

# **LEARNING TO STAND UPRIGHT HERE**

**A NOVEL**

**By**

**Helen McNeil**

**'Not I, some child, born in a marvelous year,  
Will learn the trick of standing upright here'**

**Allen Curnow**

## CHAPTER ONE; 1975

You get to 13 King Edward ten minutes early. Just in case. It's not good to keep a client waiting. The sign in front of the house has been pushed over again. You pull it upright and it leans drunkenly. Maybe you should open the doors and windows. The house has been empty for a while now, and it does get musty. It's the big trees, really they should have been trimmed back. Too late now, the vendor's gone overseas.

A car pulls up with two people in it. You look down at your note from Melanie, she didn't get a name. A young couple, probably their first home. Better play down the damp in the back bedroom, talk about the sun they'd get if they trimmed the trees.

You walk over to meet them. She's having trouble getting out of the car and he's helping her. No wonder, she's pregnant. And he puts a hand on her back as they walk up towards you, a tender hand.

You smile, hoping the lipstick hasn't smeared your front teeth. You smile and lead them to the front door. The door jams, you push it open with a jerk and it shudders. You smile over your shoulder. A gust of old dust, unbreathed air, someone else's memories, better come more often and open it up. He's running his hand down the scrim on the walls of the lounge. It's baggy, barely holding on.

"What about damp?" he says.

"It's a house that breathes. It's original, you know, great to have a house someone hasn't tampered with, means you can put your own stamp on it."

He moves on down the hallway. You take a step towards the windows, maybe you should open them. Then you remember, both of them are jammed shut.

"When's baby due?" you ask his wife.

And the story comes out. About the mother-in-law who's had a fall, and the husband who wants her to come and live with them, and how worrying it all is, what with the baby coming, and how hard it will be to look after a new baby and a mother in law who's already really forgetful. You nod, frown a little, give a little mmm when she stops for breath. You sneak a look at your

watch. She's crying now. Just quietly, in a resigned kind of way. You pull out your little bundle of tissues you always keep in your handbag. They're necessary in this job.

You move towards the lounge door, hoping she'll get the hint and follow you. The scrim on the wall billows as you pass and you sneeze with the dust. So much dust. You really must get the commercial cleaners back in.

"There's three big bedrooms, good size, at the back," you say.

But he's already decided and they're out of the house and into their car before you can hand them your card.

"And thank you very much too," you tell the empty street.

You won't air the house today. You get the mallet out of the back of the car, at least you can bang the sign back in so your name is sitting straight. That's when you break your fingernail. Damn, right across.

Today's been an early start. It's not even nine when you get to the office. There's only Melanie there anyway. She's on the phone so you head down the hall to the Ladies. It's Tuesday. The boys won't be in for another half an hour or so. One more month like this one, and you'll be included in those breakfast meetings. You count it up again - five sales, and you've worked up ten new listings. Thirteen King Edward aside, you're good at this real estate game.

You bend to retie your new shoes, stack heels that tie around the ankle – the string's been digging in. But they're perfect with this trouser suit. Red, it's bright red. A power colour, the book said. You smooth the trousers. You stand three inches taller and tell the woman in the mirror –

*"Today is life – the only life you are sure of. Live today with gusto.  
Page thirteen."*

You say it three times. Well, you whisper it three times, just in case Melanie hears you. The book said it should be spoken loudly, with lots of expression and conviction, but yesterday when you did that Melanie came in to see who you were talking to.

You have got lipstick on your teeth. Damn. No wonder they didn't buy the house. You reach for a paper towel, grimace into the mirror, and rub hard. You'd better keep an eye on that. Nothing looks worse than lipstick on the teeth. You breathe in, smile an unblemished smile, and walk back into the office.

“Just you and me,” says Melanie. “You want to do the new listings? Himself rang, said you could take your pick. What makes you the flavour of the day?”

“Well, Melanie, it’s like this. The royal road to a man’s heart is to talk to him about things he treasures most. Page thirty seven.”

You reach for the pile of papers at the edge of Melanie’s desk. The top one looks promising. Another villa. You’re good at them.

“What are you talking about, Sandra?”

“It’s from that book I was telling you about. It’s very good. It says you talk to men about what they’re interested in.”

“Huh, what’s new about that. If I want my Fred to listen it has to be about who made the last All Blacks.”

“Well, I’ve been learning about golf so I can talk to the boss. Putters, irons, handicaps, even birdies. He loves it.”

“Sweetening him up, are you? I’d be careful. He might take you the wrong way, girl.”

The ten or so new listings are mostly flats, two commercial properties. There’s a villa in Wairere Road. You run your finger down the specifications. Damn, that broken fingernail. It looks terrible. You’ll have to do a repair job. You hope you’ve got the right colour in your handbag. Three bedrooms, a formal dining room. Good for a handyman. That means it’s a mess. You scribble in the margin –

*“When fate hands you a lemon, make lemonade. Page 93.”* You’ll take it. You pull the next one out, the address...it’s the house next door to your flat. Number fifty-four, yes, that’s it. It’s a beautiful house, been restored. Oh, you’d love a house like that. You drift over to your desk with the two sheets of paper in your hand and pull out your cigarettes. You push the filter end into your cigarette holder and light it. The smoke drifts. You often look over the hedge into the next door yard. There’s a big deck on the back of number fifty-four and the people who own the house never use it.

You can just see yourself out there with a table set for eight, with linen napkins, and large white plates that sparkle from the dishwasher. There's two kinds of glasses, one for water, one for wine. And you're bringing out a serving dish with a roast chicken, cooked to golden perfection, with the carving fork standing up. You put it in front of....

"Good morning, girls."

It's the boss. And the boys. Three of them. All in dark suits, all with matching ties.

"Good morning," you call. "How was the meeting?"

"Ah, Sandra. Did you get my message?"

"Yes, thanks. I've found two I'd really like to handle. One's a dump probably, and the other's been done up. That's not too greedy is it?"

You check out the three men behind the boss. They've drifted off to their desks. You notice the boss's eyes flick, very quickly, from your face down to your stack heel shoes, and back again. You smile with your lipstick free teeth.

"Hmm, two you say? Villas? A woman's touch is always good with a villa. Go ahead Sandra."

Your smile fills your whole body. Today, live today with gusto. You turn back to your desk, reaching for a pad and paper. There's vendors to meet, photographs to take, advertising to organize.

It's late before you leave work. You're the last one. You lock the front door, holding your new stack heeled shoes in a plastic bag. On the way home you dream about that house, next door, how good it would look painted grey, with a dark grey trim. You'll try the Pattons tonight, when you get home. It wouldn't do to just drop in, it's probably not a good idea to let them know you live next door, that wouldn't be professional. As you get the mail from your letterbox, you sneak a look over the hedge. There's a light on, you'll ring tonight.

There's a letter in your box, tucked into the advertising for specials at Four Square. It's been redirected, twice. You don't recognise the handwriting of the original address. It's the one in Sandringham, you lived there two years ago. You turn it over. On the back it says:

*Sender: Mrs B Simperingham.*

There's no address. You push it into your plastic bag. The key jams in the lock and you twist it as hard as you can. But it won't budge. Maybe it's the wrong one. You jiggle it, ease it out a little. It finally turns. Then the door sticks and you have to push it hard. You put the plastic bag down on the sofa.

The light on the answering machine is blinking. Better get that first. You press the replay button.

"Hi Sandy girl, it's Barb. You're having dinner with us on Saturday night. No argument. John's got a new client coming. Works for Marac Finance. Can't remember his name but I saw him the other day and he's a dish. And he's single. Pick you up at half six."

The fat accountant who was the last blind date bored you stupid trying to get you to understand monetary policy. You drank too much and wound up being sick in his car when he drove you home. The machine clicks to the next message.

"It's Brent. I'm in town for a couple a days, any chance of a drink?"

You press delete. You're going to try the Pattons, now.

The phone rings several times before someone answers it. It's Mrs Patton, you've seen her next door, she's out there pruning roses sometimes. You're not sure you've ever spoken to her.

"Hello Mrs Patton," you say. "It's Sandra McLeod here, from Barfoot and Thompson. You rang wanting to list your home for sale?"

She could be miles away, not just next door, in that lovely house. You can't imagine her out on that deck, with guests, the way you'd do it. She's a teacher, at a school not far from here. She wants you to meet her there tomorrow, at morning tea-time, to get the ball rolling.

When you put the phone back, it falls off its cradle. *Settle down*, you tell yourself, *settle*.

There's no one else to ring tonight. You get the salad from the fridge, that'll do for dinner. And that fingernail, you have to do something about that broken fingernail, maybe you can stick a false one on, until it grows back. You unpack your shoes, and the letter falls on the sofa. You push it into your handbag, tomorrow will do, you'll think about it tomorrow.

It's late before you go to sleep. You've decided to start reading your book at the beginning again. You almost know it by heart. It's midnight before you finally put it down, "*How to Win Friends and Influence People*." Every real estate agent should read it.

You dream of a breakfast meeting, with hundreds of people, and the boss is up on stage with a microphone. He's calling your name out and waving a little gold statue of some kind. You stand to walk up and get it – and everyone's staring at you. You look down and you're wearing nothing except your stack heeled shoes, tied at the ankle. In slow motion you swagger, your hips rolling from side to side, stopping to tease the men in their dark suits, all the way up to the microphone. There's complete silence but you keep going. Then the boss is suddenly right in front of you, except he's changed. He's a woman with a shapeless dress on, and a floral pinny. And she's holding out her arms which are long and keep growing longer and they're wrapping themselves around you and you can't breathe and you wake up in a sweat.

## CHAPTER TWO; 1975

This is not a day for the red trouser suit. You pull out a dark blue skirt, and do up the buttons on a white blouse, right up to the neck. Your first appointment is the morning tea one, at the local school, but there's still the vendor of the other villa to find and today is settlement for a deal you were involved in two months ago. That means it'll count in this month's figures. Then there's that letter....Focus, you need to focus.

*Act enthusiastic and you will be enthusiastic. Page 43*

You read the note stuck to the bathroom mirror, over and over as you clean your teeth. The eyeliner on your right eye is beautifully straight. *Enthusiastic* you announce to your reflection. You start on the left eye and your hand slips. The brush gets you in the eye. It stings and you blink and can't stop yourself from rubbing it.

It's a brisk walk to work this morning. The clouds are threatening. Mr Patton is backing out next door as you walk past your letterbox. The people in the back flat have left their old Viva parked just over his driveway. He's going very slowly, to get his Rover past. You almost wave out, it's as if he's an old friend, then you remember he hasn't met you yet.

At the corner Mr Loo is arranging oranges outside his shop. You remember the settlement today.

"Good morning, Miss Sandra," he says.

"Good morning Mr Loo, I'll have the usual please."

"Sorry, no rose today. Only mixed bunch. You want?"

"Yes, that'll be fine. Thanks Mr Loo."

It's your private touch, the bunch of flowers at settlement. The woman's touch as the boss calls it. You walk up to the cash register, reaching into your handbag for your purse. Mr Loo's mother nods at you. She doesn't speak English. She doesn't smile either so the nodding is what the two of you do. Mr Loo pulls a bunch of flowers out of the buckets in front of the counter, you say yes when he asks if you want them wrapped.

"Someone happy? They got good house?" he asks.

"They got a great deal," you say. "How's your mother?"

"Very fine. See, she very fine today."



Mrs Loo shuffles up to the counter. She hands something to her son. She's talking, in Chinese, very fast. Mr Loo is listening. And frowning. Then they're both staring at you.

"What's the matter?" you say.

"Well, Miss Sandra. Mrs Loo, she, well, she say you drop something."

"Oh, that must've been me getting my purse out."

"Here, a letter. You drop a letter."

He puts that letter on the counter. The one with the crossed out addresses. From Mrs B Simperingham. You leave it sitting.

Mr Loo hands you the flowers, you fumble with the cellophane wrapping the rough cut stems, protecting the fragile flower heads. He nestles it into the crook of your arm. The smell of the night stocks is sweet. You turn past the green of the lettuces and the paler cabbages. You're almost out of the door when you feel a hand on your elbow. You stop. There's that letter, in Mrs Loo's hand. You stare at the rectangle that so urgently needs to get to you. You could just walk out. You could go to work, with the mixed bunch of fragile flowers, and meet Mrs Patton, and give the clients the bunch of flowers and everything would carry on. Mrs Loo pushes the letter at you again. You look up into her face. It's very lined and written into the deep lines on her face is something you should remember. You nod. She's insistent now. You take it from her hand. She nods very hard and shuffles back into the shop.

Melanie's on the phone when you push open the office door. She makes a face at you as you rush past to the Ladies. You drop your bag on the floor, the flowers in the washbasin and hold the white porcelain edge with your white knuckled hands.

*Fear doesn't exist anywhere except in the mind. Page twenty-four.  
Fear doesn't exist anywhere except in the mind. Fear doesn't exist anywhere.  
Except in the mind.*

Your breath slows. If you don't do it now, you may never do it. You slit open the letter. It's only one page. On white paper.

*Dear Sandra,*

*I hope this letter reaches you. I have sent the same letter to every Sandra*

*McLeod I could find in the Auckland phone book. I hope you are well. I am writing to say it would be a good idea for you to come and see your mum, Betty. She is getting very frail. You haven't been back for a long time, dear, and it would be very good to see you. When you come, you can stay with us. Our phone number is 7007.*

*Pat is well, so are the kids.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Bea Simperingham.*

Your mum. Your mother, Betty. You haven't been back for a long time. The words snare your breath, pull it from you. Your belly hurts, it's cramped up, knotted up with your heart and your lungs and you can't breathe. And you look into the mirror and it's her face you can see. Not yours. It's a blank face. With empty eyes. Your mum. Your mother, Betty. And you fight those words for your breath and pull it hard into your heavy body.

*Page twenty-four. Page. Fear. Fear doesn't exist. It's just in the mind. Fear doesn't exist. Anywhere. Just in the mind.*

There's a hand up at the mouth in the mirror. It's holding a piece of white paper. And the eyes. They're empty.

*Fear doesn't exist anywhere. Except in the mind.*

But it's your face. And the left eye is slightly red. The hand pulls away and you look down at it. The red nail polish, it doesn't go with the pink lipstick that's smeared on the back of that hand, your hand. The one that's shaking. That's holding a single sheet of white paper, screwed up in a ball.

You drop it in the sink and reach for a paper towel. You rub at the pink lipstick, the quiet pink lipstick smeared on the right cheek. The cheek in the mirror goes an angry red. *Why can't she leave you alone?* After all these years. After all... You stop rubbing. You won't go down there. You're Sandra McLeod and you're a successful real estate agent. And you have more courage than you ever dreamed you possessed – page twenty-nine. And you have a settlement to do and a new house to list.

You dab at the corners of your eyes. No tears. Not one. You reach for your handbag and the pink lipstick. It takes two goes to put it on, but you manage. One last look in the mirror, a smoothing of your skirt over your hips. You pick up the flowers and the letter sits, crumpled in a ball, in the damp sink.

You make it to your desk. Thank goodness you didn't wear those stack heels today. The flowers go into your empty out-tray. The smell is very strong, sweet, heady. You reach for a cigarette, push it into your cigarette holder and light it. You pull the smoke in as hard as you can. Your body relaxes.

"Oh, there you are. I was about to send out a search party. Two messages for you."

It's Melanie. She leaves two yellow slips on your desk. You reach over for them. The first one's from Mrs Patton. She rang to cancel today's appointment. They've decided not to sell after all. That lovely back deck. You won't get to stand out there and tell a potential buyer about the dinner parties they could have. You think you might ring tonight, just to follow up, just in case. One more listing on this month's figures would look good. The second one's from a name you don't recognise. The address you do. Thirteen King Edward. It must be the young couple, the pregnant woman who cried. They want to come back for a second look, and bring the forgetful mother-in-law. And the wife says thank you for being so kind. You never can tell.

"This yours? It was in the sink, in the loo."

Melanie has smoothed out the crumpled piece of paper. She puts it right in front of you and stands there, as if she's expecting something. You stare at it.

"Sorry. I read it. You'll go, won't you? I mean, you should. Himself will give you the time off."

You keep looking down at the rectangle of wanting. You don't want to be wanted. Escape was what you did, escape is what you still want. But Melanie's still standing there.

"It's just that, well, my mum got really sick and I was too late, you know?"

"Oh," you say. "Really? That's awful. I don't....well, anyway, thanks Melanie."

She turns back to her desk. You put the letter underneath the stack in your in-tray. You'll think about it later.

Later you're outside a flat in Fowlds Avenue. The flowers are sitting on the seat of the car and you have a folder of paper to take home- the content of your out-tray. You'll work at home tonight. Away from Melanie's concerned looks. The flowers are drooping a little, you're tired too. They're late. You open the folder, lifting each paper-clipped bundle. There's marketing plans to write. Three of them. No, two now, because the neighbours have withdrawn. You pull out the listing and stuck on the paper clip is that letter. It won't leave you alone. Like a long thread across the years, it's pulling you back.

### CHAPTER THREE; 1975

You bend to pick up your suitcase. It's small. Only a few days, you said. The air breathes you. It eats into your nose and mouth. You know, in the next few days, everything will taste like sauerkraut. That hasn't changed. You straighten up. You can feel the mountain behind the house. Cloud sits heavy on its flanks. It leans on you. That weight is familiar. You took it with you when you left, and it's stayed, waiting for you. Your eyes are pulled to the swings on the traffic island. One slung up over the frame, the other hanging on one chain. You remember them swinging, cleanly, back and forth, and turn away while they're still empty. Look at the house in front of you. Don't look next door, past the hedge that didn't used to be there. You walk up the path. Your suitcase bumps on your leg. Your feet step over the cracks.

On the front door the translucent mother duck is steaming forward, over the glass water. She doesn't wait for her babies. You knock. Your heart is beating louder than your knock. You wonder if they can hear your heart beat, the Simperinghams, your mother, and whether, even if they could, if they would think this is a foreign heartbeat, not one of ours. You think some time has passed since you knocked, but you can't be sure. You bang harder this time. And your foreign heart beats louder. Then there's the creaking of floorboards and a shadow comes across the glass, and a hand reaches up to open the door. You hold your breath.

*Fear doesn't exist anywhere except in the mind.*

The door opens, and you breathe again. It's not her, not yet. You recognise? Bea Simperingham? At least, it seems to be her, an older version of her. You count the years – fourteen, no it must be fifteen years since the last time she passed you one of her big man-sized handkerchiefs and you know that lump in your throat is going to need a man-sized handkerchief. Swallow. Take a shuddery breath. The lump recedes.

"Hello dear," she says. "Come in."

You nod. You bump your suitcase up that one step.

"Thank you for coming, dear," she says. "I'm so glad. Just leave your suitcase, we'll get it organised later."

You follow her across the lounge. There's the furniture you remember. And the picture of the Virgin Mary with the red, red heart.

“She’s in her room,” Bea says. “She’s expecting you, and you know, I think she’s excited.”

You wonder why the hallway is so long, it seems to have stretched. It wasn’t this long when you used to come to visit Cathy, to come to this bedroom, where she’s waiting. You wish it was Cathy who was waiting but it’s not. Your heartbeat has taken over your whole body, your feet want to run the other way. A little duckling from a picture book you bought for your friend’s two-year old has taken over your head. *Are you my mother?* it asks, over and over. Bea’s hand reaches up for the round, black door handle.

“Here she is, Betty, here’s your Sandra to see you.”

You wait while Bea steps through the doorway. In that one long moment in the hallway, your feet almost win. You will them one step forward. You stop in the doorway. It smells, a smell you know. A sweet smell, *English Leather*, that’s it. She always smelled of *English Leather*. In that other bedroom. Even when...

The mirror on the dressing table in the corner catches your eye. You can see your own reflection, in your red trouser suit, red, the power colour. You can see another reflection, a very small figure shrunken into an armchair. And there are the hands. Bent fingers are picking, picking at the blanket, pulling at it, urgently, and you’re mesmerized by the rhythm of it. You stare while your heart slows, slows to the same rhythm. Pick, pick they go. Pick, pick. You keep your eyes on the reflection as you step into the room. It’s not real, any of it.

“Hello mum,” you say.

You wait. The hands keep picking at the rug, and your heart keeps beating.

“Hello mum, it’s me. It’s Sandra.” As the nodding head straightens the duckling is sure. No, this is not your mother. This is a very frail, elderly person. She’s small, very small. You take another step and look closer at the reflection. There’s her green eyes, faded, as if the sun has bleached away the colour. Green, like yours. The eyebrows, the nose. You look at your straight nose. It’s just like hers. But she hasn’t recognised you, so she can’t be your mother. The reflection in the mirror puts up a hand. To where your hair comes to a point on the forehead. The widow’s peak that forever denotes mourning. It matches hers. You turn from the reflection. The old woman who is

your mother nods, her lips, your lips, move but no sound comes.

“Some days she’s really with us, you know, Sandra,” Bea says. “We’re grateful for those days.”

This is not one of those days. *Are you grateful?*

“I’ll leave you two, shall I? I’ll be in the kitchen.”

You nod. You nod and the old woman in the chair nods. The door closes behind you.

“Mum,” that’s all you can say.

You sit on the edge of the bed, on the pink candlewick bedspread, and you pick at the fluff that frets its surface. Pick, pick. You watch your fingers picking at the fluff and you catch the reflection of those old hands picking at the blanket. Pick, pick.

You have beginnings in your head.

You have:

*“Guess what I’m doing now, mum?”*

And

*“It’s good to see you, mum.”*

And

*“Do you....”*

You stop that one. The one that goes

*“Do you remember....”*

That would unravel too much.

How long do you have to stay here, in this room, with this elderly woman, with your mother, before you can decently go out to the lounge and ask all those questions, all the ones that are picking at the edges of you. Before you can ask them of Bea. You jump when there’s a tap at the door. Your voice is too loud when you say –

“Come in.”

As if you have any right to say come in anyway. The door opens, you watch it, so you have somewhere else to put your eyes.

“I brought you a nice cup of tea, dear,” Bea says. “Your mum needs help with hers, but, don’t you worry, I’ve even brought her helper. Might be a bit of a surprise, mind.”

You jump up to help with the tray. You want to help, that's why you're here, to help. You take the tray and another person crowds in. You sit on the bed again, to make room, concentrating on the tray with its teapot in a woolly teacosy. Bright orange, with blue trim. It's old now, and the little flower you crocheted for the top of it has lost its shape. You made it, for your mother, for her birthday. Once. Then you see there are three cups. You register relief. That means Bea must be staying in the room, staying with you while those hands pluck at the blanket and those eyes look blankly at you.

And you wonder if you could manage if those eyes did know who you are.

"Hello Sandra," it's a man's voice.

You place the tray on the tufted bedspread, and look up. You stare at the heavy cheeks, and the black hair and at the brown eyes looking solemnly at you.

"Do you recognise me?" he asks.

"Robert," you are galvanised by an almost electric shock, "Yes of course I recognise you. How are you? It's great to see you. What have you been up to? My goodness, its been sooooo long. You haven't changed a bit."

The words get faster and higher and the last word is pulled from you like the beginnings of a shriek. You hold that brittle smile and you hold your breath. But those brown eyes have moved to the old woman in the armchair. You watch the faded green eyes widen. You watch them recognise this man, this Robert who's just come in. You watch those eyes welcome him.

"Hello Betty," he says. "How are you today? You're looking very well, I have to say. That lipstick suits you."

He bends down and lifts those plucking hands and cradles them, and a pang in your belly registers how gentle he is. You pick up the teapot, in its orange teacosy. It shakes in your hand. You pour, carefully, so very carefully. The third cup only fills half way. That will have to be your cup. You settle the teapot back on the tray and straighten the little orange flower on its top. The next thing to do, you wonder where that is.

"It's good to see you here, Sandra," he says. "It's good for Betty. To have you here, I mean."



You look up. He's fussing with the blanket on your mother's knee, tucking in the edges. You keep your eyes on his sure, confident hands and pick up the tray. It only shakes slightly. You point the tray towards those sure hands.

"I don't think she knows who I am."

You hadn't meant to say that.

"You've been gone too long," he says.

You look up to the brown eyes, to see if they're accusing you. You can't tell. He takes the tray with the tea and you are relieved those eyes are looking elsewhere, just in case. *You've been gone too long*. Maybe you never really arrived.

#### CHAPTER FOUR; 1954

The photos always sat on the kitchen table. Rectangles in black and white. Taken to send home, to England. To be exclaimed over, shown to the neighbours, and to Mrs Philpot in the corner dairy. To be put on the mantelpiece, above the gas fire. Small black and white representations of a life over the other side of the world.

*Snapshot One: February 1954. Sandra and Amy with the neighbours' dog. They're sitting on the doorstep. Amy has her arms around a small terrier, she's holding it tight. The dog is squirming, arching its back. It's trying to escape. Sandra is sitting very close to Amy, with her arm around Amy's shoulders. Her dark hair is cut short, with a fringe, her teeth stick out. Her face is screwed up and she is trying to hold both Amy and the squirming dog.*

Sandra was half out the door when she remembered she hadn't told her mother where she was going. She yelled down the hallway.

"Muum, I'm going to play with the Simperingham kids, all right?"

