the wayaway white moon illuminating the darkness of the night, together with billions of stars, so bright and so close you could almost reach out and touch them; when the landscapes and bushscapes and seascapes that confront you at every bend in the road, under every footfall, during every conscious moment, offer up so many subtle shades of blue and green no paint brush could ever capture and only the heart could hold; know that I am close — that I will teach you home is where the heart is: here, where herons fly with awkward arching grace, their wings outstretched against the sky.

There is a lone Pohutukawa tree where the land meets the sea, twisted and broken, bent and gnarled, just like me. This is the place you might meet me; watching, waiting, ready to set you free. All manner of creatures live off me. When summer comes, I crown myself in crimson glory. And when the moon is full, Marama still shines down on me.

Dead Ball Zone

The game of rugby is played on a field called a pitch — a two-dimensional space 100 metres long by 69 metres wide. The game of life is played in a field called the universe — an infinite multi-dimensional space. In rugby, the pitch is divided into zones which are demarcated by white lines; the goal posts are exactly five point six metres apart with a crossbar set at a height of three metres; and a typical game is limited to 15 players a side. The rules of the game are predetermined, and play lasts for strictly eighty minutes, extending into overtime only in rare circumstances. In the universe, there are no such lines, presets, rules, demarcated zones or time constraints. $E = mc^2$, and that's supposed to sum it all up — well most of it, bar a few mysterious, as yet unfathomable details. Everything in the game of life is relative; gravity bends space, black holes warp time. In this vast nebulous field, billions of players operate in an undelineated space; there are no sides; and the goalposts float ever further apart as the universe continues to expand.

Darren awakes to the sound of the baby crying. He usually gets up for her in the early mornings so that Layla can lie in, at least for a short while — he has to get ready for an 8.00am start most days anyway, and he often doesn't get home till late, sometimes not at all if something major is going down at work, so he often misses the little one's bedtime. He knows it's tough on Layla being stuck at home alone with three kids under five; a never-ending merry-go-round of domesticity and responsibility. But when he sees the washed-out, wintery, late afternoon sun waiving its feeble light across the bedroom, he remembers that it's not a weekday morning after all, and the day's significance returns painfully to him. He rolls over onto his back and groans.

The baby's cries become increasingly plaintive and he wonders where Layla is, and why she's not responding. Eventually he crawls from the bed, searching for something to pull on over his boxers. His All Black supporters' jersey is lying on the floor where he tossed it only a couple of hours ago. He can't bear the thought of wearing it, but it's the nearest thing to hand; the clean washing is still lying crumpled in the overflowing laundry basket. He finds it immensely irritating that Layla is always behind with the household chores — what the heck did she do all day? He pulls the jersey on resignedly, then makes his way into the room next door to tend to the baby. When he sees the special smile she always saves for her daddy, he doesn't mind being disturbed quite as much, and he takes her up into his arms and wanders through to the living room. Nancy and Josh are parked in front of the TV set watching cartoons, still in their pyjamas, and their mother is outside on the deck hanging listlessly over the balustrade. Darren yanks the ranch slider wide open.

"God, woman, you know the weekends are the only time I get to rest!"

She turns towards him. Her face is puffy and her eyes are red. He sees the half-empty bottle of wine on the patio table, the full ashtray, the disappointment in her eyes.

"For God's sakes, Layla, it was only a rugby game! Get it together, hon; Cyndy needs her bottle."

"Since when did I ever give a damn about the rugby, Darren?" she says.

“Ay? Well what’s the problem then?”

He steps out onto the deck to hand the baby to her, but next thing he’s doubled over in pain and the baby is hanging from the crook of his arm like a rugby ball awaiting a calculated pass. He glances down to see shards of broken glass strewn across the floor.

“Freakin’ hell! What’s going on here?”

“Give her to me,” Layla says. “And how many times do I need to ask you not to swear in front of the kids?”

Darren swings the baby in Layla’s direction mid-stumble, and Layla reaches out to catch her, just in time. Then he flops down into a patio chair and starts examining the underneath of his foot.

“Jesus!” he says. “This is all I need right now!” He starts to pull a chunk of glass from a deep wound in his heel.

The baby is pulling at her mother’s hair, burbling, “Mamma, mamma ...” Layla sighs loudly.

“You know Darren, you’re not the only person around here who could do with a rest,” she says, stepping carefully across the deck in slippered feet, making her way inside to the kitchen.

Balancing Cyndy on one hip, she takes the baby’s prepared bottle from the fridge and begins to heat it in the microwave. As she stands there waiting, she scans the disarray of the bench and the sink full of dirty dishes, the floor littered with toys and other domestic debris. Her eyes prick with new tears. She hears Darren calling out to her from the deck.

“Layla?” She ignores him.

“Layla!” he shouts.

Nancy and Josh are jumping up and down on the couch during the commercial break. “We’re hungry, we’re hungry,” they sing in unison. She lies the baby down on a cushion in the playpen with her bottle, then fills a couple of bowls with Coco-Pops and sloshes milk into them.

“Okay kids, come and get it!” she calls.

When they run in to collect their bowls she says, “Special treat time for good kids. Eat nicely at the coffee table and call me if Cyndy grizzles; Daddy and I need to talk.”

In the bedroom a short while later, she leans against the headboard snivelling into a tissue. Darren limps in, slams the door, and goes into the ensuite. She hears the water running; the sound of the vanity squeaking open and objects being pulled out and thrown onto the floor as he rummages around in its depths for the First Aid Box.

“Layla, I’m worried about you,” he calls through the open door, “your drinking and smoking — what kind of an example is *that* for the kids?”

She doesn’t reply. She can see Darren sitting on the toilet, muttering under his breath as he slathers antiseptic cream onto his wound. Then he hops back into the room.

“For God’s sakes, woman, what the fuck is wrong with you? I really don’t need this shit right now — not with that big court case coming up. I’m under a lot of pressure; my promotion is hanging on this investigation. So the whole country’s in mourning! So what! It’s not the end of the fucking world! ”

“You’re having an affair,” she says.

Darren stops mid-hobble. He throws his hands up in the air, rolls his eyes.

“I thought we sorted that out. You forgave me, remember? We got on with our lives, with our marriage. For the sake of the kids. Because we love each other.”

Layla leaps off the bed and walks right up to him. Earlier she looked pathetic; now she looks crazy, crazier than he’s ever seen her before.

“Do you think I’m stupid, Darren?” she spits into his face.

She slaps him hard and he’s momentarily dazed, feels like he’s falling, stumbles to the edge of the bed. Layla carries on talking, but she sounds very far away.

“After you fell asleep I went through your phone. And guess what? I found multiple texts to and from a woman named Kelly, about how you would give anything to see her again. Soon. Real soon. And it appears the feeling is mutual...”

The pain in Darren’s foot becomes secondary to the rush of adrenalin that hits his empty stomach and the acid bile of stale beer rising up his diaphragm. He swings out and grabs Layla’s wrist, jerks her towards him and throws her onto the bed, then rolls across her, pinning

her underneath him with his forearms pressed against her shoulders, one tree-trunk sized thigh slung across her hips.

“I told you, woman, don’t EVER go through my phone!” he hisses inches from her face. “You could come across classified information that might endanger you and the kids!”

Layla begins to struggle. She’s not sure where the bravado to confront him like this has come from. All she knows is there’s something awful bursting out of her that she can’t control anymore; the tender, soft heart of her has morphed into an ugly, raging beast.

“So what you gonna do about it, you big bully?” she shouts into his face.

Darren grabs both her wrists with one hand and pins her arms to the bed above her head. With the other, he tears her skirt and panties away from her body and shoves his hand up roughly between her thighs. She squirms and wriggles beneath the weight of him, trying to break free of his hold.

“Stop it! You’re hurting me!”

“Shut up,” he says. “You know you want it. You know you need it. So I’m gonna give it to you good and proper!”

“What about the children?” she sobs.

“Oh that’s rich, coming from you. The kids are still in their pyjamas, you’re feeding them cereal at 4 o’clock in the afternoon, and the TV is babysitting them while you’re out on the deck, in full view of the neighbours, drinking and smoking. You’re so self-absorbed; you didn’t even hear the baby crying!”

He forces his way inside her — hard, brutal, unstoppable — and gradually Layla acquiesces; there is nothing for it, no way to escape his bruising domination, his guilt assuaging form of discipline. In his arms she finds a short-lived kind of ecstasy, a brief promise of oblivion. But all too soon, it’s over.

“That’s your punishment, Layla — for being a bad mother — for cutting my foot — and for breaching police security regulations,” he stutters as he withdraws.

Layla lies motionless on the bed now in a state of subdued shock, like a dead butterfly pinned outstretched for display in a sterile museum case. Darren rolls off her and limps across

the room towards the laundry basket. He rummages through it until he finds some track pants, then pulls them on, and grabs his keys, mobile and wallet off the bedside table.

“I’m taking the kids over to my sister’s and leaving you to your pity party,” he says. “When you get it together, let me know. Just bear in mind that I’ve got a lot on my plate right now, and could do with some support, Goddamit! And clean this fucking place up before I get back!”

When he leaves the room, Layla turns on her side and draws her knees up to her chest. She’s shivering now, and pulls the duvet up over herself, but her cheeks are burning; her salty tears drying on them in streaks. She hears Darren calling out to the kids down the hallway: “Get some clothes on, you monkeys! We’re going over to Auntie Val’s.”

“Yay! Yay!” she hears the kids shouting as they thunder down the corridor to their room to get ready. Then she hears Darren rummaging around in the baby’s room next door for her nappy bag and a change of clothes. A short while later they’re gone; only the muffled sound of the TV blaring on in the lounge room fills the silence they leave behind.

The weekend papers are still lying strewn across the bed in disarray, and Layla remembers how she and Darren had cuddled there together earlier when the baby had gone down for her afternoon nap, reading them over each other’s shoulders, squabbling light-heartedly over the best bits. Before he fell asleep. Before she went through his texts. She finds herself staring absentmindedly at a full-page Warehouse advert on the sheet of newsprint that lies inches from her face:

*FINAL CLEARANCE OF ALL WINTER STOCK
CLOTHES, SHOES, UNDERWEAR, ACCESSORIES
FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY - MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN*

There’s a picture of their discounted range of patterned women’s Wellington boots, NOW ONLY \$19.95. Some of them are covered in bright florals, some in animal prints, and others in camouflage. How wonderful it would be to own a pair, she thinks, how practical, but also how

‘out there’. She imagines wearing them to the rugby club on a Saturday afternoon, sees herself walking out across the rain-soaked grass, squelching through the sweat-filled trenches of mud and clay, across the sidelines and out onto the centre of the pitch. All the roiling and running and ra-ra-ing would suddenly cease and the game would come to a standstill, the players frozen in various attitudes of play. Darren would look up from the ruck, surprised, confused, questioning. And he’d see her, really see her; not just his wife, the mother of his children, the maid, the cook, the convenience, the obligatory sex partner. And she’d keep on walking till she was right in the middle of it, right there in his face. He’d make eye contact and give her that ‘how dare you?’ look, the kind only a cop can make. But he’d be powerless, unable to react out there, in front of all his macho teammates, in the public eye. And she’d pick up the slippery, mud-encrusted, forgotten rugby ball, and tuck it securely under her arm. She’d turn away, and just keep walking, walking, walking; through the muck and dross and confusion and chaos, across the halfway mark, past the 22-metre line, right through the centre of the goal posts, into the dead ball zone.

Darren drops the kids at his sister’s, then drives over to the rugby club. When he enters, it like he’s joining a wake; the glum-faced crowd are staring silently at the TV3 news coverage of that morning’s World Cup quarterfinal :

“The magic moment for the French came in the 68th minute when they got away with a blatant forward pass that enabled them to break through and score a try. Scrumhalf Jean-Baptiste Elissalde’s conversion of Yannick Jauzion’s try brought the score to 20-18 heading into the final minutes. In the last minute of the game, New Zealand fullback Leon MacDonald missed a drop goal that would have won the game for the All Blacks.”

He queues at the bar for a couple of handles, then walks over to join his mates. By the time he reaches their table the sports news is over, and suddenly everyone is talking, all at once.

“Chokers, ay? The ref’s bad calls shouldn’t have made any difference — on paper the All Blacks were so far ahead of the French, poor refereeing decisions should only have affected their winning margin, not the outcome of the game!”

“Sure, but three warm-up games against minnows left our boys feeling invincible. And let’s face it, they’ve been treated like a bunch of namby-pambies over there, swanning around the French Riviera like movie stars ...”

“Our guys should have kept the ball in hand or kicked it out. Everyone knows the French excel in open running play. And they often come back strong in the second half.”

The debate and drink swilling goes on around him, but Darren is preoccupied, even though he’s as gutted as anybody is. He “Yeah, right’s” and “Fuck, no’s” when appropriate, but he’s thinking that he had it all going for him, like the All Blacks did. And he blew it, as they did, because when the crunch came he didn’t get his game together; because he allowed some unexpected changes, random mishaps, and the stress of it all to distract him from the ball.

“Player rotation and conditioning was the problem — Graham Henry’s new strategies lost us the game. He should have stuck to traditional rugby, man.”

“But let’s face it, the French won the coin toss, they won the jerseys, they won the national anthem, they won the Haka — they won the game, fair and square!”

“Yeah, I had a bad feeling from the start, mate; the way the French stood up to the Haka gave them the psychological advantage. And it didn’t feel right seeing the All Blacks in silver-grey — the jerseys were indistinguishable. That has to have put our boys off, man!”

“The nail in the coffin was Mc Alister’s unjust sinbinning — that’s what cost us the game in the critical moments, being one man short.”

“But the All Blacks had 73% possession and 68% territory! There was absolutely no excuse for them losing the game, man.”

Something inside of Darren snaps and he jumps up and slams his pint down on the table. “For God’s sakes, guys! We lost a game, not a war. Get over it!” Silence follows his outburst; everyone in the room is staring at him. “Aw, fuck it!” he says, grabbing his handle and storming outside onto the deck where it’s dark and cold and quiet.

He puts his beer down on the balustrade and leans against it, taking the weight off his injured foot. It’s painful, but nothing worse than any injury he’s ever suffered on a rugby field, or even in the course of his job. He’s tough; probably way too tough, he thinks, over-

conditioned to be the aggressor, both on the pitch, and in life. He stands there for a while, looking out over the new field that it took the local club years and years of fundraising to put in, fully floodlit tonight, glistening with dew, smooth and sparkling and glorious; a monument of green grass and white lines, framed at each end by its iconoclastic, towering, parallel poles.

He rubs his eyes, taking in deep gulps of frosty air. He's exhausted, he realises, from trying to keep it all together, trying to find a way through the muddle of his life; the lack of sleep, the unhappy wife, the stress at work, the long hours, the increasing financial pressures of escalating mortgage interest rates, the demands of his growing family, the need to be a paragon of virtue in the eyes of the community. And what's worse, deep down inside, he knows he's a hypocrite of the worst kind — the lying kind. If the All Blacks had won this game; if he hadn't been so down after the loss of the match that he'd overdone the drinking and passed out; if rugby wasn't so bloody important to him and he'd stayed at home instead of insisting on watching the match with his mates at the club; if he'd helped Layla around the house and made the effort to spend some quality time with his family and not left her alone with the kids on the one day of the week that she counted on his being there to take the pressure off her; if he'd just had the nous to delete all those texts to and from Kelly before returning home; even better, if the All Blacks hadn't fucked up, he wouldn't have sent those texts in the first bloody place, and everything would be different. Ultimately, he knows, however, there's no excuse for his infidelity; no excuse other than his own selfishness.

He'd met Kelly when he'd been stationed up in Wellsford a few months earlier, investigating the case that he was now preparing to take to court — she worked the night shift at the truck stop where he took his evening meals, before retiring to his motel with a briefcase full of paperwork to mull over. She was as hard as the truckies and bikies, late night revellers, and mystery travellers who passed through, and as crass. But she was a cute little thing, small in stature, like a tiny fragile bird. And her tittering and tatting and flittering and fluttering about the place reminded him of a happy little fantail flying from tree to tree. She'd fucked him up against the trash cans in the filthy back yard of the takeaway outlet next door to the police station, where he spent his days dealing with the incompetent local cops who'd botched the

investigation he'd been sent up to co-ordinate. Wriggling and giggling, with her jeans around her ankles, and her black apron pulled up over her waist, she'd said, "Well, well, this is a first for me; the first time I've ever been with a ... *detective*." He'd laughed. "Well, it's also a first for me; the first time I've ever been with a ..." He was going to say "waitress," but had thought better of it; the word didn't really describe her adequately. She was so carefree, so much fun; so different from Layla and her angst and high seriousness, her impossible expectations, her overwhelmedness.

He'd already put Layla through hell prior — not that long ago, she'd ankle-tapped him into a confession about a previous one-night stand, and that prior transgression had already nearly cost them their marriage. He remembers how relieved he'd been when she forgave him; how they'd come to an understanding and moved on. But he realises now that in a weird sort of way, her letting him out of the sin-bin was like the resume play whistle for him to have another affair — he so needed something easy and uncomplicated, untrammelled with the detail of shared history, unloaded with significance, untainted by the burden of his guilt and the damage done. And Kelly was it; always there if and when he wanted her, and easily satisfied with what little he had to offer — for her it was always enough, more than enough. How ironic he thinks; both Kelly and Layla were 'waitresses' in the sense that both of them spent their lives waiting for him; for some input and attention from him.

What the hell was he going to do? He wasn't going to be able to Maori sidestep this second transgression as easily as the first; especially as he'd compounded things with his abominable behaviour today. And if Layla red-carded him, he'd be lost. Because he loved her. Because she was a far better person than him. Because she was the only woman for him, because she was always true; the reason why he'd married her in the first place. And he had so much to lose — his children; their future as a family. He knows he's gonna have to pull out all the stops; he's gonna have to change. But where to begin? How to turn things around?

His mobile rings and when he sees who's calling, he has no option but to answer. It's his boss from Central, wanting to talk about the Wellsford case.

“Have you read the psych report on the Rawhiti twins yet, Darren?” He hasn’t. He hasn’t found the time, or rather, made the time.

“Um, I’m getting through it, mate,” he says.

“Riveting stuff, ay? Quite a story; reads like a novel ...”

“Yeah. Interesting; very interesting.”

“One can’t help thinking kids like these shouldn’t be held responsible for their behaviour — it was really just a cry for help, the inevitable consequence of the trauma and abuse they’d been subjected to throughout their young lives. You know, I can’t help admiring them somehow, especially the girl ...”

“Yeah; the girl is something else. I remember interviewing her, when we tracked her down and brought her in. Hard, defiant and cunning; but also very nurturing and protective of her twin brother.”

“Mmm. Interesting how she masterminded their pyromaniacal spree, did all the planning and scheming — the boy is apparently stuck in a permanent state of arrested development; just the pawn she used to carry out her arson attacks. Makes you wonder what this country is coming to Darren; how kids like this fall through the net somehow. Not surprising they end up delinquents, ay?”

“No, I guess it’s not. Lack of effective parenting, broken homes, violence, neglect, sexual abuse, routine drug use — what do you expect?”

“Anyway, mate, we’ll talk about it some more tomorrow — there’s still a lot of work to do, and we’re gonna have to be onto it, especially as prosecution is pushing to meet with us to finalise preparations for the court case. We can’t afford to fuck up on this one and must appear to be sympathetic; not with all the current negative media attention the police are getting thanks to Clint Rickards and his crooked cronies. ”

When his boss rings off, Darren makes his way to the bathroom. He has to clean himself up, get a grip, otherwise he’s going to crack up. He washes his face with cold water, and pulls off his jandal to examine his foot again; it’s throbbing painfully, and the wound is covered in gungy dried blood. He’s taking a slash when he notices the posters that are plastered all over

the walls, about the *Blow the Whistle Campaign*, launched in Tauranga to coincide with the World Cup. He reads that it's been funded by the *Campaign for Action on Family Violence*; remembers now how the club's bar counter and tables are covered in coasters promoting the campaign, and that red buckets full of gimmicky red pea-whistles have been placed in prominent positions, with a notice on them inviting punters to take a whistle home, and use it, whenever a domestic situation is getting out of control. The bright red poster shouts its message at him from the white tiled urinal wall; two screaming faces covered in rugby war paint, under the words:

*BLOW THE WHISTLE ON VIOLENCE
FAIR PLAY ON THE FIELD AND AT HOME*

He stands there between his past and his future, urine streaming from his body, psychological stress and physical pain the only buddies standing alongside him, wondering how to get that ball back into play. And gradually a kind of resolve overcomes him; a resolve he can't ignore.

He leaves the club and calls in at Pizza Hut where he orders Layla's favourite, an extra large Seafood Deluxe. While he's waiting for it to be prepared, he paces up and down, thinking about how the best thing to do is to revert to the tried and true, to fall back on all his training. No more player rotation. No more 'conditioning'. No more distractions. No more excuses. He chants the haka like a mantra all the way home: "Ka mate ! Ka mate ! Kia mau! Hi !" But he knows after today's loss that bravado doesn't always cut it; he is going to have to find another way to repair the damage done.

When he gets there, Layla is still lying where he left her, asleep now, in the sea of newsprint that covers the bed. She dreams that she's walking in space, wearing a pair of bright floral Wellington boots, floating, flipping, flying, tripping, attached only by her lifeline to what really matters. There are no floodlights in outer space; starlight is bright enough to see the

rugby ball she has kicked high from the dead ball zone shooting through the centre of the moving goalposts into endless orbit.

Darren puts the pizza in the oven, then hobbles around the house, tidying up as quietly as he can. When he returns to the bedroom a while later, Layla is sitting up in bed. He is struck by her cool, dark beauty; how her cool, level gaze is like a blackbird's, focused, fixed, penetrating. Uncompromising.

"The laundry still needs folding and putting away," she says quietly.

"Shush, hon," he says, "you just rest, I've got it all covered."

He tips the washing basket out onto the bed, and the laundry falls in a heap on top of newspaper, covering the Warehouse advert and all the quick fixes consumerism offers in exchange for a man's hard earned dollars and infinitesimal longings. He starts working through the pile, item by item, folding them as best he can, and placing them in neat piles on the dresser, like he's seen Layla doing, night after night, before she falls into bed beside him.

"Where are the kids?" she says.

"They're safe and sound at Val's. She's keeping them overnight, hon; not to worry."

"Okay," she says. Her voice is so quiet he can barely hear her.

"I'm gonna try and get some time off work," he continues. "We need to sort ourselves out, get ourselves back on track somehow, Layla." She ignores him, but he presses on. "I'm gonna get some help, request counselling. I promise you, things are going to change around here ..."

"Whatever," she says, cutting him off. She looks away, and Darren follows as her gaze travels to the window where the curtains remain open, even though it's way past dark.

"The sky is unnaturally bright tonight," she says.

"Yeah, they've got the floodlights on down at the club; they've lit the whole place up like a bloody Christmas tree, as if an international game is just about to kick off. God knows why — probably in commiseration for the All Blacks loss today, I guess. Those bloody pikers all deserve the bloody sack, if you ask me."

"That won't change anything," she says. "What they should do, what they ought to do, is ban the game. Before our son grows old enough to play."

Darren doesn't reply. He knows that he and Layla will never agree on the importance of rugby to the national psyche. He also doubts whether his hollow promises are going to cut it this time; after all, Layla's heard them all before. From now on in, he's going to have to ensure the best man is in the team, out on the field, and intent on keeping that elliptical leather planet that is the centre of the universe in a game of rugby from flying around totally unpredictably.

When all the washing is folded and stacked, he pulls his battered guitar out from under the bed and sits down. It's a relief to get the pressure off his wounded foot at last, and although he hasn't played the old twelve-string Washburn in years, it feels good in his arms. His hands begin the process of tuning it up, adjusting the machine heads and tweaking the strings as if it'd been only yesterday he'd last done the job. It comforts him somewhat, knowing that there is a part of himself that is still gentle, that he can draw on in need; a part that he hasn't yet sacrificed to cynicism. Or mere survival. As he starts playing the opening bars of the song he courted Layla with, when they too were young and carefree, like Kelly is now, like she'll always be, he's hoping that somewhere inside of himself he can find the goodness and compassion to become a better man. His hands move deftly through the song's signature G Flat major chord progression, and when he gets into his stride, he starts singing, ending with its plaintive chorus:

"Layla, you've got me on my knees,
Layla, I'm begging darling please,
Layla, darling, won't you ease my troubled mind?"

When he finishes the song he looks up at Layla. She's still staring out at the bright night sky; unmoved, unmoving.

"How many more times will I have to forgive you, Darren?" is all she says.

Golden Girl

Art Lazarus was a creature of habit, and as is well known, old habits die hard. He was an exceptionally early riser as many elderly people are; the comfort of deep, extended, restful sleep no longer something they are able to take for granted. After rising well before dawn and shuffling patiently through his early morning routine which consisted, in this order, of relieving himself (a lengthy and difficult procedure what with his prostate problems), letting the cat out (dangerous, because one might trip over her in her enthusiasm), painstakingly making a cup of strong tea which he delivered promptly to his wife's bedside at 6.30am (tricky because he possessed few natural domestic skills), and slowly dressing himself (which might have been the easiest task of his early morning routine if he wasn't so arthritic, as he merely pulled on yesterday's discarded clothing that he'd thrown on a chair the night before), he ventured outdoors as soon after daybreak as possible, without fail, to spend the long mornings of his life lazily tending his beloved flower garden at the front of the house.

The only interruption to Art's morning routine was when Madge called him in for his daily cooked breakfast of fried blood sausage, eggs and toast around nine o'clock — a necessary refuelling of the body through which he suffered the interminable garrulousness of the female specimen to whom he was attached; she who would inevitably spoil the pleasure he would otherwise have taken in this repast by insisting on preaching forth ad infinitum on a variety of subjects including the weather, the rising crime rate, and the effects of inflation upon the household budget.

His afternoons, which tended to dissipate into uncertainty as far as gardening weather was concerned due to the vagaries of the South Island climate to which he had long grown accustomed (having been dragged kicking and screaming out to New Zealand from England as a youngster in the fifties by his colony-hopping British parents), he spent dozing in a fat armchair which had shaped itself to the contours of his body through long use, in front of a large window which proffered a wide-angle view of his garden and the quiet street beyond; a street which suffocated itself in its clean and regimental ordinariness and lack of interest, come rain or shine.

As such, his obsession with his garden, combined with the daily rituals that he had built around that obsession, afforded Art the ability to observe the passing parade in the street that he and Madge had lived in since the year dot. Because he was also latently an inquisitive fellow, he preoccupied himself with the idea that someone needed to keep a vigil, lest anything untoward take place in the neighbourhood. Yet he knew full well that his ability and desire to participate in the life of the community in which they lived had long been reduced to that of a mere observer, and it never occurred to him that he might, in any proactive sort of way, become involved or embroiled in any other life, other than his own and Madge's. It was sufficient for him to merely witness the comings and goings from this, his hallowed piece of earth, which had fronted the quietly mundane Orchard Road in Takaka, for as long as he could remember.

The picture of retired contentment, mornings would see Art moving slowly around the front garden communing with his plants, petting them with his hands and often talking to them

in soothing tones, with such gentleness and unhurried affection that one might have thought that the plants which grew there were actually human. Occasionally he would dip into his grubby gardener's apron for a pair of sharp secateurs or a bottle of pre-mixed pest spray, or bend desultorily to pull weeds from the carefully tended beds as soon as they dared raise their heads above ground level. In the afternoons, settled comfortably in his stuffed out old Lay- Z-Boy, strategically placed in front of the window to afford him clear views both up and down the street, he could be seen reclining resplendent, the daily paper lying prostrate on his lap (keeping the burn of the sun at bay on a good, sunny day and warming his knees during inclement weather), his worn tartan carpet slippers and egg stained brown button-up jersey, and the grey stubble on his slack jaw *de rigueur* for the easy pose he exuded, without being conscious of the fact.

Thus, he filled his time when Madge was out of the house, working the day shift down the road at the local fish-and-chip shop to earn the extra income they needed over and above their superannuation. But when he heard Madge's footsteps on the footpath outside — or if he'd remained non compos mentis until then — when he heard the turn of her key in the front door as she let herself in at around four o'clock, he'd jerk upright, push his bi-focals back up onto the bridge of his nose, brush away any spittle that might have run down his chin with the back of a cardiganed arm, and grab a blunt pencil from the folds of his lap, pretending that he'd been working on the Dominion crossword all afternoon. Soon after, when she started rattling around the kitchen and he heard the jug whistling, this was his cue to switch to his evening routine, which he always referred to as "going to see a man about a dog".

And so it was, now she was gone, that out of long habit, he would find himself coming to with a startled feeling at precisely the same time every afternoon, and as was his long time custom, he would rise slowly from his chair, stretch, scratch his crotch, then shuffle softly through the kitchen (where he had always pecked Madge perfunctorily on the cheek in passing), out the back door (which he had invariably slammed shut behind him, always causing Madge to wince), and make his way along the cracked concrete path to his shed at the bottom of the garden. En route, he would pause at the same place to relieve himself — the same place

the cat always used — to notice with a certain smug satisfaction that in the spot where they both freely urinated, the grass never grew. When he reached the shed, he'd dig in his trouser pockets for the key and fumble a while with the padlock on the door; a nuisance it was — his fingers could no longer easily manage small, intricate operations — but since Madge had reported she'd heard around town that there were some bad elements about, they'd both decided to be a little more cautious. Besides, all his treasures were in his shed, and he wouldn't want any old stranger poking about amongst them and helping themselves now, would he?

He relished the feeling that overcame him when the padlock snapped apart at last, and the door sprang open against its hinges, allowing him to enter. He'd pause on the threshold to inhale the smell of pipe tobacco and 2-stroke oil that lingered in the stuffy space inside, and after a few moments of delicious anticipation, he'd shuffle in and settle down on an upturned beer crate cushioned by an old flour sack in the back corner, his pipe comfortably within reach of his hand, lying in wait on a shelf beside him. He'd take it up, his hands knowing its exact position through long practice, and alongside it, always in the same place, his fingers would find his pouch of Drum tobacco. He'd fill the pipe in a leisurely fashion (he had no need to rush through his life anymore, as he might once have done), and he'd light it and start puffing away. After a while, when his throat began to feel a little scratchy, he'd take a long swig from the half-jack of whisky he kept tucked away behind the crate he sat on, "to ease the joints", he always said.

The effect of the alcohol in his system always fired him up somewhat — he would feel the blood coursing through his veins, feel alive again, and in his mind's eye he'd randomly relive scenes from his past, and once again begin to feel like the strong, capable man he'd once been. In the glow of his pipe certain expressions would flicker across his face, as the shadows of his former selves lived there again ever so brightly for a few brief moments.

One particular evening, as the alcohol warmed Art's tired old body and he sucked on his pipe searching his memory for past exploits of derring-do, he became distracted by the sound of something vague and near; obscure sniffings and scratchings in the wood box that backed onto the shed. He shifted from side to side on his bony buttocks, and settled down to listen

more attentively, a certain foreboding overcoming him as he remembered Madge's repeated warnings of bad elements in the neighbourhood, combined with an acute sense of aloneness now that she was gone. It occurred to him that perhaps a possum was scratching for pickings, but the compost heap was on the other side of the backyard, next to the veggie patch, and much closer to the back of the house. He switched his hearing aid up to full volume, and leaned in closer to the wall to listen more carefully. He still couldn't identify the sounds he was hearing, yet knowing instinctively that they were made by some living creature, he waited quietly, patience being a quality that he had learned well in old age. And in the silence of his mind and the quiet of the autumn evening, he heard what he thought sounded like sobs, interspersed with deep gasps of breath.

His innate sense of curiosity made him determined to find out who or what was in the wood box, but he was afraid, and so alone now that Madge was gone, that a feeling of inadequacy overcame him. He didn't know what he would do if he had to deal with a 'situation', or even whether he was up to it. He took another deep swig from the half jack and began to search out a gap in the boards to peep through. When he found one, all he could make out was the back of a head of golden curls that rose and fell in concordance with the sobs that emitted from the sorry little creature that huddled there.

Madge had always insisted that Art keep a tin of crackers or biscuits in the shed for his low blood sugar — if he came over queer before she called him in for dinner, he'd have something to nibble on, she'd said; something to counteract the side-effects of that God-awful whisky, not to mention that devil's weed tobacco he smoked. "And don't you ever think I don't know what you're up to down there in that darn shed, you old curmudgeon", she'd scolded, far too often than he cared to remember. He felt so shaky right now that he reached for the tin and slipped a handful of wine biscuits between his lips, drowning them down with a swig of whisky, while Madge's high-pitched admonitions continued to ring in his ears. I must get this hearing aid seen to, he thought; it's playing up on me.

But then he heard the sniffings and shufflings again, loud and clear. The voice of his long dead mother took over from Madge's and he heard her say, "Better do the right thing, my boy, and share." He slipped a couple of biscuits through the gap in the wall and let them fall.

The muffled sobbing stopped suddenly, and he heard a large intake of breath. He leaned forward again to peer through the gap, and saw a tiny little hand moving one of the biscuits up to a little cherub-like mouth that opened like a trap, and began daintily to nibble on it.

Art was perplexed. He'd never noticed a fair, curly-headed child playing in the street before, vigilant as he was regarding the coming and goings of the neighbourhood. Who could it be? He pushed a few more biscuits through the gap and watched, intrigued, as the child munched delicately through them. Eventually he ventured a soft "Hello?" All activity on the other side of the wall came to an abrupt halt. A dirty little tear-stained face turned to see where the voice was coming from, and their eyes met. There was a violent scrabbling in the wood box, and he heard the lid squeak open, then slam shut. When he looked through the gap again, the child was gone.

And so began the third most significant relationship of his life with the opposite sex. There was his mother, there was Madge, and then there was Mercy, the Golden Girl from Golden Bay. As a son, he had taken from his mother all that she could give; what she had had made him strong and sure, capable and true, and had grown him into manhood. As for Madge, he had taken from her too; her youth, her beauty, her devotion. Even though they had been unable to have children, he had never felt their lack or longed for them; the softness of Madge in his arms and the way she cleaved to him in the night made him feel that, whatever happened, he could let everything go, through her, and that had always been enough for him.

But he would come to adore this little golden haired girl above the two other women who had been significant others in his life, with a selflessness formerly unknown to him, and a love that was purer and more unadulterated than anything he'd ever experienced prior. She came often and spent long hours hiding in the wood box, running and hiding from what horrors he knew not, and they'd whisper a childish form of communication through the gaps in the wall. She was always ravenously hungry, and Art broke a larger hole in the slats, so that he could pass through bigger morsels — bunches of black, juicy grapes from his vines, leftover cold lamb chops, tomatoes fresh off his vines, a cup of milk, anything that he had to spare. And the child devoured whatever was proffered her, as if Art was her only food supply.

As she grew older, she grew braver, and came to trust the old man; he was different from the constant string of unknown blokes that passed through her mother's home, who caused upsets and meted out discipline, taking always, but giving nothing in return. Art Lazarus became her father, for she had no other, and she his daughter, by proxy.

She would call in on her way home from school, in her unironed little blue and white checked smock and scuffed sandals, always grubby and unkempt. Art would wait for her of an afternoon, parked in his Lay-Z-Boy, watching the quiet street from his picture window through the tall heads of his flowering hollyhocks. And when he heard her letting herself in through the front door, he'd call out: "Here comes my Golden Girl!" He'd let her sit at Madge's dressing table and allow her to use Madge's things, teaching her how to remove the tangles from her golden locks with Madge's soft boar-bristle hairbrush, and showing her how to trim and file her dirty little fingernails with Madge's manicure set. And he'd wash her face with Madge's soft facecloth, wiping the encrusted grime from her rosy cheeks. Later, she'd sit beside him at the old upright piano and he taught her all the scales, and soon she was picking out tunes with her deft little fingers that flew across the keyboard like butterflies.

She was usually bright as a button, a darling little angel girl-child, who skipped and sang around him as he tended his plants, learning the names of all the birds, rescuing hedgehogs from the cat (and sometimes the other way around, if they were big ones), plucking weeds from the beds with her nimble little fingers. But sometimes, when something had gone wrong at home or school, and life was difficult for her, he would need to dry her tears, gently wiping away the drops of mauve liquid that oozed from the corners of her beautiful eyes with one of Madge's scented tissues. And he would marvel, always, at the colour of her eyes; moody blue they were, like the cornflowers he cultivated in his front garden, and ever so slightly crossed, the way a cornflower's perfectly blue petals folded imperfectly over one another.

As time passed, she grew into a Hesperides nymph; strong, tall, and serene. And as Art's mind grew duller, as his body ever weaker, she became *his* carer, running errands for him, cooking up little meals, and reading the paper to him while he dozed in his chair of an afternoon.

But one day, when she was about fifteen, she came no more, and the long extra years she had added to Art's life ran out. Soon, he became ill, increasingly decrepit, and took to his bed, his health declining rapidly as he neared his end. His garden quickly fell into a state of disrepair, and the weeds took over, choking the flowers, invading the beds as the grass grew tall and unkempt, fuelled by the compost of rotting fallen leaves and decaying blossoms that lay thick on the ground. As he lay dying, and the world outside ceased to exist, he thought only of her, of Mercy, the Golden Girl from Golden Bay. Who would lose themselves in her beautiful liquid eyes now? Who would listen to her bell-like, pitch-perfect soprano, her sweet chatter, her perfect laughter? And who would touch her delicate fingers through a gap in the wall, and pass her little morsels of food?

Jeannie, Jerome, the Publican and Pope John Paul Too

Jeannie and Jerome walked into my pub late on an autumn Sunday afternoon. Heads turned, as they do, when strangers rock up unexpectedly in a small town, but Jeannie made straight for the bar as if she was on home turf, and Jerome was only a couple of steps behind her. He asked for a Speights Old Dark and she ordered a triple brandy and Coke.

“I’m driving,” she said, as she flicked me a \$20 note. An odd remark I thought, but in this business, you learn to keep a straight face.

The mystery couple took their drinks outside and sat down at one of the picnic tables on the deck. I had a clear view of them from the bar — the French doors were flung wide open to take advantage of the warm Indian summer weather — and I got a good look at them. It’s part of the job description to size up your customers, their behaviour and state of inebriation etc., and I was always conscientious, even though I’d ended up in this Godforsaken dead-end job by default. But aside from that, I was curious: they seemed such an odd couple.

The guy was sallow-faced with sandy-coloured hair cropped at the collar in the Prince Valiant style. His hand moved often to his brow, to push back a lock that had fallen across it. Although he was tall, he didn't seem to fit his rakishly thin frame. She was short and curvy, almost matronly, but although she seemed a good deal older than him, her face was unlined. Her skin was pale, like milk, and against it, her dark silver-streaked hair and black-lined dark eyes formed the perfect chiaroscuro. She had a disarming crooked smile that she used both effectively and often.

A hush fell over the pub as the TV News jingle? promo?sounded.

"The death of Pope John Paul II in the early hours of this morning has joined over a billion Catholics around the world in an immense outpouring of grief which is expected to result in a pilgrimage of unprecedented proportions of the faithful to Rome..."

I'd heard it all earlier, so told Stacey that I was going to take a smoko and asked her to cover the bar for me. I grabbed a Woodstock from the chiller and headed out back, where I sat down and swung my legs up onto the dustbin. It felt good to get the load off my feet and the drink tasted smooth, sweet, and cold. Believe me, the best thing about the hospitality business is the down time.

I was just beginning to relax when the back door burst open and Jeannie came to a standstill beside me. I leapt up, startled and somewhat annoyed. Although the back door was demarcated as a fire exit, it also had a sign on it that clearly stated 'Staff Only'. She stuttered she was sorry; she was just looking for somewhere to be alone for a while. Her eyes were swollen and mascara streaked down her pale cheeks. Man, there is something about a woman crying that really stumps me. The safest thing to do seemed to be to offer her a seat. She flopped down into the chair beside mine and stared at her feet for a while. Then she started to grope in her bag.

"Hey, can I get you anything?" I asked.

"Um ... no, I'm all right thanks. I'll be okay in a little while ..."

I sat down again and inhaled deeply on my cigarette. I was determined to at least have a few more drags before making a retreat.

"Having a bad day, huh?" I asked.

"Yeah. Pretty much ..." She pulled a rosary from her bag and moved it slowly, bead for bead, between her fingers.

"That bad, huh?"

"I'm sorry," she sniffed, "It's just that ... he's ... well, you see ... he's ... um ... he's *dying* ... and mostly I can handle it, but sometimes it just gets too hard."

Now, of all things, I was thinking, I'd have to counsel a devout Catholic through the Pope's death, on top of a hell weekend dealing with the local yokels and their need to anaesthetise themselves with alcohol at the end of the working week.

"Hey, you must have missed the news. He died in the early hours of this morning."

She turned to face me, but she sort of looked right through me. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "You know, the Pope," I continued.

"Oh ...yes," she said. Her eyes dropped again to the rosary in her hands. "I was actually talking about Jerome, the guy I'm with."

"Oh. Right. But he's pretty young, isn't he? And he sort of looks okay ..."

There was an extended silence.

"Hell, what would I know anyway?" I continued. "I'm sorry ...I mean, a lot of Catholics are pretty upset at the moment, and when I saw the rosary I just sort of assumed, you know ... " I decided it was time to make that hasty exit. "Look, I guess you'd rather just be alone right now ..."

She looked up at me and the way her face softened, I could tell there was no way I was getting out of this that easily.

"That's okay, how were you to know?" she said. "He is pretty young, only thirty-two. It's his birthday tomorrow actually. But I guess thirty-three's a pretty unlucky number, ay?" Fresh dark tears started rolling down her cheeks. "I just hope he's gonna make it through the night," she continued.

I started feeling panicky; trapped like an insect in a jar, rapidly using up the available air supply. But I'd already broken the unwritten rule, and crossed the professional line between publican and punter. There was no going back.

“What do you mean?” I blurted out. I knew what she meant, but my discomfort made me keep putting my foot in it.

“It’s very near the end,” she said wistfully. “I know; I can sense it. It’s as if there’s a shadow hanging over him, like ... like a dark *presence*.”

I was thinking: this woman has read way too many fairy tales. But she was looking at me as if she expected an intelligent reply. I ventured a lame question:

“Hey, if he’s that sick, why isn’t he in a hospital or something?”

“He just got up and walked out; told them he wanted to do it his way. He insisted on driving, even though he could hardly walk, and the next thing, we were over the bridge and heading north. After a while, I asked him where we were going. He turned to me and said, ‘To the end of the road, my sweet.’

She did the crooked smile thing. Suddenly I could see what the attraction was; why he was with her. There was something cute and innocent and endearing about her. But she was also compelling; fiercely compelling in her intensity. She went on:

“We’ve been tiki touring for a couple of weeks now, having a great time, like it’s the best holiday either of us has ever had. And it is ... but ... I worry that if he goes before ...”

She sank back down into her chair and stared at the rosary, then started working it again, bead for bead, bead for bead. I waited, wondering what was coming next.

“I guess the thing that upsets me most,” she continued, “is that he’s kind of shut himself off, doesn’t want to know, believes he’s unworthy and all that. But that’s the whole point, isn’t it?” She looked up at me again then, questioningly. “We’re human, fallible, sinners, all of us — that’s precisely why we need the saving grace of God’s forgiveness — surely?” she said.

I am not religious at all; in fact, I had always thought religion in all its diverse disguises was the biggest con of all time, but she was so earnest, I found myself being kind of sucked in. I sat there speechless, inadequate, like a new priest in the confessional, grasping for some way to help her, some words of comfort for her. The way she was looking at me, with all that softness, I knew I was going to have to come up with *something*. The easiest thing to do was default to hospitality mode — *my* saving grace.

“Look,” I went on, “perhaps you guys could stay here tonight. The unit down by the water’s edge is vacant; it’s quiet and comfortable. Maybe you both need to just stop and, you know, chill. We do a mean pub dinner, and the atmosphere is pretty laid back around here on a Sunday night.”

She stopped working the rosary beads and laid its worn wooden cross across the palm of her right hand. She looked at it, closed her eyes, was quiet for a moment, then she said:

“Yeah. Good idea.” She put the rosary back in her bag, wiped the black tears from her cheeks with her t-shirt sleeves, and got up to leave.

“Hey, my name’s Jeannie, by the way. Thanks.”

A while later, back behind the bar, I noticed that the newcomers had moved to a table inside and ordered a meal. They were talking animatedly and I could only guess what the topic of conversation might be. As the evening softened towards night and the pub quietened down, they selected a few slow numbers on the jukebox and held each other close on the dance floor as if the world outside their personal concerns didn’t exist. Everyone in the room was under their spell, closeted in the cocoon of their strange attachment. At the end of the set, Jerome escorted Jeannie back to her seat. Then he came over to the bar counter.

“Hey, name’s Jerome,” he said. “Jeannie said that I should talk to you about the room.”

“Sure, mate, I’ll just get the keys and the Register.”

When I returned he was leaning on the bar counter with his back to me and was watching Jeannie smiling at him from across the room.

“You seem really smitten, mate,” I said, hoping to lure him into conversation. I’m not usually so personal with customers. As I mentioned before, it’s preferable to maintain a professional detachment in this industry, otherwise you end up being a counsellor or mediator, or what’s worse, a convenient line-of-credit towards the oblivion of inebriation. But since I’d already been forced across the line by Jeannie, I figured what the hell; I was intrigued and wasn’t going to be satisfied until I got his side of the story.

He turned back to face me, and grinned, full and wide. It was probably the way he'd looked at Jeannie in the car when they'd left Auckland and started driving 'to the end of the road'. "Yup," he said, "you're right about that, mate."

He leaned in closer, across the counter. A lock of hair had fallen across his forehead and he raised a hand to push it back up over his brow.

"Hey, how about a nightcap, man? A whisky is what the Doctor ordered for me tonight."

"Sure," I said. I poured us each a nip of the best, Johnnie Walker Black Label. He downed his in one gulp. I followed suit, and topped our glasses up again.

"Cheers, mate," he said. "You know, the funny thing is, before Jeannie, I'd never looked at a brunette before, let alone an older chick. No way, man! I've been through blonde after blonde after blonde, the younger the better. But you know what? They were all interchangeable. Clones. Cardboard cut-out dolls."

Under the bright bar lights, now that we were face to face, I could see that he was extremely unwell. His complexion was dull, his eyes were sunken in their sockets, and his shrunken gums barely held his teeth in position. He was so thin that, given half a chance, he could have fallen through his own backside.

"Oh yeah?" I replied.

He went on: "Jeannie slipped into my life when I wasn't really looking, when I was hung up on other stuff, when I was the centre of my own universe. Ever had a woman do that to you?"

"Now that you mention it ..." I was thinking about Mercedes; about how she'd pushed me to the place I was in now.

He laughed. "I guess she got right in under your skin, man, before you even realised what was happening. Like Jeannie did. And it scared the hell out of me. She was always so sure of herself; so true — like ice, like fire. And when you're flapping around like a big girl's blouse, you're not fit to handle the heat or the cold. Know what I mean?"

I nodded. I knew what he meant all right. And I didn't particularly enjoy being reminded. He laughed, then reached for his glass. After throwing back its contents, he leaned in even closer and lowered his voice.

"When we first started sleeping together, I told her, 'this means nothing to me'. She did that sweet smiley thing she does, and all she said was, 'So what? All that matters is that it means everything to me.' She knew all along how things would turn out, mate; that her gentleness would soften my heart." He laughed out loud again. It was a sound I'll never forget, the sound of a drunk, dying man, somewhere on the journey towards finding himself and conquering all fear.

"That woman made me face what I see in the mirror every morning. She gave me the courage to live, she did; showed me what it's all about. Somewhere along the line, I discovered that Jeannie is all about what she wants to give, not what she needs to take."

I nodded again. "Good on you, mate," was all I could think of as an appropriate reply.

Jeannie was using sign language from across the room, indicating that it was high time I wrapped things up. Jerome and I did the business and said goodnight.

Within a half hour, all the locals had cleared out too, returning to their individual destinies, dominated by the prospect of another week of responsibility after a weekend of forgetting. After Stacey knocked off and headed home, I locked up, lit a cigarette, and took a leisurely stroll down to the beach. It was a beautiful, balmy night and I wanted to stretch my legs before turning in. The moon was in its last quarter and the sea was gently lapping up to high tide. I followed the winding path along the shoreline, enjoying the darkness and the quiet.