"You take Amy with you, don't just leave her to me, you hear me?"

Sandra made a face at Amy.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes, mum."

Sandra hissed at Amy as she pulled her out the door.

"You'll just have to keep up."

Amy nodded, stamping her heavy boot down to keep her balance.

It was a joyous army, a savage army, a wild army going for freedom that hooted, whooped and ran over the field together, pretending to shoot each other, rolling over in momentary death, tripping each other, tangling legs and arms. Jip, the Simperingham's dog, threaded between them, yipping and skipping almost as high as the children. Sandra danced in and out of the melee, circling back to her sister who, with her mouth set hard in determination, formed the rear guard, with Robert.

"We've got wounded, we have to carry our wounded," called eleven year old Lenny.

“You heard the sarge, ”said Peter, also eleven. “We’ve got two wounded, and the Anzacs never left their wounded.”

“Neither did the British army,” yelled Sarge Lenny. “Come on troops, there’s a war to be won and we must take every last man. You Simperinghams, you’re on ambulance detail. One of you take Robert, and one of you take Amy. Fall in.”

The army settled slowly, one last shot from Luke felling two of the Simperingham boys. They shuffled to get organised, with Jip chasing his tail, tripping them up and causing chaos. Eventually Amy and Robert, the wounded, were piggy-backed by two of the bigger Simperingham children. Two small Londoners, riding on strong Kiwi kids. Sandra bit her fingernail as her little sister was jiggled along on someone else’s back. Amy’s arms tightened around Stu’s neck, and Stu, trying to balance the heavy leather boot, staggered.

“Are you all right, Amy?” she asked.

“You, soldier, you are needed in the battle. Let the ambulance detail do their job,” Sarge Lenny yelled.

“Stop yelling at me. I’m nine and you can’t boss me all the time.”

Sandra sat down, folding her arms.

“You have to take orders. You’re in the army,” Lenny said.

“Come on, Sandra,” Peter said. “You can be the dog handler, Jip hasn’t got a dog-handler and he’s a dangerous weapon.”

Jip was capering around Amy and Stu, threatening to destabilize them further.

“Come here, Jip, come here,” she said and Jip, finding someone at a more accessible level, leapt at her. She grabbed his collar and stood up. “Good boy, good boy....”

With the rebellion quelled, the army was on the move again. The destination was Sulphur Hill. It looked like a battle field, it was the best place for war games. Here, the mountain had breathing holes, tiny cracks and long fissures that emitted the earth’s breath, smoke and steam coming from deep hot springs in the live earth, the bubbling earth. The fissures sat like Hell’s flowers in an uneven bed of bright, brittle sulphur deposits. On that sunny day, they were blindingly bright, white and yellow. At the edge of the smoke,

where the earth was streaked the yellow of nicotine stains, the army stopped. Sandra carried a squirming Jip.

“Fall in, troops,” Lenny yelled. “That means get in line.”

Peter stood next to Lee, everyone else shuffled into a crooked line.

“Some of you have to be Germans,” he said. “So we can kill you.”

Jip barked and wriggled. He seemed to be the only volunteer.

“Stop it, Jip,” and Sandra tightened her grip.

“The Simperinghams can be Germans,” Lenny said. “They’ve got a German name.”

“No, we haven’t. We’re from Christchurch,” Peter said. “And anyway, that’s not fair, that means you get to win.”

“We can have turns,” Lenny said. “You can be Germans first, then we can swap over when you’re all dead and you can kill us.”

So it was decided, and World War two began again. The wounded reverted to being the two smallest children. Amy and Robert found an ant nest to poke. The ants, already accustomed to dodging the hot spots in the earth, scurried away from the sharp sticks, unwilling to join a war. Cathy defected from the German Simperingham army and made an unauthorised alliance with Sandra. They played together with Jip, throwing a stick shed by the stunted, wizened manuka. The depleted war consisted of the English army of Luke and Lenny shooting at the German army of Stu, Colin and Peter. The battle noises filtered through the smoke, “You’re dead,” “No, I shot you first, you’re dead,” “You’re German, you have to be dead,” and arms were thrown up and bodies fell down.

The sulphur invaded Sandra’s sinuses. The gases from the earth, not from an older war, were heavy and clung to her clothes and hair. She was enveloped in the mountain’s breath: sulphur dioxide – the smell of brimstone: hydrogen sulphide – the smell of farts and untreated sewage: toxic, causing deadening of the sense of smell and creeping death. The acid of it caught her throat. She coughed.

The smoke drifted, carried the voices, fragmenting them. There were flashes of bodies through the smoke, emerging and submerging. They collided and collapsed, swallowed by fumes. Then the earth breathed out and the

weight of her breath deadened all sound and movement. Sandra held on to Jip's collar, a small, lost island.

In the silent fog, Sandra squinted. There was a wooden fence, coming and going in the billowing white, now you see it, now you don't. It was around a winking eye of a pool almost buried by the yellow sulphur: a small window of water bubbling and steaming, like a cauldron of some potion for earth magic. As if in the slower time of the mountain life, she reached for the stick, threw it into the smoke and steam, towards the fence.

Jip was fast after it. Legs and body in one determination, he was a stray bullet. Sandra heard a splash and a high pitched, frantic yelping. Her legs in slow motion against the heavy gases, she ran through the fumes, through the smoke and steam. She reached the fence around the small bubbling pool, to see Jip pull himself out of the water, out of the portal to the belly of the mountain. She reached for him, trying to help, but Jip wriggled away. And he ran, with an unearthly yelping, and disappeared.

"Jip, Jip, Jip come back," she called "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

The war stopped and the soldiers came running out of the steam.

"What's the matter? What happened?"

Lenny was the first to arrive. Sandra was crying, knuckling her eyes, gulping.

"I threw a stick for Jip," she said. "It landed in the hot pool. He.. he.. he jumped in and he's hurt and he's run off. He's hurt, he was crying and crying."

The rest of the army had arrived. She repeated her story, wiping her nose on her arm, hiccupping.

"He will've gone home, Peter said. "If he's hurt he will've gone home. He always does that, when he's hurt."

The Simperinghams all nodded.

"Yeah, he did that when he got hurt in the barbed wire,' Cathy said. "He'll be at home."

So the little army disbanded into a group of children going home, back across the fields, following the dirt road.

They found Jip lying on the front porch. Sandra was not the first one to reach him, it was Peter. He ran over to pick his dog up but stopped as he got closer. He stood and stared. The children joined him in a silent circle,

witnessing. The white and black hair was gone from his back legs and trunk. He was a livid red, the red of meat fresh cut. And the front of his body and his head were still Jip, with his black patch on one shoulder, one black ear and white muzzle. His mouth was open, his tongue a limp pink rag on the concrete step and his open eyes were glassy marbles. He smelled of cooking meat. He still had his collar on.

*Snapshot Two: March 1954. Sandra, her sister Amy, and her mother Betty collecting pinecones down by the stream with the neighbours. Betty's bending down, her skirt is dragging on the ground, she is holding open a hessian sack. She's stretching her face upward, to look at Sandra. Sandra has her arms full of pine cones and she's walking towards her mother. She's saying something. Amy's in the corner of the photo, standing, in her crooked way, staring at a single pine cone. Her face is hidden by her wispy hair.*

It was the dandelions that pulled Amy away. She wanted a great golden feast of them. She followed the gleam further along the creek, further from the chatter and laughter. Here the manuka thickened, it shielded the edge of the fast flowing creek, met over the top, forming cool shadows where the dandelions shone brighter. She dragged her orthopaedic boot, pushing her lopsided way through the long rye grass, its seeds rustling, poking at her as she passed. Under the canopy of the manuka, on the edge of the water, the dandelions promised.

She reached for those little golden flowers – like small suns in a green sky. She swung her boot over to the edge of the bank, leaning down to pick them. But the creek had swept under the bank, taking the sandy subsoil, and now, taking Amy. She slid, grabbing at a young, rough twigged manuka, She slid further, ripping her palm. The water, fast, greedy, pulled her in.

They say that once the water has seen you, seen into you, you will never fear it again. Amy would always remember the caress of the cold creek water, the way it filled her ears, her nose, the way it held her, carried her. Her body would remember the cold. The cold that shocked her warmth from her, then insinuated itself into her veins. She would remember the entrancement of

manuka against blue sky, twisted, stroked into movement to mimic the water. And the feeling of water pushing her eyelids open.

*Look. See. This is the real world. This is what eels, trout and koura see. And you. Now, you. Remember, remember me, you once swam like this. Before your birth. Before. This is who you are. You are the creek. You are the water.*

Then, moving faster than her, like question marks on the blue patched sky, the dandelions floated. She reached for them, through the insistent water, reached for the gold and could not catch them. She could not touch the bottom of the creek bed: could not get beyond the water's grasp. Her boot caught a large plant of rye grass growing close to the water, while the current pulled, pulled at her body, and the shock of the arrest broke the dream, and broke the creek's possession.

She bumped against the sandy edge, grabbed at the grass tangled in her boot and it held. She hauled herself up the sandy soil. The tiny pumice stones pricked her bare arms, bit her strong knee as she levered herself up. Her heavy leather and iron boot still in the creek, she retched out the water. Numb with the cold of it, numb with the creek's bid for her, she could hear the cicadas, insisting the urgency of the sun. Her name was calling her back.

"Amy, Aaameee."

Her sister's voice calling, calling. Amy pulled her heavy boot from the creek's grasp, and tried to stand up, her legs numb, refusing to hold her weight.

"Amy, Aaamee," and Sandra came running, the paspalum whipping at her bare legs, effortless. "Amy! Oh, Amy, you're all wet, all of you. And you're all dirty too. What happened?"

One of her big sister's hands was on her shoulder, and one was wiping her wet face and hair. She could not speak, could not tell of that otherness. She gulped in this sunshine, this dry world.

"Mum's worried. She sent me to look for you. Come on. We need to get you dry. Come on, I'll give you a piggy back."

Sandra hauled her sister up on her back, the water-logged boot awkward. Amy clung on, and like an age old repeating motif of refugee children, reliant on each other for support, they staggered back along the creek. They weren't

far, the creek bend had carried Amy further by water, but the voices were close.

“That’s enough, Luke love,” Betty said. “It’s going to be too bloody heavy otherwise.”

She was overseeing the pine cone collection and the weight of the bags. There were five sacks full, one for each adult or child capable of hauling it home.

“Where’s those girls? Sandra, Sandra – oh, there you are. Gawd, look at you Amy. Get those wet things off her Sandra, she’ll catch her death. I hope she hasn’t wrecked her boot, your dad will be furious. What were you doing, Amy? Can’t leave you for a minute.”

Betty rummaged in her cane basket and handed Sandra an empty hessian sack.

“Here, Sandra, put Amy’s wet things in here.”

Sandra gentled her little sister, peeled her wet clothes off and patted her body dry. She squeezed water from Amy’s fine, white-blond hair. Her boot was waterlogged, and the leather straps were difficult to undo. The boot came free with a sucking sound. A small tadpole of a foot, bending back on itself, beached on the grass.

“I think her boot will be all right when it dries out, mum,” Sandra said. But Betty was sitting on a pine log, lighting a cigarette.

“Do you think we need to come back for more of these pine cones, Jill? You said we’d get a load of wood coming too, from the camp.”

She dragged on her cigarette, crossing her legs.

“How cold is it going to get anyway? Innit supposed to be a lot warmer here?”

Amy peeked out from the close hold of her sister. Her thin body shaking, her fair skin bluish tinged, her club foot twisting her body so she always looked precariously placed on the earth.

“Mum, she’s freezing,” Sandra said. “Amy’s shivering and shivering.”

Betty threw her cardigan over to Sandra and Sandra wrapped Amy, hugging her closer. Amy’s arms tightened around Sandra’s neck. She held on, melding her body to her sister’s warmth, as if the creek was still pulling at her. Around her the warm, dry world continued.



“Well,” Betty said. “I know we need them for the copper, and I s’pose for the fire. Funny not having a gas fire, innit?”

“Lots of things to get used to,” Jill said. “It takes a while. At least you’re in your own place now, you and the girls, and Ian. You’d never get a place of your own back home.”

Jill and Betty sat smoking together on the fallen pine. Two boys, brown from a summer of sun, dressed in shirts, shorts, and plimsolls appeared through Jill’s smoke haze.

“Mum, Robert’s stuck – he’s got himself in under the tree and he won’t come out because of the monsters,” said the biggest one.

“Here, hold my fag a minute will you, love?” Jill said. “I’ll fetch him out. It’s time we got home anyway. It’s nearly four and your dad will be getting off to work soon and he’ll need his dinner.”

Jill handed her cigarette to Lenny, who pretended to smoke it, the smoke curling up over his face.

“Bet you can’t do a smoke ring, Lenny.”

His younger brother, Luke, grabbed for the cigarette. Lenny batted him away, ducking his head down so his mother couldn’t see his face.

“Don’t you try, I just said hold on to it. And no fighting, the two of you, or I’ll tell your dad.”

They straggled back across the dry, empty paddock, leaving the loudness of cicada song, the manuka dark green on the hills behind the creek. Amy was on Sandra’s back. The buttons of Betty’s cardigan dug into her chest, and her wet hair straggled over Sandra’s face as well as her own.

It was the end of summer and the ground was sandy where the grass had burned away. Only the small, yellow flowers and long paspalum fronds survived the heat and dryness, their seeds sticking to the full hessian bags, and to the children’s bare legs.

*Snapshot Three: March 1954. Betty, in the backyard. She’s holding a hose, squirting water at something outside the photo. Her dark hair is permed and it looks like Queen Elizabeth’s hairstyle, with two kiss curls at her forehead. She’s wearing a sundress. The front gapes because she’s thin and*

*the sundress is too big. Her eyes are screwed up against the sun and she's shouting at whoever is holding the camera. She's agitated about something.*

*Dear Kath,*

*Am sending you a photo of our back yard. Can you believe it? That's me in a sunfrock and its March!!! Bet you're shivering in front of the gas fire. You can see we got a big lot of land, we could have a picnic out here and pretend we're on Tooting Common. Ian is keen to get it nice, put in some flowers and some lawn because the kids can play outside so much. You wouldn't believe the house, it's a bungalow. It feels really strange not going up the apples and pears to bed. And it's made of wood, all the houses here are made of wood. And there's a fence between us and the neighbours – how posh is that. Got three bedrooms but the girls have decided to share, they got a playroom too. They think they died and went to heaven. The girls are good, our Sandra is going to school. Do you remember them prefabs they put on the Common during the war? Well, that's what her school looks like – prefabs in a field. And she doesn't have a uniform. She seems happy enough. Our big trunk has come. It seems so long ago that we packed all those things in it. Sandra thinks she's too big for her walky talky doll – would you believe it, all that fuss she made about missing it. Amy's been playing with it and it if says mamma, mamma one more time, I'll throttle it. Amy's happy to see her old puppet, that one you gave her, you know, from the Bill and Ben on telly. And I'm glad of me old mangle, don't know if I'd get one here, at least you can get the washing dry outside!!! We got a whole lot of Poms here so we have good sing-alongs, excepting it's in each others houses because there ain't no pub down the road. Ian's working every day, even Sunday, they're building houses faster than you can say Jack Robinson. Me and the girls are going to church on Sundays – excepting it's in the prefabs at the school!!! There's no footpaths yet, and the roads are only dirt. I'm getting about in me old skirts and sandals most of the time. Me flash London clothes I packed might not get much airing. Gawd, this sounds like I've come to the middle of nowhere, and that's what it feels like. !! Remember that pamphlet we looked at, before we came. The one that said about New Zealand being prosperous and needing new settlers – and remember how there was just a blank on the right hand side –*

*that's where we are. The middle of nowhere. Missing you all – Amy is really missing her Aunty Kath, she's gone all silent on me, won't answer when I talk to her. I suppose she'll get over it, we all have to make big changes. Run out of room, will post this when I go to the next town on the bus, its name sounds like Wockertarny, lawd knows how you spell it. Have to go there to get my shopping once a week, we just got some shops here in Kawerau (see I can spell that) but they're not very big. It is the middle of nowhere!!!! Love Betty.*

Betty sealed the blue aerogramme and took a puff of the cigarette sitting in the ashtray.

“Hurry up Amy,” she called. “Get yourself out here, we’ll miss the bus.”

Amy came down the hall, with her boot stomping on the wooden floor. Betty checked the straps. The boot looked as if it was getting too small for Amy, but she wasn’t complaining.

“Did you clean your teeth?”

Amy nodded.

“Show me. You’ll do. What are you doing with that old rag doll, oh, it’s your puppet, you can’t take that, Amy, you’re likely to lose it. Here, give it me.”

Betty held out her hand but Amy just looked at her mother and shook her head.

“Amy, you can’t take that old thing to the hospital. What if you lose it? Here, give it me.”

Betty reached for it. Amy took a step backwards, tripped, fell on the floor and her precious puppet landed on the concrete base of the oven. Betty snatched it up.

“Got it. It’s going up here, Amy, and I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

Betty put the puppet in a high cupboard and bundled her string bag and her purse into her cane basket.

“Now come on, we’ve got to get up the road for the bus.”

She held her hand out for Amy. Amy pulled herself upright.

“Please yourself, now come on.”

There were no footpaths, so the two women and the two children walked on the road, Jill and Betty ahead, with Amy and Robert trailing behind them. The dust and small stones worked into Robert's plimsolls and into Amy's heavy boot.

"And then," Jill said. "I said to my Stan that we should have you over this Saturday, have a few drinks, and we could ask a few others. Thought I might get a bottle of Pimms in Wockertarny, Betty. What do you think?"

Betty was distracted by Amy and Robert, who were lagging behind. Amy had knelt to pick a flower, a bright yellow flower that held itself erect to the heat of the sun. She touched its three pronged stamen and the yellow pollen smeared her finger. She stroked the papery petals, and her fingers left bruises. The flower smelled of heat and the yolks of eggs.

"My brothers said those are rotten egg flowers cause they stink," Robert said.

Amy carefully placed the yellow flower back on the sandy soil. It was already wilting.

"Hurry up you two slow coaches," Betty said.

Amy scrambled to get up, Robert grabbed her arm to help. She leant on him.

The bus left from the new shops. Betty would have called it the corner shop, except it wasn't on a corner. She boarded the old green bus with her big cane basket. Jill turned to help Amy up the step.

"Cor, bus is a bit empty today," Jill said. "Where do you kids want to sit?"

The two mothers sat at the front of the bus and Robert led Amy down to the back. The two children sat on the edge of the seat, their legs dangling, holding on to the steel bar in front.

"My Ian wants me to look for some nice pig trotters for his tea," Betty said. "Do you think they'll have some? And me and Amy have to be at the hospital first, our appointment's at 10.30. What do you want to do Jill? You want to come to the hospital with us before we do the shopping?"

Betty pulled out a cigarette, offered one to her friend.

"Might as well," Jill said. "Might be a good idea to see the hospital anyway, just in case."

Two more women boarded the bus, talking softly in a language with strong consonants and stretched vowels. Jill and Betty looked sideways, trying not to stare. The women sat further back in the bus.

“You know who they are don’t you, Jill? They’re the Finns, sound a bit like Germans to me.” Betty looked over her shoulder. “Ian said they’re here for the paper mill. Hope they learn to talk English.”

Betty looked out the window at the bumpy field with its dirt tracks and sheep that still thought this was their home. There was nothing that looked familiar to her. The sunlight of the southern hemisphere was brighter, more direct than the soft, greyed dampness of London. The air was missing its heavy load of exhaust fumes, although as the old bus started up, it did its best. Mostly it smelt of dust, and heat, and the heat had a hint of sulphur in it. There was little to hear – no hum of traffic, no clack of passing trains. There was not even the sound of wind through trees, just the old bus, rumbling and coughing. She smoothed her linen skirt with one hand, and pulled a plume of smoke back through her nose and mouth.

“How-d’ya-be ladies?” the bus driver asked, turning to check his load. “Anywhere you wanna stop? I’ll be going through Kopie, anyone need the hospital?”

“What did he say, Jill?” Betty asked.

“Um, yes, we want the hospital,” Jill said.

“Righto, off we go then,” and the driver pulled out.

They sat in the waiting room at the hospital on hard chairs with straight backs. The walls had notices about washing your hands, and about notifying health authorities if you were coughing blood. Robert hung on to his mother’s legs, she absent-mindedly stroked his hair.

“Mrs McLean? And Amy?” called the receptionist and Betty reached over to Amy, pulled her up off the floor and followed the white uniform.

“Ah, Mrs McLean, sit down,” said the doctor. “And you must be Amy. Come on over here Amy, let’s get you up on the bed and have a look at that foot of yours.”

The doctor’s accent was familiar to Betty, he sounded similar to the doctor back at St Mary’s in London. She relaxed on the hard chair, crossing her legs,

cradling her shopping basket. Amy climbed up on the bed and sat perched with her booted leg sticking out.

“So, let’s get your boot off, hmm, it’s getting a bit tight. How does it feel, Amy, is it a bit tight?”

The doctor was slipping a finger into the side of the boot. Betty could see Amy wincing, she frowned as Amy pulled her booted foot back from the doctor’s manipulations. The boot came off.

“She isn’t wearing a sock underneath, Mrs McLean. It would help, stop the boot from rubbing. See, she’s got calluses along the edge here. Did you notice how tight it has got, Mrs McLean? I would have expected you to contact us about that. I think we might have to do some alterations. What else are you doing today Mrs McLean?”

Betty’s chest tightened. She reached for her handbag to get a cigarette. Stopped herself. She felt the old guilt slosh in. A heavy sludge of guilt, full of undigested chunks. The flavour of motherhood.

“Oh, I got the shopping to do, doctor, me and my friend, we came in on the bus, to do the shopping,” she said.

“Did you bring a pushchair for Amy, Mrs McLean? I need to send the boot down to the technical department for some alterations, it will take a little while. That is, unless you want to wait here.”

“Oh, um, no. I didn’t think about that. I really need to get the shopping today.”

“Well, maybe we can let you have a wheelchair on loan. We might get you to sign for it and take it home, Mrs McLean. Amy shouldn’t be walking long distances with this heavy boot on, it will ruin her posture even more.”

Betty remembered the walk to the bus. *Was that a long distance? Was the walk to school a long distance?*

“Let me see, she was five in....oh two weeks ago. I assume she’s started school?”

Betty felt the weight in her belly drop further.

“Um, no, she’s starting after Easter, doctor,” she said.

She hadn’t yet told the school about Amy, she was hoping that they wouldn’t notice until Robert had turned five. It just seemed easier to have the two children start school together.

“Well, we had better get her measured up for a lighter weight boot, think. The heavier one for night time, and the lighter one for school. She can have the next operation when she is six, by the look of her growth. The club foot is much smaller and is likely to stay smaller than the other foot. We’ll move on to a built up shoe once she has had the next operation.”

He looked down at his notes, and began writing. Betty wasn’t sure if that was the end of the appointment. Amy was still on the big white bed, like an abandoned bird, with her one clawed foot, sitting in a nest. She had a way of curling into herself, making herself small. Betty looked at her and felt how heavy she would be to lift. She was trying to work out how she was going to get all the shopping with a child in a wheelchair. Would she get the wheelchair inside or would she have to carry Amy into the shop? She felt the tears pricking at the back of her eyes and blinked. I’m not going to cry she thought. It was always like this, little things made so much harder. Oh, I wish, I wish.....but she would not allow herself to finish that one. The doctor raised his head again.

“You can pick up a child-sized wheelchair at reception, Mrs McLean. Take this slip with you. It’s on loan until the new boot is ready, then you are to return it to reception. Is that clear? The old boot will be ready around four this afternoon and you can pick it up at the same place. Meanwhile, I don’t want Amy walking on that foot without a supportive boot on – and no long distances until she gets her new lightweight one.”

“Yes, doctor,” Betty said, nodding. “Thank you, doctor.”

She straightened herself and carefully arranged her skirt so that she could stand up gracefully.

“Come on, Amy, let’s get downstairs. You can be the lazy one today.”

She reached for Amy, scooping her up off the bed, a small, passive parcel.

They walked into the town centre. Robert wanted to push the wheelchair, and, after steering it into a hedge once, and down the kerb once, he managed to keep it moving straight ahead. Betty had lit a cigarette as soon as she was clear of the hospital reception.

“Cor, he was a right one, that doctor,” she said. “Thought he was a Harley Street surgeon he did, sounding so posh, made me feel like a right pillock.”

“Yeah, but what did he say about Amy?” Jill asked.

The two women walked on towards the town. This time there were footpaths, and sealed roads to cross, and trees in the gardens of the houses they passed. They came towards the bus stop, tucked into the side of the hill.

“Here, Betty,” Jill said. “Let’s do the butchers first, it’s just over there and we can take turns waiting here with the wheelchair.”

The concrete bus shelter had a tin roof, and wooden seats. The old pohutakawa tree slopped down from the hillside above it, its branches leaning over the footpath, providing shade. The shaded footpath was crowded with Maori who had come into town from Poroporo and Te Teko to shop and to meet. Betty could hear them speaking but she could not understand the language. She moved past them, hoping to sit down with the wheelchair. She tried not to stare at the old women sitting on the wooden seats. They had head scarves on, with wrinkled faces that looked as if they’d seen a million winters. They had black marks on their chins, and their lips were blackened. They smoked, not cigarettes, but old pipes.