Suddenly I heard voices and noticed some movement in the water. I couldn't make out what was happening at first but as I got closer, I saw that Jeannie and Jerome were naked, waist-deep in the water, and she was holding him in her arms, like a man-sized baby. The way the moonlight shone on their bare bodies brought to mind that Michelangelo statue, the Pieta, where the Virgin Mary is holding the crucified Jesus in her arms. Jeannie was saying something, and after every phrase, she paused, and I heard Jerome repeat after her:

"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty...And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father...who was crucified, suffered and was buried. And the third day, He rose again, according to the Scriptures. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life...and one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the remission of sins. And I expect the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

There was a short pause, then Jeannie gave the blessing:

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, I baptise you now, and wash away all your sins. Christ's death on the cross means that he has taken on the sins of the world; therefore He absolves you of yours, Jerome. You are now free, a new man; reborn, remade in His imagery; eternally forgiven, eternally saved."

When she finished, all was quiet for a few moments. The next thing, she just seemed to let him go, and there was a lot of splashing about in the water. Suddenly the night was filled with her laughter.

"Are you happy now, my sweet?" I heard Jerome spluttering as he surfaced.

"Happy? I'm *ecstatic*!" she shouted back at him.

I stood there, a silent witness under the pohutukawa trees, by accident or co-incidence or design, I don't know, but as much a part of this human drama that was unfolding in the back blocks of Northland as Jeannie and Jerome were. They moved through the water towards each other, laughing and splashing, and then clung to each other and started kissing, passionately, desperately; a desperation and passion the depth of which I was well acquainted with.

I turned away and stumbled back up the slope; I could hardly see through the tears that clouded my eyes. It was the first time I'd cried since I'd been a young boy, and as the tears flowed, the loneliness and pain I'd carried with me for a long time fell away with them. For all my own life's disappointments and struggles, detours and dead ends, somehow everything made sense at last; everything was as it should be. I felt privileged, exalted; free too at last, in a way that passes all understanding.

When I let myself into the flat above the pub, I fell into a chair and grabbed the TV remote. The CNN all night news coverage lit up the screen and once again, the subject under discussion was Pope John Paul II:

“Drama and rhetoric were among his major personal interests. As a young man, he was a member of an experimental theatre group, and also published a collection of poetry. He always embraced the media, and never missed a photo opportunity, encouraging extensive coverage of his international travels and various religious activities. As a result, he is said to be the most well recognised figure in the world today. One of his famous sayings was ...”

My attention drifted as I pondered the evening’s events and wondered what the morning would bring. As it turned out, Jerome’s birthday was another fine autumn day, warm and still. He and Jeannie looked good, and I stood there smiling as they spun out of the parking lot, with Jerome behind the wheel, and Jeannie waving animatedly goodbye. I noticed she’d hung her rosary from the rear view mirror, and its cross swung in a wide arc between them, through the windscreen.

After they left, I tended to the usual Monday morning chores, tidying the chillers, taking stock, placing orders and sorting the paperwork, while Stacey got stuck in to the big post-weekend clean up. And I got to thinking about Jeannie and Jerome and Pope John Paul too. Mostly, I got to thinking about the Pope’s apparently famous dictum: ‘If it wasn’t on TV, it never happened’.

“Yeah right,” I thought, as I opened the doors to the first punters of the day.

Ka Kite Bro

A battered Harley Davidson burns up the hill full throttle, then taps down a couple of gears, skidding to a standstill on a sandy verge overlooking the town of Wellsford. The girl riding pillion jumps free, pulling off her helmet, and her hair falls in a cascade down her back like a muddy waterfall. “Yeeha!” she shouts out to the lonely hillside, while the leather-clad driver kicks the bike stand down, kills the ignition, and flashes a wide, wicked smile her way. They hi-five, then turn together to look over the town that lies spread out below them in the darkening winter evening. Smoke drifts lazily from chimneys and the smell of fast food hangs in the air. Across town, along the western skyline, the neon-lit silhouette of El Tabora Pizza Bar & Grill cuts the shapes of cacti and sombreros into the sunset, like a tavern in a Speights advert, and in the middle distance, Rodney Road pulses and throbs with the red and yellow lights of heavy north and south bound traffic.

But deep in the hollow of the valley, where the railway tracks and shunting yards slash through the lower part of town, all is dark and still. In the gathering dusk, the run-down station buildings and derelict sheds seem to lean against each other like weary watchmen, as dust blows in eddies around their footings, fanning the flames of a small fire. The bikers stand quietly, watching, waiting; hearts beating like thunder and breath streaming from their mouths smoke-like into the cold, thin air. Suddenly, the railway yards light up like a fairground, followed immediately by an explosion that ricochets across the valley. Within seconds sirens start sounding, one...two...three...four; long eerie wails, low to high pitched, calling the emergency services to action.

The girl turns to embrace her companion.

"You're just so hot, bro. It's the best job we've ever pulled!"

He clings to her, and her hair falls around his shoulders like a cloak of feathers; warm, soft and comforting. He smooths it down her back and it crackles and bristles under his hand, full of static electricity. But when she feels him clinging to her, she pulls away.

"We better make tracks," she says. "I'll cut through the stock yards to Aunty Vai's on foot; get her to drive me up north. You take the bike and head south to the couisi-bros in Huntly; lay low for a few days and I'll get a message to you when the heat dies down."

"But there'll be cops everywhere, Kitty. It's Queen's fucking Birthday Weekend!"

"Stick to the back roads Tae; you'll be sweet. Just keep it together, okay?"

"Okay." He shrugs. "What you said. I'll do it for you."

"Good one; you always come through for me, mate."

She slaps him on the back. "Ka kite, bro," she says, and she turns to walk away.

**

It's late, and the rhythm of the rain drumming on the tin roof makes Kitty feel drowsy, but she knows her mother is going to call her; she's told her so before. And if she doesn't come straight away, Kitty'll get what's coming to her, all right; her mother had said so. But Kitty has a plan, and she's prayed and prayed that her plan will work, because Aunty Vai says that if you pray long and hard enough for something, God helps you because you've proven that you have

faith, and even if things don't work out exactly as you might want them to, things always *change*.

Tae is lying next to Kitty on the small bed they share in the back room, his rumbling tummy louder and more insistent than the streaming rain that pelts down outside. He is also thinking about Auntie Vai and how, when they'd been there for Christmas, she'd had kumara and mayonnaise salad, pork ribs on the barbeque, and Pam's cool-drinks too, in all colours of the rainbow. Later she'd brought out a trifle in a big glass bowl, with sponge-cake and strawberry jelly, thick yellow custard and a whipped cream topping covered in hundreds-and-thousands, and she'd said they could eat as much as they wanted. Whenever he's hungry, he can't help remembering that special day and the wonderful feast she'd treated them to.

But Kitty keeps prodding him and shaking him, telling him that he mustn't go to sleep. She keeps talking about the matches, making him tell her over and over again where she's hidden them in a hole in the side of the mattress, and what he has to do with them when Mum calls her.

Suddenly the back-lit shape of their mother fills the doorway. She leans against the door-jamb, bath-robed and beckoning.

"Kitty, Uncle Ray wants you to come and see him now. He's got a big bag of food and lollies for you kids; only if you do what he says mind. And he's given me some dak that I can sell to get money for us. We'll be able to go to the Op Shop and get some stuff; blankets and warm clothes, maybe even a heater ..." As their mother's jaw moves up and down, the curved lines of the moko on her chin flicker, flame-like, behind the smoke of the cigarette that hangs from her mouth.

"Okay mum, I'll just say 'night night' to Tae," Kitty says. She takes him in her arms and holds him there as their mother turns away.

"Now don't forget to do what I told you," she whispers in his ear. He leans against her, comforted, his mind drifting, his body slackening, relishing the feeling of her hair and the way it always wraps around him when she hugs him, soft and feathery. But when she feels him cleaving to her, she pushes him away, shaking him hard.

“Tae! Tae! Wake up bro! Come on, sit up!” She keeps at him till he raises himself up on his elbows and looks her straight in the eyes. “Just do it now, okay? Promise? Do it, for me.”

“Okay, okay Kitty, I’ll do it now, I promise.”

“Good boy,” she says, as she gets up to leave the room. “Ka kite, bro.”

Early Tuesday morning an unmarked police car slows to a halt outside Wellsford Police Station. Detective Constable Darren Tamati steps carefully from the vehicle and activates the electronic car alarm, then reaches up to check his pistol is still securely positioned in its holster under his left armpit, and his police radio earpiece is comfortably in place. What a fucking dump, he thinks as he walks towards the single-story prefab building. He has a strong feeling that by the end of the day his Italian leather lace-ups and designer trouser-cuffs will be caked in mud.

Soon he is seated at a desk in an interview room inside, with a view over the filthy backyard of the take-away outlet next door. A large mug of black coffee steams in his hands as he eye-balls the local cops who huddle around him in a deferential circle.

“So, boys, what have you got for me?”

Matt, the Officer-in-Charge, clears his throat. “Our main suspects are Kaitirea and Taero Rawhiti, a.k.a. Kitty and Tae McQueen. They’re siblings — unidentical twins actually — a boy and a girl aged 16. They’ve been living in the area for a couple of months now, but we have yet to establish whether there’s a family ... er ... whanau connection ...”

“Right. Have you got a description of them?”

“She’s a beauty;” says Tom, the rookie cop, “longer legs than I ever seen on a girl. I’d give it to her anytime.” He wiggles his index finger in the air.

Matt cuts him off. “Shuddup, Tom, this is serious stuff.” He glares at him, then turns back to the detective.

“We had to evict them from the Tavern recently for underage drinking, so we got a good look at them then. Their father was Scottish apparently; their mother Maori. The girl is tall,

about 5'10", with long, reddish-brown hair. She's fair skinned, and has blue eyes; blue-as-blue, like the Highland sky."

The detective looks quizzically at him.

"Um ... I'm from Scotland too, Sir — it's a common expression there."

Darren raises his eyes impatiently heavenwards. "Okay, okay. What about the male suspect?" he barks.

"The boy looks Maori, through and through; wiry black hair usually pulled back in a short, fuzzy ponytail, olive skinned of course. Uses his eyebrows a lot when he talks, as they do. He's much smaller than the girl — as short and stocky as she is tall and lean. A distinguishing feature is the huge tattoo which apparently covers the whole of his back — it's a flaming torch; quite a work of art I believe, according to a couple of the local hoods."

"Right. So what do we have on them so far?"

"As detailed on the rap sheet, they've been suspects in various petty arson incidents, mostly up in the Far North, but because they're juveniles, and their targets have always been low-key, with no-one ever getting hurt, they've pretty much gotten away with it up till now. Interestingly though, the house they were living in, in Kaitia, when they were nine years old, burned down. Their mother and an uncle died in the blaze, but the twins escaped or were rescued — no-one really knows. They've apparently been indigent ever since. A large quantity of cannabis was found in the freezer after the fire — it was believed at the time that the mother had gang connections and had been running a tinny house."

"What about the father?" Darren continues.

"We don't have much on him, except that he was Scottish, as I mentioned before; an immigrant who was granted residence on the strength of his qualifications as a fireman, according to Immigration. From what we've been able to piece together, he must have taken off when the twins were babies, or perhaps even before they were born, but we haven't been able to track him down yet."

"Mmmmm. So this is the biggest job they've pulled to date?"

"Yup. As far as we know."

"But what makes you think *they* did it."

“They always leave a calling card — they tag a nearby wall or building with the word ‘MAHUIKA’ in red paint. This time they tagged the wall of the local gang headquarters, which is just down the road from the station. Their head honcho has already been up here to lay a complaint, sounding off about wayward youth and indiscriminate vandalism. Bit rich if you ask me ...”

“Okay, okay — we all know these bloody gangs are a law unto themselves. Let’s get back on track here. ‘MAHUIKA’, you say? What does it mean? Anybody bothered to find out?”

There’s a protracted silence as the local cops search each other’s faces for the required information. Detective Tamati waits expectantly, but when nothing is forthcoming, he slams his fist down on the desk.

“What the fuck is wrong with you boys? Don’t you know this is what goes down in a report as ‘gross incompetence’? Get me the local iwi on the phone right now!”

The cleaning lady who is mopping the corridor outside the interview room pauses at the open door.

“Excuse me, Matt. I might be able to help you with that. It’s Maori for ‘Goddess of Fire’,” she says.

“Are you sure, Vai?” Matt says.

“Yes. Sarita has been learning about it at school. You know, Maori myth and legend; all that stuff they teach them in social studies.”

“Okay, thanks, old girl; that’s a great help.” He shoos her away; it’s obvious she’s been eavesdropping. “Go and put some more coffee on please, dear,” he says.

The detective stretches his arms out in front of him and flexes his fingers against each other, cracking the bones. Tom winces. “Ouch,” he says. Matt glares at him again.

“Right. Now we’re getting somewhere,” Darren continues, “but what’s their motivation? Why have they now escalated to blowing up government property?”

Once again, an uneasy silence fills the room, as the local cops shuffle their feet and stare embarrassedly out of the window. Tom puts his foot in it again, impulsively voicing what they’re probably all thinking:

“We thought that’s what *you* were here to find out, Sir ...”

Darren tenses up again. His wife has recently spoken of divorce, threatening to take him for all she can, all because of one little indiscretion. And he feels tired; very, very tired. But this is not the time to demonstrate any personal weakness. He needs to focus on the job; take charge, keep control.

“Right. I guess it’s time to call in a criminal psychologist,” he says, standing up. The local cops all take an involuntary step backwards. “I’ll get onto it. Matt, put out a full APB on these kids immediately; I want every unit in the area trying to track them down. As for the rest of you fuckwits, get off your butts and out onto the streets. I want to know who these kids’ connections are, where they were staying, and anything else you bloody incompetents can come up with. Oh, and one last thing, get me a motel room; looks like I’m gonna be here for a couple of days.”

Kitty and Tae lie in their cot, their little bodies curled around each other like koru. They can hear their mother cackling from time to time in the front room, and the clink of glasses. Thick smoke sucks through their open door and curves around them where they lie, accompanied by the acrid scent of a burning joint. They don’t mind too much, because they know that soon they’ll feel warm and hazy, and will drift away into the oblivion of fantastical dream-like visions, able to forget for a while that this caged space with its damp smelly mattress and thin coverlet has been their whole world for as long as they can remember.

Sometime later they awaken to the sound of hissing and spitting; an intense heat fills the room and a bright haze glows and flickers up and down the walls. They raise themselves up, and clinging sleep- and dope-dazed to the side of their cot, they watch stupefied as huge flames lick towards them across the rotten wooden floor. Tae clings to Kitty, terrified and screaming, and she holds him tightly, her hair falling around him like a protective cloak of softness and darkness, her mind searching her limited infantile experience to understand the significance of this crisis. The synthetic net curtains shrouding the window alongside their cot disappear in a puff of smoke, and Kitty thinks she sees her mother’s face in their remaining twisted, black coils. Soon, the noxious fumes overcome the twins and they fall semi-conscious

back onto the mattress, coughing and choking. Soon they feel a hand shaking them and hear a man talking, saying they must get up, and hurry; he will carry them out to safety, if they will just stand up and jump into his arms.

“Aye’ll tae the wee one first,” he says in a strange, lilting accent.

But Tae clings to Kitty and won’t let go of her, paralysed with horror.

“Go with him, Tae! It must be our daddy, come to save us at last,” she says as she shakes him off and pushes him into the fire fighter’s arms. “Ka kite, bro.”

“All rise.” A hush falls over the court room as the judge enters and takes his place behind the bench. “Youth Court, North Auckland; Judge Andrew Becroft, Principal Youth Court Judge presiding. You may be seated.”

There is a scraping of chairs. Kitty and Tae sit next to each other in the dock, behind the police prosecutor. To their right, their social worker confers quietly with a male colleague whom they don’t recognise. On their left, the youth advocate rustles and rearranges his papers on the desk in front of him, and beyond him, the CYFS appointed youth justice co-ordinator yawns absentmindedly. The seats reserved for family members behind the dock remain vacant.

The Court Taker begins speaking again: “We are gathered here today to hear sentence in the case of Kaitirea and Taero Rawhiti, also known as Kitty and Tae McQueen. They have been charged with committing an indictable offence; namely the wilful destruction of government property by arson at Wellsford Railway Station, on Sunday 4th June 2007. The court has heard the prosecution’s case and considered all the evidence presented by it. The court has also heard the case for the defence, and has given due consideration to the reports submitted by it to the court; namely, a report from the defendants’ social worker, and a report from an independent psychologist that includes psychiatric evaluations of the defendants. Judge Becroft to now pass sentence ...”

The judge asks the young people to rise, then addresses them directly:

“Kaitirea and Taero, I would like to impress upon you the seriousness of the crime you have jointly committed, and, notwithstanding the extenuating circumstances with which this

court has been presented, and to which it's given due consideration, I find you both guilty of the above-mentioned charges, and recommend that you be remanded under supervision ... separately ... to be held in residential custody, under the legal guardianship of Child Youth & Family Services, until such time as you have been rehabilitated. You will both undergo psychological and psychiatric counselling, and arrangements will be made for you to each complete a satisfactory period of community work, of no less than 300 hours, in reparation for your crime against the government of New Zealand."

Tae's face crumples like a baby's, the horror of being separated from Kitty for any length of time something he has never found easy to bear. He hangs his head, biting his bottom lip as tears drip from his trembling chin.

"All rise," says the Court Taker, and once again, the scraping of chairs, as the judge leaves the court room. "Court now adjourned."

There's a flurry of activity, as papers are gathered together and briefcases snapped shut. Kitty and Tae hear their names being called, and turn to see Auntie Vai beaming at them with a big cheesy grin all over her face. There's a man standing quietly beside her, and although they don't recognise him, they know him well. He is short and stocky with pale, freckled skin, wiry reddish-brown hair, and piercing blue eyes. A badge glints on the breast of his starched formal uniform — the 8-pointed star and silver ferns of the New Zealand Fire Service. He looks shyly at the twins; then begins to move hesitantly towards them.

"I told you bro, didn't I? I told you so ..." Kitty whispers in Tae's ear. She turns to embrace him and her hair falls around his shoulders, covering him like a cloak of feathers, like the korowai of their brave Maori ancestors. But he has no need to cling or cleave to her anymore; he stands there strong and serious, head held high, like a warrior who has returned home after a long, hard journey, a boy no more. Kitty pulls away and winks at him, and they hi-five.

The female social worker stands custodially alongside her, and the male one takes Tae's arm. It's time to go.

"Ka kite bro," Kitty says, as she turns to walk away.

Terror and Self-Loathing in Te Atatu

That particular morning, you should have known your number was about to come up. You really ought to have, man, because when that day dawned — so sudden, so bright — every cell in your illness-racked body went on high alert, as the news of the closeness of your death travelled between them in an incomprehensibly fast-travelling, unbelievably accurate, Chinese whisper. Yet something inside you continued to resist the inevitability of it all. You were gung-ho, on top of it all, safe, riding the wave. Even though you barely had the strength to drag yourself through another twenty-four hours, you continued to be the great pretender. Always the Invincible Man; the man of multiple aliases. But even comic book heroes have use-by dates, mate. *Surely you knew that?* This was the day on which the enormity and truth of everything you'd have to face, sooner or later, was to come suddenly upon you; despite your unreadiness, despite your denial. There was no escaping it.

The fact is, dawn always comes too soon when you're loath to face another day. As you surfaced uneasily to consciousness that morning from the depths of Hieronymus Bosch's *Hell* — where you'd spent the last few hours in the company of creatures more animal than human engaged in acts more surreal and bizarre than your waking mind could ever imagine — it seemed as if a cosmic switch had been activated. In that moment, the dense pre-dawn blackness you'd been staring numbly into for what seemed like the longest time was instantaneously replaced by the glare of a fierce sun, as the bright, unforgiving, light of day shot its vengeful beams through the chinks in your sagging bedroom curtains to pierce you where you lay, mesmerised, terrified of what this new dawning might bring. You waited, still as death, face to the wall, as a woman crept softly from your bed. You wanted to say something to her. Honest you did. You wanted to reach out to her in some way, and share some kind of tenderness. But it was so much easier not to...

You heard her shuffling around the room, pictured her dressing in last night's hastily discarded clothing, then sensed her closeness and felt her hot breath on your face. A long, quiet moment followed. *What was she doing?* Next thing her lips brushed across your cheek and she was gone. The door clicked behind her; her car started up outside and you heard it accelerating through successive gear changes, fading away to merge with the distant grumble of commuter traffic on Te Atatu Road heading north, lemming-like, towards the motorway. You sighed and rolled over onto your back. *Just another weekday morning in the life of me, myself, I.* Your body felt like someone else's. Your limbs ached, your head whirled and throbbed, the hollow in the pit of your stomach felt like a gaping wound.

Curry jumped up onto the bed and made his way across the rumpled sheets until he was pawing at your shoulder. Next came his usual early morning, foul-mouthed greeting: a long, plaintive 'Meooooow', meaning 'I'm hungry. Get up you sod. Feed me'. You slapped him away and he retreated, but he wasn't about to give up. He stood nearby pawing the bedclothes determinedly, glaring at you as if to say 'You pathetic, lazy excuse for a human being.' He is so like Garfield you often question your own sanity in choosing to co-habit with him, but the girl before the one before; the one before ... the one ... before the one that had just left your bed, had left him behind when she'd moved out, so you'd been kind of stuck with

him. He was a poor excuse for a flatmate, granted, but at least, in his cupboard love kind of way, he cared whether you lived or died. You sighed again as a wave of self-revulsion swept over you. *Why were you always so mean to him? Why had you been so cruel to her? Why were you so angry at everyone and everything?*

The glowering sun continued to bore holes in your retinas, even when you closed your eyes. Unbearable. You crawled from the bed and made your way shakily to the ensuite where you slumped over the basin and began to run the hot tap. You glanced up to catch your reflection in the mirror. Big mistake. A parody of your former self stared back at you. Your once startling ice-blue eyes now faded and sunken in their sockets, your dull skin, and the sharp protruding cheekbones your illness had left behind cast the rest of the face that looked back at you into deep shadow, exacerbated by a five-day growth. You were about to wash the sleep out of your eyes, but you hesitated. *Maybe it was time you shaved. Maybe not though — what difference would it make?* An overwhelming anger began to rise up inside of you, as the gall from your rotten stomach rose slowly up your gullet. There was only one thing for it: to break the mirror so you wouldn't have to look at yourself anymore. You cast about wildly for something strong and hard, but rummaging through the vanity beneath the basin, all you found there were a few threadbare towels. You grabbed one and tore it up into strips, then wrapped them around your hands, fastening them under themselves, into the palm, like bandages. You took a last look at the spectre in the mirror, made serious eye contact, then lunged as if your life depended on it: you were in the ring with David Tua — it was the world heavyweight championships, and you were the contender.

When you'd had enough, breathless and panting in the fractured fragments that remained on the wall, the basin was unusable. *Better purge myself properly; better scrub away all the shame and ugliness and pain that threaten to overwhelm me*, you thought. You flicked the shower on, waited for the jet of water to heat up, limped in. Leaning against the cold tiled wall, you shed the strips of bloodied towel that covered your fists like a mummy unwrapping its own embalming, and they fell to the floor. Hot water gushed over you and it felt good; good

enough. You slid down the wall and slumped into the corner. You sat there, hunched in a stupor of sudsy vapour, until the water ran cold.

It was only when you heard the shrill ring of the telephone that you came to your senses. The shower cubicle was about to overflow. You pulled the plug of fabric blocking the drain hole aside, and the water began to gush away in a steady stream. Then you realised you were shivering and forced yourself up and out, even though it took every wedge of your will. 'Guess Who' was waiting for you in the bedroom — you tripped over him a couple of times while trying to dry yourself and kicked him out of the way. You caught a glimpse of your naked self in the full-length mirror on your cupboard door — your body looked like the carcass of some strange inhuman beast hung out to cure. *Bugger*, you thought, *I'll have to break this mirror too*. But you just didn't have the energy right then.

Curry wasn't about to give up. Spurred on by his growling stomach he tried again to rub up against your legs. You couldn't help yourself — it was so easy to send him flying clear across the room, and you watched as he hit the wall, spun off it into the air, landed perfectly on his feet, and bolted from the room. "Stupid arsehole pea brain," you shouted after him, "stay out of my way or you're dead, mate!"

You sank down onto the edge of the unmade bed and tried to collect yourself. After a few moments, you pulled on some track pants, a T-shirt and jumper, and what last night's lay had cheekily referred to as your 'old-man' slippers. The smell of her lingered on in the room. You remembered how good it felt when you got your dick into her at last and let rip, got your rocks off good and proper, after all that inane small talk and trivial seduction repartee. *What a hard-up grot she was*. She'd said you were the only man she'd ever known who could undo a bra with one hand, in a single deft movement. "Must be due to all the practice I've had," you'd replied, before you started biting her naked nipples. But she didn't flinch; didn't even bat an eyelid. All she said was, "I'm the lucky one, then," and she'd smiled at you, sweet and calm and strong.

When you'd gotten yourself together, you shuffled through to the kitchen, made an instant coffee, and threw a few Friskies cat biscuits onto the floor. *That should shut him up and*

keep him out of my way for a bit, you thought. Then you made your way into the lounge room where you fell onto the couch, grabbed the TV remote, and pressed the red “ON” button. The picture shimmered slowly into view. *Oh God, spare me!* That metrosexual was on; the guy on TV One’s Good Morning show who’s expected to bake cakes and take sewing lessons while he flexes his perfectly toned exfoliated abs and flicks back his designer fringe. A red-nailed sophisticate with her hair teased up into a French roll was showing him how to cut out and sew an apron. “And after that,” she said with a wicked gleam in her eye, “he’ll be wearing this perfectly practical apron while we bake yummy blueberry muffins for morning tea.” *Fuck, what next?* you groaned.

The phone blinking on the coffee table distracted you from this banal entertainment and you remembered that someone had tried to call. You dialled the message retrieval code.

“Jimmy? (Pause.) Jerome! This is your mother. (As if you needed some kind of introduction ...) Why can’t you just record a proper message so that people know they’re talking to a machine? And what was that awful cacophony? Must you always have that hideous music playing? (She was referring to the few bars of Led Zep you’d recorded in place of an answer message.) Anyway, what I want to know is, when is your hospital appointment? It’s bad enough that you’re sick but (voice shrieks up to a crescendo) Nana’s not too good either. She wants you to come down and see her; says this time she’s certain she’s ... (Blubber, blubber. Extended pause.) You were always her favourite, Jerome; you know how fond she is of you. Remember how she used to call you Jiminy Cricket? ‘Come to me, Ji-mi-ny,’ she’d say, ‘come to the Blue Fairy, and let her set you on your way.’ You’d laugh and run into her arms and she’d ruffle your hair, straighten your little clothes and make the sign of the cross on your forehead ... ‘You are to serve as the wise partner and conscience of Pinocchio; his helpmate and confidante who will save him from all ill-deeds.’ Then she’d put you down and pat your bottom and say, ‘Now run along and play; time enough for you to be serious another day.’ (Sniff.) Anyway, I’m just ringing to say that Dad’ll pay for your air ticket — I suppose you haven’t any money as usual. (Sigh.) It’s about time you came home to Dunedin Jimmy; your brothers want to catch up too. And your birthday’s coming up. You could spend it with us, just this once. You

know, we do *care* about you, even though ...” The message timed out. *Even though I’m an arsehole and a total failure as far as you’re all concerned*, you thought.

You rolled a cigarette and lit up, inhaling deeply. Aah, the acrid taste of burning tobacco — the perfect complement to sweet, hot, metallic caffeine. Your mother’s voice seemed to continue on and on over the lame TV programme: “You’ve got to pull up your socks Jerome — clean yourself up and make an effort, take better care of yourself! Cut out the alcohol, coffee, the cigarettes, and anything *else* you’re on, dear — you know what I mean. Eat lots of fruit and vegetables — you know what the doctor said! Come home and we’ll help you through this, take care of you ...” *Yeah*, you thought, *more likely drive me to my own demise, and hammer the nails into my coffin as fast and as furiously and as firmly as you can. In case I try to force my way out of it. So that at last you can be rid of the gaping canker in the family: the profligate pariah that shames you more than you can bear.*

Fuck, you were thinking, *she is such a control freak, how did Dad put up with her...?* She didn’t have any idea, man. And come to think of it, neither did he. They lived in a different world; it was as if the twentieth century had passed them by. He was a successful accountant, an independently wealthy property developer, and a serial womaniser — no surprises there! What? She liked to call herself a ‘home executive’ — her positive slant on the drudgery of housewifery, underpinned by a long-standing membership of Probus and The Womens’ Institute, with a craft fetish for self-fulfilment, and a packet of Prozac always tucked surreptitiously into her knitting bag, to take the edge off the perpetual pre-menstrual tension she inflicted on all and sundry. So entrenched were they in their secure and blinkered lifestyle living down there at the ass-end of the world, that Armageddon could come, and they’d still be out there on a Saturday, mowing the lawns, pruning the roses, and having date scones for afternoon tea, while your Grandma wandered aimlessly around the neighbourhood in her urine-stained nightie, repeating nursery rhymes like a mad cow to anybody who gave her the time of day. *Yeah, Grandma was the archetypal ‘Blue Fairy’ all right*, you thought. *And she had the blue rinse to go with it!* They knew nothing about anything, man. Like, success is relative. Happiness is relative. Like the whole fucking universe is relative. Relative as ...

Didn't they know that success wasn't necessarily equal to being a doctor or a lawyer like your exemplary brothers, with a couple of late-model cars in the garage and flash mortgaged-to-the-hilt houses and baches, 2.2 children, and a pair of nagging wives to boot? That kind of life wasn't the be all and end all of existence, man. The world had changed; the old ways of working yourself up to success and security were outmoded models that just didn't cut it anymore. None of them could possibly understand or appreciate the matchless high you'd felt when, at the pinnacle of your career as a drug dealer, you left your 'office' in Newton at the end of a long day of trading with a couple of K in tidy cash bundles stashed comfortably in your briefcase, alongside some cracking good blow. And you'd pumped all the way home on Highway 16 in your brand new burgundy Holden Commodore 5.7 Litre V 8, with PsyIllusion's electronic trance music blaring from the boom box in the boot, feeling like Darth Vader. Could anything in their paltry lives ever match the way you felt when you walked in the door? Your long black leather coat swishing across the pitted polished Kauri floorboards. Your hand in your pocket, stroking the loaded Smith & Weston .45 handgun that lay there like a hard-on. The knowing smile of the Siamese cat that sat like an ornament on the Persian rug in front of the fire, as you passed her by. The salacious smugness that spread across your face as you opened up that loaded briefcase, and threw all that fucking success and happiness over the bed where the chick you were currently screwing was lying, legs wide open, in a silky G-string and lacy push-up bra? *Relative as, you thought. Like, hadn't they ever heard of Einstein?*

Yeah, things were different now; that you had to concede. And in *their* eyes, the eyes of your family, you were the prodigal son. But, little did they know, you had no intention of ever returning home. You loathed them. And your hometown. And everything claustrophobic and abnormal and dysfunctional about all of it; passionately, desperately, darkly. But who were you? Really? What separate identity had you forged for yourself? An ex-dope dealer junkie. Absent father to a fair little girl; about to become an absent father for the second time round to the progeny of another of your cast-off women. And riddled too, with stomach cancer; a one way ticket, for sure. You counted off these facts about yourself on your fingertips. *So what?* you thought. *A short life on the edge was infinitely preferable to any other alternative.*

Something started pricking you where your skinny buttocks nestled against the seat cushion. You reached down to see what it was and a hoop earring attached itself to your finger. It could only have been 'Crystal's'; it had been that long since you'd had a woman over. You'd probably nibbled it off her ear at some stage during the drunken proceedings of the night before. Not her real name, *obviously* — you'd picked her up on the internet. She hadn't even been able to come up with an original handle, for God's sakes! Maybe she believed the name 'Crystal' imbued her with a sense of mystery and uniqueness. *How pathetic was that?* you asked yourself. She'd written to you, as they all did; you didn't really have the physical energy to go after chicks anymore. You'd been some looker when you'd been well, and only ever posted your good pics on *nzdating*; the way you once were before you'd gotten sick and your life had turned to shit. She'd messaged you some sob story about how you reminded her of her ex, and how badly she wished to relive just one moment of the happiness she'd shared with him. Well what could you do? You saw an opportunity for an easy fuck and took it up; got her to drive over last night and worked your indifferent charm on her.

You swung the earring around your bony finger like a hula-hoop for a couple of minutes, thinking about her. There was something about her that was intriguing, you had to admit; something that sort of drew you in. For one thing, she was different. You'd always gone for blondes; that is when you'd been well enough to go out on the prowl for women. And, man, you'd been through so many you couldn't really tell the difference between them — they were all the same somehow; cut-outs, clones, 'cardboard' dolls. If someone had asked you about any one of them in particular, you wouldn't have had a clue which bird they were talking about.

Actually, there was one once; just one, just once, who stood out above the rest, probably because she had a bit of spunk — Mercedes. Moreover, she was a natural blonde. A *real* blonde. She was as ditzy as the rest on the whole, with her new-age mumbo jumbo, and her suitcase full of incense and Buddha effigies and tarot cards and stuff, but God could she sing! She used to bum around the countryside, performing in bars and cafés to earn her living; the quintessential, happy, hippy chick. If it hadn't been for her skew-whiff eyes, she might've made it; some music producer would surely have come across her somewhere, and snapped

her up. Thinking about her now, you remember how you pushed her out of the Commodore in front of the Maungaturoto Tavern after that drug deal in Dargaville went wrong. You'd been hightailing it back to Auckland, coming down after smoking a lot of bad shit, and she'd got up your nose about something, irritated you beyond endurance, as they all eventually ended up doing. But her eyes were something else, yeah. You had to admit it. Those squint blue-grey liquid eyes always kind of saw right through you ...

You had a stock joke that you'd always used on blondes. Ha ha. You'd always ask them to describe their hair colour, and they'd say, you know, *ash*-blonde, or *strawberry*-blonde or *platinum*-blonde or whatever, and your retort had always been 'No ... bottle blonde, surely?' Most of them were so thick they didn't get that you were taking the piss, and they usually just laughed embarrassedly before quickly changing the subject. But you hadn't been able to use that ruse on 'Crystal' last night — she had dark hair with silver streaks running through it. And she was a big girl, with feet that seemed to stick out way in front of her; like that's all you could see coming towards you were these clumsy, clown-like feet. Scary, man. But there was something *real* about her too — she doesn't act like a bimbo because she knows she's not one, *could* never be one, *has* never been one. She's shy and awkward, and when she talks, it's about silly things, like the way it feels when you push your face into a full-blown rose to smell its perfume. Sometimes, she says, roses make her so happy, because they're just so beautiful and soft and velvety and fragile, she just can't stop herself — she tears the blossoms to pieces and eats the petals, one by one! For the joy they bring her. *Crazy, man; way crazy.* But you have to concede, she did have a kind of sparkle about her, and when she was talking, her voice was soft and sure and soothing, and her mouth was velvety, like a rosebud, you thought. You remember thinking that she had ... something. You're just not sure what though.

Mmm, it's not like you to wax lyrical, Jimmy Masters, you tell yourself. Probably letting the side down, mate. After all, a woman is only good for one thing, and you don't get sweet on them — ever! It's not like they've got personalities or anything — once you've had them, fucked them silly and relieved yourself, you wish they'd just bugger off so you can get on with your life. But they always hang around, wanting to talk bullshit, waiting for you to say something meaningful, and only then do they finally bugger off. *Since when were you ever*

capable of saying anything meaningful, Jeremy Masters? This one didn't though. She just up and left; made no demands on you, didn't even try and set up a repeat date. *Weird*, you thought, *way weird*. Maybe you were losing your touch, getting soft. Whatever. And you didn't even know it.

The gay dude on TV was stuffing a muffin into his face, looking like a total dick wearing the frilly apron he'd made, while the bitch beside him jumped up and down with spurious glee. *Rather him, than me*, you thought. It occurred to you that you should maybe try and eat something but you felt nauseous and shaky. Strong black coffee was the only thing you could stomach right now — it was time to top up your mug. You threw 'Crystal's' earring into the empty fruit bowl on the table and raised yourself slowly up off the couch. Then you remembered it was Wednesday and you brightened up a little. Your gang had always referred to their weekly get-together as 'Coffee Club' — made it sound normal and routine; a regular men's-only social fixture a bit like Rotary or Masons for the older generation. *Bring it on, man*. It was the only thing you looked forward to these days; a bit of ya-de-da with the old connections, a couple of P pipes, a game or two of pool. The macho communion and bro-like support had always carried you through, good times and bad times alike. You decided to get in touch with Dune to check whether he could still give you a ride tonight — the Commodore was out of action, had been for a long time; it was a wreck on the front lawn right now, unregro-ed and unwarranted, with ferns growing up through its engine, and knee-high grass covering those to-die-for mags.

There was a call bar on your landline 'cause the bill was overdue, so you changed direction and headed shakily for the bedroom to retrieve your mobile from where you'd left it charging on the bedside table. It was a struggle; you had no idea till then just how close your whole body was to shutting down, how close death was. You almost had to crawl to get there, clutching the walls, doubled over in pain. And you nearly didn't make it. But when you entered the room, and fixed the position of your mobile in your mind's eye, you pushed yourself on, shuffling awkwardly towards it — your life-line it was; your connection to the outside world. It was close now, you were about to reach out for it. But Curry got in the way. He must have

been hiding under the bed; as you approached, he probably panicked, and he shot out in front of your legs, cutting you off. You tripped over him and fell down hard, hitting your head against the wooden bedside table; the victim of your own embedded vitriol and calculated violence. You crumpled there on the floor, the fallible, dying, human man-beast that you were; always had been; ever could be. The sun burned bright in your eyes where you lay, until it became the bright white light of the tunnel of death. *It's pretty much all over now, dude*, you thought. And there was nothing you could do about it, man: nothing. Moreover, you knew all that stuff about life after death was just wishful thinking; that the tunnel of death was not a spiritual experience as you travelled to meet your maker, but rather, a chemical reaction induced by the body's physiological response to a lack of oxygen — therefore just a lie, like all that other crap and shit they fed you and expected you to believe; all lies.

And that's when you finally realised that your number had come up — that you were only passing through, Jiminy Cricket, on your way to annihilation and oblivion. If last night's lay hadn't decided to come back for her missing earring, it would have been tickets for you man, that particular, certain day.

Love Me Tender

When Elmore arrived at the back door of the theatre at precisely six o'clock of an evening, Charlie, the elegantly attired doorman/security guard, would step aside, holding the door wide for him, and as El crossed the threshold into the maze of dark corridors that comprised the back stage area of the Classic Comedy Bar, they'd exchange the usual hurried pleasantries. Elmore made a point of allowing time for this brief interchange; he liked to acknowledge what he called 'the little people' who managed his life for him in various ways. He would always need to pause anyway, to allow his eyes to adjust to the dusty gloom within, and he would brace himself on the threshold of his two lives, before hastening down the vortex of dimly-lit passages that led to his dressing room. Charlie enjoyed the brief attention El bestowed on him; he basked in the knowledge that he was personally acquainted with the star of the show, and besides, he was able to set his watch by El's arrival, which meant that he would be on time for the rest of the evening.

When El reached his dressing room, his daily routine continued unabated. He was always in a state of high panic, dreading the long hours of preparation, followed by the exhausting performance that awaited him; and after that, the posturing and petty small talk with various high-profile visitors, critics, and sycophants that his position demanded of him. A set routine was counterpoint to his nervous agitation; it provided him with practical matters to focus on. First, he hit the ancient light switches with the palm of his hand, and the dungeon-like room would spring to life, illuminating him as he entered, capturing his reflection in the light-bulb-surrounded mirror that dominated the far wall. When he saw himself standing there, he knew that the show would go on. If he could go on. He'd engage in another brief conversation, this time with his reflection, asking himself whether he was up to it, whether he could cut it once more. Inevitably, his eyes would fall on the black and white framed photograph of his mother that sat in pride of place on the dressing room table staring back at him, and he'd remind himself that this aspect of his life was non-negotiable. He did what he did for her — only for her. He'd sigh, resigning himself to his situation, and lock the door behind him; he didn't appreciate being interrupted by anyone, even his manager, or the show's director, while he was psyching himself up for the show. Then he'd put his bag down and begin working his way through his ritual preparation.

His first task was always to make himself a fresh Arabian coffee on what served as a kitchen bench on one side of the dressing room, with the aid of a grinder, hot water jug, and plunger. Mum had always said that life was too short to drink bad coffee. She'd also said that life was too short to stuff a mushroom — a contradiction, in the sense that both activities required time and careful preparation, so why would the one be worth doing and the other not? But the consistency of Elmore's mother's wisdom was beyond reproach as far as he was concerned, because, when one thought about it, it made perfect sense. Mushrooms are a delight to eat on their own; there is no need to stuff them to enhance their enjoyment, so why go to the trouble? Whereas good coffee was well worth the effort — the alternative, instant, was not only undrinkable; when one was acquainted with the real thing, it was unthinkable.

When his brew was ready, he'd add four teaspoons of sugar, and throw it back like a drug. Then he'd prepare two lines of coke, snorting them with a \$20 note from the magnified

make-up mirror that always lay ready on the dressing table. As he shot up, his enlarged reflection would stare back at him, and his state of panic and feelings of inadequacy would increase exponentially when he saw the coarse curly hairs that sprouted from his nasal cavities, the silver roots of re-growth at his parting, and the unruly grey strands that threatened to overpopulate his lamb chop side-burns. Thank God for stage make-up he'd think, as he collapsed onto the stuffed-out old couch in the corner, where he'd spend the next ten minutes in abject repose, psyching himself up for what was to come.

At approximately six thirty, his dresser and make-up artist would knock tentatively at the door, and he'd rise reluctantly to open it for her; Sweet Jane he called her, because she was sweet — very sweet — and because her name was, actually, Jane. But mostly, he thought of her as Sweet Jane because she did what was required, because she doubled as his drug dealer, and because she kept her mouth shut.

He wasn't exactly in the prime of his life; the middle-aged spread that hugged his hips necessitated elasticized trousers, extra width in the design of his jacket, a full-torso girdle, and Diabetes 2 medication to boot. He was short too, at five ten, and had to wear built up shoes. Not *that* short — in fact he was tall by average standards, given statistics regarding the average height of the average man. But he was too short to portray his character convincingly enough, even on stage, so compensatory measures had needed to be taken, 'for the purposes of verisimilitude' according to the show's director, and El couldn't argue with that. But then there was the matter of the large fake penis that he had to wear strapped to his inner leg. Sweet Jane was always so gracious when she attached the appendage, and when he was fully made up and dressed, ready to go on stage, she always said something like, "You are soooooo like him, El! You're the living image," topping the fake adoration off with an extra line of coke — a freebie — and a vote-of-confidence kiss on the cheek, before she pushed him in the direction of the stage door.

Up until that moment, he always doubted himself, wondering whether he could pull it off, wishing he had another life, lived in another place and time. But when he heard the opening bars of *Love Me Tender* peal sweetly, gently, across the stage, into the nether-land

where he waited petrified and inadequate in the wings, he felt uplifted, borne forth on the fringed glory of white bellbottoms and rhinestones, called forth by the myriad nefarious dreams and longings of a whole world of hopefuls, try-hards, and has-beens. He'd stride out into the spotlight, compelled by the memory of his long-gone mother, and he'd sidle up to the microphone, bellbottoms flapping, hips swaying (he knew not how, or why, or wherefore, but everyone said the way he moved was so authentic, even the critics), and begin to lip-synch the song.

Throughout his performance, the thought of his dear mother sustained him; she of the Mary Quant eyeliner, tight mini-skirts, and big hair teased up bouffant-style into an upswept style that always reminded him of candyfloss. Night after night, she would set him up under a crocheted blanket on the couch where he slept in the lounge room, in front of the brand new TV set in their little bedsit on K Road, with a bottle of Coke and a bowl of popcorn. Then she'd leave for work, returning only in the wee hours, or sometimes only after a couple of days had passed. All he'd known and understood as a small child was that she was hardly ever there. Her job was very important, she'd said. And he knew it paid very well, because when she got home, she'd remove a wad of pound notes from her handbag and hide them in a shoe box under her bed. She also kept her Southern Cross savings account book there. She was gradually putting away enough money so that they could travel to Memphis, in the US of A, to be reunited with the very famous man she'd told him was his father.

Elmore's favourite time of the day was the evenings. He spent many happy hours with his mother in front of her dressing-table, watching her in the mirror as she applied her make-up, helping her match the colours of her eye-shadow and lipstick to her various outfits, and performing the special task of applying hair-spray to her back-combed Jackie Onassis flick-ups, when she was all dressed up and ready to go. She also taught him how to paint her nails — she'd said that he had such a steady hand and his strokes were so neat, he'd surely be a famous artist when he grew up. Another important job that she'd assigned him was placing her Elvis seven-singles on the turntable, and playing them over and over, as often as she wanted, on the bright orange, battery-powered, portable Phillips record player that she'd bought at Smith &

Caughey's with some of her hard-earned money. The record player had even accompanied them on a rare picnic to Alexander Park, she loved Elvis' music that much.

When the authorities came to take him away, they gave him a few minutes to collect his personal effects and pack a small suitcase. He'd waited until the social worker visited the bathroom and the cop was stationed outside guarding the hallway, before slipping into his mother's room and emptying the contents of her dressing-table into her toilet bag, which he hid amongst his belongings. He also grabbed an LP, *Elvis Presley*; it had been the first ever pop album to go gold on the US charts, and was to become, many years later, a treasured collector's item. Most of his best numbers were on it: *Blue Suede Shoes*, *Tutti Frutti*, *Blue Moon*, and *Money Honey* — their tunes and lyrics had been etched onto his brain since babyhood, as had every inflection and nuance of Elvis' voice. He also took his mother's PYE Pockette transistor radio with him, and he kept it set always to her favourite channel — Radio 1, which played all the pop tunes. It was to serve as his constant companion in the days and months to come, enabling him to consistently add to his repertoire as each new Elvis release hit the charts.

Throughout his long years in the foster home, these precious memorabilia comforted him. Whenever he was able to manage a few private moments, when the other boys were at rugby (he didn't play; was considered too delicate and sickly) and their foster mother was having afternoon tea with the neighbour, he'd unpack his secret hoard and lay the items out on his bed. The presence of his mother still lingered on these treasured items — the indents of her dainty fingerprints on the cake foundation; the taste of her lips on the bright orange and dusky pink lipstick tips; the curve of her eyes on the thick, fanned, false eye-lashes; and the soft pads of her eye-lids in the multi-coloured palettes of eye-shadow. Most precious though, was the scent of her skin on the powder puff, and of her underwear in the little vial of Worth eau-de-cologne.

He was a good boy, always had been, and he excelled at school. He also worked the local newspaper round for many years, and began to accumulate a tidy little sum in his own Southern Cross savings account book. And mostly, he kept his secret shame to himself, scrubbing the make-up off his face and packing away all the evidence, before anyone came

home. But one day, he was caught in the act by the other boys, and the words 'poofter' and 'sicko' became known to him. After that, he knew that as soon as he could, he would make his way to Memphis to find his father, for his mother had never come for him, and he had no idea what might have become of her.

When he finally made it to the US of A, he hit Graceland running, purchasing all the gear he needed — Stetsons and pointed snakeskin cowboy boots in every available colour; stretch-white-linen, hipster bellbottom trousers; sequin-adorned boleros; form-fitting tasselled jackets; stud-encrusted belts that could handle a couple of heavy duty holsters; red silk shirts; bling. He based himself in Nashville, entering every Elvis look-a-like competition going, winning many, and stashing away large amounts of greenbacks. Eventually, he returned to New Zealand a rich man, bringing the allure of the States back with him to the conservative parochial little country of his birth, where he was hailed as an artiste of the highest order. His billboards read 'FORGET JOHN ROWLES: ELMORE IS THE REAL THING!' (Shortly afterwards, as his own star rapidly faded, Rowles was forced to move across the ditch to pursue his career, and has lived there ever since, returning only to NZ for the odd show, most recently to perform in TV One's *Dancing with the Stars*.)