Betty shuddered. She remembered stories of witches that her mother used to tell, of old women who could curdle your milk, or wish an ague on you.

Robert wandered over, and sat on the seat next to one of them. He didn’t look much bigger than the old woman he sat next to. The old woman turned and patted him on the knee. He smiled and pointed to Amy in the wheelchair. The old woman nodded.

“Come here Robert, this minute, come here.”

Betty’s voice was shrill.

*Snapshot Four: April 1954. Ian, outside the front door. He’s wearing grey trousers and shirt – his working clothes. They still look new and slightly too big for his thin frame. He’s got his work-boots on, steel capped. His hair’s thin, his forehead shiny from the brylcream. His big, crooked nose splays to the right of his face. He stands with his legs apart, his arms at his side, holding a cigarette cupped in one hand. He’s smiling at the camera.*

Blue McDonald was the foreman of Ian’s work detail.



“G’day,” he said, “How are you today, Mac? Here’s your orders for the day, mate. You’re on with Sam, that bloke over there. The two of yous are getting that roof on. And you boys will need these.”

Blue handed Ian two pairs of heavy gloves. He took a drag of his roll-your-own and pointed the limp cigarette over his shoulder.

“We’ll have to go for it, the old girl’s already got her roof on, so it might be a wet one by the end of the day.”

Ian looked over Blue’s ginger hair. He could see the heavy black cloud that reached half way down the brooding mountain. That was the old girl. He already wore his carpenter’s apron, but his tools were stored on the tray of the truck. He heard someone coming up behind him as he rummaged in the wooden crate.

“G’day, I’m Sam, I’m new to the job.”

Sam held out a big, calloused hand.

“Good morning,” Ian said. “Pleased to meet you, Sam. I’m not so old myself, been here a couple of months.”

They shook hands, their dry calluses rasping.

“Where have you been working, Sam?” he asked.

“Been building for a couple of years, finished my apprenticeship in Auckland last year. Before that I was farming in the Waikato.”

Sam buckled on his own apron. He stretched to get around his belly, his brown arms thick with muscle built from plentiful home killed mutton. Ian looked down at his own arms, flexed his fist. His skin was still pallid, his wiry muscle built from ration book provisions and occasional black market whale meat.

“What about you, you’re a Pom aren’t you?” asked Sam.

“More like a Scot,” Ian replied. “But I was living in London for a while, converting flats for an old Jew-boy.”

He offered Sam a cigarette, the red package inscribed ‘Pall Mall.’

“You know, I feel like a bit of a pimp doing this, Pall Mall is slang for a girl in London.”

A blank stare. Ian cleared his throat.

“Where’s the roofing stuff? Is that it? Never done a roof with stuff like this before.”

The roofing stuff was a pile of corrugated iron, cut in sheets, fitting neatly one on top of the other. It sat half hidden under a tarpaulin. Ian and Sam pulled the cover off together. The iron was sharp, the gloves a necessity.

As they worked together, pulling the iron sheets apart and moving them closer to the house skeleton, Ian screwed his eyes against the smoke drifting up from his cigarette. Some of the sheets were difficult to pull apart. Like pages in a book where the ink, the words themselves, have stuck together. The book he wrote himself - we came because....

Ian climbed the ladder, steadying himself on the widely spaced rafters. There was little infill to hold him. He swung over to grasp the first sheet of iron, his body at an awkward angle. He grunted, and pulled.

"Watch it mate," Sam said, "Nearly had me off the ladder."

They settled into a rhythm, moving several sheets up on the roof, then working as a team to secure them, using heavy nails that needed a strong arm to hammer them home. Conversation was sporadic.

"You Scotch beat us, you know," Sam said. "Must be tougher than those Poms, we beat the pants off those Poms."

Ian looked up, took a drag on his cigarette.

"You know what I'm talking about, don't you? The All Blacks tour, mate, of your country. You follow the footy don't you?"

Sam hammered a nail in, not waiting for an answer. Ian thought about the pools that he used to fill in each week, down at the bookies on the corner. Footy to him meant a round ball and Dundee United. He carried on working.

"Need a break, mate, just going for a piss," Sam said.

He disappeared down the ladder. Ian straightened up, balancing on two rafters, clear space beneath him. The floor had not yet been laid: he could see the pattern of the floor joists that linked together the concrete piles: he could see the spaces that still existed between them.

"Blimey, what a lot to do," he muttered.

The rain never came. The corrugated iron roof was anchored by the end of the day.

"You boys deserve a beer – roof shout," Blue said.

They leaned on the tray of the truck. Blue pulled three bottles out from the front cab, flicked the lids off on the nearest metal edge.

“Sorry it’s not cold,” and he handed one to each of them.

“Thanks, mate,” Sam said, and tipped his bottle.

Ian could see the heavy cap of cloud stationery on the mountain, behind the upended beer bottle. He shifted his feet, looked at his own bottle, away from the brooding mountain.

“Cheers” he said and joined in.

Warm beer, at least, was familiar to him.

As they drank, the earth beneath them shifted, almost imperceptibly. Ian started, his heart pounding.

“What’s that?” he said.

“Strewth, you don’t worry about a little one like that,” Blue said.

The tools on the back of the truck quivered, briefly. Ian frowned. Sam and Blue, both pre-occupied with rolling cigarettes, took no notice.

Once the beer was drunk, Blue decided they had done enough work for a Saturday. Ian stowed his tools back on the tray of the truck and wheeled his bike out on to the sandy road, a new one just created a week ago. He zig-zagged to avoid the pot-holes and the piles of pumice sand that slumped against the boxing put in for the future kerbing and paths. Sheep scattered as he passed, colliding with wooden stakes where houses would be. One of the sheep clambered to the top of a pile of timber, the tarpaulin ripped slightly. It stood on its mountain, and stared at Ian as he wobbled home.

Ian leaned in the back door, easing his feet out of the constriction of his steel capped boots.

“Got a treat for you tonight, “ he said. “Let’s all go down the caf for our tea. Come on, get your glad rags on, you kids, get yourselves organised.”

“Ian, I sent the girls to play in their rooms,” Betty said. “They were getting on my nerves something terrible. I don’t know they should get a treat.

And I’ve got some chops to cook, and the potatoes ready to go.”

“Oh, come on lass,” he said. “It’ll do you good. Get you out of the house.”

“Oh, all right then. You get yourself washed and we can eat this for tea tomorrow night.”

Betty replaced the sunlight soap in its wire container on the saucer on the window sill and looked up from the sink. Ian was smiling at her, she smiled back and sighed.

“Where’s my wee gurlies,” he called as he went down the hall.

Amy rode on Ian’s shoulders, holding his ears. It was a long way down. Brylcream anchored his wispy hair, and the sweet smell of it anchored her. There was no way she would be dislodged. Sandra skipped ahead. Betty, in her elegant blue suit with the shoulder pads, and her peep toed London shoes, held her husband’s arm, leaning on him to negotiate the uneven roadway, down the pumice road to a brick building in the middle of a field.

On a Saturday night “The Caf” had lines of men still in their working gear, and families dressed up for a night out. They all queued together. Some of the children ran around the big dining hall, dodging between the formica topped tables and wooden backed chairs. Two men in once white aprons stood behind a servery of deep dishes. The ash from cigarettes clamped in jaws occasionally fell in the food. Amy and Sandra stayed close to their parents. Amy held on to Ian’s trouser leg.

“It’s mutton stew,” Ian said. “Smells good. Wonder if this is one of those sheep that has been watching us work all these weeks, serve it right for not getting out of our road. ”

He laughed. He handed out plates from the stack, one to Betty, one to Sandra, and one to Amy. Amy’s eyes narrowed, her lips clenched. She shook her head.

“What’s the matter, snookums?” Ian asked, hunkering down next to his smaller daughter. “You’ll need a plate, for your dinner. Do you want me to get you some?”

Amy shook her head, harder. She didn’t want to eat a sheep she had seen running around, one that had flicked its ears at her and dodged away when she tried to feed it grass.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “You need to tell me. Come on, we’re holding up the line.”

Amy shook her head again, and looked at the floor.

“Oh, Amy,” Betty said, “You stop your nonsense. You’ll eat your tea and that’s that.” She took the plate. “She’s still not talking, you know, She won’t talk to me. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I just wish we had Kath here to help, she would sort her out.”

Ian picked Amy up, balancing her and his own plate. He looked at Betty. There were frown lines between her eyebrows, and tracks of lines around her pursed lips. He wondered where the laughter went, and the flirt that couldn't help but flutter eyelashes and the quick sense of humour. There was a sharp jab, somewhere in his belly.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Let's just get her some dinner. She can eat it if she wants. Come on Sandra, you be my big girl, you carry her dinner."

## CHAPTER FIVE: 1975

You carry the tray into the kitchen, turning your ankle on your stack heeled shoe. The teapot nestled in that orange tea cosy slides on the tray. Robert has followed. He grabs for your elbow, to steady you. You shake your head at him, smile. The teapot is still. You can manage.

“She’s gone to sleep, Bea,” he says.

Bea’s hands come out of the soapy sink, and she wipes them on her apron. She still wears flowery aprons that tie behind her waist.

“How are you, Sandra?” she asks.

Your hair falls across your face, you push it behind your ear and look around. How are you? You’re swamped with the familiarity of this kitchen with its green shacklock stove and the handles on the cupboards that had always flicked back to catch your finger. Just like the kitchen in your old house, the one next door. It should feel like home. And you’re shaky with the strangeness of these faces impersonating people you once knew. Who are you is more the question.

“I’m good,” you say.

Bea’s face stays immobile, waiting.

“It’s good to be here. Thanks, thanks for letting me stay, and for letting me come and visit....”

You look around for a chair and sit down, scrabbling in your handbag for your cigarettes.

“Betty will sleep for a while now, Sandra,” Bea says. “She gets very tired, very quickly. I’ve put you in the boys’ old room. Hope you don’t mind.”

You shake your head. The lump in your throat is back.

“I’m going for a bit of a drive and a walk,” Robert says. “I’m in the King of the Mountain Race this year. You know, the one that goes up Mt Edgecumbe. It’s my first time. I want to find my route up the mountain and walk it. I was wondering if you might want to come.”

“Sounds good, I’d like that,” you say, holding your cigarette in one hand, and your black cigarette holder in the other. You catch Robert’s eyes shifting from one to the other, and you put them both back into your handbag.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any sports shoes have you?” Robert says.

“Well, actually, I have. I’ll go and get changed,” you say.

Your one dress looks lonely in the empty wardrobe. You wish you'd brought a dressing gown, negotiating the bathroom in that nighty might be tricky. You slip your shoes off and one of them falls off its platform heel. You pull your running shoes and track pants out of the case – they might get more wear. You put your book carefully on the bedside table. Only a few days, you whisper, only a few days.

As Robert drives through the twisting roads of the town, familiarity and difference play two discordant notes in you at the same time. The house where Rewi's aunty used to live, now has a high fence: the signs along the river bank that once shouted in bright red letters, now whisper in faded pink "Dangerous River. Adults Warn..." The last words must have been washed away. There are now private homes and letterboxes where the maternity hospital used to be. Don't look there.

"We'll park up by the old dump," Robert says.

"Nice car, Robert, what kind is it?"

"Oh, it's a Holden, bit of a tank, but it does me."

"You must be doing well."

"The bank pays me OK. I've nearly finished my accounting exams, then I'll be worth a bit more."

"You'll move then? Away from here I mean?"

"Move away? Why should I?"

You get out of the car with the noise of the river as it throws itself over the rocks and under the bridge roaring in your ears. Behind you the mountain, silent guardian of the river and the town, has shrugged off its clouds and pushes its shoulders up into the sky. It's looking over you, and keeping its silence. Your eyes stray down its flank to the smaller mound that the hot earth tried to birth. A child mountain, tucked in, held, secure. Here, close to the old maternity hospital, even the mountain's got a baby.

"Robert, do you have any idea which way you want to run to get up there?" you ask.

"Not sure, I'll probably go around the small hill, there's a fence line up there now. I want to find it so I don't get lost on the day."

"You know, I've never been up this mountain."

You pull your hair back a through a rubber band.

“Me neither. All the contestants have to find their own way up, on race day, I mean. That probably means everyone will be in a bunch anyway, it’ll just be follow the leader. But I’ve been told there’s a short cut somewhere, a track that goes off from this one. That’s what I’m looking for.”

Robert locks the car and shoulders a small backpack. You follow him along the rutted pumice track, with its clay bones exposed by the rain. You have to concentrate on where you put your feet. It’s slippery. You are not sure what to say. A weight of years and a burden of happenings sit heavy in your belly.

“I often wondered why this was called Mt Edgecumbe, I suppose it’s because of the town, Edgecumbe,” you say.

“No, it was named by Captain Cook, I did some research.”

You smile to yourself. Robert is the pedantic adult promised by the solemn child you knew.

“Oh. What did you find out?”

“Are you really interested, Sandra, or are you just asking to be polite?”

“No, no. I’m interested. Really, I am. I’ve always wondered...”

Robert stops and pulls his backpack off from his shoulder. You cough as it hits the pumice, throwing fine dust into the air. He reaches into the side pocket.

“Well, just look at this. This is the entry in Cook’s journal. I found it in the library, and copied it out, exactly.”

He hands you a small notebook, his face expectant. You open the notebook, and look at his precise handwriting, his exact transcription. This man you would trust with your money.

*On 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1769, Captain Cook anchored off of a small island in the Bay of Plenty. A double canoe of local people came alongside, threw some stones at the Endeavour, and stayed nearby for the rest of the day, out of curiosity. The people in the double canoe did not know that Cook wrote in his journal that day. “SWBS (south west by south) from this Island on the main land, seemingly at no great distance from the sea is a very (crossed out) high round mountain which I have named Mount Edgcomb (added later) it*



*standings (corrected) in the middle of some low flat land (crossed out) a large plane (corrected) which makes the more conspicuous”.*

You look up at Robert, his solemn face intent as if he is willing you to understand. You want to ask him so many other things.

“But why did he call it Mount Edgecumbe?” you ask.

“Well, it seems he was trying to impress his Navy bosses.”

He’s becoming more enthusiastic. You pass the notebook back to him.

“You see, George Edgecumbe was a politician and had just been promoted to admiral of the British Navy. He came from Cornwall. It’s his name that got put on the mountain.”

“How typical. How just like a man. Greasing up to his boss.”

“Are you sure you’re really interested, Sandra?” Robert says. “I won’t carry on if you’re not, you know.”

“Oh, yes, I am. Really interested. Honestly Robert, I am.”

You want him to keep talking, even if it is this tedious stuff, you just want him to keep talking. That earnest intentness comes back into his face.

“Well, there’s another really interesting story about the mountain’s name. Apparently the First Earl of Edgecumbe had a wife called Emma Edgecumbe. There’s a story in Cornwall that she’d been buried with a valuable ring on her finger, and a few days later, a thief dug her up to steal the ring. He tried to cut it off her finger and she woke up.”

“Yes, well, buried alive, it happens. I can imagine the revenge of a woman like that.”

“Oh, I don’t know. That’s just the story. Are you one of those women’s liberation types, Sandra?”

“Oh, yes, of course I am,” you laugh. “I burn other women’s bras, as well as my own. And I tell mothers they can have jobs as well as kids.”

“I don’t think you can have any opinion about mothers and kids, Sandra.”

The mountain pushes its silence down on you, you open your mouth, close it. The silence breaks as Robert pulls his backpack up on his shoulder and walks away. You almost go back down the track, to the car. Almost. You take a deep breath and follow his footprints.

The track is dug into a cutting between two hillsides. Robert is somewhere ahead, around that bend, with his backpack and his stolid face. You’re

enclosed, held by the bones of exposed clay hill bodies, with black ash and white pumice like flayed skin clinging in the cracks. There's a piece of broken lava right underneath your heel and you stop, unlace your shoe, and tip the lava out. Sharp ash fragments crunch under your shoeless foot. No opinion, you should have no opinion. Page eighteen, remember, page eighteen – *The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it*. You pause, listening. The scrubby manuka with blackened bark is motionless in the still, hot air, it also is listening. You can't hear Robert, just a crunching under your one shoe, and that other loud noise, your own heartbeat. You brush the underside of your sock, poke your foot back into your shoe. The dust from the spent ash makes you sneeze and the sound of the sneeze is absorbed, with no echo.

"Robert?" your voice is loud, flattened into the hills. "Robert, where are you?"

Silence. You try again. Louder. The hills breathe in your voice. You listen. Up to your left, on the hillside the manuka rustles. Robert's feet appear above you. You look up to see his face obscured by the dark green.

"I think I found the track. Keep going around the bend and you can come up. This way's too steep."

You watch the back of his heels as he pulls himself back up the slope. The track is a small break in the manuka, with steps cut into the clay. You climb up, holding on to the bushes, pulling your body up the wide steps, placing your feet carefully, close to the shallow rooted manuka. The dust invades your nose, clings to the spit in your mouth. You swallow. Robert is waiting at the top of the slope.

"It's not that easy to see," he says. "I'm sure this is the way, this path goes directly up to the little mountain and misses the swamp."

"You must be keen, Robert. It's so dusty. Have you got any water?"

He reaches into his back pack and pulls out a water bottle. You take a long drink, the water settling the dust that reached your throat.

"Not too much," he warns.

You put the lid back on, hand it back to him. You trudge behind him again, the slope now edging up towards the small mound tucked into the mountain. The ash shifts under your feet, pushing you back down.

“Sheesh, it’s one step up, two steps back,” you say. “And this stuff fills up your shoes, too.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No, I’ve given up on emptying my shoes.”

You shake one leg behind you. Lava bits shift inside your shoe. There’s a series of fence batons sitting like bared teeth across the slope, ringing the rocky outcrop of the small, baby mountain.

“I think that’s your fence,” you say. “What’s it for?”

“Maybe to keep animals out.”

“What animals? I haven’t seen any.”

“Wild pigs. And people. Mostly to keep people out.”

“Out of what?”

“There are caves,” Robert says. “Burial caves. Old ones for the Maoris who lived here, on the plain.”

“I need to sit down,” you say, “Get my breath back.”

You slide yourself down a fence post and lean against it. The town is spread in front of you, its streets snaking black between the red and green roofs. You notice the trees that soften the rawness, the newness. Like an adolescent woken too early in the morning, the town sulks under the heavy grey cloud. You’re searching for your old house, intent on following the bend of the black road, its convolution around the traffic island. Your breath is slowing. And then you hear it. There’s a muttering, a voice not carried in the air, but embedded, inscaped into the rocks behind you where the caves live. You can feel that life. And there are the hands of the old man, bending over next to the chicken coop, reaching. The caves breathe the muttering and the hands shake as they lift bone.

“She’s not going to last much longer, you know.”

Robert’s voice cuts into you. You’re pulled back from the shaking old hand to Robert’s hand, dribbling ash, here, now.

“What? What did you say?”

“I said, she’s not going to last much longer, your mum, I mean.”

“Oh, really? Had a vision, have you?”

The words are out of your mouth before you can stop them. You watch his hand, it freezes, with the dust from the ash haloing around it.

“God, I’m sorry,” you say. “I’m so sorry Robert, I didn’t mean it.”  
Robert is standing up, brushing his pants. He pulls on his backpack.  
“Time we headed back,” he says.

## CHAPTER SIX: 1956

If she'd looked, Betty could have seen the mountain from the kitchen window. She was sitting, staring in its direction, not seeing it. She had a letter half finished on the kitchen table. It had been there for a week. There was a tea stain on it. The future of the blue aerogramme was uncertain.

*Dear Kath,*

*Monday*

*Thanks for the parcel, I don't know what I'll do with the clothes, the big heavy coat might be useful, we get frosts here. Funny seeing Mum's old things again. What with you moving out of the old house, I suppose there's a lot of things to sort. I opened it up and thought – Gawd, its been two whole years since we left. It was (crossed out) I wish we could have come home for the funeral. We never really talked about it when we left, whether we could come home. Me and Ian just couldn't afford it. Don't know (crossed out) Mum would understand. I've put the photo you sent of her grave on the mantelpiece, the flowers on it look lovely. It makes me cry just to think of you all. You know, I never really thought about how much I'd miss you (blotch)*

*Wednesday*

*Sorry, I didn't get time to finish my letter on Monday, the kids came home from school, then, what with the all the roads in the town getting tar-sealed and Ian doing double shifts. Still, mustn't get too down. Sometimes (crossed out). The kiddies loved the comics you sent with the parcel. Sandra keeps them under her bed and all the neighbourhood kiddies borrow them. It's like a little library. Amy's due back at the hospital for another bl (crossed out) checkup. She's wearing a special shoe now during the day, and just the boot at night. It tears the sheets something terrible. What makes it worse is she's still wetting the bed sometimes, I don't remember her doing that before we left .....Blotch*

Betty had been there for an hour, staring, not seeing, wearing the old dressing gown that she'd unpacked from the parcel of clothes. She was seeing another place, a sunny day on the Common, with another dark head thrown

back in the sun, and arms reaching up to catch a little child. And that other person, with the same dark curls as herself, is laughing, and she's laughing. And the sun is shining. And soon they'll pack up their picnic and go home. Home.

The sun was creeping into the cold kitchen, catching the formica sink bench and the empty, upended milk bottle. It was moving slowly over the rag rug with the scarlet bits that had been her best blouse. It was thin light, not promising much. Her cigarette was burning down in her hand and the ash was spilling on to the aerogramme, coating it. It was Saturday morning and Ian was due home from night shift soon. Sandra and Amy were still asleep. She shook herself, stubbed out her cigarette, pushed the chair back to stand up, slumped back onto its hard wooden seat, put her face down into her arms, and cried.

.....

Down the hall it was cold in the bedroom that Amy and Sandra shared. Amy leaned over to Sandra's bed, lifting the heavy eiderdown, poking the ball curled underneath it.

"Wake up, wake up Sandra," Amy whispered. "Wake up, that old lady's here again"

"What? What, I'm asleep."

"Look, that old lady's back again. Look, by the cupboard."

"Where?"

"There, in the corner."

"Have you been having bad dreams again? There's just our clothes on the chair."

"The old lady was there, Sandra, she was, over there by the cupboard."

"Well she's not anymore. Don't cry Amy, its all right. You just had a bad dream."

Amy blinked her wet eyes, hard, squeezing the tears out so they ran into her ears. (*Remember the water, remember, this is the real world*). She knew it had not been a bad dream, that she had been awake. She had felt as if she was looking up through water, and she knew she had seen a stooped old woman,

nodding and waving a finger, urgent, wavering, her edges indistinct, and the wall showing through her.

“Amy, Amy, come and get in bed with me,” Sandra said.

Amy wanted to, she pushed the eiderdown aside, then stopped. Her bed was cold and wet. She pulled the sheet further up to her chin.

“Come on, come into my bed, it’s warm in here,” Sandra said, opening up the bed cave.

Amy shook her head, wriggled towards the wall, as far away as possible from the old woman’s cupboard and from her own wet centre.

“Well, maybe we should get up anyway. They’re doing the road today, we can watch.”

Sandra made one leap to the clothes chair, grabbed the pile, and leapt back into her warm bed. She sorted the clothes into two piles, stowing some under her eiderdown and throwing others down on the floor between their beds. Her bed became a series of bumps and heaves. She came out pulling up her trousers.

“Amy, you haven’t even started yet. Here, here’s your vest. And your pants.”

The clothes stayed on the bed, slid back on the floor.

“What’s the matter, Amy?”

Amy pulled herself harder against the wall. Maybe she could disappear through it, dissolve like the old lady.

“Oh, have you wet the bed again?”

Amy nodded.

“We’d better tell mum.”

Amy picked at the sharp point of a feather that was poking through the eiderdown cover. She shook her head.

“We have to, Amy.”

Amy dragged her booted foot across the bed. The iron strut snagged on the wet winciette sheet. She pulled her leg hard with both hands and there was a ripping sound. She dropped her heavy boot on the floor, as if it was someone else’s leg, lifeless. She got out of her wet bed and pulled the sheet up. She worried at the buckles of her boot. She hauled it off and headed for the door.

“I’m not telling mum,” she said. “You can.”

.....

In the Parker house, next door, Robert was sitting on the floor, pulling on his socks. His brothers were whispering. They often whispered, without him. Robert was a stolid, solemn child, with big brown eyes and fat cheeks. As the youngest of the three boys in the family he followed after his redheaded brothers, trailing after them, catching his own personhood from the close tightness of their twosome. They regularly tied him up, left him in cupboards, and told him that the monsters would get him if he came out.

Lenny leaned out from the top bunk, bedclothes twisted, face screwed up and hands making talons at his little brother.

“There’s a monster, little turd,” Lenny said. “It’s just about to jump out and get you.”

“Yeah, a big one. It’s gonna get you, little turd” Luke said.

“I’m not scared. I’m seven and I’m not scared.”

Robert screwed his face up, narrowing his eyes at them. He twisted his sock around so that the heel was in the right place and sneaked a look behind him.

“You’re not coming anyway,” Luke said. “So don’t worry about it.”