El is in full swing tonight as he gyrates his way through his repertoire, still going strong almost thirty years after he returned home as a professional Elvis impersonator. The crowd are calling for an encore, and Elmore decides to do *Love Me Tender* once again; after all, it has always been his favourite number, and was his mum's also. An elderly woman in the front row with a purple rinse teased up bouffant-style and a string of large faux pearls around her neck catches his attention as he returns to the stage. She's waving and blowing kisses, and swinging a lacy black bra around in the air, like a feather boa. Elmore watches her intently as he begins to perform, suddenly realising that something about the tilt of her head, the set of her mouth, and the flick of her wrist is closer to him than Elvis' G Major countertenor could ever be. But a few bars into the song, she collapses to the floor, hidden from view by the swaying bodies all around her. No-one else notices; everyone's eyes are on him.

Love Me Tender continues playing without Elmore's accompanying pelvic thrusts, and all the crowd can see on stage now is the solitary mirror ball hanging from the ceiling turning slowly in circles, keeping tempo with the crooning voice over. He has leapt from the podium, and is pushing through the pressing mass of bodies to reach her. The crowd parts before him, and soon he is cradling her head in his lap. She gazes up into his eyes, and lifts a cool, frail hand to his cheek. Her lips are moving, and he leans in closer, straining to hear what she's saying above the music. "You were magnificent tonight, my boy," she whispers. "Absolutely the bees knees! Your dad would have been proud, Elmore, real proud." At least, that's what it sounded like, because that's what he needed to hear. But what she really said was: "If life was fair, my boy, Elvis would be alive! And all his impersonators would be dead, Elmore, real dead."

Mehico

Dear Frida,

I have something to tell you; something important. I'm coming to visit. I'm coming to share your view of the sky. I wish to learn all that you know: the sound of a hummingbird's wings aflutter, the scent of soft Iztaccihautl snow, the weight of woven cloth, the burn of a cruel sun's brightness, the bitter-sweet taste of iced lemon syrup. You will teach me: the calibration of a cordon of colour, the horror of a loved one's betrayal, the gift of a good father's blessing, the curse of a cold, hard, steel rail, the feel of a monkey's velvet pelt and small simian fingers entwined in mine. I wish to wear a carmine crown of Hibiscus flowers in my hair, to hear the sweet sound of your Spanish sibilances in my ear.

We shall link arms and walk and talk among your cacti collection in the courtyard of La Casa Azul; we shall lie together in your vast canopied bed on embroidered Castilian cushions, smoking cigarillos, drinking Tequila, and tickling each others' necks with your sable-hair paintbrushes. And when evening draws close, we'll comb frangipani oil through our hair, and pile its plaited coils atop our heads to dress them with black lace Mantillas. We'll wear Tehuantepec-style gowns, and you'll adorn me with your turquoise pendant earrings, and drape your long, long chain of Mexican silver medallions around my neck. You'll paint my lips and cheeks with blood-red rouge, pencil black brows above my dark eyes with a stick of charcoal, and a black crow will fly across my forehead, its bleeding prey hanging from its razor-like beak. Together, we shall share a platter of quesadillas and ensalada de nopales.

And when night falls, we shall dance and sing on the upper balcony with your semiotic skeletons for company; we shall cry too, as we watch the shadows of our former selves playing on the adobe walls in the firelight. Later, much later, you will throw your patterned peasant shawl around my shoulders to stop the chill that comes down on Anahuac at midnight, while we drink sweet rich café solo in the navel of the moon. And you will teach me how to feel again; how to feel more than pain.

Jet engines hum a lullaby as I doze fitfully at 4000feet, hurtling through the ether towards you, spanning the space between us in seeming slow-motion. My journal falls closed on my lap; my pen drops to the floor and rolls away, lost forever. Later, the voice of the pilot awakens me, as he announces over the intercom:

"Ladies and gentlemen, on our left, to the east and south, the Mountains of the Sleeping Lady. We are now beginning our descent into the Valley of Mexico. Please place your seats in an upright position, and fasten your seatbelts. Estimated time of arrival at Mexico City: 11.45a.m. The weather is clear and warm; ground temperature — 34 degrees; wind — south easterly 6-7 knots, humidity —76 percent; visibility — poor."

Through the porthole window, the magical city of your birth and death spreads smouldering in every direction beneath me, Frida; a vast expanse of dusty squatter hovels

stretching relentlessly to the foothills of the mountains, giant refuse dumps crawling with stray dogs and ragged people, a landscape blurred and hazy through the murky film of smog and acid rain that hangs above it like a canopy. And then, row upon row of identical condo-like structures — cheap government housing developments — crisscrossed by narrow streets of asphalt, no green of grass to ease the eye, giving way gradually to industrial urban sprawl: smoke stacks; vast used-car graveyards; excavation craters plumbing the depths of the earth populated by towering construction cranes reaching up into the sky; a matrix of tangled streets choked with emission-exuding traffic crawling to and from the heart of the city, where skyscrapers of steel and glass rise high above the few sparse green belts that mark out the public squares and parks.

As we come in to land, I start thinking about Davey. When I came out of the clinic he'd invited me to stay with him for a few days; said I should take my time, take it easy.

"So what now?" he'd said in the car on the way out to his place.

"I don't know. Back to my box at the top of the stairs I guess; and my mindless job at the Warehouse when my sick leave runs out ..."

"Go to Mexico."

I looked at him askance. "Oh yeah? Why would I do that?"

"Just go, Leyla. You'll find out why when you get there. And throw away those packets of Prozac and all that other stuff you're on. You've got to learn to live again. Without them." He said he'd come into some money, insisted that I use it to take a trip, *this* trip. He loved me; that I knew, had known for some time. And I loved you, Frida; he knew that. He knew your world could heal me, make me feel again; that only you and your beloved Mehico could rescue me from my memories. He hoped that the brave welcome you gave to all life brought you would welcome me too; that the solutions you found to rise above its limitations and disappointments would become mine too, in time.

As the plane hits the tarmac, we pass the grandstands they've erected at the end of the runway for the poor to visit for entertainment. They're packed with swarming bodies of all

ages; colour-coded groups of shouting and waving schoolchildren, officials who man the gangways, peddlers touting their wares. The welcoming party moves me — I've never seen such a seething mass of humanity, so animated, content with so little. It reminds me, Frida, how both our childhoods were black and white — colour and depth and resolution were the precious things we had to fight for as we grew into adulthood and faced our lives as autonomous beings, as women, because they made our lives bigger, brighter, more bearable; because they cancelled out the grey netherland of pain, where black and white merge in shadow. And for all our superficial differences, and the great distance between our worlds, we have another thing in common — our Jewishness; the fact that we have always lived as strangers in a strange land, far from home. A fact that binds us, always, irrevocably, over the time and space that separates us ...

The taxi ride to Coyoacan, your part of the city, is perhaps not unlike what you would have experienced almost a hundred years ago when the street car in which you were travelling home from college derailed, and you were so tragically injured — impaled through your middle on a steel bar, crucified on a cold, hard, steel rail. The sound of screeching brakes, squealing tyres, and screaming horns would have been forever etched on your memory as it is now engraved on mine; the sound of women crying for their dead babies and their lost loved-ones, as real for you as it is now for me; the sad lament of our common destinies ...

When I reach the Caza Azul, it's just as you left it, Frida, so unlike the nondescript, run-down, suburban villa I lived in with my husband and children on the other side of the world, in Auckland, on the other side of experience, not so long ago. Green wooden windows. Blue adobe walls. Flowering cacti. Yuccas and massive elephant ears. Pottery. Sculptures. Easels, paint-boxes, pots of coloured paint. The coffins of my dead were plain, unlike the ornamented catafalque that carried you in state to your final resting place, along avenues lined with limes, bordered by throngs of people clad in memorial black. A cold, hard, steel rail took my life from me too; an accident on the motorway — my exhausted unfaithful husband hit the crash barrier, when he was bringing my precious little ones home to me.

So Frida, when the morning comes, let us meet outside of time. Let us wear wreaths of bougainvillea; vermillion flowers like crepe paper; crumbling dry leaves the colour of viridian; welcome thorns like daggers to pierce the heart. Let us sit in front of your easel in the sun-drenched, snow-covered courtyard of your blue, blue house, with your pet Chihuahuas playing at our feet. We shall drink tea with Trotsky and his wife, Natalia. And you will paint me, as you painted yourself, in the retablo style, so that I too, like you, can celebrate my own miraculous recovery from disaster, my return, my life. And you will say: "I paint myself because I am so often alone ... because I am, therefore, the subject I know best ... the only subject I know at all. And I will answer: "My dear, we are each of us the only subject we can ever know; the central subject in the drama of our own lives." And we'll laugh, and cry, together. And then, Frida, you will leap up, spin around, clap your hands, and shout out: "So, live! LIVE! LIVE! Because, always, you are dying ..."

Queen of the Night

Claw maintained a careful vigil over the gardens at Apple Tree Cottage by day, yet by night he guarded them all the more fiercely, when the dangers of dark forces were that much more likely to be prevalent, under the cover of ... *darkness*. This personal mission, with which he had endowed his life with meaning, was one to which he was eminently well suited by virtue of his species, his gender, his natural aptitudes, and the many years he had invested in the honing of his innate skills.

He was thus, at one and the same time, self-employed and self-appointed to perform the distinct yet overlapping duties of both daytime security-guard and night-watchman (depending of course on whether it was daytime or night-time), as well those of CEO of his own limited liability company: a profession or undertaking or even a *calling (his word)* , that he approached and imbued with the utmost sense of gravitas. The fact that his various jobs and their implicit duties dominated his life around the clock was never for him a burden too great to fulfil; in fact it would have been almost impossible to detect on any given day or night that he was actually on the job, were it not for certain telling details.

Ever vigilant, he patrolled the grounds at regular, predetermined intervals, leaving no path untrodden, no bush uninspected, no vista unscanned, no flower bed unexplored, no corner unturned. All observations, relevant data and other (possibly pertinent) associated information —in short, the sum total of his investigations — were relayed back to “The Boss” for analysis and possible further inquiry (Claw had an almost uncanny, mercurial ability to switch effortlessly between roles, as required). Eventually a decision-making process got under way that, depending on the extenuating circumstances, sometimes resulted in certain actions being taken, or not, by one of the members of Claw’s organisation, as befitted the situation.

The manner in which he carried out these different yet equally essential aspects of his various tasks always appeared leisurely and nonchalant; moreover, the magnitude of this huge responsibility and undertaking never seemed arduous or burdensome to him at all. Yet on further investigation, it was obvious that this enterprising tomcat’s *modus operandi* were thoroughly ... *thorough*, and methodically ... *methodical*. No field-mouse, sparrow, daddy-long-legs, weta, cicada, huhu grub, cricket, grasshopper or any other visitor was able to come and go at Apple Tree Cottage unobserved, unapprehended and uninterrogated. Bigger threats — or “game” as he liked to call them —came under even more severe scrutiny. A wood-pigeon, for instance, preening on the overhead telephone lines in the cool of the morning would be surreptitiously observed and investigated from every possible angle and perspective. And sometimes, these bigger threats were subjected to even more drastic action. God help any vermin that might have even considered, or further, dared attempt a grab-and-run assault on the freshly-filled rubbish bin or fragrant (to vermin) compost heap in the dark of night — a lengthy pursuit on an empty stomach was all they would have to look forward to, till dawn rendered both the pursued and the pursuer exhausted.

Even when taking a break — Claw was acutely aware that subject to “the law” (always voiced in an American accent), all employees must be afforded their due breaks (a minimum of fifteen minutes per three hours of work), and since he was both the boss and the employee on duty at any given time, “24/7” (he actually hated the expression, but popular parlance demanded its use), this computed in his estimation to an absolute minimum of thirty minutes per three hour period plus an extra five minutes either side to clock off and clock on; i.e. forty

minutes per three hours (he was, after all, a generous employer) — he would lie in the shade in the pre-designated staff rest area and appear to be taking a cat-nap, but on closer inspection, one couldn't help but notice that the stipulated spot not only had an excellent vantage point, but also that a grossly unnerving hairy eyeball was always stretched wide open, noting every shiver of leaf, flutter of wing and articulation of miniature mandible — even the capture of a tiny dust mote in a fragile thread of spider web.

Claw didn't wear a uniform; an unnecessary expense he felt. He'd been through all the catalogues and come to the considered conclusion that his natural attire would do just as well, since it suited his purposes, so very ... *suitably*. Incidentally, he also believed in the practice of flat management and therefore, that both employees and employers were all equally valuable members of the organisation, and consequently, that they shouldn't be distinguishable by virtue of their designations or any other differences. So, as a result of this eminently wise executive decision, during the day he was highly visible, as any security guard ought to be (the deterrent factor!), his glorious, thick, shiny-black fur coat easily visible from rooftops and treetops, telephone poles and electricity supply lines, as well as at ground level, even when glimpsed through dense foliage or long green grass. Yet, by night, he passed under the cover of darkness, black on black, blending with and bleeding into the amorphous shapes of witching time; unseen, unnoticed, moving from shadow to shadow, incognito.

For many of the creatures that lived at Apple Tree Cottage, as well as for those that dared venture an unexpected visit, the sight of Claw on patrol, or even at rest, was a disconcerting blur on what would otherwise have been a perfectly idyllic landscape, consisting as it did of a rambling, authentic, Devonshire cottage set in an English country garden, which included an ancient orchard and carefully tended vegetable and herb gardens, surrounded by a couple of paddocks where sheep and cattle grazed contentedly in knee-high grass. Situated such as it was at the foothills of the Tamahunga Ranges, near the innocuous service town of Warkworth (named after a town in Northumberland in England), in the verdant countryside of rural New Zealand, and bordered on three sides by a river which flowed through native bush, and on the other by a road which separated it from extensive vineyards, it proffered the perfect

lifestyle for those seeking to escape the modern world's over-populated, over-stressed, over-polluted urban world.

The only time Claw allowed himself any significant respite from his onerous (not to him though, as I've pointed out) responsibilities and duties, was when he took his annual leave, in January — 20 working days now, according to "the law" (a very welcome, recent amendment to the Employment Act), which meant that he usually had a full month off, what with the addition of statutory holidays and weekends. In the manual of company regulations (which he had compiled, naturally), annual leave always officially started when the Queen of the Night that grew alongside the west wall of the cottage came into bloom. This stipulation was non-negotiable, for there was something about the scent of the flowers in full bloom that induced in Claw a drug-like state of such inertia, that, coupled as this event usually was with the languorous, intense heat and extended, long, lazy days of high summer, all his resolve, accountability and self-discipline immediately dissipated. And thus, his commitment to his usual multifarious activities was instantaneously foregone, as he fell beneath the night-flowering jessamine and lay there comatose for days and nights on end, whilst the shrub gently dropped its prodigious tubular-like miniature flowers upon him where he lay prone and prostate beneath it, suffusing the air around him with their insidious perfume, the sickly-sweet sensuous scent of them promptly penetrating his nostrils and ingratiating itself upon his highly susceptible sinuses. These, as in all creatures of the feline kind, had a direct link to his synapses, with an effect not much unlike serotonin uptake, the result of which served only to prolong this hedonistic state of absolute apathy and lassitude indefinitely, as he took his annual leave.

In my considered opinion (as the all-seeing, all-knowing Eye of God), the focus of Claw's choice of career in the usual course of his life was entirely misdirected, for in the world of man that existed cheek-and-jowl with his own, there were far more dangerous and subtle forces at work to which his gravely serious attentions could have been redirected, to far better effect. And so it was a great misfortune that, one January when Claw was taking his annual leave and dreaming away the long lazy days and brief twinkling nights of high summer in a state of

euphoria and inertia under the Ike He Po, a chain of events in the world of men was set in motion that was to result in the sudden termination of his (completely taken for granted) annual leave.

Those of you who know anything of the living arrangements and habits of cats will be only too acutely aware, probably as a result of having been endlessly taken advantage of, that they attach themselves to human beings — not out of need, but rather because they are so psychologically in tune with mankind, that they generally seek humans out, in all their various forms, for some kind of communion (not unlike the religious kind), and communal living situation (not unlike the conjugal kind). Lilith, the resident and Lady-of-the-Manor as it were of Apple Tree Cottage, was no different from the rest of the human race (on the surface, that was), in the sense that a cat always seemed to attach itself to her. However she had never consciously sought to be a cat “owner”, and was not by nature a cat “lover” or even a “cat person”; yet somehow she was never without one — they always seemed to come to her through some bizarre or tortuous circumstance involving an ex-lover, ex-friend or ex-acquaintance; or sometimes, they just turned up on her doorstep unannounced, and promptly moved in with her on the basis of a tacit invitation. Predictably, they were always black males, and their names were usually almost interchangeable: Claw, Paw, Fang, Satan, Beelzebub, Grim (short for Grim Reaper) etc. And so it followed that Lilith always had a familiar, even though in this case, Claw was obviously unaware of his role vis-a-vis his mistress, and believed himself to be self-employed in an industry and profession entirely of his own choosing, living the self-sufficient lifestyle he believed he had personally engineered for himself.

Now Lilith was a work of art, as much as Claw was a work of nature. She’d been around since the dawn of time and had lived through many reincarnations since her original claim to fame as Adam’s first wife. Thus she had become a master (or rather mistress) of her own destiny; a master (or rather mistress) of the particular art of artifice that served her life’s — or more aptly, her many lives’ — purpose. And since she’d been around the block a few times throughout the long convoluted history of man, she’d had the opportunity to add a great deal of experience to her own, particular, innate abilities.

She was a busy woman and had her finger in many pies — she was a popular socialite in the local community, an accomplished cook and gardener, and a woman who excelled in a variety of other ordinary as well as nefarious pursuits, all of which either directly or indirectly supported her present life's purpose. Currently that purpose involved a man named Rove. She'd been introduced to Rove (short for Rover) at a Christmas function by a mutual acquaintance, and he had ingratiated himself upon her during the course of the evening in such an obsequious manner, that she had immediately recognised him as being a man in dire need of "retraining" — in the sense that he had gotten away with so many misdemeanours regarding his relationships with women and their (sometimes, actually often his) children during his lifetime, that he desperately needed, in Lilith's opinion, what she termed *corrective* treatment.

Now the strange thing about Lilith was that, even though she stopped traffic and people gasped when they saw her for the first time, most men — ordinary, decent men, that is — gave her a wide berth, because something subliminal inside them knew that they could never match her, and they really didn't want to go there, to phrase it in common parlance. Tall, willowy (she towered above Rove who was, although perfectly formed, a rather small man), raven-haired (it flowed down her back to well below her waist like a black bridal train, and on closer inspection one might have noticed the odd spider resident there, in amongst its web-like tresses), moon-skinned (even in the daylight), rosy-cheeked and red-lipped (this, even without the application of any make-up), she inspired the kind of awe and respect in men that brought them instantly to their knees (metaphorically speaking), and had them dutifully rushing home to their wives or girlfriends the minute they could stand again (metaphorically speaking) without trembling. So when Rove attached himself to her at the Christmas party, she knew immediately what kind of a man he was (it was always the same "type" that had the audacity to approach her), and her every inherent sensibility and long-practised skill rallied to her command. You see, Rove was of a kind that Lilith recognised instantly — Archetypal Gnome, Leprechaun, Rumpelstiltskin — the type of man who is by nature mercenary, miserly and cruel; a taker and perverter of every good thing; the type who is incapable of love other than that of the most narcissistic kind, which, in Lilith's book, was the epitome of a certain kind of male personality disorder that demanded the employment of dire measures.

On returning home after the Christmas “doo”, Lilith promptly consulted her almanac on the forthcoming position of the planets, calculated the phases of the moon, and induced in herself a deep trance-like state of meditation by means of a herbal concoction, in which she could exactly divine what Rove’s karmic acts of selfishness towards women had so far entailed, so that she could determine how to deal with him appropriately. And so she set about preparing herself to bait the trap that she would lure him into; the trap that would not only be his undoing but also his nemesis.

She invited him to join her for an intimate dinner at Apple Tree Cottage on the 12th January, a Saturday in the year 2008. When he turned up on that exceptionally sultry summer evening and banged the brass knocker (a cheeky little cross-legged elf) on the front door to announce his arrival (it was wide open suggesting that she would be wide open to his advances, he thought), she was fully ready to deal with him in the most merciless of ways.

She floated towards him in a midnight-blue chiffon gown that twinkled in the darkening evening light as if studded with stars, welcoming him in with a twinkly wave of her delicate bejewelled hand. She noticed that he had the self-satisfied look on his face she knew so very well: the look of thousands of men just like him that had crossed her path through the ages, whose grasping ego-bound need for self-gratification cannot be disguised when they believe they are about to get lucky with a Queen of the Night without much effort on their part.

Lilith played Rove slowly so that she could savour every moment of his gradual undoing, leading him first into the cool conservatory on the east side of the house, where she had prepared a little feast for the two of them. She handed him a silver goblet into which she poured a generous amount of well-chilled gooseberry wine from a cut-glass decanter, and she toasted him with such a promising sparkle in her well-practised eye, it induced in him a look of crooked-smiled lecherousness that revealed an set of ugly rotting yellowed teeth. As he took his first sip of the syrupy golden liquid, her chest expanded as she sighed gently in anticipation of its effect upon him, and she watched bemusedly as his eyes dropped to her ample heaving décolletage, returning to her face via the gracious curve of her swan-like neck. She knew full well that it was highly unlikely he would ever have tasted such nectar of the gods before (he

wouldn't have been in need of reforming on this particular occasion otherwise!) and she gleefully awaited its inevitable result — a few, small sips and he'd become intoxicated with a lust so all-consuming that any vestige of self-protection he might have arrived with would be instantly eroded. Shortly he began to exhibit the behaviour she was expecting.

"Lilith, my dear, your beauty overwhelms me," he said and lurched towards her, wrapping his arms around her tiny waist, and, finding that his face now nestled conveniently between her ample alabaster breasts, he couldn't resist the urge to slobber a few wet kisses on them. She tittered sensuously and drew away.

"Rove, Rove, what's the rush? We have all night darling. And I've prepared a delicious light repast for us to share over an intimate *tête á tête*."

She bade him sit down, and moved behind him to tie a large starched napkin around his neck. As she leaned across him he felt a violent stirring in his groin, and she grinned cheekily behind him at the ludicrous sight of the pogo-stick-like protuberance in his trousers that was now pointing heavenwards. She moved away to light the candles and as they flickered and caught alight, he noticed how sheer her gown was and how her porcelain skin glowed like moonshine through its silken folds. But all too soon, the throbbing anticipation he felt mounting in his groin area gave way to a compellingly vague discomfort in the region of his throat — the napkin that Lilith had tied there seemed to have tightened, ever so slightly, and as he pondered this unpleasant development, it tightened again, and then again, almost imperceptibly, as if some invisible hand was tugging on it, until it became uncomfortably taut. He reached up a nervous hand to loosen it off, as best he could.

"Whew, it's so warm tonight ...," he said by way of explanation.

Lilith smiled benevolently at him. "Oh yes, darling," she said. Then she winked at him, "and it's going to get much, much warmer as the night wears on, my love." But she was thinking that soon he'd be so very cold, he'd wish he hadn't said that.

She seated herself graciously alongside him, and proceeded, with a flourish, to remove the domed lid from the large silver serving platter that dominated the table. Voilà, the sickly-sweet smell of some sort of braised meat in a creamy shallot sauce permeated the air, causing Rove's nostrils to flare wide open with greedy anticipation. The meat was garnished with a ring

of nasturtiums and capers in which quail's eggs nestled cosily, and Rove couldn't help noticing that the nasturtiums were still growing. In fact, from the moment Lilith had removed the platter's lid, their tendrils had begun to creep over its side and spread their nubile fingers across the white tablecloth towards him. He was a trifle surprised at their tenuous creeping embrace, but Lilith's indulgent attentions distracted him as she served him an ample plateful of food, and he returned to thinking about what the rest of the evening held in store for him. He was very much aware of the fact that he'd downed the whole goblet of the gooseberry wine in a couple of gulps, and the thought occurred to him that he'd better slow down, or he might not be able to perform to his best ability later on.

Within a short while, Rove had literally "licked the platter clean" and had sucked every delicate bone dry. He didn't think he'd ever tasted anything quite as delectable, even though he'd always made a point of shacking up with and living off women with excellent culinary skills. Lilith hadn't even had a mouthful and he was overcome with a momentary feeling of incredulousness that he'd single-handedly devoured all the food, but she looked so happy and glowing that this uncharacteristic lapse of self-centredness passed over rather quickly. Had he been any the less self-absorbed, even perhaps an iota less, he might have seen the fresh stick-mounted possum pelt stretched out to cure against the glass panels of the conservatory. Or he might have noticed the occasional flicker of concern that crossed Lilith's face as she wondered whether she'd be able to raise Claw to action from his comatose state, and mentally rehearsed the spell she had prepared to ensure that eventuality. But Rove only had eyes for Lilith.