“The road’s being done today, we can have a tar fight – but not you, little turd.”

Lenny’s voice slid from high to low, he squeaked the “little turd” and it lost some potency. His voice was not behaving itself. He jumped down from the top bunk, and Robert pulled his feet up just in time.

.....

Two doors down breakfast was already underway in the Simperingham house. Cathy was helping her mother set the table.

“There’s a new boy moved in over the road, Mum,” she said. “He looks about our age. Have you seen him?”

“Nope. Don’t forget the sugar, and the porridge is nearly ready. Can you tell the boys? I think they’re awake.”



Cathy went down the hall. The boy's bedroom door was closed. She listened, preparing to knock. She could hear fragments of voices... "Not the girls" "Will we tell mum where we're going?" "D'you know where the path starts?" Then there was silence. She knocked and a flurry of whispers rose and fell.

"Breakfast is ready," she called.

Peter was first to sit down at the table, with Stu following close behind. Cathy narrowed her eyes, and glared at Peter, mouthing "What". He raised his eyebrows and stretched his mouth in a smile that said innocence and tackled his porridge. He nudged Stu and Stu exploded – his porridge spraying out back into his plate and over the table.

"Oh, Stu, that's disgusting, here clean it up," Bea said, passing him a dishcloth. "Where's Colin? Cathy, go and tell him his porridge is getting cold."

Cathy sniffed, pulled herself up on her eleven year old dignity and yelled "Colin" down the hall. Something was up.

.....

By eight o'clock the first child came out into the street, by eight thirty there was a crowd. There was eleven year old Sandra (who didn't tell mum) and Amy (her wet bed not yet discovered). There was Robert (with his socks on the right way round) and Lenny (with the sliding voice) and Luke (who kept making monster faces at Robert). There was Peter (whose voice also slid sometimes) and Stu (with a little bit of porridge stuck up one nostril) and Colin (looking worriedly at his two older brothers) and Cathy (who whispered to Sandra that something was up).

The road always belonged to the children. It was a dead end, with a wide circle in which an island had been marked off. Around the corner came a truck full of sand, which was spread and raked by men in boiler suits. The children snuck up behind and threw sand at each other and were told off. Two mothers came outside with arms crossed over floral pinnies, tied at the back, and yelled. It was the older girls, Sandra and Cathy, who copped it. They were supposed to keep some order, in lieu of the busy mothers.

The older girls sat Robert and Amy up on the lawn, with little piles of sand to dribble through their fingers. They picked at rye grass stems and ran the tender white ends between their teeth. The boys wrestled on Lenny's front lawn as the sand truck turned at the end of the road, its gritty train soothed and smoothed, without help from the orderly children.

After the sand came the bitumen. The bitumen truck, revving and choking on its own thick, hot ooze, came spreading tar over the sand in a fine, black mist. It smelled of burnt molasses. The men in boiler suits had cloths covering their mouths and their eyes gleamed white from black faces. They appeared and disappeared out of the steam and the smoke. Now you see them, now you don't.

"You, get back from the road, this stuff's hot. Get back," yelled one of the boiler-suits.

From the lawn Sandra could see another boy coming out of the house across the other side of the incipient traffic island. He was eating a piece of bread and stopped close to the edge of the road. The tar splashed up on his bare legs and he looked down. He wiped his leg, and looked at his blackened hand. He sniffed it and a pink tongue came out, to taste it. One of the boiler-suits waded through the bitumen, and grabbed him by the arm.

"Get back from the road, you moron," he yelled.

The boy's face contorted. His mouth dropped open. He tried to pull himself away from the gloved hand and almost fell on the road.

"You stupid little bugger, you get that hot tar on you and you'll know all about it."

The boy got himself free and ran inside the house.

"Who's that?" Sandra asked.

"That's the new boy," Cathy said. "He's just moved in."

"Huh. He's already black," Colin said. "I reckon he already rolled on the road."

"He looked like he might cry," Luke said. "Did you see that, Robert? Just like you, little turd, like he was going to bawl his eyes out."

"See, cry baby, cry baby, baby gonna cry," Colin said. "You aren't coming tomorrow, anyway. Girls and babies aren't allowed."

He pushed Robert over and stalked off to follow the older boys.

“What are they talking about?” Sandra asked.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Cathy said. “They’ve been on about it all morning. It’s just stupid boy stuff.”

.....

It was Lenny and Luke’s idea to explore the small mound tucked into the side of the bigger mountain. Not one of the five boys had told his parents where he was going. Each of them had got up very early and together they had walked along an old track from the town dump, up towards the little lake that sat at the mountain foot. They had skirted the swamp that stretched between the lake and the mountain. They had slid and scrambled up the dry ash slopes. No-one had remembered to bring any water to drink.

The smooth, round head of this almost volcano was deceptive. When the small mound tried to reach volcano-hood, it spurted lava out, like pimples, in adolescent eruptions. So, up close, there were many doorways, passageways, and caves. The boys were assembled outside a thin cleft in the ragged volcanic rock.

“It will have to be you, Colin,” Lenny said. “You’re the littlest. All of us are too big. You go in and see what’s in there.”

“What if I get stuck,” Colin said. “What if I can’t get out again.”

“You’re not scared are you. You sound like little turd,” Luke said. “You are, aren’t you, you’re scared. Scaredy cat, scaredy cat...”

“Shut up,” Peter said. “We’re explorers and explorers do things properly. When people go into caves, they have a rope around them. I’ve got a rope. We’ll tie it around your waist Colin, then we can pull you out if you get stuck.”

Peter pulled a heavy, frayed tow rope out of his rucksack and started to tie it around Colin’s middle, over the top of his dusty shirt. Colin blinked and his mouth worked. He scratched his head and pulled away.

“Why can’t one of you go? You’re the ones who want to do all this ‘sploring. Why does it have to be me?”

“You’re the only one who’ll fit through that little crack, Colin.” Lenny said.

“Look, we’ve got a torch too. We’re proper explorers. You can use my dad’s torch.”

He rummaged in Peter’s rucksack and pulled out a big torch with *Tasman* burnt into the metal. Stu reached out for the torch, turned it on and off, and nodded.

“Except don’t lose it. He doesn’t know I borrowed it,” Lenny said.

So it was settled. Colin was to go into the narrow opening. He pointed the torch at jagged, sharp rock. The small gap looked like a mouth, with teeth bared. It did not look welcoming. “Scaredy cat, scaredy cat, scaredy, scaredy, scaredy cat,” whispered Luke behind him.

Colin knew that, as the youngest on this expedition, this was his test. He knew that he would never be able to call any one else scared again if he didn’t pass. He knew he’d be left behind next time there was to be an adventure.

He wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve, swallowed hard and, holding the torch, wriggled his body between the tearing, gouging rocks. Once past this gate, this voracious mouth, there was a narrow passageway. The passageway hadn’t just been for lava. The torch had a narrow beam, and he could see, directly in front of him, a way through the jagged rocks, places to put his feet. He jumped as the noise of his scrambling and the noise of his heartbeat bounced against the edges of the passage, and the edges of his own body. He was being swallowed. He could hear someone whimpering, small sounds, magnified in the confined passageway. He wondered who it was. He turned back to the light of the entrance, ready to run back. It seemed a long way away. “Scaredy cat, scaredy cat.” It could be Luke, it could be Luke’s voice, or it could be inside his own head. He took a breath and it shuddered out. He turned towards the dark. A few more steps and the light stopped bouncing from rock edges. There was a smell of damp, and of age. There was space which holds.

Colin swung the torch around. The light fell on bones. Maybe an animal had come in here and got stuck. Maybe it was... The light fell on a skull. It was green with mould and sat on a pile of other bones. It was not an animal skull.

*Jesus loves all little children, Colin. Jesus died for you because you’re a bad boy, Colin. Jesus was in a cave for three days, for three days he was shut*

*in a cave. And he wasn't even dead, Colin. And then he came out as the Holy Ghost, Colin, and he'll come and get you if you're bad. And then Colin, there's Emma. And when the thief went to cut the ring off the finger of Emma Edgecumbe, she woke up. She'd been dead, or had she, and she woke up and the thief died of fright. And she, well, she went back home and they didn't believe that she was not a ghost.*

"Scaredy cat, scaredy cat, scaredy, scaredy, scaredy cat," it was the voice of Jesus, maybe, or Emma Edgecumbe, bouncing off the low, jagged ceiling of the cave, bouncing off the skull on the bones, bouncing off the inside of Colin's own skull. Colin could see a hand reaching down, reaching for the skull ("Scaredy cat, scaredy cat"). He could see it stop, just short of the green mould that stained and gathered in the cracks of the bone. He could see it slip sideways, grasp at a long bone. Maybe this was a cow bone, maybe it was an animal. He pulled. The skull rolled over, separated from the other bones, sat on one side. Colin jumped back, slipped, caught his shirt on a jagged edge. Chaos and fear twinning in his movement, he scrambled, slid. He was lying on one arm, on top of the bone he had stolen and the bone he had stolen broke. The torch was pointing up to the rocks above him, they seemed to be moving down on him. He grabbed at the torch and waved it around. The beam caught the eye sockets of the skull.

He came out of the mouth of the cave with no heed of the scratches and cuts that he gathered. Breathing fast, his out breath carried a deep sound of distress. The light was blinding and he couldn't focus. In one hand he was clutching the torch, and in the other, a long bone, greening, moulding. It was broken and the edges were jagged.

"What did you see...."

"What's in there..."

"S'plorers have to give a report....."

The tumbling words stopped. Colin sat down, suddenly. He was breathing very fast and his eyes were focused on somewhere else. Lenny took the torch, Colin did not seem to notice.

Peter pointed at the bone in Colin's left hand.

"What's that," he said.

There was no reply.

“Come on, let’s go home. I had enough of this exploring,” Luke said.

“Come on.”

He started moving back off the small ridge to the ash slope.

Colin looked down at the bone in his hand. He blinked, he blinked away a millennia of caves and graves, of cold earth and mouldering green, of joints letting go and skulls falling away, of sweet, sickening smells of rotting and decay. He dropped the bone, stood up, swayed, and started walking after Luke. Peter hesitated, picked up the bone and slipped it into his rucksack.

They slid and scrambled down the dry ash slope of the mountain. Ash got stuck in their shoes, chafing their feet. The swamp that stretched between the lake and the mountain, its dark water silted, waited for them to put one foot wrong and it would suck them in. At the edge of the little lake that sat at the mountain foot they stopped to get a drink, moving carefully, with no words, keeping to the edge, in the shallows, where the water was clear. They didn’t step further in where the water was dark, held by the reeds that infested the lake bed, a close cousin to the swamp they’d avoided. There were no sounds, until they disturbed the stillness, carefully scooping water to slurp. Colin stood on the sand at the edge.

“We should get you a bit cleaned up, Colin,” Stu said. “Get some of the blood off you.”

Colin shook his head.

“Yeah, we’ll get in trouble if you go home all bleeding,” Peter said.

“Dad’ll give us the belt. You look like something tried to eat you.”

Colin shook his head again. He shuddered.

“We can wash him with the hose when we get home,” Lenny said. “We can just say he got stuck in blackberry bushes.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN: 1956

On that same Sunday that the bone left the mountain, and Colin felt the wrath of Jesus, or maybe of Emma Edgecumbe; down the newly tarred dead end street, Sandra felt the wrath of her mother (again) for not looking after Amy. While Sandra sat gossiping with Cathy, Amy was sitting on the kerbing, with Robert and her new friend, the boy from across the road. They'd been playing barefoot in the sand that collected in the kerbing, and they'd been moulding the still sticky tar. There were three handprints distinct in the road surface.

Betty stalked across the lawn and stopped to put her hands on her hips and a frown on her face.

"Oops," Cathy said. "You're in trouble."

"What do you think you're doing, Sandra, just sitting around, like Lady Muck. Why aren't you looking after your little sister, haven't I got enough to do?"

She didn't stop long enough to get any answers and carried on to Amy and Robert. Robert stood up. Sandra hadn't been paying any attention to them. When she did, she tried not to giggle. Robert had tar streaks on his cheek, and on his arms. His trousers had black patches, and his hands were black. Amy still sat on the kerb, curled over herself. She scrunched the toes on her crooked foot and the little toes stuck together, curled like a baby's fist. A blob of tar pulled the edge of her mouth into a lopsided smile and stuck it there. She rubbed at it with one black hand and smeared tar into her eyelashes. One eye persisted in sticking closed. It looked to Sandra as if Amy was winking at her mother. She felt another giggle coming, and dug her fingernails into her hand to plug it.

The bigger boy jerked himself up from the kerb. His feet and legs were blotched. His old shorts and shirt, already ripped and dirty, were black with tar.

"Blimey, look at you, what a pack of little savages," Betty said. "What's the matter with you, you're all covered in it, and you took off your special shoe, Amy."

"Richard go home now," he said.

He waved vaguely at Sandra and, keeping his eyes on Betty's hands - still on her hips - he backed into the middle of the road and bolted, leaving faint footprints.

"Who's that?" Betty asked. "Who's that dirty boy?"

"His name's Richard," Robert said, pointing. "He lives over there. He nearly fell in the tar yesterday."

"He's as big as our Sandra," Betty said.

"But he's little inside," Robert said.

"You get home, Robert. And you, Amy, you come with me. Lawd knows how we'll get this stuff off. And it's school tomorrow. And you, madam," she said to Sandra, "had better help."

She pulled Amy away from the sticky road, stripped her clothes off at the door, and humped her inside. Sandra lifted Amy up on the kitchen table. She was in her underwear, one strong leg, and one thin wasted leg equally streaked with black, both dangling. Amy clenched her hand, stretched it out again. The fingers stuck momentarily, then separated. She repeated the action, again, and once again. For a moment Sandra felt the delight of the fingers, stuck together, separating, to stick together again.

Betty turned from getting the butter from the fridge, gave it to Sandra to hold and found a rag from the hot water cupboard. It was a hard, old towel and she used it to scrub the grease into Amy's skin. The smell of grease joined the smell of tar, and the smell of roast beef cooking.

"I hope you're ashamed of yourself, Amy, sitting out there in the gutter, barefoot, getting filthy dirty like this. And I don't know what you were thinking of Sandra, too busy nattering away to that friend of yours..."

Sandra let her breath out in a rush and Amy smiled as Ian came in the kitchen, his hair still wet, face freshly scrubbed. He had been asleep all day, and he would be home tonight for dinner, cycling off back to work for the midnight shift.

"We'll have you for dinner, little buttery one," he said, "You smell as good as the joint. You want me to do that, Betty, you get on with the dinner."

He poked at the tar hardening on Amy's bent foot, tried to separate the little toes and his fingers stuck.

"You look like a little tar baby, snookums, you're all sticky," he said.



.....

It was Monday. Sandra and Cathy were walking to school with Robert and Amy trailing behind, still smelling faintly of tar and butter. They turned into Newall Street, passing Atkinson Street, which should have joined up with their street, but didn't. They stopped to wait for Robert and Amy. From where they stood, Sandra could see her mother, in the back yard, hanging out washing. There were no trees between the snaking roads that looped and turned back on themselves, coming to surprising dead ends, like the entrails of the sheep that hadn't wanted to leave.

"What did those boys do yesterday? Did you find out?" Sandra asked.

"No, I don't know," Cathy said. "They won't tell me. They were whispering and Colin wouldn't go to sleep last night. I could hear them til real late. He's got to stay home today. He must've hurt his arm yesterday because it's really swollen. He's even crying about it. Mum's taking him to the doctor."

They turned into Galway Street, it snaked around, doubled back on itself before it allowed them a short, straight street to their school. An old green bus pulled up outside the school gate, shuddering and stopping in a diesel cloud.

"Watch out, Amy, Robert, come here and we'll cross the road together," Cathy called.

They skirted the back of the bus, Sandra holding her breath to avoid the smell of diesel.

"Whose bus is this?" she asked.

The ten children coming off the bus were Maori. They stopped on the footpath, all barefoot, carrying newspaper wrapped bread for lunch, crowded together, the older ones holding a hand of the younger ones. They stared at Sandra's plaits, with carefully tied ribbons that matched the double bows of her laced up shoes; at the gold cross around Cathy's neck, on its gold chain; at dresses neatly stitched by mothers on Singer sewing machines, and white socks. They stared at the blond curls flying away from Amy's pale face, and one shoulder lower than the other so half of her seemed to belong somewhere else; at Robert picking his nose with his thumb. They frowned, resentfully, at

these school kids who were learning how to read in buildings where they used to ride horses and run after the sheep with Uncle Hone and the dogs. New kids at this school; old kids at playing here, they looked for smiling, they looked for something that said they were welcome back.

The four children who had walked to school around the twisting new roads stood at the gate, all wearing English shoes, carrying paper bags with sandwiches spread with beef dripping, crowded together, the older ones holding a hand of the younger ones. They stared at brown faces, with sleep still in the corners, and one upper lip with a trail of old white snot like a snail trail; at tangled hair that had not had a child under it screwing up a face as the comb pulled out the knots; at the dress that seemed to be for a bigger girl, the hem nearly at the ground; at barefeet that could run on stones and three knees with scabs that crusted and cracked. These were Maori children who were not like the other children in the school, who wore white socks and pleated skirts and bows in their hair. These were strangers. They looked for something that said these were children their mothers would approve of.

“Come on Amy,” Sandra said. “We’ll be late.”

They drifted up the footpath as the bell rang.

It was just after morning inspection. Sandra’s group had got an extra five points for everyone having clean fingernails and only one boy without a handkerchief. Her group was winning. They all sat down as the teacher recorded little chalk marks saying so in the corner of the blackboard.

“There’ll be two new children joining our class today,” said the teacher. “They’ve come from Onepu pa, they’re swapping to our school. Sandra, they can sit next to you, at the end of your group. I know we’re already cramped, but you’ll just have to move your group further to the front. You boys, get two more desks from the library.”

Sandra made a face at Cathy. It must mean the children who came on the bus this morning. This would probably mean their group wouldn’t be winning morning inspection points again. She got her arithmetic books out of her desk, the 1B exercise book and the special book of hard problems that the teacher had given her. She set to work on page twenty three:

*John wanted to make a kite. The long strut was to be three feet, four inches. The short strut was to be two feet nine inches. They were to cross over half way up the long strut. (a) How much material would he need to make the kite? (b) If the material cost two shillings and threepence a yard, how much would it cost?*

She had drawn the kite and was trying to think through the next steps when the two new girls arrived. They slipped into the classroom quietly. Sandra sniffed, they smelled really strong. It was like the smell she tried to escape this morning, a smell of buses and cars. Their hair was wet, that was the smell. One of them was crying, silently, wiping her chin as the tears dripped.

“What happened to you,” Sandra asked her.

“We got kutus, this stuff kills them.”

“What are they?”

“Kutus? They live in your hair, they bite you.”

“Do they hurt?”

“They do now.”

Dad had told Sandra once about cootees, she supposed they were the same thing. He said that he had them when he was a Prisoner of War. Some of them were almost pets, he would pull one of them out, say hello, and put it back, because there would always be cootees, because there was no soap.

“How come you get those things?” she asked.

There was silence. The girl who was crying used her fingers to wipe her nose. Sandra nodded to herself. Her group would not be getting any more inspection points.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“I’m Miria, this is my cousin Jessica,” said the other girl, the one who was not crying. “What’s yours?”

“I’m Sandra. This is my friend Cathy. We live next door to each other. Where do you live?”

“Onepu.”

“Where’s that?”

“Down the road, past the mill.”

“Did you just come here? Like us? We’ve been here for two years.”

“No, we’ve always been here, but my nan, she came from Whakatane.”

“How come you just came to this school, just now?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t want to. Too many kids at Otakere school prob’ly. And our little brothers just started, and our little cousin. Too many kids for the school, eh?”

The teacher came across the classroom, leaving a ragged line of unsolved arithmetic fidgeting alongside his desk.

“You, you new girls, you’d better come here and get some paper and pencils. I’ll give you a list of stationery to take home. Not that I expect your parents will get it. And you get on with your arithmetic, Sandra, don’t let these two distract you.”

So by lunchtime Sandra knew how much material John would need to make a kite, and that the two girls from Onepu were called Miria and Jessica. She knew they both had younger brothers the same age as Robert and Amy. She knew they did not want to move schools, and she knew their teacher didn’t want them to either.

In a classroom at the other end of the school, Amy was writing a story. She had already drawn her picture. Her tongue protruded as she held the thick pencil. She was trying to concentrate, not to listen to Robert.

“See, that’s you and me sitting by the road, and we’re all black. I drew Richard too, that big boy, but he’s already black. We’re all tarry. And your mum is over there and she’s jumping up and down. What did you draw?”

Amy didn’t answer. Her picture was of what she saw this morning. When it was still dark. When Sandra was still asleep and the moon woke her up. It was the old lady standing by the cupboard. With the water holding her and streaming around her. With the wall showing through her. Except this time she was angry, and Amy was not sure why. She was not sure if the old woman was having trouble with the water, or whether it was Amy she was angry with. She was writing a story. It was a one day story.

*One day there was an old lady. One day she fell in the water. One day she lost something in the water. One day she was very angry. One day.....*

Amy couldn’t think what to put next.

The teacher called them all down to sit on the mat. The milk crate was next to her and she was counting out straws from a box. Amy sat down next to Robert, her strong leg tucked underneath her and her little leg limp on the mat

in front. She poked fat Margaret who always wiggled back too far, and sometimes sat on her little leg. She crossed her arms and sat with a very straight back. She was hoping to be picked to give out the straws.

The door opened and an adult in a white dress came in with two new children, one on each side. Amy recognised them from the group of children that had come off the bus this morning.

“Say good morning to the nurse, children,” said the teacher.

Thirty three voices swooped the vowels around the classroom. The two new boys looked at the floor. Amy could see that they were brown children, one of them very dark brown, but their heads were pale, with short stubble. She didn’t think they’d looked like that this morning.

“Come and sit on the mat,” said the teacher. “Come and join us. What are your names?”

She had to lean close to hear.

“This is Samuel, and this is Para, did you say? You can come and sit next to Robert and Amy, mind Amy, move over a bit. Oh, I think you had better sit on a chair, Samuel.”

She looked up at the nurse, pointing at Samuel’s left knee.

“That, on his knee, gentian violet? Oh, we have school sores, do we? Robert, can you get Samuel a chair, please. Good boy. There you go, Samuel. Now where were we?”

Amy wriggled closer to Samuel’s chair. She stared at his knee. It was blooming a deep purple, the centre of the flower a cracked and bleeding scab. It looked sore. She looked up at his face. His lip was trembling and he stared back at her.

.....

Sandra and Cathy were sitting in Cathy’s lounge, working on their model about medieval life in an English village. They had made a plasticine family dressed in scraps of fabric and sat them in an empty shoebox that once held English shoes. Colin had been given some aspirin and was asleep on the sofa. His arm was in a cast that went from his armpit, bending around his elbow, and encased his hand, with a loop between his thumb and fingers.

Cathy put down the wool and matchstick fence she had been working on. She sat on the floor, beside the sofa and beckoned Sandra over.

“Watch this,” she said. “He talks in his sleep. Colin, Colin, what happened? How did you break your arm?”

Colin moaned.

“Colin, you have to make a confession, Colin.”

“Jesus’s bones, they’re coming, no, no. Got to get out. No, not me, Jesus, don’t make me stay here,” he mumbled, his head thrashing around, his eyes closed.

“You must say ten Hail Mary’s, Colin, you’ve been a very bad boy,” Cathy said. “Say it with me: *Hail Mary, Full of Grace.....*”

But Colin had gone back to sleep.

“Could you work out what happened?” Sandra asked.

“Nope,” Cathy said. “Peter told mum he landed funny when they were playing. No idea what happened. We need some twigs to be trees, and some dirt for the floor of the cottage. Let’s put in some chook poos, that’ll make it smell right too.”

Out in the back yard they found Peter, behind the chook house. He was squatting down, with his rucksack.

“What are you doing, Peter,” Sandra asked. He jumped at the voice.

“Oh, um, we went up the mountain yesterday, up to that little mountain, up there,” he said, pointing. “Colin found this bone up there. He picked it up. I think, um, I think it’s a cow bone.”

Sandra looked at the long piece of broken bone, the shaft dark where it had fractured, then at Peter’s face. She tried to catch his eye, but he kept his face turned up towards the mountain where the late afternoon sun was tinging the slope with red. Peter’s neck was flushed.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “You just found it, did you?”

“I’m just going to put it here, behind the chook house. It might have some disease.”

He threw it, as far as he could, along the wire fence. It landed on a pile of chook poo. He turned and pushed past them.

“You forgot your rucksack,” Sandra called.

“Come on Sandra,” Cathy said. “Don’t mind him, let’s get this finished before tea.”

The two of them turned from the mountain and the mystery of the bones, back to their task of portraying a medieval English village, held in the confines of a cardboard shoe box.

Sandra carefully carried the shoe box to school the next day. She had had trouble with the cow. Sandra and Cathy had argued over whether it should have horns or not, and how big it should be. In the end Cathy had asked her mother if they could borrow the cow from the nativity scene box that lived in the hall cupboard and came out at Christmas time to reside in the corner of the Caf where the Catholic community held its services. This holy cow wasn’t allowed to be taken to school, but had provided a model at least. In the end the medieval cow did have horns.

“Why do you have to come with us?” Sandra asked Colin, whose plastered arm was held in a cloth sling.

“Mum made me,” he said.

“She told me I have to stop him playfighting with Peter and Stu and I have to stop him climbing trees as well,” Cathy said. “His plaster’s still a bit soft.”

Today was assembly day, held on the asphalt tennis court. Two hundred and forty three children were gathering there, sitting or standing in groups. Colin had got away from his sister as soon as he could. He was surrounded by a group of admirers, and he was telling the story of his broken arm. Cathy could hear his voice getting louder and louder.

“Then we got to the cave and I was the only one brave enough to go in. Everyone else was way too scared, eh. So I squeezed in this little, little passage and I got to a big cave full of bones and the bones all got up and they danced around...” he was waving his cast and kicking out with his thin legs, “And one of the skellingtons grabbed at me and pushed me over.” He crumpled on the asphalt. “And I grabbed it and pulled off one of its arms and ran out and they all chased me cause they wanted the arm back but I got it...”

He ran out of story and breath at the same time and lay on the asphalt with his eyes closed.

Sandra glared at him. She could see Peter, Stu, Lenny and Luke milling about, whispering. She could feel a press of children behind her and turned

around. The Maori children from Onepu had come off the old green, wheezy bus and were standing in a group. Sandra looked for Miria and Jessica, her class mates. She could see horror on their faces.

.....

Ian was working at Tasman, on maintenance, on a new shift roster. He had joined A shift, and he was starting at 4.00pm. There would be a new group of work mates he had to get to know. He already knew Pat, Pat's kids played with his kids. But Pat was a Catholic, a "left-footer." He didn't know who else was in A shift.

It was a grey, cloudy day. When it was going to rain, the mountain wore her cloud. And the wind came in from the North East. Once it would have been a damp, clean wind, coming from the coast. Now it was a heavy wind, a cold bath of sulphur from cooking wood pulp. Ian knew that smell, it was the smell of his family's security. It was the smell of the paper mill.

He cleared his throat, spat on the lawn, got on his bike and pedalled off to work. The roads were asphalt, laid last week. There were houses he had built, now with footpaths, and letterboxes. He passed a big corrugated iron building where pictures were shown on Saturday afternoons. He cycled over the bridge that crossed Tarawera River- "Dangerous River, Adults Warn Children Away"- said the sign. He joined other men on their bikes, hard hatted, steel cap bootied, protected.

He shoved his bike in the bike stand, stowed his swandry in his locker, and headed for the smoko room. His shift team were to gather there, in the heart of the machinery, with the noise of the paper machine humming. Pat was already sitting on a wooden chair at the smoko table.

"G'day," Pat said, "Grab a cuppa, we're waiting on the other two shift mates and the foreman."

"Do you know who they are?" asked Ian.

"Yeah, well, the foreman's one of those Finns, hope his English is up to it. Don't know who the other two blokes are, though, oh, here they come."

Two Maori men came in, pulled chairs out as far as they could from the table, sat down, folded their arms. Nothing was said.



“Afternoon,” Ian said. “I’m Ian McLean,” and he extended his hand.

There was no response. Ian looked at his extended hand, bit his lip, let his hand fall. Pat leaned back against the wall, swinging his chair on two legs.

“You fellas, seen you at church, haven’t I? You’re Catholics, aren’t you?” Pat said.

He lit a cigarette, put the packet back in his shirt pocket without offering it around.

“We going to be the new shift team, eh? Us four?”

One of the Maori men nodded, slowly. The other continued to stare, shifting his hard, direct gaze from one set of eyes to another. Ian looked at the floor, to avoid the intensity burning into him. He continued to stand against the wall.

“One of yours got a boy called Colin?” asked one of the men.

Pat’s head jerked back. He frowned. “Yeah, why?”

“A boy with a broken arm?”

“Yeah, he broke it on the weekend. What’re you on about?”

“Your boy, he went with some other boys, up the mountain?”

“I dunno, the kids go everywhere. I dunno where they were in the weekend.”

The Maori man with the shafting eyes had remained quiet through this exchange. He leaned forward.

“Let me tell you where your boy was. In the weekend. He and his mates went up the mountain. They went to the caves up there. You know he came back with bones?”

Pat unfolded his arms. “So what?” he said.

“He came back with bones. That’s tapu. You understand?”

“No I don’t bloody understand. What does it matter if he picked up some old bones? Bones of what? A pig, an old cow? What’re you talking about?”

The two Maori men looked at each other. There was silence again. Ian cleared his throat, opened his mouth, closed it. He shifted uneasily against the wall. The door of the smoko room opened, letting in a blast of noise, and a man with a clipboard.

“All right, here you are. Hello everyone. I am Heiki Kankaanpera, I am the foreman for A shift. You are all A shift?”

Four pairs of eyes moved towards him. Two pairs blue, two pairs brown, all hostile.

“Can you introduce yourselves, please? As I say, I am Heiki, can you tell me who you are please?”

Ian’s hand shot out again. He felt sure this time it would be shaken.

“Ian McLean” he said.

“I’m Pat.”

“Hemi, Hemi, but you can call me Jim.”

“Ted, my name is Ted.”

Ted turned to Pat.

“We want our tupuna back,” he said.

.....

The children gathered in the McLean backyard. Ian had been hammering together some timber framing that took up all of the space. It was the beginnings of a set for the town pantomime, with struts across, partitioning it into empty rooms that could hold many different stories. The children sat on the timber framing, organising.

“You can’t be the princess, Amy, you’re too little,”

“Yes, I can, I want to be a princess with long hair, like Rapunzel.”

“I want to be the king, I could have a sword, and I could kill the dragon.”

“Who said there’s going to be a dragon?”

“I want to be Robin Hood, and you can all be my merry men.”

“No, that’s boring, they all just sit up in trees and we haven’t got any trees.”

“I want to play cowboys and Indians – we can make bows and arrows.”

“You can’t do any of those. Mum told me the pantomime is Aladdin, so we have to do Aladdin.”

There was an argument over who would be Aladdin. None of the boys would take it on. It seemed that going into a cave to fetch a treasure did not appeal to them. Amy was sure she wanted to be Rapunzel and demanded that Robert put on his mother’s floral pinny and be the old witch who looked after her. They settled in one section of the framing. Peter had been reading “*The*

*Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*” and knew he was destined to be a king. So he set out from the castle with his queen (Sandra) to kill a fierce dragon (Stu). And a travelling Robin Hood (Lenny) and Little John (Luke) went in search of trees. Peter told Colin he could be Aladdin, and go into a cave to get a treasure, but, he paled, and without saying why, he refused point blank. He became the single cowboy who was relegated to the shed, but was expected to rescue Rapunzel.

As stories do, this one took an unexpected turn. Rapunzel was accidentally eaten by the dragon, and an argument broke out about whether killing the dragon would result in killing Rapunzel as well. It became very heated. Robin Hood, or Lenny, called a meeting, to be held on top of the flat shed roof.

The children climbed up the wood stack, pulling their cloaks behind them, dragging swords and carrying cardboard crowns. Amy got her special shoe stuck in a gap in the wood stack, Sandra pulled her out. Colin tried not to put weight on his plastered arm. Lenny got everyone to sit down. From the shed roof, there was a view of the street.

Sandra looked down at four men coming up the driveway next door.

“Peter, there’s a whole lot of people going to your house,” she said. “A whole lot of Maoris.”

The children crowded to the edge of the shed, staring. There were four men, in black suits and white shirts, holding hats. Three of them had black hair neatly combed back, brylcream glistening. There was one older man with them, his hair grey, combed carefully over a balding spot. He was holding his hat and leaning on a stick and led the other three men up the footpath. The delegation stopped on the front lawn.

“I’ve seen them at our church,” said Peter. “They’re Catholics like us. They must want some church stuff from Mum.”

Peter’s mother, Bea, came to the front door, wiping her hands on her apron, shaking her head. She talked, the old man talked. Sandra strained to hear, but the sound didn’t travel up to the shed roof. Then, her voice shrill, Bea called out –

“Colin, Colin, where are you? You come here this minute.”

Sandra stared at Colin who was biting his lip. She remembered his jerky skeleton dance, and the look of horror on the faces of her friends, Jessica and

Miria, and she gave him a shove. He climbed down the woodpile and went over to his mother. She held him by the shoulder, talked to him. He shook his head, waved his cast around, looking at his mother, not the men. Bea folded her arms, talked to the old man again and Colin escaped back to the roof.

“What do they want?” Sandra asked, “Why did your mum want to talk to you?”

Colin’s face was pale, his shoulders drooped. He nursed his broken arm.

“They wanted to talk about the bone that I got from the cave. I told them I don’t know what happened to it. I think I dropped it in the cave. They said it was one of their dead people,” and he shuddered.

Peter had sat down, he was staring at his feet.

“What about that cow bone, Peter, the one you threw on the chook poo pile?” Sandra asked.

He shook his head, said nothing. Her cardboard crown and her queenly cloak were left at Peter’s feet, and she climbed down the wood pile. She went over to where Bea was nodding while the old man talked and stood, waiting for a gap in the conversation.

“I think I know,” she said. “Your bones. I think I know where they are.”

Sandra led the old man behind the chook house. The chooks, thinking someone has come to feed them, crowded to the fence. She leant down to pick up the piece of bone that Peter had thrown on the pile of chook poo but the old man held her arm and said something, in a language Sandra didn’t understand. He gestured, said something again and she moved back from the fence, from the inquisitive chooks and the bone, sitting on the brown, crumbly manure. He pulled a white cloth from his trouser pocket. As he bent down to pick up the bone, he talked quietly, his voice a soft cadence with the curl of chook song punctuating it. He was almost singing to the bone, gently lifting it, cradling it. He pulled the white cloth over it, gesturing her to follow him. Bent to protect his burden, the old man led them back around the house.

Sandra ran over to rejoin Bea. The old man nodded to them both and turned towards the three men standing on the front lawn. He passed the white cloth with its hidden contents to one of the other men and they bowed their heads. The soft murmur started again, its rhythm falling and breaking, rising and mending. There was silence. As the men turned to leave, the old man

looked at Bea and Sandra, then he pointed with his stick to the children on the roof, banged his stick on his forearm, nodded a final time and turned to leave.

Up on the roof, Amy said “That must be why the old lady is so angry. She’s been living in my wardrobe and she’s been very, very angry, I been seeing her every night. Maybe she’ll go away now.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT; 1975

A flash of heat from the ash you're sitting on comes up through your body. The flames reach your face. Words explode in your head. *Vision - the old woman, she's back Sandra*. Before you can grasp them, Robert is down the mountain in long strides, fast down the slope into the manuka fringe. He's gone.

You pause, listening. The caves hold their silence. You wipe the sweat from your upper lip, and pull yourself up, steadying yourself on the fence post. Your eye travels along the taut wire, there's no sign of a gate to get into the enclosed caves. But the fence shouts loudly 'KEEP OUT'. You slide your gaze away from the rocks that muttered at you, and the ash slope carries your feet down and away. Away from the mountain and back to the fences stretched between you and Robert.

You turn the corner of the deeply etched track and step into the roar of the river. It buffets you, pushes at your edges, echoes through your head and your belly. The sound sweeps you towards the Holden with its open door and Robert sitting behind the driving wheel. You're washed into the car and.... one thing, you need to do one thing, to be here in the car. You take off your shoes, empty out the mountain ash. The lace has lost its plastic end, and is fraying. New laces, you need to get new laces. One shoe emptied, you're beginning on the other.

Then there's Robert, his knuckles white on the driving wheel, staring out of the windscreen at the river. You follow his stare. The water is urgent under the bridge, fierce in the prison of its narrow banks. It throws itself at a huge boulder immobile in the middle of the river's track. You watch the desperate water thrown back, broken by the rock. To dissipate its force into the air. You know that violence. That trying to escape.

"Robert," you say. "Robert, are you all right?"

He doesn't reply.

"Robert, Robert. What can you see. Tell me."

He turns towards you. His eyes are focused somewhere else. In the river, in the past, in whatever he can see in the disintegrating water. You're both held, like the boulder, in the roar of the river, both pounded by the violent water.

He breaks the stasis. He turns to the ignition in the car and starts the engine. The river noise swallows its sound. As if the dam has broken, the noise is carrying the car away. You and Robert and the Holden drift over the ash road, back into the town.

As the car winds back towards the street where you once lived, when you were a different person, you watch the grey turn to rain. The windscreen wipers flick across, and back, across and back, a metronome measuring those ten years. You'll not go there, not back there.

"It's raining," you say.

"I did notice."

The sound of the windscreen wipers is preferable. Robert's face is saying "KEEP OUT". You're not sure whether to be thankful when you reach that street, the one with the roundabout and the swings, where your mother lives now, where you used to live. *Only a few days*. You remind yourself. *Only a few days*.

Soon, soon you can go back to Auckland, back to your flat. And the young couple might have their mortgage money by now. They might be ready to put in an offer. Maybe you should ring.

"The doctor's here," Robert says. "That's his car. It'll be Betty."

He's in the house before you can get your door open. You move slowly, out of the car, along the footpath and to the open front door with its mother duck frozen in glass. You stand in the lounge, under the Virgin Mary's red heart, and wonder what to do. You can hear voices in the bedroom. Where your mother is. And you have a nagging feeling that this is not going to be a few days. You pull out a cigarette, push the brown filter end into your cigarette holder, change your mind and put the cigarette holder away. You find your lighter, light the naked cigarette, pull the smoke in, let it flood your lungs.

The door of the lounge opens and an older version of the doctor you remember steps into the room. He's talking over his shoulder and doesn't see you. You slam a door inside yourself. The door to the last time you saw him. The doctor. Who knows so much of who you were. You take another deep pull of your cigarette.

He's carrying a doctor's bag and pushing a pen back into his jacket pocket.

“Oh, hello,” he says. “You must be Sandra. My, how the years fly.”

You’re unsure what to do, what to say. You feel very young.

“Your mum had a fall, Sandra,” he says. “She’s all right. She’s in bed now.”

You knew it. People will expect you to be here for more than a few days. Well, you’re just going to go home to Auckland anyway. You have a job – you’re nearly up to breakfast meetings, just one more sale. You clench your teeth.

“You’ll be wanting to spend as much time with her as you can, Sandra,” he says. “She’s very frail.”

You feel the panic coming up - that blank face, those empty eyes - you don’t want to spend time with that. You sit down on the sofa and stare at the carpet and the pattern moves up to swallow you. You close your eyes. A weight sinks into the sofa beside you and a hand pushes a man-sized handkerchief at you. You take it.



## CHAPTER NINE; 1956

The story on the radio was “The Sad Little Mermaid” about the mermaid princess who lost her home in the water, her fish tail and her voice, all for a prince who loved someone else. It was Saturday and Sandra and Amy had been awake since six o’clock, listening to the radio. They were sitting on cushions from the sofa, because the mill felt that covered the floor was rough and hard on their knees and elbows. The ashes from the first winter fire were cold in the fireplace and Sandra had dragged their eiderdowns into the lounge to keep them warm. The story was almost finished and the mermaid was floating back in the sea, as the foam, as the foam with her sisters.

“I’m a mermaid,” Amy said.

“No, you’re not, you haven’t got a fish tail, don’t be stupid, Amy.”

“Oh, but I am a mermaid. I just don’t live in the water any more. Like the Sad Little Mermaid, with her sore feet.”

Amy stretched out her crooked foot.

“Watch out then, the sea witch will make you drown,” Sandra said. “Let’s wake Mum up. Dad will be home soon, it’s eight o’clock. Let’s make mum a cuppa tea in bed. It’ll cheer her up. Come on Amy, you can put the sugar in for Mum.”

Sandra could reach the cups, if she stood on the bottom drawer. She put a cup carefully in a saucer. The tea caddy had pictures of Big Ben and London Bridge on it and she counted the spoons of tea; one spoon for mum, one spoon for dad, and one spoon for the pot. Carefully she tipped the boiling water in, put the lid on and tucked the orange woolly tea cosy, the one she knitted, around the pot.

“You’ve got to turn the pot around three times before the tea will be ready,” Amy said. “It’s a magic spell.”

“Don’t be silly, Amy.”

Sandra turned the pot around three times.

“And you have to put the milk in first, and the sugar.”

“How come you know so much about making a cuppa tea? You’ve never done it.”

Sandra put the milk in first, then the sugar.

She led the little procession to their parents' bedroom at the end of the hallway, carrying the cup of tea. Her tongue protruded just a little, to keep the cup steady. Amy, dragging her eiderdown, pushed open the door.

"Mum," Sandra said, "Mum, we made you a cuppa tea." She couldn't see her mother, only a lump under the covers. She carefully placed the cup of tea on the bedside table, only a little of it spilled and caught in the teaspoon.

"Mum, wake up," Sandra said. The two girls stood next to their mother's bed. If dad was home they would have jumped into the bed, jumped on him and he would have rubbed his unshaven chin on their soft necks and they would have run, squealing, to lock themselves in the bathroom. But he was still at work.

"Mum, we made you a cuppa tea," Sandra said.

Betty blinked, reached for her cigarettes. The cup of tea, so carefully placed on the bedside table was in the way. The cup upended.

"Gawd, what was that?" she said and pulled herself up on her elbows.

The tea was spreading on the bedside table. Betty's Pall Mall cigarettes had taken most of it, and the red packet sat in a puddle of brown tea that dripped down the side of the table on to the floor.

"Oh, crikey, me fags. Oh no, that's me last packet."

She reached over and picked the packet up, shaking it. Tea drips scattered on the sheet. She looked inside, threw the cigarettes back into the puddle of tea, lay back on the pillow and closed her eyes. Sandra pulled Amy out of the room, closing the door.

Amy and Sandra spent the morning playing in their room, and Ian gave them two sixpences for being so good and so quiet, suggesting they go to the pictures. Later that afternoon, they were standing in a queue, with Cathy and Robert, outside the Rec Hall, with sixpences clutched hard. It was the girls' turn to choose the film and this week Amy was hoping they could watch *Dumbo* again.

Inside the big corrugated iron building, it was murky. There were no windows and the light came in through the nail holes in the walls. Children sat on wooden chairs with metal legs. Fifty children with a play of sun fragments lighting up one here, one there. Now you see them, now you don't. At the end furthest from the door was a screen, made from sheets. It flapped slightly in

the draught. The noise of fifty children, talking as loudly as they could, scraping chairs on the concrete floor, bounced off the high iron ceiling, hit the floor, and broke into a thousand shrill sounds.

Amy and Robert sat cross-legged on the floor. Amy patted Sandra on the knee.

“Sandra, we forgot the cushion again,” she said.

“Only sissies bring cushions,” Robert said. “My brothers said so.”

“But mum said I’ll get piles.”

“Piles of what?” He was looking around the exposed rafters. “There’s piles of rats up there. I’m going to see four today, that would be a record.”

Charlie Mac was on the platform at the top of the ladder. Amy always wondered how such an old man, with white hair, could climb up and down so easily, especially with such a big belly. The platform was where the projector was, and Charlie Mac was the boss of it. He was waving his arms and saying something, his mouth opening and closing, like a drowning mermaid. The noise swirled and swelled and lulled a little. The next thing he shouted was so loud it pierced through the nail holes.

“Och, shut your gobs, the lot of you.”

A small silence then fifty voices echoed it back to him.

“Shut your gob, Charlie Mac.”

Fifty children laughed.

“We’ve got Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse for starters. Who wants Donald Duck?”

A half hearted “yes.”

“What about Mickey Mouse, then?”

The “yes” was louder.

“All right then, Mickey Mouse it is. And we’ve got Cinderella.”

A groan from the boys.

“Och, come on now, it’s the girl’s turn. You boys can have Hopalong Cassidy next week.”

A cheer from the boys and Charlie Mac turned to the projector.

Amy scrambled to her feet with fifty other children as God Save the Queen was played. Charlie Mac played it very loudly, Amy could hear it over the noise of scraping chairs. It sounded like the sea and today, the queen was

floating, with her crown on, like the Sad Little Mermaid, and God, in his long dress and long, grey beard, was leaning out of his boat, trying to save her. The song finished before God got to the queen.

Cinderella, with her perfect feet, fitted the slipper, got her prince, and lived happily ever after. The film over, children jostled to leave, crowding out on to the footpath, claiming bikes, shouting at each other.

“That’s a sissy story,” Robert said.

“Well, you didn’t have to come,” Amy said. “Where’s Luke and Lenny today, anyway?”

“They’re over there, I’m not big enough to have a bike yet. I’m going to tell them it’s Hopalong Cassidy next week.”

Over the road, on the soccer field a group of boys were racing up and down on their bikes. Robert ran towards his brothers, and the sign that shouted in red capital letters: DANGEROUS RIVER. ADULTS WARN CHILDREN AWAY. The sign the children took no notice of.

Amy, Sandra, and Cathy had reached the fire station when Robert came running up behind them.

“Here you are, Amy,” he said. “My brothers said you’d like this. They found it in the river.”

He held out a wet bundle. It was a rag doll, with china head, and china hands and feet. One cheek was cracked and the crack had spread, like a spider web, across the snub nose and one blue china eye. It was naked, and its cloth body was streaked in mud. Amy took it.

“Yuk, its all wet and dirty,” she said. “I don’t want a drowned doll.”

She threw it on the concrete pad in front of the fire station. The face lost its shape. The spider web seeped across the other eye, disturbing its blue stare forever.

“You can’t leave it there, Amy,” Sandra said. “We’ll take it home and throw it in the rubbish.”

She carried it home, put it on the wood pile next to the back door, and forgot about it.

It was Monday. As Amy pulled her head through the neck of her jumper, her breath caught in the cold air, smoking the space between her and Sandra. She’d wet the bed again.

“Don’t tell Mum, please Sandra, don’t tell her. Just let her find out when we’re at school.”

“I’m just going to pretend I don’t know. I’m sick of getting into trouble because of you. How come you still wet the bed, anyway? You’re nearly eight. You’re too big.”

Amy sighed. She had woken up with a start in the night, her eyes jerking open, her heart pounding. It had rippled through her again, a short, deep shaking. It had rippled up from somewhere far below her.

“Earthquake,” she’d thought, “It’s just an earthquake.”

She’d looked over to Sandra, who was still asleep. And over in the corner, near the wardrobe, was the old woman, quivering, shaking, indistinct. It was as if Charlie Mac had turned the projector on, using the wall as a screen. But it was a silent film, with no sound, except Amy’s heart beat, surging in her ears. The old woman was pointing at Amy, with a long shaky finger. Amy had stayed very still for what had seemed to be a long time, impaled by that finger. Wet, weedy hair was reaching for her, pulling her into a watery world.

*This is where you belong...*

It was a long wave of time before she’d rippled out, like foam, on to the surface, away from the quivering earth, and the accusing finger. Her bed was wet. She’d moved over to the edge, carefully wrapping herself around the cooling middle. When she’d looked back up at the wardrobe, there had been nothing there, just the clothes in neat piles, ready for school. She’d not gone back to sleep.

“Oh, come on, hurry up Amy, stop dreaming,” Sandra said. “Come and get breakfast.”

In the kitchen Betty put apples into paper bags of sandwiches.

“You girls don’t play down by the river do you?” she asked.

“No, mum,” Sandra said.

Amy shook her head. She was thinking about the wet bed, and wanted to get out of the door as soon as possible.

“Good. You two be good girls now, and hurry, it’s going to rain,” and Betty closed the door behind them.

“Look,” says Sandra, “the mountain’s disappeared.”

Amy looked up. There was dark cloud, not just over the mountain, but also over the small mound at its side. There was a heavy smell, a faint odour of sweaty socks and dead rats coming from the mill. On a fine day the smell leaked towards Onepu, where the Maori children lived; on a wet day it wrapped itself around Kawerau, permeating into bedrooms, infusing food, and impregnating clothes. It made Amy feel slightly sick.

“It’ll rain today,” Amy said.

Amy saw it first, up the street from the school. It was a big black car stopped outside a house. She and Sandra, Cathy and Robert hurried to see what was happening; the rain spotting their dark raincoats. They joined a small crowd of children that swirled, like leaves caught in a dam.

“What’s that noise?” Cathy said.

It was a single voice, a woman’s voice, rising and falling, riding long, and clear into the coming rain. And behind it was a wailing, a high pitched cadence of misery that carried the woman’s clear voice. The hair on Amy’s neck prickled. She could feel the sound pulling at her, like a rope that was only for her. She pushed ahead of the other children and stopped, at the front of the small crowd. A hand pulled her, roughly, by her elbow, pulled her aside as two men came, carrying a small white box. On the box lid was a cross in gold. The box was so small that it didn’t need two men to carry it, one could have managed. Amy started to sob. She wasn’t sure why she was crying, maybe she was crying for the smallness of the box, for the smallness of the coffin. Maybe she was crying for a drowned doll she’d thrown on the concrete, outside the fire station.