During the meal he talked incessantly about himself and was gratified to see that Lilith hung on his every word, laughed when he laughed, and tut-tutted solicitously when he shared his sad stories about how badly women had always treated him and how it was always their doing when things hadn't worked out. He made a point of explaining that he'd always been honest about his feelings, had always told them that he couldn't be blamed if they loved him more than he loved them. If they'd been foolish enough to keep chasing him, taking care of him, even having his children, children that he never wanted, and, God forbid, never wanted to take any responsibility for, was it his fault?

“And so Lilith,” he heard himself say, “I have left a trail of broken hearts and fatherless children because I knew all along that one day I’d meet a woman like you; someone worthy of me, someone I could truly be myself with.” How right you are she thought, smiling sweetly all the while.

As soon as he’d made this confession, he baulked at himself — he’d never, ever, admitted to anyone, ever before, least of all a woman, that he was basically a selfish bastard and a user and a taker. Moreover, he’d never complimented a woman so freely before, usually keeping them guessing as to his true feelings, but Lilith didn’t seem to mind or even notice, and she continued to smile indulgently at him, saying “*Mon tout petit choux-choux*,” as she wiped the dribble from his chin with the napkin that hung around his neck.

“And now dear one, some dessert?” she said.

“Oh yes. Lovely,” he replied.

As if by magic a huge bowl of trifle replaced the bone-filled dish in front of him: sherry-soaked sponge, stewed plums suspended in jelly, and a thick layer of yellow custard topped with meringue nipples — amazingly the favourite treat his mother plied upon him with utmost devotion every time he returned home seeking succour and solace after some or other woman had finally seen through him and sent him on his way. Once again, he couldn’t help himself, and he gobbled it all down so quickly that he started burping and farting uncontrollably.

“A little stroll in the garden, Rove, to aid your digestion?” Lilith said. He loved the way she uttered his name, the way she rolled the “R” over her tongue and her lips pursed into a kiss as she sounded out the “v” — it looked and sounded like an invitation; an invitation to the zenith of personal gratification.

“What a good idea!” he said, gleefully anticipating that he could reduce the physical distance between himself and Lilith far better when he was on his feet.

He leapt up enthusiastically, but was overcome by a sudden head rush, quite unlike the many drug-induced ones he’d enjoyed over a lifetime of indulgence in every kind of chemical high. He grabbed the chair back for support, and realising that he’d single-handedly drunk the entire carafe of gooseberry wine, he berated himself silently for his lack of artificial good manners. But when Lilith took him by the arm and their skin made contact through the

sensuous sparkling fabric that barely hid her voluptuous feminine form, every vague qualm he felt immediately dissipated, and he fell in beside her, floating alongside her through the French doors that led out into the garden.

There was a profusion of roses of every possible colour, size and shape growing beside the path they followed (naturally! roses were Lilith's eternal flower), and to Rove that night, they seemed like the soft, velvety faces of all the good, trusting women he had defiled over the years with his lewd thoughts and selfish actions; yet tonight they inclined towards him with faces beaming with the purest gratitude and devotion. And at their feet the sweet innocent faces of innumerable pansies and violas smiled up at him, and these seemed to him to be the little faces of all the children he had begotten and promptly forgotten, yet tonight they whispered "Daddy, Daddy, we love you," as he passed by. He had never felt so good, so justified ... so self-satisfied.

When they rounded the corner of the house a wall of such intense perfume wafted towards them that Rove was almost overwhelmed with its cloying sultriness, and he closed his eyes and sucked in deep breaths of such sweetness he had never known before. It was almost as if Lilith's arm (around his waist now) held his body slightly suspended above the earth as they moved dreamlike past a flowering Queen of the Night which grew alongside the house. Of course, he was in no fit state to notice a certain black cat lying comatose at its base. If he had seen Claw there, beast that he was, with paws the size of dogs', and a jaw like an animal trap, he might have come to his senses and taken flight, avoiding the inevitable that was yet to come, but he was so consumed with the delicious anticipation of having his lust assuaged at the earliest opportunity, that he was quite oblivious to every warning. As they passed by, Lilith spoke a few words in what sounded like a foreign tongue, and Rove, recalling that she had used a sprinkling of French earlier, though it sweet that she would woo him in another of the sonorous romance languages she was obviously so fluent in. He couldn't quite place which one, but what did it matter he thought. After all, the language of love was universal. He turned to smile indulgently at Lilith, failing to notice that upon her indecipherable utterance, Claw had leapt instantly to his feet, and realising that he had been summonsed by a power far greater

than any he had formerly known, to face a challenge and adversary far more sinister than any he had heretofore ever encountered — far more daunting and worthy therefore than any of his former, now petty concerns — he immediately rallied to action, and fell in behind Lilith and her visitor, slipping from shadow to shadow, incognito.

A haunting siren song, juxtaposed with what sounded like the wailing of children, started up somewhere in the background, and the thought crossed Rove's mind that Lilith had perhaps put on a CD without him noticing — not his taste in music certainly (he only listened to hard rock), but how romantic of her to “set the mood” for their romantic tryst, he thought.

Lilith led Rove through a rickety, squeaking gate into the orchard where ancient quinces shone like lanterns in the moonlight, and the flowers of the Deadly Nightshade vines that curled up the trunks of the fruit trees twinkled like billions of stars. They left the path and she guided him across lush ankle-high grass, telling him that she was taking him to her cosy little love nest overlooking the river. Rove's excitement was mounting by the second, but he was momentarily distracted by a black shadow that leapt and pranced in his peripheral vision. Then he noticed that a gentle breeze had lifted and deduced that the swaying branches of the massive plum trees under which they were now walking were casting shadows. He thought it strange though that a wind had picked up — it had been perhaps the stillest and hottest day of the entire summer, and that evening's report had not mentioned any unexpected change in the weather.

He started to feel a little cold and shivery — a sobering thought, because he wasn't that well endowed, and moreover, he was acutely aware of the fact that the rapidly falling temperature would adversely affect the size of his manhood, in direct proportion to the risk of his rising in the falling of Lilith's estimation. Suddenly however, she stood before him in all her glory, floodlit by a shaft of moonlight. She beckoned him closer, saying, “Come my love, come to me”. As he lunged towards her, her gown began to slip from her shoulders to reveal the most magnificent bosoms, delicate waist and curvaceous hips he had laid eyes on in a long while. She stood between the columns of the entrance to what looked like some sort of mausoleum, but since he was overcome with relief that they might have reached her little love nest at last, and now needed to concentrate more than ever on not “jumping the gun” as it

were, he didn't give it a second thought. He fell upon her like a vulture upon its prey and she took him welcomingly into her arms and drew him inside. The temperature within was decidedly colder but Rove was only vaguely aware of it; the warmth of Lilith's hands as she undressed him and her naked skin as she cleaved to him rendered him oblivious, mentally at least, to the freezing draft that whirled around them. She ran her hands over his buttocks and squeezed them encouragingly but Rove became concerned that further progress would be hampered by the fact she was so much taller than he. He considered asking her whether there was a bed in there, somewhere in the darkness, but she seemed to have read his mind, for she whispered sensuously in his ear, "Darling, you're covered in goosebumps! Lie down and let me cover you ..."

He was overcome with how absolutely amazing she was, how she anticipated his every need and desire, and when she pushed him gently down onto a cold concrete slab, and an awful smell of death and decay rose around him, he couldn't help ignoring it as she lay down upon him. There was nothing he liked more than the woman-on-top position and he couldn't believe his luck; it was as if Lilith knew everything about him, every secret of his lascivious soul.

"You're the perfect woman for me Lilith," he said. "I am in your thrall ..."

"How right you are, *mon amour des époques*," she whispered in his ear, as she began to make love to him.

Rove succumbed to her passionate ministrations and was soon transported on waves of mounting pleasure. He was vaguely aware that the gentle breeze he'd noticed earlier had become a howling gale, and the branches outside the love shack creaked and swayed violently, thrashing about in the wind. A sensation of rocking and swaying overcame him and he felt as if he was falling through space, through darkness, through time. A stray thought crossed his mind — maybe this was what was meant by the expression, "the earth moved" — that wonderful earth-shattering feeling that couples in love were supposed to experience during sex. He'd never experienced it prior of course, and felt so gratified to now be the deserving recipient of this wondrous sensation — at last, he thought, at last, I am getting what I've deserved all along.

"Rrrrrrove," Lilith growled in his ear, "my love of the ages, my destiny." Her breath in his face was now a hiss; her teeth, fangs; her kisses, bites; and her formerly soft hands now

raked across his body like claws, tearing his flesh apart. Rove was more than happy — there was nothing he liked more than a bit of S & M. Lilith kept climbing in his estimation — she seemed to be one step ahead of him on every count; the epitome of perfection in a woman. But she had become very furry he thought, and seemed to have shrunk in size. She was on his face now, and as much as he enjoyed being the recipient of oral sex, he hated a fur-burger; the pleasure/input ratio in this instance was always skewed in the woman's favour, which went against his every naturally selfish inclination. And she was so very furry that he began to struggle for breath, his mouth and nose completely filled with hair. He wanted to cry out, "Lilith, stop, you're suffocating me," but it was too late.

Early the next morning, Rove turned up at the local doctor's clinic looking as if he'd suffered a near death experience. Covered in bites and scratches, he claimed he'd been attacked by a giant feral cat, and that the bruises which covered every inch of his battered body had come about during his escape — a grove of apple trees had shed their fruit on him as he'd run beneath them, almost like a stoning, he said. He couldn't explain what had happened to his "willy" — it had disappeared without a trace. The doctor sedated him, placed him in a straightjacket, and promptly booked him for psychiatric evaluation at the nearest mental hospital.

Back at Apple Tree Cottage, Lilith sat in the conservatory with Claw perched comfortably on her lap. He kneaded her curvaceous thighs through the folds of her sheer midnight blue gown, and his purring vibrated so loudly into the stratosphere that no unwelcome visitor dared trespass on the grounds of Apple Tree Cottage. He had recently signed papers ceding his entire business, including all its holdings, staff, intellectual property and inventory over to Lilith, in what others might term a "hostile take-over". But he was extremely pleased with the deal.

"My dear boy," she said as she stroked his beautiful, black, silky coat, "I think it's time to make apple sauce and jelly, seeing as we've had such a bumper crop this year. Totally out of season of course, but this is Apple Tree Cottage, after all. And how about fresh apple pie for dinner?" Then we can talk about compensation for your annual leave, which was so rudely cut short. Claw looked up into her face and narrowed his eyes in deference, showing the utmost

devotion and obeisance. He'd never imagined he'd work for a woman, but in this instance he was happy to concede to a far higher intelligence.

Cestrum Nocturnum: *A sprawling shrub with glossy, smooth, simple leaves and long, vine-like stems. Small, creamy, greenish-white, tubular flowers rise from above the leaves along the stems, to bloom in cycles throughout warm weather, followed by shiny-white, fleshy berries. The flowers are insignificant but have an overpowering, sweetly- perfumed scent at night that attracts caterpillars and butterflies. A native of tropical America but considered an invasive plant in some countries and classified as a noxious weed on certain Pacific islands.*

Common Names: *Queen of the Night, Dama-de-Noche, Night-flowering Jessamine/Jasmine, Iki He Po*

Asian Triptych

ESOL Exercise

*Write a short piece about something that happened to you yesterday after class.
Don't worry about your spelling or grammar. Just write whatever you can, using the English
words and structures you already know. Aim for about 200 words.*

I sit at Brooklyn Bar on Queen Street. I drink beer. I smoke. I play Nintendo on my Nokia. You sit at my table. I look up. You say do you mind? I say no it's okay. You look at me. You smile. You sit down. You say you look sad. I say what means sad? You make face like something is wrong. I smile. I say yes I am this ... sad. You say why? I say I no like this place. I shake my head. My friends and my school and everything I like is at my home. You say you must be Japanese. I look at you again. I say how you know this? You say I am English teacher. I teach many Asian students. I know their faces well. I say you are clever. You say no just experienced. I say what means this? You say it means to have lived a lot and learned a lot. I say ah. I smile. You smile. I say my parents they send me to New Zealand for learning English. You say then you've come to the right place. I laugh. You laugh. You drink your drink. I drink my beer. You smoke your cigarette. I smoke mine. You take your Motorola from your bag. I say what game you play?

Transit Lounge

Witching hour at the newly refurbished Wellington International Airport — my accommodation for the night. Bad weather has delayed my connection to Christchurch, and the few remaining *won* in my wallet won't cover the cost of a hotel room, let alone a taxi ride anywhere. I'm not fazed though — I've flown non-stop from Seoul, and am resigned to waiting it out; only a final leg between my OE and 'home'. I'm sitting slumped on one of those moulded plastic chairs with armrests that are bolted to the floor in long rows, preventing weary travellers from putting their feet up, or stretching out for a lie down. I'm pretty wired though, on ephedrine; wouldn't be able to sleep anyway, and wondering how I'm going to pass the time. There's not much action here — just a few others in the same situation as I. Implicit. In transit.

A service door bangs open and a cleaning lady shuffles into the room, pushing a wheeled bucket and mop ahead of her. She stops in front of the huge cantilevered windows; a shadow suspended in space between this hushed, dim-lit, interior and its shimmering, surreal, reflection in the panels of glass behind her. Splash, swish, thunk; she slaps the mop into the bucket, swirls it around in the sudsy water, then smacks it down onto the tiled floor. A momentary pause, as she braces herself, takes a deep breath, arches her body upwards, extends her neck. Then suddenly she is moving across the room in a figure of eight; straight, turn, straight, cross, straight, turn, straight, cross, like an ice-skater. I wheel and whirl with her through space, outside of this time and place.

Behind me, a soft, high-pitched voice begins counting, starting at number one. I turn to see a little girl moving up the row, her arm raised and her finger pointed like a magic wand, as she counts the chairs, one by one. She articulates the numbers slowly, carefully and eloquently, in Queen's English: 'one' is *won*, 'two' is *too*, 'three' is *thhrree*. With each utterance, she bows slightly towards each chair. The rag doll tucked under her other arm listens as carefully as I do. Together, we practice the art of semaphore in Wonderland, numbering the Knights of the Round Table, knighting them.

A woman sits diagonally across the aisle from me, legs demurely placed side by side, feet in sensible shoes, a handbag open on her lap. She rummages through it, finding deep within its depths a lipstick compact and a travel pack of tissues. She flicks the compact open, examines herself in its tiny mirror, then paints a red line across her mouth. She looks at herself again and sighs, pulls a tissue from the pack and wipes away the lipstick, then slowly draws another red line across her mouth. Wide-eyed, she checks her reflection again, incredulous. I see what she sees. I see how impossible it is for her to make herself beautiful. Beautiful enough for the lover who awaits at her destination.

The cleaning lady is moving closer, her shadowy form gaining definition as she turns and twirls towards me, executing a perfect figure of eight. I see the bulging varicose veins beneath the hem of her shift, the bunions peeping out of their self-made holes in her canvas shoes, the way her silver moustache catches the light. I rise to meet her; I take her in my arms. *You have found the perfect floor mop*, I tell her, *because you are the perfect dancer*. We waltz on together, through the plate glass windows, and out into the vast night sky, where we twirl through space in the company of billions of bright stars.

The counting exercise behind me is increasing in speed and volume. The little girl reaches the number twelve, then moves on to the next chair, which joins the ranks of the prior number ones. The Knights of the Round Table are many; numerous. The rag doll and I become one. We point and bow and articulate the numbers with our Queen, as she carries on up the row, faster now, and shrill, like a dervish. *Won, too, thhrree, you will never catch me; four, five, sex, numbers are not complex; seven, eight, nyne, we ascend the helicline; ten, eleven, twelve, into your true nature I will delve*.

The woman is trying different coloured lipsticks now. A pile of crumpled tissues grows on the floor at her feet until none are left in the sachet. Her face is criss-crossed with pink and red and purple slashes; none are 'right'. The hands that hold the little lipstick compact tremble; the tiny mirror clouds over with condensation. I speak inside her head: *Your reflection is an illusion*, I tell her. *May I kiss your many-real-beautiful-bleeding mouths?* The distance between us is not great; I gather the discarded tissues up in my arms, throwing them high into the space above us. They come tumbling down, slowly, slowly; in super slow motion. White flowers rain down upon us. Paper planets. Confetti.

Queen Street Caddie

It's about 10.30pm on a weekday night. I find myself seated at a Formica table inside an ethnic Food Court on Queen Street awaiting my order. Three or four separate kiosks share the space, and each is decorated and signposted to reflect the type of cuisine on offer. I spend some time observing the similarities and differences between them, noticing the tackiness of the plastic flowers adorning the wall alcoves, and the crudely painted ethnic trompe-l'oeil scenes on the dividing partitions.

In the hazy reflection of a grimy wall mirror, I see a young girl sitting on the counter of the Chinese takeaways across the room. There is something about her attitude and pose that intrigues me. I change seats so that I can see her without the looking at her through a reflection. She is probably about twelve or thirteen, slightly built as Asians often are, and nondescript too, dressed in a washed out grey shift, and scuffed black school shoes.

I deduce that she must be Chinese. It's the shape of her face more than the fact that she's sitting on the Chinese take-out counter that convinces me of this; she has that particularly round, plump-cheeked, generic facial structure typical of Chinese people. She sits there desultorily, arms rigid and hands pressed against the counter on either side of her body. She swings her legs backwards and forwards, deliberately banging her feet against the counter front, *thud, thud*; a look of absolute disdain and boredom flickering in her uneasy eyes, discontentment evident in the sulking pout of her mouth. I am amazed that a face so sublime, as yet unmarked by experience, can convey such complex emotion.

It occurs to me that it's rather late for a school-aged child to still be out and about. I can only surmise that she's attached to the operators of the Chinese takeaways; that perhaps they've had no choice but to bring her with them — there may be no caregiver at home to mind her while they work the long, late hours their business demands of them. Yet the stall is

unmanned at the present time, and everything appears to have been packed away and shut up for the night.

I begin to feel anxious for the young girl and wonder whether I should approach her to ask her if she's alright. But just then, my dinner is delivered, and I'm distracted by the delicious smell of roast lamb kebab. I haven't eaten since early in the day, and have a long drive home ahead of me. I order a coffee, then begin to eat my meal. But I continue to feel uneasy, and when a swift movement glances across my peripheral vision, I look up.

The girl has hopped off the counter and is standing to attention in front of it, arms still rigid at her sides. She stares now, watchfully, at the door. A middle-aged man has entered the food court and is striding towards her, muttering what sounds like a minimally restrained reprimand in Chinese. The girl flinches noticeably but immediately regains her composure, her face rearranging itself back into its former look of disdain and ennui. The man is carrying a bag of golf clubs which he now throws down on the floor, propping it up against the counter. He motions towards it, and the girl steps forward, like an automaton, and picks it up, slipping her arm through the strap, and hauling it up onto her shoulder. She bows over under its weight, and starts walking slowly towards the door. The man follows, motioning by word and gesture for the girl to hurry up, get moving.

My heart lurches. Time stands still. I leap up, but my feet are rooted to the spot. My mouth opens, but no sound comes out. I step forward. I raise my arms in the air. I am thinking, *"Excuse me. That's no way to treat a child."* But they are gone, out into the night, lost in the throng of late night passersby in the semi-darkness, obscured by the lashing rain that pounds the pulsing city pavement outside. And many white golf balls bounce around inside my troubled mind.

Too Much of Nothing

Maungaturoto is not a dead end town; a geographical characteristic that can sometimes be in a place's favour in terms of its potential for growth, for when you reach the end of the line, it's perhaps easier to stay, to make a go of things at the known edge of the world, rather than face a return journey. But Maunga, as it's affectionately known to the locals, is unfortunately on the way to somewhere else, and most travellers pass through it in a blur, looking neither left nor right, slowing only to observe the reduced speed limit applicable in an urban area.

The railway tracks that slash through the town in parallel lines heading north-west from the eastern port of Whangerei to Dargaville on the Kaipara, are an anachronistic superimposition, because, for the rest, the few streets that make up Maunga appear to have been thrown upon the undulating landscape in a random fashion. The main road winds and bends through the town along an exposed ridge that drops away sharply behind the few

straggling stores and sagging houses that hug the road, to gorse-choked gullies of tangled bush. Dust blows in eddies round sharply angled corners, and the signs above the shop fronts rattle a feeble welcome, as stray cats creep from the hoardings, approaching the unwary, begging for some sustenance. Aside from the few cars always parked up outside the Maungaturoto Tavern, the streets appear almost deserted.

A kilometre to the south east, before the main road begins to rise and curve into the town proper, a scrap yard squats like a giant post-modern sculpture on the floor of a small lowland rural valley, bordered by a curving line of dusty yellow willow trees which droop wistfully over a dried-up stream. In January, suicide month, the heat and glare of the sun refracting through the windows at the back of the barn-like structure that serves as an office are debilitating and, unlike further on up the road, on the ridge in town, not a breath of freshness stirs the air. Frank Dunbar sits slumped in his chair; the only sound the drumming of his grease-encrusted fingertips on the countertop, keeping time with the blowflies buzzing against the glass. He pauses to wipe the sweat from his forehead with a dirty rag he keeps under the counter for this purpose, and glances up once more at the large wall clock that dominates his life with its interminably slow ticking towards five o'clock.

But suddenly his face animates — it's a quarter to — and he leaps up like a puppet yanked into action by invisible strings. He grabs a broken fly swot encrusted with the remains of dead bodies from a nail on the wall, and attacks the blowflies, slapping them mercilessly to their death. Then he locks the cash register and pops the key in his pocket — there is no need to cash up; there hasn't been a customer all day. Bright now as a box of birds and whistling a merry tune, he goes outside and strides across the yard, passing beneath the shadow of an immense pile of car wrecks, to where he has a sign by the roadside that reads *'MAUNGATUROTO SCRAP METALS – ONE MAN'S JUNK; ANOTHER'S TREASURE'*. He picks it up and carries it inside; he can't afford to have some hoons make off with it or deface it during the night. Then he secures the front door, and jumps up into the cab of his battered tow truck, starting it up with a roar.

A few minutes later the truck hisses and squeaks to a halt outside the Tavern, where Frank parks in his usual spot just off the main road, to advertise his tow services to passers-by. The barman's greeting is always the same: "A man could set his watch by you, mate! Beer o'clock it is. Formally and officially." Hendry would ring the old ship's bell that hung behind the bar, and announce in a sing-song voice: "Happy Hour, Happy People!" Then he'd turn to Frank. "Two for the price of one then mate, as usual?"

Frank always retires, with his two handles of Speights Old Dark, to the Victorian veranda that fronts the dusty parking lot, and sets himself up in the cool shade there. He usually downs his first beer in a couple of gulps, then reaches for the packet of cigarettes that sits comfortably in his top left pocket, lighter tucked safely into the box. He only allows himself a few cigarettes in the evenings now — five to be exact; his doctor has put the hard word on him and his high blood pressure often enough.

As he sucks on that first cigarette of the day, and sips on his second beer, he feels reasonably content for a while. Margery shuffles by on her way home from work at the local Four Square, and they wave a cursory greeting. The Paki dairy owner across the road comes out with a pile of broken down cardboard boxes to throw into the Skip rubbish bin in the alleyway beside his shop. Inevitably, a couple of skeletal kittens poke their heads out from beneath the hoardings, and Frank watches bemused as Ali chases them away, hissing under his breath, "You vermin! Get lost, or else I'll cook you up for dinner and make a fookin' good curry out of you!" Sometimes, a modified car throbs into the service station diagonally across the road and a couple of hoons leap out, yanking their low riders up. They pump gas; then drive off, stereo blaring, drowning out the sound of Gerry, the owner — a bald Greek with a physique like a spinning top — who emerges with arms flailing, shouting, "Hey! You delinquents! I have video surveillance! And don't think your hoodies will disguise you! I will track you down, even if it kills me! And you will pay. PAY! This world was not only made for you, you fuckers!"

Frank watches the passing parade, relieved as always, after a long, slow week that it's Friday; not that his weekends offer much to look forward to. Although he keeps the yard open on Saturdays, he allows himself to sit for hours at a stretch in front of the TV set in his flat

above the shop with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label and a couple of packs of chips and dips for company, and only ever raises himself from his greasy couch if a potential customer toots their arrival down below. But this is a rare occurrence, even rarer than on weekdays, when he feels obliged to keep a conscientious vigil behind the counter downstairs, if only to keep up appearances. By Sunday, he's usually comatose. Leaning over from the couch, with the press of a single button, he'd set his five-disc CD player, stacked with his entire collection of Pavarotti, on random play. He'd lie there stupefied in a bath of sweat, the melodious sound of opera washing over him in waves of emotion, until he recovered well enough from his hangover to take a shower and put himself to bed.

Frank wonders what's happened to his drinking buddies this evening. Bert and his crew of cowcockie cousins, One-Eyed Jack, Peebles and Snake Man, usually keep him company, arriving shortly after he does. But milking must have run late tonight and town seems even quieter than usual, save for the dull rumble of a big-engine car approaching from the west, obviously cruising way above the speed limit. Shortly, it swings dangerously wide around the nearest corner, then skids and slides to a halt in a cloud of dust on the metal verge in front of the tavern. Frank notes the make and colour – an older model Holden Commodore V8 5.7 litre gas-guzzler, burgundy or brown; he can't quite tell, it's that dirty. *If this joker carries on driving like a bloody cowboy, there might be some work for me tonight*, he muses with a perverse kind of hopefulness. He can hear the sound of arguing over the distorted techno that pumps from the vehicle, then the front passenger-door swings wide. A bloke is leaning across the female passenger, shouting, "Unbuckle, bitch! Hurry up!" The woman struggles with the seatbelt and as soon as it releases her, she is pushed from the seat and falls awkwardly to the ground. "What about my bag?" she shouts. "Get it yourself, cow!" is the reply. She stumbles to her feet, rakes the hair that has fallen across her face away with a bloodied hand, and approaches the boot while the driver revs the engine impatiently. It pops open, activated from a switch inside, and she grabs a battered holdall from its depths as the car pulls violently away, sashaying back onto the road. She stands there stunned for a few seconds, then, as if as an afterthought, she shouts after the vehicle as it gathers speed around the next bend, "Well fuck

you too, Jerome!” Then she turns towards the tavern and stumbles on red high-heeled sandals across the stony surface of the parking lot, making her way towards the entrance.

When Frank returns to the bar for another round a short while later, the woman is perched on a stool and slumped over the bar counter, stuffing peanuts into her mouth as if she hasn’t eaten for days. She still looks shook up, and Hendry makes googly eyes at him, as if to say, shout the lady a drink, Frank. Come on.

“The same again Hendry, thanks,” Frank says. Then he adds, hesitatingly, “And what about you miss, can I get you something?”

At first she ignores him, and kind of jiggles her head around, as if releasing the tension in her neck. Frank is beginning to think that he’d better back off; that she probably just wants to be left alone. Then suddenly she says, “Yup, okay. Make it a triple.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hendry pipes in. “So what’ll it be?”

“Vodka, lime and lemonade.” Frank detects a resigned nonchalance in her voice; something he is long accustomed to in his treatment by women. But when Hendry winks at him, it makes him feel braver, even though his voice belies it.

“Okay. Make that two please, Hendry, two triples,” he says. Hendry’s surprised — Frank only drank beer at the pub; his spirits purchases extended solely to his standard off-sales order of the bottle of whisky he took home with him on a Friday night. Hendry begins to prepare the drinks, and Frank reverts to small talk to smooth himself through this unfamiliar ground.

“So what brings you to Maungaturoto?” he asks the woman politely.

“What’s it to you?” she replies, mumbling through a mouthful of peanuts. Frank was, if nothing else, always ingenuous, and it showed in his reply:

“No reason. Just haven’t seen you about is all.”

For the first time, the woman stops throwing peanuts down her throat and turns to face him, making full eye contact. He notices she has a decidedly marked squint, like that movie actress from the eighties, Karen Black. In fact, everything about her signals the eighties — her big hair, strawberry blonde, teased up into a high crown; her fitted stovepipe jeans; the yellow

wet-look top that hugs her breasts; the curved black eye-liner; and those strappy, fire-truck-red, high heels.

“Well, if you really want to know, I didn’t exactly pick it out of a tourist brochure.” She laughs in a brittle way, before returning to the bowl of peanuts, but Frank feels encouraged.

“Yes,” he pauses, searching for something meaningful to say. “It’s not exactly the sort of place a person would chose to visit, is it?” This response seems to open her up, and she relaxes her body language somewhat, leaning back on the barstool.

“Oh, it’s not that bad, I guess. I’ve lived in dumps all my life — familiar territory, you know.”

“Join the club,” he says. She laughs, and suddenly the ice is broken.

“Well, I’m Frank. How do you do?” he says graciously, stepping forward to offer his hand. “And this is Hendry ...”

She waves his hand away. “Mercedes. I’ve already met old Hendry here.” Her fringe has fallen forward and she flicks it away with her hand which is badly grazed from her fall outside. Frank notices that her temple and cheekbone are also bruised.

“That’s pretty grand,” he says. How did you end up with a name like that?”

“It’s a long story. Do you really want to hear it?”

“Yeah. Why not?” he says. He was not a bad looking man for a forty-four year old: he still had a full head of wiry brown hair, and even if his lamb chop side-burns were a bit passé, and the khaki shirt and shorts that was his habitual dress gave his age away somewhat, he was still considered a good catch by the local townsfolk. But no good woman had, as yet, been able to pin him down. Frank was so involved in his own loneliness that it seemed to form an impervious shield around him, a bit like the towering buffer of used car bodies that occupied the yard between his office and the main road.

“Okay. If you must. I warn you, though, it’s boring — not the stuff movies are made of.” She settles herself on the bar stool to tell the story.

“Mum was a hippy chick who drove a beat up old kombi with a string of shells hanging from the rear view mirror, and a cheap sound system that chewed up all her Doors and Moody Blues tapes.”

“Yeah, yeah, *I* can relate,” says Hendry. “Been there; done that.”

They all laugh, and Mercedes takes a long swig of her drink before continuing.

“Anyway, we lived to hell and gone out in the backblocks, at Golden Bay; not only far cheaper, but also ‘protective of the lifestyle’, as Mum always used to say. That clapped out old heap of nuts and bolts and diesel-spewing fumes only stayed on the road because her long list of loser boyfriends successively worked on it, in return for board and lodging, and mum’s other favours. I guess, in her mind, keeping us in transport sort of made up for the fact that they usually had nothing else to offer. Anyway, she named us all after good cars, as if we’d somehow channel them into being for her — my sisters are Jaguar and Porche; Porche pronounced with an ‘ay’ at the end, the Italian way. And my brother’s Rover. Rove for short.”

She turns to Frank, fixing him in her gaze. “Funny how names often tell heaps about a person, don’t you think?” He doesn’t have time to reply. “Well in his case,” she shrugs, “Mum couldn’t have been more accurate with her selection.” She pauses, and takes another swig of her drink. Frank and Hendry are bowled over, not quite sure how to reply. But they don’t have to. Mercedes stands up and pulls a battered tambourine from her bag.

“Hey, guys,” she continues, “Do you know that old ballad? The Gypsy Rover?”

Frank and Hendry look searchingly at each other, then shake their heads in unison. Mercedes smiles, and her eyes flash with a strange luminosity. They are cool; cobalt blue. Watery. Disarming. Alluring.

“Anyway, I always think of it as Rove’s signature tune,” she continues, as she moves a few steps away from the bar counter towards the centre of the room. She composes herself by running her hands down the front of her curvy, jean-clad thighs, and flicking her hair away from her forehead. The few other punters in the room stop talking, and turn to look — the mystery of a new face; new blood. She starts to sing, in a husky, lilting voice, and the sound is sweeter than anything anyone in the room has ever heard, even on American Idol.

The gypsy rover came over the hill,
Down through the valley so shady,
He whistled and he sang till the green woods rang
And he won the heart of a lady.
Ah-dee-do-ah-de-do-dah-day
Ah-dee-do-ah-dee-day-ee
He whistled and he sang till the green woods rang
And he won the heart of a lady.

When she finishes, she takes a bow, and everyone claps hard. There are a few wolf whistles, and “yeah, right’s”, and “go girl’s”.

Hendry says, “Well, well. I think that impromptu performance merits dinner on the house for our unexpected entertainer!” He hands Mercedes a menu and she and Frank each order a meal. Frank signals for another round of drinks. After Hendry has poured them, he goes out back to the kitchen to place their orders, and Frank sits down at the bar counter beside Mercedes. He’s somewhat at a loss for words again, but resorts to his usual politeness.

“That was lovely,” he says. “Are you a professional?”

“I wish,” she replies. “I have done a lot of singing, though. A lot of singing for my supper.” She flashes those cool, watery, blue eyes at him. She’s so beautiful; anachronistic, ravishingly complex. Recalling their former topic of conversation, Frank ventures another question.

“So, getting back to your name ... Mercedes. Aside from the car, being German and all, the name is actually Spanish, isn’t it? Any Spanish in the family line?”

“Maybe. I wouldn’t be surprised. Mum wasn’t exactly committed to maintaining the purity of our Anglo-Saxon blood line. She used to say that, down there in Golden Bay, you could travel the entire world, without ever leaving the beachfront. *Especiallly* if you were the owner of a kombi camper van ...”

Mercedes stayed on in Maunga. It wasn’t as if she had anywhere else to go, or any money either for that matter. Frank offered her his bedroom, and he slept on the couch in the open-plan living room, amongst the empty Pavarotti CD covers. He didn’t ask her about the bloke in the Holden Commodore; figured she probably wouldn’t want to talk about him. But he did offer her some arnica cream for the bruises, and bathed her cuts and grazes for her in diluted Dettol.

When he woke up on Saturday morning, his world was a different place. She’d unpacked her duffle bag, and her transistor was broadcasting Big River, the local radio station. The sizzle of frying bacon and green tomatoes was the only other sound in the room; no

blowflies buzzed against the clouded glass, and all the windows were wide open. The sweet-sour smell of silage curing in the sun drifted through the flat from the neighbouring paddocks round about, and it occurred to Frank how much he loved the peculiar scent of it, and wondered why he'd never noticed it before.

"How do you like your eggs, Frank?" she asked him. "Over easy?" He nodded; whatever way they came would be good enough for him. She'd produced a blue and white checked table-cloth from somewhere, and a jar of wild flowers sat in the middle of the table. All through breakfast, she talked about her life back in Golden Bay, and how, through the long years of her childhood, she'd dreamed of being a famous singer; an artiste. At the first opportunity, she'd hitched a ride north to the bright city lights of Wellington, and she'd been on the road ever since, singing in dives all around the country, hoping that someone, somewhere, would give her a break.

At around ten o'clock, the phone started ringing off the hook. Every man and his dog needed something, and that Saturday morning, they decided to turn their visit to Maungaturoto Scrap Metals into a family outing. Frank trolled the yard with the men, fulfilling their requirements. Mercedes operated the office, rocking local-yokel babies in her arms, while the women confided in her, seeking her advice on recipes, remedies and remodelling. The older children turned the heap of scrap outside into a maze for hide-and-seek.

Snake Man hopped from car wreck to car wreck, his usual eloquent self. "So are you getting any, man?" he asked Frank, wiggling his forefinger in the air. Peebles overheard: "Yeah, she's one hot babe, mate," he said, waving a Toyota ute silencer in front of him. "Must be my lucky day; I've been looking for one of these for ages, dude." Then Bert piped up: "You've landed with your bum in the butter this time, ay?" Frank shrugged; he was too much of a gentleman to have laid a hand on Mercedes, and knows he would never make a move on her, unless — until, if he should be so lucky, *she* initiated something.

Weeks passed, and soon, the morning mists of early autumn came down upon Maungaturoto, and the land began to cool once more. And the rains came at last; welcome drenching torrents that filled water tanks, overflowing the old claw-footed baths in paddocks

that livestock drunk from, saturating the parched earth, rushing downhill following the contours of the land, flowing always to the lowest point, gushing into the dried-up streams that crisscrossed the countryside, spilling out into the waterways that fed the big rivers of Northland, following their course east and west to the oceans, washing away the sweat and dust and grease and grime of all Frank's summers, bringing the promise of newness.

Maungaturoto Scrap Metals hadn't done this well in years, and the days passed by in a blur of business, with spare parts being ordered by courier from all parts of the country. Mercedes earned good money too; Hendry organised a PA system with backing tracks, and she sung at the Tavern on Friday and Saturday nights, pulling big crowds. During the week, she read tarot cards from the shed at the yard that she'd made over into an Aladdin's Cave with sarongs, Buddha effigies and incense. Everything she touched shined with the cleanness and the brightness she brought to it; everyone who crossed her path felt lighter; happier. And it seemed to Frank that she carried all the magic of the world in her, and in her battered carryall — her tinkling laugh, her capacity for joy, her vivaciousness. And the way she loved him up on the banks of the stream caused the operatic unlocking of his own constricted heart; among the wildflowers and the remains of a picnic dinner on a bed of spearmint under the whispering green willows, as the water rushed past beside them, red and gold with falling leaves.

But the day was to come when Mercedes' magic ran out. She woke up tetchy one morning; the sparkle had gone out of her, and everything was wrong. When Frank slipped upstairs at around lunchtime, the place looked as if she'd never been there; the checked tablecloth was gone, and the transistor radio was silent. She was strangely quiet, unlike her usual ebullient self, and Frank ate his sandwich without speaking, not wanting to precipitate anything. Soon a tooting car outside called him away.

When he returned to the office, Mercedes was sitting there waiting for him, her bag packed and ready, near the door.

"Do you really have to go away?" was all he said. He placed his hands on her shoulders, but she jerked away.

"You didn't think I was gonna stay forever, did you?"

"I didn't think about it much, Mercy."

"Well maybe you should have."

"But you just turned up here, out of the blue, and when you stayed on, I ... I thought, maybe ..."

"Oh, you stupid man."

Frank winced at her retort, and flustered now, he reached compulsively for the greasy rag that still lay in its place beneath the counter. Mercedes watched him with contempt as began to raise it to his face.

"You really didn't believe that I could love you, Frank, did you? That I could actually want to spend the rest of my life in this shithole with you?"

Her words stopped him mid-action, and he stood there frozen to the spot. A couple of blowflies began to buzz against the window, and the sound distracted him. The rag fell from his hands as he moved, like an automaton, to open the window and set them free. His fingers were shaking and he fumbled with the latch, but suddenly, the window gasped open, and he leaned against the sill, taking in deep gulps of air. In the silence behind him he heard Mercedes mutter again, "You stupid, stupid man." Then the striking of a match as she lit another cigarette, and the sound of liquid connecting with ice as she sloshed another generous dollop of vodka into her glass. After a few moments, he found the courage to turn back to her.

"I thought you were happy, Mercedes. I thought we were happy. I ... I don't think I'd be able to go on if you left." He wrung his hands. "I can't go back to how it was."

She glanced up at him, and her squinty watery eyes seemed to Frank to be the very essence of her; her multi-facetedness, her rare beauty. He had never wanted her as much as he did now; in the moments he was losing her.

"You are so pathetic, Frank," she continued, eyes flashing. "You should have got out of this dump years ago, before you turned into a fossil, like that heap of scrap and junk that fills your yard." She swigged a great gulp from her glass and tipped her ash dramatically on the floor.

"But why did you stay in the first place then? Why did you get close to me?" he asked.

“Why do you think? I was just marking time, you idiot! It’s not as if I had any choices, for God’s sakes ...”

“Then why did you do all of this? For what?” He looked around at the tidy office, the freshly swept floor that she was now defacing with ash, the bowl of flowers on the counter top.

“Don’t you know anything about the ways of women, Frank?”

Frank stood there with a look of absolute incomprehension on his face.

“Do you want me to spell it out?” she continued. “State the obvious?” She swigged her drink and tipped her ash again. “I was just using you, you stupid, stupid man!”

He suddenly realised why she was hurting him — it would make things easier for her. How could he have ever believed she’d be content, staying on here, living with him in this god-forsaken place? Her words confirmed his thoughts:

“I’m shifting to Auckland, Frank. No more living in dumps, no more singing for my supper, no more road running. It’s time to grow up; do something sensible with my life.” She paused, fixing him with her cool, watery gaze. “I’m leaving on the 4 o’clock bus. I’ve decided to enrol at university, to study a social sciences degree. I want to help people. You know, like I do; only officially.”

A car tooted outside. Mercedes killed her cigarette in the ashtray and stood up. She ran her hands down the front of her thighs, composing herself. “That’ll be my taxi,” she said. Frank noticed she was wearing the same strappy red high-heeled sandals she’d arrived in. He staggered past her to the door and out into the yard — he needed to see it for himself; to understand that what was happening to him was real. Perhaps she would give him a few minutes to take it all in and get himself together before they said goodbye. He so wanted to find a way to make it easier for her too; a way he could set this bird free so that she’d fly back to him one day soon. But mere moments later, she walked right past him. The passenger door of the taxi swung open, and she threw her bag onto the back seat, then climbed in, and fastened her seat belt. He watched, stunned, as the white Toyota Corolla spun out of the driveway in a cloud of dust.

Piles of car wrecks loomed up in front of him, dwarfing him, representing the mangled mess of his life and his situation. He stumbled across the yard and collapsed onto the bonnet of an old Hillman Classic. In his despair, it seemed as if the living world had ended; that softness, light, and colour had drained away; that all that remained was cold hard steel. The realisation came to him that he'd had too much of nothing for way too long. He had to make a change, do something different, get amongst the living again. In the darkness of his pain, in the black void of his mind, a stray thought began to form. He remembered seeing an advert in the Northland Gazette — a pub and motel outfit on the east coast was looking for a manager; someone mature and responsible, with business experience. Maybe, if he could swing it, Mercedes would come with him, provide the entertainment, add her sparkle to the place. Or, if she wouldn't, maybe she'd come back to him if things didn't work out for her, when she'd finished making something of her life. He should follow the taxi to the bus stop, and try and talk with her; offer her some options.

These thoughts comforted him; his prior emotional loneliness had grown within him a capacity for endurance, a large reservoir of patience. Rust never sleeps, granted, and rust is infinitely patient too. But steel and metal never break down unless subjected to incredible artificial heat — they endure against all odds; inscrutably, indomitably. He heard a rumbling overhead, and looked up. A thunderstorm was brewing and great dark clouds were gathering over Maungaturoto. The sky was cobalt; like he'd never seen blue. Like her eyes. Like the ocean. Only a single streak of white sky remained; squinting, glinting, shining through a small crack in the overwhelming density of the heavy storm that was building. It was time to shut up shop for the day. He strode across the yard under the shadow of the immense tower of car wrecks, out to the roadside, to get the sign in. But when he got there, he changed his mind. He went over to the shed and returned with some red paint and a brush, and painted 'FOR SALE' in big red letters across the words, '*MAUNGATUROTO SCRAP METALS – ONE MAN'S JUNK; ANOTHER'S TREASURE*'. Then he secured the front door, hopped up into the cab of his tow truck, and took off, pulling up a few minutes later in front of the Maungaturoto Tavern.

"A man could set his watch by you, mate!" Hendry said when he entered the pub. "Beer o'clock it is. Formally and officially." Hendry rang the bell, and announced in a sing-song voice:

“Happy Hour, Happy People!” Then he turned to Frank. “Two for the price of one then mate, as usual?”

The Journey

She strides through the automatic doors of Christchurch International Airport and out into the clear bright light of a new day. The glare is fierce and she pauses, just for a brief moment. Squinting now, shading her eyes with a hand, she scans the parking lot, fixes a bearing on the taxi rank across the road, and begins to navigate the pedestrian crossing. The luggage trolley precedes her as if clearing a path, straining under its load, its wheels stubbornly resisting any change in direction, it's lack of manoeuvrability countered only by her resolve.

Three children bob alongside her like the scattered remains of a shipwreck, their shapes and sizes distorted by the enormous amount of hand baggage that appears to have been piled upon them; such is the assorted paraphernalia of international travel, the volume and disarray of which inevitably increases en route. The eldest, a boy, forges ahead, a skateboard tucked under one arm, and the smaller of the two girls brings up the rear, dragging a tired looking doll along the ground behind her. The middle child hangs onto her mother's jacket as they cross the street, complaining bitterly.

Eventually their copious luggage has been prized into the back of a taxi-van and they pile in, collapsing onto the seats, their hand baggage filling the spaces between them. She pulls a piece of paper with an address on it from her pocket and hands it to the driver; then she gathers her children close like a mother hen, drawing them under her wings.

“Good kids,” she says as the taxi pulls away from the curb, “we’ve made it and ...” Her voice trails away as the taxi gathers speed and its motor hums up a few decibels. They sit quietly and watch the unfamiliar landscape pass by through a blur of exhaustion.

**

In Auckland, some weeks later, it’s been raining for days on end, and she’s pretty low. She leaves a pawnbroker’s shop in Epsom, clutching an empty little jewellery box to her chest, and runs across the wet, busy street, dodging cars and puddles. The rainwater hitting her face mingles with the tears that blind her, as she feels for the door handle of the old camper-van she’d bought from some German tourists in Christchurch. She heaves herself up onto the seat, sighs, then wipes her face on her coat sleeve. She starts up the motor, flicks on the windscreen wipers, and inches the vehicle out into the stream of traffic, tracing her way back to the motorway. Moving on helps her push the rising tide of grief and hardship back down inside her; keeps her focused on the end goal.

Ah, well, it’s no big deal, she thinks, getting ripped off on the other side of the world feels just the same as it would anywhere else. The children sit quietly, strapped into their seats in the back of the van, not daring to speak or move, sensing that this is not the time or place to be fooling around, or asking for something to eat.

She heads north, over the Harbour Bridge. The cityscape gradually gives way to residential suburbs and industrial parks, and soon they are driving past tumbledown smallholdings and rain-drenched livestock stranded in muddy fields. From time to time, she glances at the purse that she has tossed on the seat beside her. It is no longer empty, but that is a small comfort. She knows what’s inside it will not get them very far. She also feels strangely underdressed now, as if an integral part of her is missing; the ring she’d pawned had been on her finger for so long, she’d lost count of the years.

Christchurch, the Anglican Parish of Warkworth — so reads the sign, neatly positioned at the entrance to a white-painted wooden structure so typical of the modest turn-of-the-century churches that can be seen across this land, solitary and forgotten in lonely paddocks, framed on hilltops by cloudy windswept skies, ignored on busy street corners by passers-by, nestling cosily on green grass that drops away to water.

But the presence of this particular church is the confirmation she is looking for. She wants to believe that some great plan is unfolding, that some kind of predestination at work. Warkworth is not the obvious place, not the pristine southern city she'd settled on when gazing at a map months ago when she decided to immigrate to New Zealand with her young family, but the small North Island town they have ended up in by default, through a strange set of circumstances.

She parks the van and enters the church self-consciously; glad to be late for the service because it has saved her from any inquisitive advances on the part of the regular churchgoers, but all too aware that her unannounced late arrival will attract attention anyway. She selects an empty back pew and sits quietly with head bowed, trying to pick up the threads of the sermon.

"Faith has not always meant the same thing. In medieval times, Christianity was the only acceptable version of reality in the western world. Faith in a Christian God and the authority of the Holy Catholic Church was sacrosanct. The opposite of faith in those times was *heresy*; something that was considered so shocking, so deviant in fact, that it was punishable by death.

"For our eighteenth and nineteenth-century forebears, the inherited Christian world-view was, therefore, a given. But the rapid development of science and modernity gradually began to give rise to profound questions relating to the authenticity of this entrenched system of belief, as people became less and less convinced of the authority of the scriptures and the orthodox church. Thus, for our forebears, *doubt* increasingly became the opposite of faith.

“But for us today, living as we do on the cusp of a new century, *uncertainty* — the uncertainty we face at every level of our lives — has replaced the heresy and doubt of former times as faith’s opposite. We now know that there is no longer a privileged standpoint for the assertion of truth, that all standpoints are relative, that every interpretation of reality, every construction of meaning — including the Christian one of faith in a Christian God — is merely demonstrative of man’s urge and capacity for inventing a canon of significance upon which to hang his destiny.