The men disappeared into the front door of the house. Amy looked up through the wrinkles of her tears. She could see the old woman, the one whose voice had carried the coffin into the house. She could see the old woman was looking at her. She was wavering, her edges indistinct. The old woman raised her arm, and pointed, at Amy, straight at Amy. The silent film had a sound track this time. Inside her head Amy could hear

*You, it should be you...*

## CHAPTER TEN; 1975

The door closes behind you, the doctor's gone. Keep your eyes straight ahead. There are bits of your body as it sits, very still on the edge of the sofa; the two feet on the floor; the two hands clutching a large handkerchief; a dirt stain just above the knee of your track-suit pants. Chaos swirls inside, a long arm is pointing at you, trying to pull you back, pull you into the past. There's a life raft here and you clutch at it, climb on board. It's black, cold resentment and it anchors you on this sofa. To here. To now.

*Why me. Why do I have to look after her, again.*

"I brought you a cup of tea, dear," Bea says.

You straighten yourself, one hand carefully smoothing away the muddy mark on your leg. You smile. At least, you turn up the ends of your mouth.

"I need to be back in Auckland by the end of the week," you say. "I've got commitments. I won't be able to stay beyond then. I've got a job. There's a deal that needs to be closed. And I'm expected back. By the end of the week...."

You run out of words. The lump in your throat is back.

"I'll just put your cuppa here, shall I?" Bea says.

She pulls out a little table, with spindly legs, and places the cup on it. The table wobbles and the tea spills a little. She sits on the chair opposite, and keeps her eyes on your face. You will yourself not to cry - you want to look away, go away, not be involved.

"Your mum needs you, Sandra."

You don't want these words either. You want your flat with its front door that sticks and your neat, tidy kitchen with its new stove and its cork tiled floor. You want to be there, where you can live your own life - not here, not with these words, not with the weight of your mother's need. You don't reply, stare down at your legs, your two feet on the floor. You haven't managed to brush away that mark on your knee. It's clay you decide, from climbing up the steps to the mountain. You pick at it. The vortex is swirling again, pulling at you. You will not go there.

"You're all she's got."

"Shame she doesn't recognise me then, don't you think?"

These words escape, like refugees, from your tangled, knotted belly. *What if she did? Recognise you? What then?* You pull your cigarettes out of your pocket and the lighter jumps from your hand and lands on the carpet, the swirling carpet, at Bea's feet. Like an offering. A burning from you to her. You stare at it. Bea bends down to pick it up. She turns it over. She's looking at the initials in curly writing on its silver surface: *I. M.*

"Your dad's" she says.

You nod, the unlit cigarette still in your hand.

"We miss him," she says.

You nod, the lump is huge in your throat.

She sighs and hands you the lighter. You light the cigarette, the flame wobbling slightly, cross your legs, fold your arms and inhale, pushing the smoke past the barrier in your throat. As you blast it back out again, the smoke screens you from the concern in her face.

"Not sure I can be of much help, actually," you say. "As Robert said, I've been away too long."

Bea squints into the smoke. She nods her head, slowly.

"Well," she says. "That's up to you, dear. Just remember, no matter what, she's still your mum. And you know, I don't think she's long for this world."

A shiver goes up your spine. A goose just walked over your grave, if not yours, then someone else's.

Robert is at the door of the lounge. You didn't hear him come up the hallway. He's standing with one hand reaching out.

"Sandra, you need to come," he says.

Bea gets up, puts her hand down and holds your arm. You want to shrug it off, you want to snarl at her, you want to burst into tears. She pulls you up off the sofa, and you're compelled by her push, drawn by Robert's reaching hand. All these hands – you just want them to leave you alone. You walk over the swirling carpet, and follow Robert back down the hallway and through the open door into the bedroom.

You head for the window, you can manage to stand by the window, but that hand on your arm guides you to a chair, near the pillow, near the white head and the closed eyes of your mother. You sit. The door shuts as Robert



leaves you here. In the room that smells of *English Leather*. And of some old woman.

You keep your eyes on the pink candlewick bedspread. A snoring sound tells you she's sleeping. You count the squares, starting at the bottom of the bed. You've reached forty seven when your eyes meet Betty's hand. It's thin, clawed, the fingers bent, the skin loosening from the bones - an old woman's hand. The fingers twitch and you jump. They begin to jerk, as if pulled by some puppeteer, pulling strings to lift first the fingers, then the whole hand up and off the bedspread. Enthralled as the jerking intensifies, the randomness of it startling you with each new movement, you can't look away. Your breathing jerks, her breathing groans as the hand jerks. Your body, almost in a dance, joins in, you fight for breath. You, and your mother. Then, as if some crescendo has been reached, the hand drops back on to the bedspread, and is very still. You sit in that stillness, in a space that time has vacated, in a space that suspends.

Your eyes are drawn up the arm, the arm that's now immobile. There's a stain on the sleeve of the cardigan she's wearing, there, just near the elbow. Your eyes travel further, to where the sheet covers her chest. It doesn't move. You stop in that stillness, take the breath she doesn't want and your eyes move up to her face, your mother's face, with the widow's peak that forever denotes mourning. To its emptiness.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN; 1958

At midnight Ian handed over his shift to his replacement. He used the sign language they all understood: four fingers held up, then a hand slashed across his body to show the paper had broken four times on this shift. It was too noisy for talk. His replacement put up one thumb to indicate he understood, and Ian headed to the smoko room. He sniffed. This shift it'd been Maori boil up and the remains sat congealing in the pot. Finnish sweet bread was curling up on a plate next to it. Pat was asleep on the squab in the corner of the room. Ian shook him.

"Wake up, Pat, wake up. Come on mate, the shift change is on the floor already."

Pat groaned and sat up, scratching his hair.

"Bloody hell, what's the time? What am I doing here? How come you blokes let me sleep?"

"You were sleeping like a baby, Patrick lad, we just didn't want to disturb you. Don't worry, we covered."

"Who said babies sleep. Little bugger was awake and screaming all day yesterday, I got no sleep at all."

"Don't understand you left footers," Ian said, lighting up a cigarette, and offering one to Pat. "How come you keep having so many kids? Thought you would've had enough with four of them, and your youngest is nearly old enough to have kids himself, what d'you want another one for?"

"You think I wanted it? A bit of how's your father, and next thing, she's up the duff. All right for you lot, but Bea's really into the church. And that new priest's strict. We're having the baptism on Sunday, you want to come? Father doesn't mind if you heathen Anglicans come to church, bring you back to the true faith he says. We'll have a party after, buy in a keg."

"No, not me. I don't go to church. But I'll tell Betty, and the kids, they might want to come. I'll come for a drink later, bring a scotch to wet the baby's head."

Ian was tired. After a double shift of sixteen hours he wanted his bed and he still had to bike home. He had two days off now, a weekend, and he was looking forward to it. He collected his bike from the shed. The mill had already engulfed the quarter to twelve workers, all except the Pook, who had

slept in again. The Pook was cursing as he pulled his bag off his bike carrier and fought the stream of the quarter past twelve workers who had been disgorged and were trying to get home. Ian laughed – gave the Pook a friendly push.

“You’re missus wouldn’t let you out of bed, eh?” he said.

At the corner, Ian stopped to get his swandri out of his bag. It was cold outside. He watched the hammerhead crane swinging in another load of logs. It lurched and stalled, its load tipping and catching on the mountain of wood chips. Must be a new operator on deck tonight. Smoke from the mill drifted across the windowless buildings, smudging the lights, hiding them – now you see it, now you don’t. Sometimes the mill seemed almost alive. Left to itself, its workers all safely swallowed, it listened to the deep, fissured rocks under it, and translated the noise of tiny shifts in bedrock into a constant rumble. It was permanence on shifting earth. Ian biked out of the smoke, following the moving tail lights of the other shift workers.

The bedroom light was still on when he came up the drive. Betty usually stayed awake, waited for him. She was sitting up in bed with a cigarette in her hand, doing a crossword.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said.

Ian nearly said *who do you think it would be?* And stopped himself. He peered past the bedside lamp, it threw Betty’s face into stark relief. He could see that her eyes were puffy; he knew she had been crying again. Frown lines had indented themselves between her finely plucked eyebrows and deep lines ran from her nose to her mouth. Her face was melting downwards, setting into sad folds that said disappointment.

“Oof, but I’m tired,” he said, “That’s a long shift. I’ll just be a minute, I’ll have a wash then I’ll be so glad to hit the pillow.”

He splashed the water over his face, scrubbed the soap around his neck, and wondered what to do. Should he just ignore Betty’s mood, or should he talk about it? He felt the flatness in his gut. Was this just his good idea, living in New Zealand? Was it his fault that Betty was so unhappy? Even after six years here, she didn’t seem at home. He kept his back to her as he put on his pyjamas, waited until he had pulled the blankets up before he spoke.

“How’s your day been?”

“No different.”

“Kids been OK?”

“So, so.”

“Give us a cuddle, lass,” he said. “You seem a bit on the crabbit side.”

Ian reverted to Scots, the language of their courting times, knowing it often softened Betty. She nestled into his side, and he felt the wetness on his pyjama jacket. He wiped her face with the edge of the sheet.

“Och, come on now,” he said. “Your greetin’s makin’ me all wet. Dry your eyes, now lass.”

“Oh, Ian, you’re never home. And I get so lonely. And I miss.....”

Ian finished the sentence in his own head. He’d heard it so many times.

“Well,” he said. “We’ve nearly got enough for the car. Just a few more double shifts, and I’ve got a chance to do some more building, with Blue and his crew, that’ll earn us a fair dollup.”

She’d gone limp against his side.

“It’s what you want, isn’t it Betty? Just think, we can get out and about, go on trips.”

He stroked her hair, and her wet face, ran his hands down her side, and over the cotton nighty that covered her bum. Ha, he thought, my Betty’s always got a cold bum. He squeezed one cold cheek. She went limp in his arms and he took it for an invitation. With one arm still under her head, he pushed his pyjama pants down. Usually she helped him do this, but tonight he had to manage it without her and they stopped, half way down one calf. He hooked the free leg over her and leaned his body, bending to kiss her and she turned her head away. He stopped, sighed, rolled back on his own pillow, kicked at his pyjama pants and turned the light off.

“Let’s get some sleep,” he said.

.....

Amy didn’t need an alarm. She woke at five-thirty every morning, with the light coming through the curtains. Either that, or the cat woke her up, coming out from under the bed clothes. From her bed, she could pull her curtains, and lie watching the sun creep down the shoulder of the mountain. This morning

there was a blackbird, chink-chinking in the wattle tree next door, like the shuttle in the old sewing machine she shared with her sister. The blackbird, sewing the quilt of the morning, without the people, without their breakfasting and their yawning; just the sun leaking through the tree, the sun claiming the mountain, and the blackbird.

She carefully nudged Smokey off the bed, stretched and swung her feet on to the floor.

“Talipes,” she said as she straightened her club foot out as much as she could. It was a new word for her. “Talipes – I’ve got talipes.” It sounded exotic, romantic.

Her bedroom was empty except for her bed, a chair, and a chest of drawers. Ian had built a wardrobe in one corner. There were no visions of old women from this wardrobe. It held her two school dresses, her one pair of shoes (one smaller than the other and built up three inches at the heel), and a large cardboard box full of books. When Amy wanted to be alone, she would take her pillow, and a torch, sit in the corner of the wardrobe, and read. Under her bed was this week’s stash of library books from the National Library Service at school. She was reading “The Princess and the Goblin” and Curdy was wet and cold underground and the great big grandmother in her tower was playing hide and seek from her grand-daughter. Now you see her, now you don’t.

She put on her swimming togs, pulled some trousers and a jumper over the top, and sat down to put on her shoes. She crept very quietly out through the hallway, taking a towel from the hall cupboard, wrapping her knickers and a teashirt in it, and let herself out the back door, clicking it shut. She pulled her bike out of the lean-to next to the shed, springing the carrier holder over her towel, and set off for the swimming pool. No-one had heard her go.

She was at the pool by six and, as she slipped off her clothes and stowed them in the cubby holes, she watched six other members of the swimming squad slipping into the water, trying not to shriek at the coldness, thrashing around to warm up. The coach was writing up the training schedule. She looked at the blackboard: *Junior squad: 2 x 220yds freestyle warmup, 4 x 100yds flutterboard, 2 x 100 yds backstroke, 2 x 100yds breaststroke.* She pushed her hair up into the tight rubber swimming cap, took a deep breath, and jumped in the water.

The feel of the water had never changed. First the cold shocked the breath from her and the bubbles from her warm body enveloped her face, holding her in the world of breath and air. As she emptied out her lungs, she felt the water insisting at her nostril edges, and at her ear canals, forcing her eyelids open - *Look, see, this is the real world.* A moment to decide, did she dissolve and become the water, or did she fight it and join that outside world again? For that long moment her arms floated, weightless, and her crooked leg curled, unbidden, to wrap itself around her strong, straight leg. The old woman from the cupboard – this was where she lived now, in the world of water where there was so much space, where the light was spread to eternity and where the world outside became far away and insignificant. Without any effort on her part, her body slid to the surface, to the meeting place of air and water, and she broke that membrane, the one that had held her submerged. She filled her lungs with air, and her ears with the sounds of splashing and the coach yelling “Watch your turn, you didn’t touch then.” And she swam, up and down the pool, with the water moving as she pushed it, holding her as she needed it, flowing past her as she moved through it.

.....

Sandra was still asleep when Amy came home. The slamming of the door broke into her dream and she rolled over and pulled the eiderdown up over her ears. She’d been at Cathy’s house last night, supposedly helping get the garage ready for the christening party on Sunday. But she’d spent the time in Cathy’s bedroom, helping her choose what to wear to church. The boys were all in the garage setting up trestle tables borrowed from the Catholic School of Religion.

“I don’t think you should wear that green dress,” Sandra said. “The one your cousin gave you. It’s not your colour. You should wear the one you made, Cathy, it looks really nice.”

Cathy was rummaging in the wardrobe. She pulled out a blue dress, with a gathered skirt, and slipped it over her head. She twirled in front of the mirror.

“Hmm, it needs a petticoat,” she said. “I don’t know if mum will let me, not for church.”

“Cathy, I just wanted to ask you something. Don’t you think...you know, your mum and dad, they must’ve done it, you know. They must’ve, to get a baby. Don’t you think that’s yuk?”

“You think so? I just don’t think about it. I’ve got some new stockings to wear, nylons, and mum gave me my birthday present early. Look, it’s sling back shoes, we bought them last week. Won’t they look neat with this dress?”

Sandra sat back on the bed, slumped against the wall. She would have to wear long socks and school shoes on Sunday. The black sling back shoes Cathy was putting on had a little heel, and tiny gold buckles. She wanted a suspender belt, and nylons, and sling back shoes. She wanted them so badly that it hurt.

“I just want to go and show the boys, see what they think...” Cathy said.

“What do you want to do that for?”

“Oh, um, just to see what they say.”

Sandra stood at the garage door and Cathy walked carefully past her, in her new shoes. Peter and Lenny were crouched under one of the tables, muttering at a broken catch. Lenny poked his head out. There was a big pimple, on his cheek, red and swollen, he’d probably been picking it. His eyebrows went up, really high, and his eyes moved from Cathy’s feet to her face, very slowly. Cathy blushed, raised her chin and slid a look out of the corner of her eye. A surge of blood went through Sandra’s body. She folded her arms tight over the prickly warmth and bolted back to the sanctity of Cathy’s bedroom.

It was a flushed and smiling Cathy who came back in, carrying her sling back shoes.

“The boys are going possum hunting tomorrow night, with Lenny’s gun. They’ve got their dad’s jeep to use. They need us to hold the torches, what do you think, Sandra? Do you want to come?”

She wanted to say no, she also wanted to say yes. She wanted a boy to look at her like Lenny had looked at Cathy. Mostly she wanted shiny black sling back shoes.

“All right,” she’d said.

It was a shaft of morning sunlight on her eyelids that woke her up. Cliff Richard was smiling down at her. Elvis Presley and Bobby Darin were either side of him. They were refugees from the Valentine magazines that had

arrived from Aunty Kath. Sandra looked Cliff straight in the eye. And she felt it again, that wanting, desperate, deep and diffuse. Cliff, half way around the world, looked unconcerned.

When she walked into the kitchen for breakfast, Amy and Robert were arguing over whether it was better to crunch up weetbix or leave them whole, Ian was reading the three month old Daily Mirror from Kath, Betty was stirring sugar into her cup of tea.

Sandra went to the cupboard to get a bowl. There were none. The milk had been left out over night again and the cream had clotted on the top of the glass bottle. The discussion between Robert and Amy was getting heated.

“I still think they soak up the milk and go soggy.”

“You can just use more milk.”

“But they go soggy if you crunch them up.”

“So what, then the sugar sinks in better.”

“Why are you here this morning, Robert?” Sandra asked.

“We’re practising having breakfast together,” Amy said, “For when we get married. We decided we have to be able to have breakfast together.”

Sandra snorted. Amy stuck her tongue out.

“Hey, hey, stop fighting you two,” Ian said. “Your mother’s got some news.”

Sandra looked more closely at her mother. That was what was different this morning, her mother was smiling. Sandra looked away, rubbed her wet hands on her skirt – *was mum pregnant (she didn’t seem to be), were they going to have a baby in the house, like Cathy did (how embarrassing) and then would her mother be going back home, to England (could they manage without her?) or, would they all have to go too.....*

“Kath is coming, your aunty,” Betty said. “She’s coming to stay with us.”

“Where’s she going to sleep?” Sandra asked. (*Thank goodness, no baby*).

“Oh, we’ll work that one out,” Ian said and went back to reading about mining strikes in Wales.

To Sandra, Aunty Kath lived in blue aerogrammes, in parcels of out of date newspapers, and in the magazines with Cliff Richard and Elvis Presley pinups. Aunty Kath was her mother’s upset every time the blue aerogrammes had some piece of news about “home.” She was far away. She picked up a



bowl from the bench, ran the water to rinse it, watched the water disappear down the drain.

“Yeah. Are you going to the christening tomorrow?” she said. “Me and Amy have been asked to go to the church. For the christening. Are you going to come?”

“Aren’t you pleased?” Betty said. “Your Aunty Kath’s coming. I thought you’d be pleased.”

“Course,” Sandra said, watching her mother. “I hope she brings some more Valentines. And I hope she stays a long time.”

“Oh, she’s talking about a couple of months. Won’t that be lovely. She’s saving up, and she says she thinks she’ll have enough money by Christmas. She might even be able to have Christmas with us.”

Sandra didn’t want to give up her bedroom. She liked having her own room, not having to put up with Amy reading under the blankets and her nightmares.

“Dad,” she said. “Can I have some new shoes? I need some for going out, you know, for getting all flashed up.”

“What’s wrong with your school shoes?” Ian asked.

“I’m thirteen, dad, and my friends have got sling-backs and suspender belts and nylons.”

“What do you think, Betty? Our girl is growing up. You might need to talk to her about, you know.”

He waved vaguely at his chest and turned back to the Daily Mirror.

Sandra’s body ached for a moment, for the feel of her dad’s rough chin on her neck, for the memory of leaning her body into his strong, wiry frame, and for his strong arms gripping her.

## CHAPTER TWELVE; 1958

Lenny drove along the road to the lake. A rough road, never meant to be permanent, the soft ash moving with every wheel that traversed it – hillocking in the middle and the sides, leaving potholes and corrugations. The jeep bounced. Beside him, Peter held the twenty-two up in the air, so it wouldn't jab either of them. Its safety catch was on, but it was loaded. In the back on a hard wooden seat, Luke, Cathy and Sandra, were holding on, trying to keep their balance. Colin had wheedled his way in on this trip. He was wedged between the dog pen and the wooden seat.

They drove on to the turnaround at the lake edge. Here teenagers parked up at night, and beer was drunk, and virginity became a memory. The brightness from the jeep's headlights caught the bent tops of reeds darkening the deep water. The jeep jerked to a stop and Sandra lurched. Lenny was the first one out. He pulled his swandri over his head. It was a wonder he still bothered with his brothers and younger neighbours. He was working now, on a forestry gang and his swandri still looked new.

"Come on," he said. "We're going up to the speedboat hut. Reckon we'll get some possums up there. Me and Peter are gunna shoot."

"Can I have a go, too?" Colin said.

"Nope, you're too young. You two girls, you're gunna use the torches, one each, big ones, shine them on whatever makes a noise out there."

"What about us? What do we get to do?" Colin asked.

"You and Luke watch out for noises and tell the girls, then they point the torches that way. Someone has to go out and get the possums we shoot, too. They may need finishing off. I've got dad's hunting knife."

"Yeah, that'll be me," Colin said. "I can do that, slit their throats."

He reached for the sheath and pulled out the knife. It glinted, catching the moonlight. He pulled it through the air, in front of his neck.

"Where's the torches, Lenny?" asked Cathy.

"I'll show you," Lenny said and he and Cathy bent into the front of the jeep. Sandra could hear giggling.

"Oh, Jeez," Luke said. "How pathetic." He put his finger down his throat and pretended to vomit.

Cathy and Lenny led the hunting party up the path. Cathy played her torch upward and its beam, narrow and far reaching, caught the blackened manuka, and pierced the dark that wrapped around the hill. Sandra came behind, directing her torch beam on the feet of the climbers. Ash shifted. Her heart was pounding, it was a steep climb. The hunting knife was jammed into the back of Colin's pants, just in front of her. He was using a scrubby manuka to pull himself up the last steep slope and it whipped back in her face. When she grabbed it to haul herself up, its shallow roots came away in her hand. The torch fell and its beam drilled into the ash. The blunted lava pieces absorbed the light, the tiny fragments of rhyolite glinted like so many small eyes watching. She scrambled for the torch, scrambled for her balance and the ash shifted again.

The door was hanging off the speedboat hut where the judges sat on racing days. Brown glass bits from beer bottles littered the floor and the shutter from the front window lay on the ground. The hunters crowded into it, moving along the length of the wooden bench, Cathy jammed up against Lenny, Sandra in the doorway, shining her torch into the narrow space. Her torch beam caught the graffiti carved into the bench: *Joe got a big dick* she read and *Susan fucked me*.

"All right, everyone," said Lenny. "I need you, Cathy, with a torch in here with me. And you, Peter, can help Sandra outside with the other torch – then we can swap over when you get a turn to shoot. Colin you sit outside with Peter and Sandra and listen for possum noise. Luke, I guess you have to be in here with us."

"No way. I'll go outside, thanks." He mimed putting his finger down his throat and vomiting again.

Cathy giggled. Sandra shone her torch through the open front of the hut, out into the bush. The edge of her beam caught Cathy's slightly open mouth as she tilted her face towards Lenny and Lenny's hand as he pulled a bottle out from under his swandri.

"Got some supplies, in case we get cold," he said. "Except you're not getting any, Colin."

"Oh, go on Lenny."

"Nup, you gotta be a teenager to drink Blackberry Nip, eh Cathy?"

He put an arm around her as she reached for the bottle, unscrewed the lid and took a swig. Sandra jerked the torch beam at her.

“You want me to shoot first, Lenny?” Peter asked. “Seeing as I’ve got the gun and you’re busy.”

“Na, mate, gizzit. You need to be quiet everyone. No talking, no noise. Come on, let’s get some possums.”

Sandra sighed. She stationed herself at the door of the hut, with the torch off. Peter sat down close by, and wrapped his arms around himself. Colin and Luke worked their way to the other side of the hut. They waited in the dark, fidgeting, wary. The moon came and went through the clouds and the manuka was silvered, then darkened. The lake sat, at the bottom of the hill, waiting, absorbing the light, the water still, not moving, not rippling. The thick reeds held dark silt and two bodies of drowned speedboat racers, still wearing their colours, sinking softly in surrender into the blackness. They had names known to everyone. Anything else held in that lake did not.

In the shadows Sandra heard a hissing, like her cat when he was startled. She shone the torch beam into the fork of a tall manuka, to the right of the hut and the beam caught the bushy tail of a possum. The animal turned, its eyes glowing in the light, glinting like the rhyolite in the ash.

“Peter, Peter,” she hissed.

Peter put his head in the doorway of the hut. Sandra heard a shot. The possum jerked and tried to climb higher. Another shot and it fell out of the torch beam.

“Woohoo. I got the bugger.”

Lenny came out with his arm around Cathy, the twenty two waving above his head. The arm around Cathy was tight, possessive. Sandra wanted an arm like that, one that held her. She hurt for the wanting of it.

“Have you put the safety catch on,” she said.

Colin went crashing through the bush, down the slope. Sandra shone her torch down towards the waving manuka. Luke took the other torch from the bench and turned it on. Together, the beams showed Colin’s progress as he swung down the hill, held on to manuka, slipped on the ash. The crashing stopped.

“Found it,” he yelled. “Kill, kill!”

He emerged from the bush, holding the possum by the tail. He threw it to the ground and its head fell back, almost severed. Colin wiped the blood on the knife blade on his shorts.

They stood around the dead possum, and passed around the Blackberry Nip. When it came to Sandra she took the smallest sip she could and then choked as it reached her throat. Colin grabbed at the bottle as it came past him and Luke lunged. Some of it spilled on the possum. The dark sweetness splashed on the almost severed head, mingling with the blackening blood. The sweet smell intensified. Sandra covered her nose.

Luke poked at the corpse with his foot, turning it on to its back. The furred belly moved. A small head emerged from the pouch, fur-less, rat-like, its whiteness catching in Sandra's torch beam.