“Thus, the knowledge that there are many other ways of accounting for reality means that the very nature of faith has changed. Christian faith is no longer externally imposed upon us, no longer the only authorised, acceptable, entrenched world view, no longer the only interpretation of reality, no longer the absolute extrapolation of meaning. We are in a position to choose now, if we wish, to project a fresh meaning onto reality, because we have come to believe, perhaps, that the universe itself is ultimately meaningful, that life itself is ultimately sacred. And when we trace, through the ages, the lines of meaning emanating from Jesus’ life and death, and reinterpret these events in the light of our present day knowledge, the reality that confronts us, we realise, is radically unsuited to the orthodoxy of a society. It is intrinsically too scandalous, too absurd, too impossible to be accepted by most, let alone all. It requires a consent, a willingness, a profound ‘Yes’ to a freely chosen, personally meaningful kind of faith. There is nothing about this faith that can coerce consent, or demand or force allegiance, that can convincingly alleviate doubt, ratify uncertainty, or pretend to be a prerequisite for redemption. This kind of faith is a reality that is so protective of our freedom of choice, it almost beggars description...”

The minister invites the congregation to approach a giant, roughly hewn, wooden cross that dominates the internal space of the church, and to nail to it, in a new kind of faith, “any trouble which may be unspeakable, any grief which may be unanswerable, any fear which paralyses, any chaos which fails to be undone.”

Others go forward, but she sits transfixed, unmoving. A rusty nail that someone has pressed into her hand rests lightly in her palm, its presence there the only reality she can acknowledge right now. She needs to hang on to it for a little while longer; can't bring herself

to give it up just yet. For now, it represents what she has chosen for herself; it gives her the strength to go on. Besides, she knows that it is too soon to let go, to break down; she has work to do.

It's the middle of the night, and she is sitting on the edge of her son's camp bed in the corner of the open-plan lounge/dining/kitchen room — there are only two tiny bedrooms in the unit where they now live; she has one and the girls share the other. She can see her son's face now — the power has just come back on after a blackout, and the room is suddenly filled with welcome light. Somehow, it makes things seem more bearable, makes it easier to cope.

"I hate you, I hate you!" the boy cries, rubbing his eyes with his fists. "Why did you bring us here, mum? Why? It's such a dump, and this rain — will it ever stop? I hate it here, I hate it! I want to go back to Africa; I want to go home ..."

The boy is twelve. His eyes are dark and moist; his sturdy, sweaty frame fills her arms. She holds him as tightly as she can, but the strength of his struggle tells her that his childhood is over. Yet, he can't understand what she is running from, what she is searching for. He doesn't know that her mind constantly travels the labyrinthine ways between the past and the future, and that this awful present is just the gap between them. He only knows that this is much like what has gone before in his recent memory, that it is all just too hard, that he so desperately wants everything to be as it once was.

She soothes him, promising that she will make it all better, somehow, some way. She tells him that although this feels like the end, it is also a beginning; the beginning of something new and different, and that he needs to look forward, not back. As his shuddering and struggling subside, she repeats his name over and over like a mantra, rocking him in her arms, telling him again and again that everything's going to be alright. Eventually, sleep overcomes him, and she releases him gently into his bed, covering him tenderly with the blanket.

She sits there for a long time into the night, weighing everything up, wondering whether she's made the right decisions for her family, whether they'll survive, whether they'll ever overcome what they've been through. She remembers how her son fought to be born on a

night just like this and the struggle it was for both of them. His father's words are forever etched in her mind; the often recurring, internal echo that she wishes she could just switch off, for once and for all: "I'll never, ever make you cry again," he'd sobbed at her bedside, as she and this beautiful boy struggled through long hours of blood and pain to be united in this life. *Words, words, words, she thinks, empty words. So powerful, but the truth is, they don't ever change anything.*

Late one Sunday the family drive out to Scotts Landing to escape the confines of their cramped home, to get some fresh air. Evening is approaching and it has cleared up after the day's heavy rain; the sky is beautifully clear, streaked with remnants of pink and grey cloud, and the light has a luminous quality about it that makes everything seem both sharp and muted, all at once. It's deathly cold though, and strangely still — even the ever-moving flow of the Mahurangi estuary seems motionless tonight, trapped at that point of stillness between the incoming and outgoing tides.

Down on the beach the two older children chase each other with crabs, the sound of their laughter muffled by the icy air. The littlest girl and her mother are boulder-hopping, holding hands. The rules of the game are simple: not to land in the puddles or slip on the rocks.

"Mummy, mummy, this makes me feel like a giant — these are my mountains, my rivers and my lakes; my people live here!"

The child's words fade away to an echo as her mother peers strangely into the little girl's bright, glowing face. She is amazed that her youngest has settled so quickly; that she has such a strong sense of belonging and autonomy in this strange, new place. She finds comfort in the bigness of being this little seven-year-old girl has claimed for herself, and the memory of another shining-faced, happy little girl, in another lifetime, returns to her. Joy is always well-remembered, but for her it is always counterpoint in her mind to the sorrow she carries with her, and she wonders: *At what point in our lives do we start believing we are damned?* .

The other children run across the sand to meet them. It is time to head for home and to prepare for the week to come. They walk silently to the car, arm in arm, stunned by the cold,

their cheeks glowing red and breath streaming from their mouths; a woman and her three children, doing the best they can to take care of each other.

.

Christmas comes, and the holidays, at last. It's so good to stop, to step off the treadmill after many busy months of work and school. She has found a kind of peace and serenity here in this run-down old villa where they now live, at Sandspit, with many interconnected rooms sloping away on sinking pilings, and a view over the ever-changing colours of the harbour. The bush is lush and green beside the ancient orchard which surrounds the house, and the long, lazy days of summer lie ahead.

Standing at the kitchen sink washing the lunch dishes, she looks up from time to time to gaze out of the window. Her older daughter is constructing a make-believe Barbie world in the shade under the trampoline outside, and her mother watches, unnoticed.

The Barbie dolls are sunning themselves on doll-sized deck chairs while the girl sets up their miniature barbeque. She places tiny glasses and plates onto the little plastic table, tosses the minute mock sausages onto the Barbie barbeque, and looks around to see what else needs doing. She pulls some doll-sized chairs up to the table, and adjusts the table's bright orange sun umbrella, just so. The water in the Barbie-sized pool glints invitingly and the Barbie lilo bobs up and down.

"How about a swim before we eat?" The girl mouths Ken Barbie's words as she turns him to face his companion. "I'll race you!"

Ken Barbie leaps up to jump into the pool but bumps into the barbeque and the sausages go flying. Oh dear, the day is all but ruined! But Disco Barbie comes quickly to the rescue: "Don't worry about it Ken. No matter what you do, I'll never leave you..." The girl pushes the two dolls together in an embrace.

At the kitchen window, the girl's mother is moved. *How easy it is to construct a perfect world when you're ten years old*, she thinks. A pair of woodpigeons swoop overhead, their wings beating the air as they return to their nest in the bush alongside the house. The shrilling

of the cicadas is suddenly deafening; the sunny day is somehow suddenly too brilliant, too beautiful.

Late one sultry summer afternoon, she finds herself standing on the lawn beside the house, between the landlord and a plumber, contemplating the pipe-work around the ancient wetback that has collapsed overnight. The two men appear to be at a loss, and she stands there quietly beside them, feeling spare, wondering whether this is the time to offer them a cup of tea or coffee, or a glass of homemade lemonade.

The mature magnolia tree which grows here at the edge of the bush is in full bloom. She notices how its huge waxy-white flowers are fully opened to the sun, their erect pollen-laden stamens pointing heavenward like golden daggers in defiance of their huge limp petals that seem to melt in the heat, slip from their calyxes, and float gently to the ground at her feet.

Suddenly she realises that the men have lost all interest in the plumbing problem and have both turned to look at her. She stands perfectly still in bare feet, her soft cotton dress framing the shape of her breasts and hips, falling gently to her knees where it sways, ever so slightly, as she breathes. Her hair burns bronze in the sunlight, her mouth glints golden; the skin on her neck, arms and legs glows warm and soft. Time stops, and she feels her power surge and return to her in a heated rush.

I am healing, she thinks. I am healing. I am healing. I am healing.

She is dreaming of Belvidere and a ring that didn't fit very well, a ring that had a habit of slipping from her finger. Five tiny pearls, all in a row, held in place by fragile, finely wrought, golden claws. She chose it herself; knowing full well that she was choosing her own destiny. A May wedding solved the problem of the slipping ring: a gold wedding band now held the pearl engagement ring securely in its place.

The birth of a long awaited bonny baby boy marked the passing of the first five years of her marriage. And so the babies came; one, two, and three — another five years adding up to a

total of ten, two darling little girls completing a perfect family of five. But by now, both rings sat far too snugly on her plump, middle-aged finger, uncomfortably secure, cutting into her flesh, a constant reminder of the ties that bound her, of the husband who constantly betrayed her. And from time to time, the tiny luminous pearls that she valued so much would fall from the ring, slipping between the fragile golden claws which held them aloft, to be lost forever, needing to be replaced.

In her dreams she often returns once again to Belvidere — the place of the white doves, far away, across the sea, where a little stone church and its graveyard stand alone between the indigenous bush and the ever-moving water; the place where all the sacred rituals of her life were played out: a marriage, three baptisms, and a reluctant goodbye.

She wakes suddenly, her mind stumbling through a haze of memories and misgivings. She lies quietly in her bed for a long, long time, listening to the wind lashing the trees outside, cutting the dead wood free; the sound of the blinding relentless rain washing down to the water, carrying every uncertain thing with it — down, down, always down, to the lowest point, following its ancient course, out into the ocean deep. She thinks about how long ago and far away it all seems, how great the distance is, and how hard the road has been. *How could I have possibly known, then, she thinks, that pearls always mean tears?* There is only one thing she can ever take for granted, she now realises, only one sure thing she can ever depend on; that *this day's journey is over.* And, finally, at last, she closes her eyes to sleep and dream once more. Of Belvidere. The place she once called home.

Acknowledgement:

I wish to thank Martin L. Smith for his book *'Nativities and Passions – Words for Transformation'*, published by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, London, 1996.

The sermon in this story was based on some material from a chapter in this book entitled *'Faith'*.

The Apple of My Eye

“When I arrived at work this morning, Bobby was on my mind. He hasn’t called for a couple of days and I kept reminding myself to look out for him, thinking that if he didn’t turn up today, I’d make an effort to check in on him on my way home. If only I’d done something sooner! Oh, this is such a shock! Sorry, Officer, just give me a minute ...

“Well, as you know, Bobby is my nephew, my sister Deirdre’s son. He was born handicapped. Although Deirdre would never admit it, we all knew why — she’d been drinking and drugging heavily when she was expecting him, and didn’t take proper care of herself. Such a shame — she sobered up pretty quickly when they told her that Bobby was brain-damaged, and that she was going to have a difficult time of it with him.

“When she realised just how bad things were, she changed completely, went teetotal, and dropped all her druggie friends too. From an insecure, dependent kind of person, she miraculously transformed into this capable, sensible parent, doing everything she could, to try and make it up to him. She made sure he got all the medical and specialist help available, and brought him up really well. We, none of us, doctors included, could believe the progress

he made over the years — it was amazing! But the damage was done, and I suppose it was a kind of losing battle after all. I could never forgive her though, no matter how she tried to make it up for it. We haven't really been on proper speaking terms for years. But Bobby and I spend a lot of time together, especially since he's gotten his own flat — he's like a son to me; I've never been able to have children of my own.

"Even though he's simple, he has always had a lovely nature and is well liked by everyone, as you no doubt know. In his mid-teens when he left school, he started hanging around town every day, chatting to the storekeepers and doing the rounds. Everyone knew Bobby — he was quite a personality in his own way — and he kind of grew on you and endeared himself to all and sundry.

"He'd call in and, if you weren't too busy, he'd shoot the breeze for a while, then offer to run errands for you, and do odd jobs. He used to come in here every day and collect the mail, then drop it off at the Post Office for us. He'd arrive at exactly 10.30 every morning — you could set your clock by it; that's how we'd know it was time to put the jug on. He'd always join us for a cuppa, filling us in on what he'd been up to, or any gossip that he'd picked up on his rounds.

"Before coming over here he used to call into the bookshop and take old Mr Willis's dog for a nice, long walk along the riverfront. Mr Willis was getting beyond doing it himself, you know. He's pretty old, and the most he could manage was get himself to and from work every day. Bobby and Old Nick, the dog, were a familiar sight around town — Bobby striding along purposefully in that way that he had, dragging his bad leg behind him, always wearing his large-brimmed, leather cowboy hat at the back of his head, not like a real cowboy would, with Old Nick out ahead of him, almost pulling him along by the lead. You'd see Bobby heading off down the road shouting, "Woa, Old Nick boy!" It was really quite funny. How that dog loved him! He'd lie on the doormat in front of the bookshop every morning, head on his paws, watching and waiting patiently. When he saw Bobby coming down the road he'd suddenly jump up, ears pricked, tongue hanging out, tail wagging furiously, and he'd run to meet him.

"After he'd called in here he used to go down to the service station where they'd get him to wash and valet the customers' cars or sweep out the workshop. In return, they'd shout him lunch everyday. He really enjoyed that. Being in the company of other blokes and

sharing a couple of jokes or a yarn or two made him feel good about himself; made him feel like he was one of the boys.

“In the afternoons when he finished up there, he’d call in on other businesses to see if anyone needed help with anything. Then when school came out he’d head down to the supermarket and hang out in the parking-lot, offering to push people’s trundlers for them, and helping them pack their groceries into their cars. He’d help the mothers with their kids, and the little ones really liked him because he always had lollies — he had a very sweet tooth, my Bobby. If they were being difficult, he’d play a little magic game with them, mysteriously finding lollies behind their ears or in their pockets, and the kids smiled and laughed and climbed all over him, not wanting to leave him when it was time to go home.

“Hey, he was always lending a hand wherever he could; life in Main Street wouldn’t have been quite the same without Bobby. He even got nominated for that Community Thank-You-Bouquet thing that the local paper runs once a month — you know the one I mean. You might remember him getting that write-up last September, and his photo in the paper. Proud as punch, he was, yes, happy as a sand boy. We were all so pleased for him.

“But shortly after that, he started asking me all these questions, and he’d go on and on: “*Auntie*”, he’d say, and get a sort of wistful, gleamy look in his eye, “*How come I’m different, tell me, why aren’t I like other folks?*” And “*Why do people look at me funny when they don’t know me?*” and “*Auntie, why won’t anyone give me a proper job like down at the service station?*”

“Well, he caught me off guard one day, with his constant nagging, and what can I say? I just blurted it all out. About his mum, and how she’d been, and that it was all her fault. How could I know that he’d go off and do something about it? He was always so good, so placid. He was the apple of my eye, he was, that darling boy, the apple of my eye. And you say he reeked of alcohol? Come to think of it, I’ve been wondering what happened to that bottle of whisky I bought the other day. Just between you and me, I like to have a couple of toots every night. Makes life bearable doesn’t it?”

Skulduggery

The ditch he lay in under the privet hedge was damp and cool. When at last he came to, he lay there for a long time, too tired and sore to move. He watched the great clouds high above him circling and weaving, forming and dispersing in the vast expanse of a brilliant, sunlit sky. Everything else was still and strangely quiet, save for the sound of his blood, beating in his ears. He felt like a helpless tiny insect trapped inside a glass jar that lies still and quiet on the bottom, resigned to its fate, having given up the frantic fight to escape. He reckoned that it was probably early afternoon, the hottest time of the day; not a good time to think of moving on.

Later, a gentle breeze sprang up, and he could hear it whispering through the grass and gently rustling the leaves of the privet hedge above him — the world was gradually coming alive again, recovering from the intense heat of the afternoon. It occurred to him that he should try to get up, that he should be making tracks, but still he lay there in a kind of stupor,

choosing for the moment not to move, not to act, just to let time pass. A couple of fork-tailed swallows started playing about the privet hedge above him, twittering and chattering cheerfully to each other as they swooped and hawked back and forth for insects. As he watched them, he remembered the words of a lullaby his mother used to sing to him, and he whispered them to himself, finding them infinitely comforting:

*It's the time of the year,
See, the swallows are here,
Hush little one, there is nothing to fear,
Be of good cheer, mother is near.*

More time passed and he dozed again. He dreamed his mother was near, singing the lullaby. She held him on her lap, in her arms, and wiped the sweat and dirt from his face and hands with a rough terry-cloth, cleaning him up for dinner. Usually he'd squirm and struggle and groan until it was all over, but now the wetness of the cloth on his parched lips and hot brow felt so good, he lay still and quiet, enjoying the attention. There were other sounds now too, crowding in on her sweet song, becoming increasingly louder — cattle lowing, cowbells tinkling, someone whistling and calling out. He startled awake to find a little dog panting above him, licking his face all over. He struggled up onto his elbow, pushing the dog aside.

"Hey, hey, buddy, cut that out," he said as he dragged his sleeve across his face. The little fox-terrier sat down beside him, and started wagging its tail, watching to see what he'd do next. A curious smile appeared on its face as it curled back its upper lip and cocked its head to one side. He rubbed his eyes and forced himself to start taking in his surroundings for the first time that day. As he focused, a darkening green paddock swam into view. What appeared to be a stand of dappled saplings moving this way and that in the evening breeze turned into a herd of cattle shuffling slowly by, their legs and bodies throwing long, moving shadows in the fading light.

A girl's voice called out, followed by a shrill whistle. "Titch, Titch, where the hell are ya, ya stupid mutt? Its gittin' late and we've still to drive the cows back for milkin'. Maw'll be on my case ag'n for dawdlin' and takin' so long. C'mon, boy - git ya butt back over here now, c'mon — I'll give ya a nice juicy bone for ya tea when we git home!" He could see her thin, bare legs now, moving towards him between the legs of the cattle as they shuffled on by. The little

fox terrier suddenly hopped out of the ditch and ran towards her, and then started back towards him again, jumping up and down, barking and yapping excitedly.

"What ya got boy? A dead bird ... or m'be a rabbit hole? Let's take a look-see, and then m'be we can git on..."

The next minute they were upon him and the girl cried out: "My, my, what have we here? Shush, shush, Titch - yer makin' a goddam awful noise! " She peered down at the man lying in the ditch, as he lay propped up on one elbow. "Hey, mister, ya look like ya've been in the wars, don't ya?" She was a slip of a girl, though tall for her age, which he guessed was probably about twelve or thirteen. She was bare-footed and bare-legged and wearing a washed-out cotton sundress a couple of sizes too small for her. Her hair was magnificent; he'd never seen anything quite like it. Long and wavy, it hung almost to her waist like unbundled straw; unbrushed and unkempt. Before he could reply she spoke again, looking at the little dog.

"Wait till Maw sees what we bringin' home tonight!"

She started to help him up, and when he was steady on his feet, she brushed his shoulders off. "Mister, if ya can walk, follow this here track back to the road and head north till ya come to the sign 'Skull's Farm'. If ya turn in thar ya'll see the house. You can wash up by the tank. Watch out for Grandpaw though, he don't like no strangers." She laughed, and called Titch to her. "Come on, boy, we got work to do. Off ya go then Mister, that way!" She patted him on the back and gave him a little push in the right direction.

As he made his way slowly along the track and down the road, he thought about the events of the last few days that had brought him to this place. Life just wasn't fair, he thought, it just wasn't fair. He didn't expect much really, just a little good luck to see him through. He'd do the rest, always had done. He didn't expect things to be easy, but he was a hard worker, wasn't he, a grafter that was always prepared to put in the hard yards. He was a good sort, never looked for trouble, just minded his own business, and just wanted to get by. But you couldn't predict what was going to happen, could you? Life had a way of catching you in the wrong place at the wrong time, throwing you a curved ball, and then you were stuffed again,

and had to start all over. And this time he was in it deep — deeper than ever before — a fugitive with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and he hadn't even done anything wrong.

When he reached the sign "Skulls Farm", he turned into the driveway. The homestead loomed up ahead of him, a short distance from the road. It was a 1920's villa, run down but still gracious, bordered by the usual wide, raised verandah and shaded by huge oak trees. A mass of purple dahlias bloomed along the front of the house, bordered by a concrete path which wound its way in front of them, giving access to the wide steps that led up to the leaded-glass front door.

He shuffled down the driveway towards the water tank leaning against the side of the house, and made straight for the tap. His spirits lifted a little as he scooped large handfuls of water to his mouth, and splashed his face, neck and arms. There was a clearing here and, though the slanted sun was still hot on his back as he leant against the tank, he felt his energy gradually returning.

Suddenly a shadow fell across him. He straightened up and turned around. An old man stood behind him, legs wide apart, hands on his hips. "What the hell do ya fink yer doin'?" he barked. The man's eyes narrowed to slits as he looked the stranger over.

"The young girl said that I should call in here ..."

"Right," came the reply. The old man's hands moved slowly from his hips up to the braces that held up his old-fashioned, button-up trousers. He pulled at them to loosen them, and then let them snap back into position over his grubby, woolen shirt. He continued to give the stranger the once over, moving his head from side to side as if deliberating. "Well, the girls'll be back in a wee while. Can't see no harm in havin' a bit of male company every now and agin'. Keeps 'em on their toes ya know, and gives me a break from their gabblin' on and on 'bout nothin' but the work needs doin' roun' here..."

They moved around the house and walked up the steps on to the verandah. The old man motioned for him to take a seat and did the same. Shortly he fumbled in his shirt pocket, and pulled out a wad of chewing tobacco, broke off a bit, and held it out to the stranger.

“Here then ... fancy a bit of the ol’ weed? Ya look like ya could do with some. So what do they call you, sonny?”

“Thanks. The name’s Jake, sir, Jake Emery.”

“And what brings you to these parts, ay?”

“Just passing through.”

“One of those, ay? We’ve had a few of ‘em before; nothin’ but trouble, I say. Ya be sure ta mind yer manners young man, else I’ll drive ya off the place with me shotgun, no questions asked!”

“I don’t mean no harm, sir. Just passing through and need a feed, and a bed for the night. I can make it up to you, for sure, maybe do a bit of work or somethin’.”

“Well there ain’t nothin’ here for free, young man, don’t ya forget it!”

Jake nodded and they sat for a while in silence, chewing their tobacco. A few chooks rounded the corner of the house, scratching in the dirt for pickings. The old man suddenly sat up very straight and motioned to Jake to sit still and be quiet. The chooks pecked their way closer and closer to the front steps. The old man watched them intently, squinting as if this improved his vision. He tensed his neck, craning it forward, and his eyes slowly followed the progress of the chickens across the yard. Jake noticed that he was sucking his cheeks in and out vigorously. A big red rooster led the group, jerking its head from side to side, all the while, as if checking that the coast was clear. All of a sudden the old man spat tobacco juice from his mouth in a long stream, hitting the rooster bull’s eye, on the centre of its forehead. Great raucous laughter filled the air as the chooks scattered in all directions. Jake realised now why the Bantam rooster’s white plumage was covered in dirty yellow-brown spots — this was obviously a regular sport of the old man’s.

“Got ya, ya prick! That’ll teach ya to wake an old man up every bloody morning at sparrow-fart. He, he, he, ha, ha, he, he, he.” His laughter ended in a wracking paroxysm of coughing, and he pointed a shaky bent finger at a bottle standing on a table nearby.

“Pass... that there... (Cough, cough, cough)... whisky over here... (Cough)...quick son. I believe... (cough, cough)... its time for my medication.” He pulled the cork out with his teeth and took a great swig, swallowed noisily, cleared the phlegm from his throat, spat, and started

laughing again — the kind of laugh that would make a baby or young child immediately burst into tears. Jake smiled. He rather liked the old fellow, sensing that he was more human than he'd at first appeared. He relaxed into his chair and rested his head against the wall of the house. The old man passed him the bottle and motioned for him to have a drink. As he lifted it to his mouth, he saw the silhouettes of three women, a girl, and a little dog etched against the setting sun. They were making their way down the drive towards the house.

Please note: Unfortunately, this story is, as yet, unfinished. I'm including it here as a teaser ... hoping you will be thinking, "I want more, I want more." Be assured, there are many more in the pipeline, because, as Jenny Diski (quoted in my exegesis) says: "what we all fear more than anything is to be left standing in the whistling vacancy of a storyless landscape."