"Jeez, what's that?" Lenny said.

"Oh," Cathy said, "She's having a baby. It's a baby possum, look, it's getting born."

"Kill, kill!"

Colin slashed at the pouch, the hunting knife digging deep, past the foetal possum, into the bowels of the mother. Lenny grabbed Colin's arm and took the knife. The intestines oozed from the possum's body, spilling from the confines of the fur, engulfing the tiny bones of the dead foetus.

"Yuck," Cathy said, and buried her head in Lenny's shoulder.

Sandra kept her torch beam rigid. The smell of warm blood, and of punctured gut and sweet Blackberry Nip was making her sick. But it was the coils of intestine, greenish, streaked with red veins, that overwhelmed her and she felt herself being smothered, obliterated, like the small, white foetus.

On the trip back in the jeep, she leaned against the roll-bar, not caring that her face was jarred, again and again, as the wheels caught in the potholes.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN; 1958

The christening was to be straight after morning mass with the party at twelve, in the garage. Women a plate please. Pat had brought the keg home last night and set it up between two saw horses. He'd hired jugs and glasses from the hotel.

Sandra was putting on long white socks and her school shoes. This morning she had lain in bed, wondering if she should go. Last night, leaving Cathy and Lenny in the front seat of the jeep with the lights off, she had run home as fast as she could, plagued by the sight of them with their arms twined around each other, and by the noises – kissing noises and sucking noises, and little moans. It had been a long time before she went to sleep. The noises kept coming back and she could feel her own body tingling, her nipples aching. She'd crossed her legs, hard. This morning she was not sure she should be going to church at all. She was not sure that she wanted to see Cathy and she really knew she didn't want to wear long white socks and school shoes.

“Robert's coming with us,” Amy said.

“Why?”

“Because we're going to have a church wedding, me and Robert, when we get married. We're going to see if we like this church.”

So they walked to the church, Sandra, Amy and Robert.

“What did your mum say about you going to the Catholic church, Robert?” Sandra asked.

“Oh, she doesn't care,” he said. “She said I should watch out for the lightning, I don't know what she means.”

“My dad said he thinks the Catholics have got it easy,” Sandra said. “You can just go along to confession and tell the priest what you've done wrong and say some stuff and then go out and do it again.”

The Simperinghams had all been to confession on Saturday afternoon, before the possum hunting, and before the stuff in the jeep. Sandra imagined them, one after the other, clutching their rosary beads, disappearing into a dark little cupboard to murmur their worst secrets to a hidden person. What must it be like to then have to see that person in the church afterwards, and know that he knows how bad you are? It was lucky Cathy went yesterday, otherwise, what would she have to tell the priest this morning?

*Bless me father for I have sinned. It has been one month since my last confession. These are my sins....last night I kissed a boy and he put his tongue in my mouth. Would she say... I let him touch my tits? Worse still would she say....And I really liked it.*

“My mum said it will be in a foreign language because Catholics don’t think their God understands English,” Amy said.

“Well, the baby’s got a foreign name,” Robert said. “They’re going to call him Maximilian – that’s like a Roman soldier but we can just call him Max.”

Inside the church it was dark. The wood paneling absorbed the light. As she came in the door Sandra moved from the bright of the day, to a cool, dark cave. It took some time for her eyes to adjust. She sniffed the sweet, strong smell from the flowers. It was heavy, like the smell of the Blackberry Nip. She stood at the doorway with Robert and Amy, unsure what to do. There was a sea of hats and a bulwark of solid Catholic backs in front of them, and a narrow passageway between the seats.

“Cathy and them are at the front,” said Sandra. “Shall we go up the front with them?”

“What about the lightning?” Robert asked.

“Just don’t talk English,” Amy said.

“I’m going to sit down here,” Sandra said.

She sat in the empty back seat. She waved at Cathy, who was sitting next to her mother. The baby was a froth of lacy gown in his mother’s arms, he was crying loudly and Bea was jiggling him. Cathy put her white gloved forefingers in her ears, grimaced, and turned back to look at Jesus, who was showing his heart to the world. She clasped her hands on her lap, and sat very straight on the hard, wooden pew. Sandra leaned back, slumping, hiding behind the big hat in front. She didn’t want God, or Jesus, or Mary to notice her. Maybe one of them would have an opinion about the dream she had last night. The dream with a handsome stranger carrying her in his strong arms, and kissing her with a tongue that tasted of Juicy Fruit chewing gum. She slumped further and the organ started a low droning.

Amy had taken Robert by the hand and pulled him up the carpet. When he resisted, she told him they were practising. She found room in a pew half way

up the church, pushing past the man who ran the butcher shop, and his wife, and their five children. Sitting down at the end of the row, she patted the seat next to her.

The pews were hard, wooden benches, with kneeling rails that had cushions for penitent knees. Amy pulled Robert down to kneel on the rail in front. Her crippled leg couldn't hold her weight and she leaned on him. From this position she could see the broad back, and tweed jacket of the man in front. There was a big vase of flowers next to her and the smell enveloped her in its sweet weight. The organ was droning softly, bottoms were shuffling on the hard benches, there was whispering, and a baby crying. She put her hands together in front of her nose.

"You have to pray," she whispered. "Like this."

"What do I pray for?" Robert asked.

"Pray for the baby to shut up," Amy said.

She closed her eyes. The baby kept crying.

"Anyway, that's enough," she said. "I'm only an Anglican."

The organ music got louder. The broad back with the tweed jacket was standing up, so were all the hats. Amy copied, pulling Robert up beside her.

The priest had reached the front, and was standing with his back to everyone. His white robes hung like sheets on a washing line from his upraised arms and he was talking to someone in a foreign language. Amy leaned out, her head touching the flowers, trying to see who he was talking to. In the picture up the front Jesus had his heart glowing, maybe that was how he listened, but he seemed to be busy trying to give his heart away. On the other side there was a picture of Mary, in her white dress, with a blue cloak. Mary must have a lot of white dresses, she seemed to always wear a white dress. When Amy tried to colour Mary's dress red at Anglican Sunday School one day, she was told off. It had to be white. It must have got dirty very easily.

Mary was looking at her, right at her with her white dress and her blue eyes. Amy took a deep breath, a deep lung full of heavy sweet scent, and Mary moved. She wavered, she wobbled, her edges became diffuse, the wall showed through her white dress. It looked as if she had four arms, then eight, then sixteen, and two heads, and eight kind eyes, then sixteen, then more than



Amy could count. Amy spread her holy self out, reaching to hold all the outstretched hands of Mary and to be drawn into all those kind eyes.

When the line formed to go up to the man in the white robes, Amy got up to join. She pushed her way past the flowers, to the pew near the front that had held the Simperinghams. She stood next to Colin in the line.

“Go away,” he hissed, under the droning of the organ.

“Why?”

“Because you can’t come and take the Blessed Sacrament.”

“Why not?”

“Because. You’re not Catholic.”

“But Mary told me to come.”

“Don’t be stupid. Go away.”

He pushed her as he moved forward in the line.

Most people had gone when the baptism happened. Amy pushed her way to the front of the people gathered so she could see. She pulled Robert with her. Mr and Mrs Simperingham were standing right next to the wooden block with its basin and Mrs Simperingham was holding the lacy baby. Maybe the baby was going to have a bath in the basin. Amy hoped it wouldn’t drown. She tried to listen to the man in the white robes but her prayers still hadn’t worked, and the baby was crying loudly. Mrs Simperingham was bouncing it up and down. She held the baby out, over the basin, and the man in the white robes poked his fingers in the baby’s ears, and dabbed something in the baby’s wide open mouth. The baby cried harder. Then he poured water on its head. Amy stared at the hands of the man in white. He was making a magic spell over the baby’s wet head. The baby stopped crying. His magic spell had worked much better than Amy’s prayers.

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The party started at twelve. Women a plate please. So Betty was balancing curried eggs on her plate. Her dress was freshly ironed, the petticoat lifting the full skirt. The roses on the fabric were stark red on the white background; her lipstick a matching red. Her newly washed hair had dried around plastic curlers and now the dark curls bounced as she walked.

She smiled.

“Fancy us. Look at us all fancied up, Ian. Kath would like this party, bet she doesn’t get to go to parties in a garage. Bet she doesn’t have a garage. In her new house I mean. We never had a garage in the old house, did we, but then we’d never have a car back home, would we? I suppose we’ll need one, a garage I mean, won’t we, when we get our car? What kind of car do you think, Ian? If we can get it before Christmas, we can take Kath out. She’d like that. Do you remember how we all used to go on the train, down to Brighton? She used to love those little holidays we had together. We could take her to Rotorua to see the geyser, what do you think, Ian?”

Ian smiled back.

Betty put her eggs down on the table. She turned to carry on the conversation with Ian but he was heading outside so she followed him. There was a group of men standing around the keg, holding glasses of beer and Ian was reaching out to shake hands with a number of them. He seemed at ease. Betty held back, not sure what to do. There were no women standing around drinking beer.

She went back into the garage, where the tables spread with white paper were being filled up by the women, coming in and out of the house, with the plates, all full of food. She’d never been inside Bea’s house, and wasn’t sure if she should just march in like these other women were. She stood by herself, lighting a cigarette.

“Oh, hello Betty,” said Jill. “How are you? Haven’t seen you for a while, where you been hiding yourself?”

“Oh, you know, what with the girls, and Ian working so hard.”

Betty and Jill had been two Londoners, friendly because they both felt stranded in the middle of nowhere. But Jill had got a job, she was not home much any more, and the cups of tea and friendly visits had got fewer and fewer. Betty saw more of Robert than she did of his mother, he seemed to always be with Amy. She licked her red lips, smoothed the roses on her dress.

“You remember me talking about Kath, my sister Kath?” she said.

“What? Kath? No, I don’t think....hold on, I know yes, I know who you mean, your sister Kath, she’s back in England.”

“That’s right. She’s still back home. But she’s coming out to visit. Maybe this year. She’s coming for Christmas.”

“That’ll be nice. It’s such a long way for people to come, isn’t it? How’s the girls, oh, here they come. Look how big your Sandra’s getting, she’s turning into a real young lady. My Robert keeps saying he’s going to grow up and marry your Amy, aren’t kids a laugh?”

Betty nodded. Jill continued.

“Did you know my Lenny’s working now? He’s on the forestry, with his dad. He loves it. Turned into a real kiwi. Don’t they grow up fast?”

Jill’s words flowed over her. Betty stood in the bubble of her bright dress. Just five minutes ago it had been lifting her up, lightening her, now it was a bubble that kept her separate, floating away by herself. She kept her smile stretched, a redness, a rawness.

Jill’s face had changed. She was staring at the garage door. Betty turned and there was Amy, standing in the clothes she had worn to church, her neat pleated skirt, her white cardigan, and her long socks. She was holding the hand of a large, shambling boy. His teeshirt was ragged and his shorts hung lopsided, hitched up at one side. He was barefoot and dirty.

“Ooh, look what your Amy’s got in tow,” said Jill. “Who’s that?”

“Oh, that’s Richard. That dirty Maori boy who lives across the road. She’s always bringing him home. I suppose some kids bring home stray dogs. She brings home Richard.”

She stalked over to Amy, grabbing her by the arm.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she hissed.

Richard was the same height as Betty. He looked at her face, his eyes trying to focus, like a drunk man trying to fixate. His mouth hung open. He wiped the green snot away with his free hand. Lost, every part of him said to Betty, lost. He was in a bubble too, a bubble that kept him away.

“Get him out of here, Amy, get him out of here...” she said.

“Richard go home now, “ the lost boy said, and he turned and ran.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN; 1958

The Christmas tree had been thrown on their front lawn by Lenny, from the back of the forestry truck. He hadn't chosen a very good one, it must have been a scrawny lower branch because its bulk was all on one side.

"We'll have to tie it up, Amy, it's leaning too much to one side and it'll fall over," Sandra said.

"It's all lopsided," came a voice from behind the tree.

"Just like you. I'll just get some string."

"Well, hurry up then, it's prickly."

Sandra went into the kitchen where Betty was making Christmas mince pies. Her first lot of pastry was too crumbly and she was having trouble getting it to stick together.

"You need a bit more water, I think mum," Sandra said.

"What makes you the expert, missy?" Betty said.

"We made pastry in cooking class."

"Well, you can always make pastry at home, you know, if you're so good at it."

"I just need the string from the bottom drawer, for the Christmas tree."

She rummaged in the bottom drawer where folded paper bags, picture hooks, safety pins, rubber bands, and rolled up bits of string lived. Right at the bottom was dad's old leather wallet, the one they were not allowed to touch. Once Ian had caught Sandra pulling out the old photos, and the envelope that sat in the back pocket and he'd snatched it from her, saying it was private. Sandra hadn't touched it since. She picked up three little bundles of string, closed the drawer and escaped before her mother blamed her for the sticky mess of pastry all over the rolling pin.

She climbed on a chair, tied the string around the tree and found the nail that was still there from last year. With her pulling, and Amy pushing, the tree was almost straight.

The boxes of Christmas decorations had been fetched from the hall cupboard. There were glass balls, bought in Whakatane the first Christmas in New Zealand; there were plasticine blobs that were supposed to be Santa Claus and angels and snowmen that Amy had made in her first year at school;

there were paper stars and angel swaps stuck on cardboard that Sandra had sprinkled with glitter. And there were the paper golliwogs from English Jelly Shred Marmalade, and plastic trumpets that could really play that had come from the English Christmas crackers everyone pulled at the last Christmas dinner they ate, at midday, on a cold Christmas day, in London, when Nan had cried, and Aunty Kath had promised she would visit, and Uncle Ray had drunk all the sherry so there was none for the trifle.

She pulled out the box that held the Christmas lights. They had to be draped, reverently, around the floor, each little light bulb checked to see if it was properly screwed in, then, very gently, they had to be arranged over the Christmas tree, with the one white light up the top, where the Christmas fairy would sit, with one hot white bulb stuck up under her dress.

“Mum, we’re ready for the Christmas lights,” she called.

“Wait ‘til your father gets home,” Betty yelled from the kitchen, “You can get the presents out and put them underneath, if you like.”

“I know where they are,” Amy said. “They’re up in mum’s wardrobe. I’ll get them.”

She came back with two parcels, one labeled *Sandra* and one labeled *Amy*. Sandra looked at the flat parcel. It didn’t look like the sling back shoes she was hoping for. She’d done her best. She’d asked her father, who had said ask your mother. So she’d shown her mother the shoes she wanted in the shop. The ones with a little heel, and tiny gold buckles. But it couldn’t be shoes, no-one had got her to try any on, no-one would know what size she was, and the parcel was the wrong shape. Sandra blinked, hard. She could see herself, sitting at home, with the suspender belt and nylons that Bea had bought her for her birthday still in her drawer, wearing her black school lace ups or her brown roman sandals, never going out, just sitting at the window, wishing for sling back shoes.

“I know what’s in it,” Amy said. “It’s a paint-by-numbers set. It’s a picture of the royal family, with the Queen and her husband and her little dogs and her prince and princess. I’ll have it if you don’t want it.”

“What’s in yours? I suppose you know that too?”

“It’s another white cardy,” Amy said.

She screwed up her face, shrugged her shoulders.

“Did you get a present for mum? I got her some soap. And I got dad a hanky.”

Sandra didn't say that she had got mum some soap and dad a hanky. They would all open their presents on Christmas morning, and pretend to be so happy.

The back door slammed. There were footsteps up the hallway, the toilet door was left open and Sandra could hear how much beer her father had drunk. She started to unpack the Christmas lights, carefully draping them around the sofa back, seat and arms and on the floor. She crawled under the radiogram to plug the cord in, and stopped, on her hands and knees, to listen. Ian had gone from the bathroom into the kitchen. His voice rumbled for a while, then there was a long silence, a slammed cupboard door, then more silence.

Ian tiptoed into the lounge. He was still in his work clothes, his grey shirt and pants grimy with oil, and his thick work socks bunching up his work pants at his ankles. Stepping with great care over the strings of Christmas lights, he maneuvered himself to the chair by the fireplace and carefully, slowly sat down. The cat, woken up with a start, escaped being squashed and hid under the table. Ian looked down at Sandra, still under the radiogram, put his fingers to his lips, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

“Come on Amy,” whispered Sandra. “We'll have to do the Christmas lights ourselves.”

Amy carefully screwed in the little blue and green light bulbs. Sandra made just a tiny turn of the red, yellow and orange ones. Very gently, in case they exploded, or gave one of them an electric shock. They got to the one white light, the Christmas fairy light that shone at the top of the tree, under her dress. Sandra turned it. Nothing happened.

“Let's try again,” whispered Amy.

“We could wake up dad.”

“We could get mum.”

“Let's try again,” whispered Sandra.

So they turned the little light bulbs again. This time Sandra did the blue and green lightbulbs, and Amy did the red, yellow and orange ones. They both tried gently screwing the white one. Nothing happened.

“Oh well,” Sandra said, “ I couldn’t find the Christmas fairy anyway.”

“She prob’ly flew away to live somewhere else,” Amy said.

They left the dead lights draped over the sofa, and the floor. They left Ian draped over the fireside chair, and they went to their bedroom.

“I’m going to go to church at midnight, with the Simperinghams,” Amy said. “They’re going to mass. You can come if you want to.”

“Why are you going to church? You’re not a Catholic.”

“No, but Mary will be there.”

And Sandra wondered if there was a new girl in Amy’s class.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN; 1975

Your mother has stopped breathing. The lines are going: the crumpled skin is smoothing: the closed eyes are sinking back into her face. The pillow seems to be swallowing her. She's shrinking, shrinking. Your eyes stall on the widow's peak, the hair pointing from her forehead, down her nose, to her mouth. Your hairline, your nose, your mouth. From some distant place, somewhere inside yourself that is far away, you're watching your mother leaving. You wait, drifting, in that far away place, as if there's some end to this leaving, some experience that will end something for you. But there's just you and this body that is nobody now, that used to be your mother. And still you sit. Numb. Waiting.

A sound interrupts, pulls your attention to the window. Your head turns, slowly, drifting to a large blowfly caught against the window. It's hurling itself at the pane, again and again. The sound is loud and insistent. You stand up and move slowly to the window. The catch is stuck, you pull at it, gently at first, then harder, desperate for it to open, for the window to be wide and the blowfly to leave, forever. Try as you might it will not budge. The buzzing intensifies and you can feel it inside your head. You smash your hand on the window sill, the fly escapes. Intent on catching it, on shutting it up, you try again. Smash. Escape.

There it is, the next thing. Escape. You find the round, black doorknob, turn it, pull the door open and step out into the hall. You can hear muffled voices from the kitchen and music from the radio. The sound pulls you down the narrow hallway, into the lounge. You stand on the swirling carpet and the Virgin Mary, eyes turned up to the ceiling, is watching your mother leave. She's watched others in your family leave. You know.

They find you standing there, in the lounge. Bea and Robert. It's Robert who pulls you down on the sofa, Bea who hurries off, wiping her hands clean on her apron. You wait again. For Robert to say something. For the Virgin Mary to say something. For anyone to break in, with the next thing to do. His hand is on your shoulder. You blink at him.

"She's gone," Bea says.

And she starts to cry. She moves towards you and Robert, with her apron up at her face, and her distress. You step back, just one step. Robert's hand



moves from your shoulder and you watch the two of them, holding on to each other.

“Maybe it’s for the best.”

“She went peacefully.”

“Poor old Betty, what a life she’s had.”

You hear these words and you want to scream, you want to scream so the peace is broken. What about your life? What about your life? That cold hard raft of resentment gives you the next thing to do.

“Well,” you say. “That’s that. I’ll be heading back to Auckland then.”

“What?” Robert says. “What do you mean you’ll head back to Auckland. Who do you think’s going to bury her, Sandra?”

Not me, you think, not me. What you say is, “Well, you can. Can’t you? I need to go.”

“Now, dear,” Bea says. “You’ve had a shock. I can understand. You didn’t expect your mum to pass away when you’ve only just got to see her again.”

She reaches a hand out to you. You shrink back.

“I mean it,” you say. “I need to go. As soon as I can.”

“You callous bitch,” Robert says. “You can’t face it can you? This is all you can do – run away.”

He keeps a protective arm around Bea and you ache for that arm, any arm. Your dad’s arm, he used to hold you. Then you grew up. And he died. And you didn’t come to that funeral. And you’re not coming to this one.

“Sandra,” Robert’s pleading with you, his face streaming. “Please, Sandra. Don’t go. Don’t run this time.”

That face is needing you, needing something you can’t give. You panic, look around blindly for your cigarettes, grab them from the sofa and you’re out the door.

You run. The street is empty, there’s no-one to see you. Only the mountain holds witness with its heavy clouds, they’re back, to press their weight on you. The footpath winds around corners, its white ribbon pulling you. You run until you’re gasping, the breath difficult to wrestle from the still, heavy air. You’re leaving it behind, all of it. Absorbed in your moving, in your sensation of escape, you cross the road to the sign – *Dangerous River* it says. *Adults*

*Warn. Adults Warn* – the words are stuck in your head, round they go, *Adults Warn*. If only they had.

You run out of breath at the edge of the river, where the path goes along the edge. You're gasping, pulling in the heavy air with its sauerkraut taste, it will not leave you alone. At the edge of the river where the children who never listen to the adult's warnings still swim, on hot days, and are carried by the current, pulled to freedom or to the bottom where the eels are and water will not let you go. The current swirls, and the vortex carries you down, to a cold, dark past.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN; 1960

When the frost was thick the air was very sharp. If there was no moon, the unchaperoned stars came closer. They swelled to fill the dark – filling the black with a cold clarity that shed so little light. The wind came straight from the mountain, the far one, Tarawera, the one that was unpredictable, the one that blew hot and cold. It was sharp. It cut at noses, and made throats dry and shrivel. It stole the moisture of breath, smoking it, hanging it in the air, like a formless, stolen spirit in the dark. The footpaths and roads became slippery, difficult for balance. Windows became opaque, filmed with an intricate mesh of ice crystals, difficult to see through, the inside running with condensation, like so many tears. The nights were longer and dreams were deeper.

Betty was dreaming. She was in a big house, much bigger than any house she'd ever lived in, and she'd lost something. She didn't know what it was she'd lost, but she was running from one room to the other and they all looked the same. She was trying to call out, but she couldn't make any sound. She knew she had to find whatever it was and get out, because the sound of the bombers was coming closer and the rooms were getting darker and darker.

She woke up with a start. Her feet were cold and she couldn't bring herself to put them on Ian's warm body. She lay staring into the dark. When she looked at the clock it was saying four o'clock, being definite, its luminous hands pointing to luminous numbers, sure of itself. So at four o'clock she was not sleeping and she was not thinking. Her thoughts were in freefall, fragmenting. Here she was, getting Kath to paint a thin black line up the back of her leg so that the tall yank she was going to the pub with would think she had nylons on: here she was standing around the old piano in the local pub, singing for all she was worth: here she was bringing a cup of tea to someone in bed, her mum it was. And then she was holding a new little baby, with a twisted foot and its face was all twisted and it kept crying and crying and crying.

She was still awake when the alarm did its seven o'clock insistence into the dark. Ian stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom. He hadn't closed the door. She could hear him pissing into the bowl, farting into the cold. He leapt back into bed.

“Bloody hell, it’s brass monkeys out there,” he said, “Come here, lass, come and give us a cuddle.”

Betty did as she was asked. Her arm was crushed between them, holding them apart and she was stiff, tense against his warm softness. His rough chin scraped at her cheek. His breath smelled of stale beer, from last night.

“Your feet are like blocks of ice,” he said.

“You were home late last night,” she said.

“Oh well, a few drinks, you know.”

“Where were you?”

“Oh, the pub for a while, then Bob’s – it was his shout.”

“You missed your tea.”

“Sorry, maybe I should’ve come home first.”

She said nothing.

“Better get going, starting a new house today, down that new end of town,” he said.

“Oh, I thought we...it’s your day...”

“Now, Betty, we agreed I’d work my days off this weekend. If we want to buy this house....”

Ian got out of bed and reached for his work clothes, the same ones he had on last night, at the pub.

The alarm clock said eight o’clock before Betty got out of bed. She sat down at the kitchen table, still in her dressing gown. In the bedroom, the clock hands moved and in the kitchen the ashtray filled up. Betty had lit a cigarette, put it down, and forgotten it. It had burnt down to the filter and the ash had still held its cigarette shape. She poked at it, and it disintegrated. She knew she had to make an effort. She had to get herself out of this chair and get herself dressed, for a start. Then there were the breakfast dishes to do. Then she should do the Hoovering, no maybe she could get one of the girls to do that. Then she had to make the bed, she hadn’t even made the bed yet this morning. Then she would have to think about dinner. Then she would have to.....She lit another cigarette.

Robert knocked on the back door. She pointed to Amy’s room. She got up and stood by the window over the sink full of dirty dishes. The sill was cluttered with bits of dried up yellow soap, empty bottles of cough medicine,

stray rubber bands, an egg cup with buttons in it, old shopping lists. There was no order to it, no purpose to be found. She looked at it vaguely then she sat down again.

Amy draped the sheet over the slack wire, and it sagged. The frost was still in the shadow of the garden shed, the grass rigid with its cold covering. Her hands were red and hurt with the cold wind. She pulled at the sheet. One of the arms of the washing line was slightly bent, Amy remembered holding on and her dad swinging her round and round, until she fell off and tumbled on the grass. She would lie on the ground, watching the clouds reel and spin, feeling the earth rock. Nothing would stay still.

Betty called her back inside. She pointed to the front door. Richard was standing on the steps, with something in his hand. He stood in the same teeshirt and shorts he always wore; torn, thin, the hem of the shorts hanging. His bare feet were calloused, with long dirty toenails and his hair was tangled. Some of the scabs on his legs were cracked and bleeding. Green snot sat on his lip. He wiped it across his forearm. His eyes, slightly unfocussed, wandered around her face. He held out an old Christmas card, with a fat Santa in a red suit standing next to a big bag of presents.

“I love you, Amy. Got a present for you,” he said.

“Thanks, Richard, you’re kind.”

She took the card, it was smeared with snot.

“Marry me today, Amy?”

“Not today, Richard. Come on.”

She took his hand, and led him over the road to the playground. They sat on the roundabout, on the sunny side where there was no frost, side by side, gently turning into the cold and out again into the sun, the world moving past them slowly.

“Richard,” Amy said, “you know I’m going to marry Robert. I told you that. When we’re sixteen.”

Richard sniffed. He wiped his forearm across his face again.

“We’re going to live in a house and you can come and live with us.”

“Richard come? Not Richard’s dad?”

“Do you want your dad to come?”

“Not Richard’s dad.”

“Not your dad. Not your mum, she’s dead. But not your dad either?”

“Not the belt. Not Richard’s dad. Richard go home now.”

He stopped the roundabout, climbed off and ran over to his house. Amy had often seen Richard’s dad out on the front lawn, pulling engines out of the old cars that slumped in the grass. She’d heard him yelling at Richard – “Dumb hua, bloody idiot, if you had half a brain... I’ll set the bloody dogs on you....” The dogs were two big pig dogs, chained up at the side of the house. They were thin, kept hungry and had slobbering mouths and deep, fierce barks. Their heavy chains clanked and rattled when they ran at Richard, and pulled taut just before they reached the front steps. Richard stopped half way up the path, stood with his arms flapping and his body jerking. Then he ran for the front door. Amy watched to make sure he made it, sighed and went back into the house.

“That boy should be sent away,” Betty said. “He shouldn’t be roaming the streets the way he does.”

“Yes, mum,” Amy said.

“And I don’t want him around here, Amy.”

“Yes, mum.”

She headed for her wardrobe. She had a book she wanted to read. Instead, she found Robert sitting on her bed.

“Is your mum all right?” Robert asked.

“No. But she’s no different. She’s always like this.”

“Is your Aunty Kath coming this Christmas?”

“I don’t think she’s ever coming. Let’s go. Let’s take our bikes and go.”

.....

The frost had just retreated from the asphalt when Sandra’s basketball game had started. She stamped her feet and hugged herself, crossing her arms over her breast, wrapping them around her white shirt sleeved arms. Her new bra was a bit tight around the back and it cut in when she breathed. But Sandra had wanted to get out of the shop in a hurry.

“How’s your mum?” the woman in the shop had asked, “I haven’t seen her around the shops for a long time, is she all right?”

Nosy bitch thought Sandra, it's none of your business.

"She's fine thanks," she said. "I'll have this one, it feels all right."

She prowled the edge of the white line that defined her small territory, blowing on her hands. The final whistle blew. Her team won without any contribution at all from their captive goal keep.

She pulled a jumper out of her bag, and got her head stuck in the neck. Cathy came bounding up flushed and sweating.

"Neat eh, we beat the pants off them," she said.

"Thanks to you. I didn't even get to touch the ball."

Sandra pulled hard at the jumper and shoved her arms into the sleeves.

"What are you doing tonight, Sandra?"

"Nothing."

"Can I tell mum I'm with you?"

"Why?"

"Dad and me had a big bust up last night. He said someone at work told him he should keep me away from Lenny. Cause Lenny and his mates are into the booze. They drive around in Lenny's car drinking. So dad said I can't see Lenny any more."

"So what do you want to tell your mum?"

"Oh, just that I'm hanging out with you. At another girl's place. Your mum won't tell, will she?"

"She won't even notice. Where are you going to be?"

"Well, you know, we'll just park up somewhere."

No, thought Sandra, I don't know. She imagined Lenny, in his green Mark One Zephyr, cruising down the road to the lake. Except it would be bumping rather than cruising. Bumping down the road to the lake. She imagined the car sitting on the bare patch next to the dark eye of watching, waiting water. Lenny turned the key off. He reached out for Cathy and pulled her across the slippery car seat. He leaned forward to kiss her and his hand slipped up Cathy's dress. Then Sandra ran out of imagination.

"Are you and Lenny, you know, are you doing it?"

Cathy looked away, a little smile on her face.

"You are, aren't you? You are doing it. You're going the whole way, aren't you?"

“What if we are?”

Sandra bit her bottom lip.

“Cathy, what if you get pregnant?”

“I won’t. He, you know, he takes it out,” she said.

Sandra shivered, her nipples hurt, she crossed her arms and squeezed her breasts in their new bra.

“Come on, let’s go and get an icecream,” said Cathy.

Cathy told her mother she was at Sandra’s house and Sandra sat in her bedroom, wrapped up in a blanket, with a hot water bottle, with the radio on, listening to the hit parade. Bill and Boyd told her she was *Cathy’s Clown*. She agreed. And Connie Frances sang that there were *No Exceptions to Everybody Being Somebody’s Fool* and she wished that was true. She pushed drawing pins into her wall. Right next to the two posters of Elvis, she hung up her latest poster – Elvis Presley again – carefully pulled out from the centre of Valentine magazine, sent by Aunty Kath who was never going to come.

On cold nights the nights are longer, and dreams are deeper. Sandra dreamt of soft parted lips, and black hair that licked over his forehead. He sang just to her. *Is your heart filled with pain*, he crooned through parted lips, and she nodded. *Do you miss me tonight?* he asked with eyes that pleaded just with her. He cared. He knew what it was to be lonesome. She woke up with tears tickling her ears. And three pairs of Elvis eyes were looking out of the window, at something far away.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN; 1960

It was Monday, just before lunch and Amy's project was not going very well. She was pleased with the border on her front page and the blue outlines in her picture that suggested ice. But she and Robert had both chosen the same topic and they were arguing.

"You can't put the king penguin on the front page of your project," Robert said.

"Why not? I did it first. You copied me."

"No, I did it first. Because it's a male penguin. He sits on the egg. I chose him because he's a boy, like me, and he sits on the egg."

"So? You'll have to change it. Sir will make us both do it again if he thinks we copied."

The intercom loudspeaker above the blackboard crackled. A xylophone played and a faint voice called for everyone to listen. Sir waved his hand up and down for everyone to be quiet. The voice came from far away, under the water possibly, further than the office. Sir listened very carefully. Everyone else carried on colouring in, writing, staring out the window. The tinny voice stopped, the loudspeaker crackled, there was a loud click and the message ended. Sir clapped his hands.

"Right, everyone. Clear your desks. Take your lunches. Get your bags. Everyone has to go to the tennis court, special assembly. You, Billy, you check the boys toilets. You, Mary, you check the girls. Come and tell me when they're clear. Come on Form One, chop chop."

"Chop chop, Amy, come on, chop chop," Robert said.

Amy and Robert assembled in their class line, girls on the right, boys on the left, all with lunches in bags. There was a buzz of talk. Colin was making faces at Robert, turning his eyelids inside out and going cross-eyed at the same time. Robert told him to grow up. The headmaster clapped his hands for quiet.

"Attention everyone. Quiet please. There's been an earthquake in Chile which means there may be a tidal wave coming to New Zealand. We all have to go to the highest point, just in case. There's no need to panic. Everyone must go in an orderly fashion. Please stay in your class groups, so we can keep track of you all."

“What about our parents?” asked someone from Form Two.

“There’s a whole town alert, everyone will be heading up to the Plateau. You’re not to worry. Anyone with parents who work at the mill, they’ve got their own safety plans and will be following them.”

The girls started to shrill and squeak and hang off each other. Amy didn’t want to do as she’d been told and walk with the girls. She moved over to stand with Robert and Colin. Colin was blinking to get his eyelids lined up properly again.

“I was in a tidal wave once, eh,” he said. “A great big wave and it dumped me.”

He fell on the ground, rolling round.

The younger children, with teachers leading, moved out of the school gate and flowed along the footpath. Amy could feel the power of the water that was coming, a mountain of water pushed by the shaking earth. She stamped her strong foot on the asphalt tennis court, to persuade herself that the earth was still solid, it was not flowing, dissolving, not engulfing her and the little children from Primer One. She lost her balance and lurched against Robert.

One thousand children flowed along the streets, joined by a tributary from the second of the town’s schools. Teachers tried to keep classes together, but gave up as children found their brothers and sisters and friends. Anxiety made them eddy together and they told each other stories of floods that swept towns away and drowned whole families. They were heading for Nob Hill, or the Plateau. It had five hundred feet more height than the flat pumice plain that was Kawerau, a handful of houses and three streets. The houses were big, with more bathrooms, and more bedrooms for American bosses who came from a bigger country where everyone had three televisions and huge cars.

One thousand children from the schools of the town climbed the path to Nob Hill and settled on the front lawns, on the roads, in the gutters. It was a long afternoon. They ate their lunches. The older girls talked about which boys tried it on, and the new teacher who seemed to be having a relationship with the dental nurse. The older boys talked about which girls let them, and about rugby. The younger children played *My mother said*, and taught each other to whistle. With all that water promised, they were thirsty.

Amy lay down on the grass. It was cold from last night's frost. The cold pressed through her school cardigan, from the earth that seemed to be solid, like ice is solid. She looked up at the clouds that sat, suspended, waiting for the water. She was not sure afterwards if she slept, and if she dreamed, but she didn't think so, because she could still hear the noises around her. As she drifted with the clouds, the water memory reached out from the tidal wave that was coming, reached for her. *Look, see, this is the real world.* And there she was again, the old woman who had moved from the wardrobe to the swimming pool, now she was floating in the cloud. And Amy was not sure whose face it was she wore this time. To start with she was the old woman, the angry old woman, with angry eyes; then she was Mary of the blue dress and the kind eyes; then she was mum, and her eyes were blank, empty, and behind her empty eyes was an ocean of water, swelling up and coming from far away, because the earth was not solid, did not hold.

.....

Dinner was late again that night. Betty banged around in the kitchen, slamming the cupboard doors. When they sat down at the table, Betty pursed her lips as she dished up and Sandra knew her parents were not speaking. Her stomach contracted. The potatoes were lumpy, the stew had caught on the bottom and was slightly burned. She got up for the tomato sauce, it always made dinner more appetising. She squirted a blob on her plate and passed the big red tomato to Amy. Amy stirred her tomato sauce into her potatoes, making little peaks with the pink mess. Ian's eyes wandered from Sandra, to Amy and back again. Sandra could see why dinner was late and mum was in a bad temper. The smell of beer said it all. It would be up to her and Amy.

"We had to walk up to Nob Hill this afternoon," she said.

"What for?" asked Ian.

"There was a tidal wave supposed to come. From Chile, didn't you know?"

Ian shook his head.

"All the kids from both schools went up to Nob Hill. Then we all just sat around, on the lawns of all the flash houses. It was neat. We missed a double English."

"You sat on the bosses' lawns?" said Ian.

“Yup. For two hours. There was no-one home,” Sandra said.

She knew because Luke and some other boys had gone around looking in the windows, until a teacher stopped them.

“We were up there too, dad,” Amy said. “We weren’t allowed to come home until half-past three.”

“What a carry-on,” Ian said. “We just kept working, didn’t even know it was happening. Did you hear about it, Betty?”

Amy hid some limp cabbage under her knife and fork. She stood up and took her plate to the bench.

“What if it did come, dad?” she asked. “What if all that water did come? You would’ve been drowned and mum would’ve been drowned. Me and Sandra would’ve been orphans.”

“Don’t be silly, Amy,” Betty said. “It wasn’t going to come all the way here. We’re miles away from the sea. Aren’t you going to eat that cabbage?”

“Yes, but what if it did. What if you and dad were killed, then what would happen to me and Sandra?”

“What’s the point of me cooking you good vegetables if you don’t eat them?” asked Betty.

“Och, lassie, your sister’s old enough to look after you. Aren’t you, you’re my big girl now. Speaking of which, I was talking to Pat today, at smoko, he’s worried about his girl, your friend Cathy.”

Ian pointed his knife at Sandra. Sandra took a breath in, held it. When dad had had a few beers, he would ask questions. And the knife waving meant a really long lecture.

“He’s worried about her hanging around with that Lenny. He’s a bad one, that one. He’s hanging out with those forestry boys, you know, those Maori fellas, and they’re drinking. You’re not getting about with them too, are you?”

Sandra shook her head, let her breath out.

“You know what happens, don’t you, a bit of drink and a girl will have her legs wide open. You know what I mean.”

Sandra shook her head again. Thought better of it and nodded vigorously.

“Our Sandra’s a good girl, Ian. You know that. Now give us your plate,” Betty said. “I need the housekeeping money, Ian, tomorrow, if you haven’t drunk it all away.”

Sandra breathed normally again. The focus was off her. She looked at Amy. Her sister was staring at her mother, her shoulders had slumped, her face had emptied, as if the tidal wave had pulled the life away and she was left floundering, orphaned. Sandra reached under the table and squeezed her hand.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN; 1960

The water in the creek was always clear. So clear that the bottom looked only two inches away. The sand was speckled, white pumice, and black rhyolite, sparkling when the sun was on it. The weed on the creek bed, like mermaid hair, went from lime green to black. It waved with the water that was always hurrying, rushing around bends and pulling its own edges into itself. Gravel edges made shallow, sandy beaches. Manuka grew in patches, meeting overhead, holding a frame for the water to rush past. This was where Amy almost drowned, when she was little, when the water claimed her, when the eels whispered to her. On this day she wanted to catch some.

"I've got some rotten meat," Robert said. "It's the best thing, my brother Luke said so."

"And I've got some string and some hooks," Amy said. "Well, some safety pins, we can bend them to make hooks."

"Don't be stupid, Amy," Colin said. "You can't catch an eel with a safety pin. I got some fishing nylon – real fishing nylon and I got a real fish hook."

His tongue was protruding as he tied a big fish hook on to a thin, almost invisible nylon.

"Whew, they're gonna have to have real big mouths," Robert said.

"It's not really the best time to catch eels," Colin said. "It's best in the dark."

"How come you know so much about catching eels?" Robert asked.

Amy hadn't told her mother where she was going. She'd helped herself to the string and safety pins, and said she would be home for tea. Betty had looked at her blankly. Amy knew there wasn't much point in telling her mother anything when her eyes were only windows on to nothing.

There were bridges across the creek, for those who knew them, made by other children, who chopped down the manuka, with tomahawks borrowed from home. Colin scrambled across first.

"We're going to go across the other side Amy," Robert said. "You'll just have to hang on to me. If you fall in we'll have to go home because you'll get real cold."

Amy followed Colin. Determined not to need help, she crawled across the spiky manuka, reaching for a clump of rye grass.

“Are you all right?” Robert asked.

“Course I am. See? I made it.”

“Come on, here’s a good place,” Colin called from further up the bank and Robert, momentarily distracted, looked up from his teetering walk across the manuka trunks, and almost fell in.

“Who needs help now?” Amy asked and reached her hand out to grab his.

The creek was black under the manuka shadow. Amy sat between the two boys, hugging her knees. It was still sunny but the sun was getting low in the sky and the shadows of the trees were cool, the ground cold. Colin held the line, it was pulled by the current. It was hard to see, swallowed as it was by the water. He yanked at it. It snapped up from the current, sank again, back into the dark water.

“What do we do if we catch one?” Amy asked.

“I can kill it,” Colin said. “Look.”

He pulled out a pocket knife and flicked out a blade with one practised hand. It had a serrated edge.

“What for? What’re we going to do with a dead eel?” Amy asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. We could eat it, I suppose.”

“My brother would,” Robert said. “He said they eat eels all the time, up the forest, for smoko and that.”

“Who’s going to cook it?”

Amy tried to imagine Betty cooking the eel. She got as far as coming in the kitchen door with it, and Betty screaming.

“My mum won’t,” she said.

There was no more talk for a time. The water flowed over the broken manuka in its bed, pushing at it, whispering that it was time it moved too. It shushed the grasses that bent at the bank side, pulling at them. It whirled in corners, the sound like the princesses gowns at the ball, a soft, circular swishing. Amy felt it pull at her, lull her into its movement, dissolve her edges until she and the water and the old woman who lived there would become one.

When the dogs started barking, they all jumped. Amy grabbed Robert's arm. The noise went on, loud, insistent, then stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

"Where are all those dogs?" Amy asked.

"Reckon there must be a whole lot of them, at least a hundred," Robert said.

"Maybe they got a pig. A wild pig," Colin said.

It was his idea that they go and see. The line was pulled in, without an eel, and without the hook.

"Damn," Colin said. "Hope dad doesn't find out."

"Did you pinch it, Colin?" Amy asked.

"Nah, just borrowed it – I was going to put it back," he said.

"We need to stay on this side of the creek, I reckon," Colin said and he led the way.

They left the noise of the water behind. The only sound was the cracking of dead branches, and the crunching of dry ash underfoot. Amy pushed her way through the blackened manuka that held the memory of a rain of hot ash. The lichen stuck in her hair. It was stringy and dry, like so many ribbon skeletons, bleaching slowly from bright yellow and bright green to white, like bones. She tried to pull some down from the manuka branch it hung from, but it was tough and it resisted. She stripped it of small lichen branchlets that crumbled in her hand, leaving a lurid yellow stain. There was no time here, no life to measure its passing. There were no birds. There was no wind. It was an in between place. Amy sniffed. The air smelt mostly of dust. And sulphur. And desolation.

Colin was ahead of them.

"Woohoo, look what I found," he called.

When Amy and Robert caught up with him, he was squatting in the dry ash.

"What is it?" Amy asked.

"Dunno. It's been dead a long time. It's like those Egyptian mummies we been talking about in school," Colin said.

"It's got no head. Prob'ly something ate it," Robert said.

"Look, it's got a tail, it's all curled up," Colin said.



“Might have been a possum,” Amy said.

“It’s still got a bit of hair, reckon it was a possum,” Robert said.

Colin poked at the body that may have been a possum. It was hard and leathery. The skin was stretched, taut over the skeleton. The soft insides had rotted long ago. Some small tufts of brown fur still clung, like the lichen on the trees, they were reluctant to let go. It was an essence of possum, pared down to its least presence. Colin turned the body over. The underside was still furred, and the ash clung to it, claiming it. He pulled at the tail and it came off in his hand.

“Gunna keep this. Might be good luck.”

“Possum’s aren’t lucky. That’s rabbit’s feet, they’re good luck,” Amy said.

“Only if you’re in England.”

“No, it’s everywhere. It’s all over the world,” Robert said.

Colin put the tail in his pocket, next to the fishing nylon.

“I reckon we’ll look like that when we’re dead,” he said. “We’ll be like the mummies, all dried up.”

“No, we won’t,” Robert said. “They only get like that because they’re all dry. Like its dry here, so it makes the body all dry up. We’ll be all full of maggots and sloppy.”

“It doesn’t matter, anyway,” Colin said. “When you die, you go to purgatory where horrible things happen, specially if you’ve done a sin and not confessed it.”

“So are you going to tell your dad about the fish hook?” Amy asked.

“And when you’re in purgatory you have to ask Mary or one of the saints to help you,” Colin said.

“Does she help you?”

“Only if you’re a Catholic. She only helps Catholics,” Colin said.

“I’m going to be a Catholic.”

“You can’t Amy. You have to go to mass and do confession and learn all this stuff and be confirmed and all that.”

“I can do all that.”

“Only if Father Searle says you can. And your mum and dad don’t like church.”

“They won’t care. I’ll ask Father Searle. Whose father is he anyway?”

“He’s a Catholic father. That means he’s like everyone’s dad.”

Amy wasn’t so sure she needed another father, hers seemed to be all right. But she remembered Mary of the white dress and the kind eyes. And how much kinder her eyes were than those of the angry old woman, and the emptiness of her mother’s eyes. I’m going to be a Catholic, she decided.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN; 1975

The water mesmerises you. It whirls in vortices like so many eyes, eyes looking at you and pulling you into the depths. *Shlep*, it goes, as it slides you down, *shlep, here, come, come here, this is the real world, she knew*.

You fight for breath, you will not go under.

As you pull out your cigarettes from your pocket, you're trembling so hard that the cigarettes spill, slip from their silver paper home to scatter on the pumice at your feet. You stare at them, each individual cigarette stark on the sandy pumice, not touching any other. You reach for one, put it into your mouth and ...and what? You reach into your pocket for your cigarette lighter, pull it out, and the letters I. M. glint on the silver. It takes you three goes to get your cigarette alight.

There's a bus tomorrow, you know that. You know when every bus leaves this town. It goes at 10.00am. You could be home tomorrow night, back in your own flat, your own life. You'll ring the bus depot, this afternoon. That'll keep you away, from this river, that's pulling at you, from Robert and his need for you to be here with him, and your mother's still body. You take a deep drag of your cigarette, and the ash drops into the pumice.

You don't hear him coming. He just appears. He used to do that, when he was a child, just turn up, everywhere there was Amy. It's him you need to get away from. You grind the cigarette out, leave the brown filter butt mashed into the river bank.

The pumice crunches as he sits down. He doesn't say anything. He stares straight ahead, at the river. And the river pulls you again, pulls the two of you, down into its green depths. There's just its voice – *shlep*, it goes, *come here, to this world*. His voice startles you.

"I'm a Catholic, now, Sandra," he says. "I converted, after, you know."

You stare down at the cigarettes, the escaped cigarettes. You begin to pick them up, slowly, putting them back in order, in their packet. He carries on.

"It was a great comfort. Father Searle, you remember, how he was so good with, with us all."

The last cigarette won't fit back in the packet. You stare at it, maybe you should just smoke it. Robert leans over, and takes it from your hand.

“Bea’s arranging for your mum to go to the chapel, at the funeral home, the one in Whakatane. You know, the one where your dad went.”

He’s fiddling with the cigarette, turning it round and round in one hand. It breaks and you can see the bits of tobacco coming out of the split in the paper. You don’t remember the funeral home. You never came back for your father’s funeral. You don’t even know where he’s buried. No, he wasn’t buried, someone told you, he was cremated. His thin body, with its big splayed nose and a memory of hair, it became a thin coating of ashes, to be swept up and put in a box, and that box where was it? You don’t even know where his ashes were put. And you almost ask. You’re eyes are drawn back to that cigarette going round in Robert’s hand, leaking itself out, bit by bit. You know you won’t ring the bus depot this afternoon.

“Bea’s worried about you, Sandra.”

The cigarette sags, the two bits held together with a tenuous piece of paper. You can’t hold on any longer. It’s not the earth that trembles this time, beneath you, it’s you. It’s who you built when you left here. It’s the men who only stayed for a month at the most, it’s the weekends working to pull together deals, it’s your red trouser suit. It all shakes and slumps into just so much ash. You take a long shuddering breath. You’re back in the desolation that you tried to run from all those years ago.

“You will stay, won’t you?”

You nod. No words. You just nod. From your emptiness. The two of you sit by the river side, with the water.

“We should get back.” Robert pulls himself up, holds out his hand for yours.

You hesitate, take it and he hauls you to your feet. One foot has gone to sleep and you stagger. He grasps your elbow to steady you and there’s an echo, deep inside.

He walks beside you, back across the field, to the road. You have to wait for the traffic, from the mill. Cars mostly, with a few bikes and the swandri jackets, the steel capped boots still being worn by the workers, on their way home from the four o’clock shift. The ribbon of pavement winds back along the streets. Robert points out who lives in which house. Most of the names mean nothing to you, you’ve been gone too long.

You stop at the letterbox. It seems a lifetime since you stood next to it, this morning, with your suitcase, and your platform shoes. The head of your shadow merges into the high hedge, the one that hides the house next door, where you used to live. This time you let yourself look at it. You can only see the green roof, and the chimney with its television aerial pointing in all directions at once. The paint is peeling from the corrugated iron, and rust is showing through. You helped dad paint that roof, one sunny Sunday morning.

That's enough. One step at a time. You walk back up the path, to the glass mother duck in the front door. Take a breath, ready to walk down the long hallway to the empty bedroom.

## CHAPTER TWENTY; 1960

Sandra hurried along the corridor. The black and white tiles marched ahead of her and there was a cold wind coming in from the open doors at each end of the school block. The corridor always seemed so long, especially when you were in a hurry. She lengthened her step, so she only landed on the black squares. For luck.

Geography had just finished. She needed to investigate her stomach cramps, and she was clutching her brown paper bag, the one that brought the comments from the boys in class if they saw it – *Got your lunch in there...I know where you're going...Sandra's got her rags on....* She had to go now, between classes. She paused at the door of the girls' toilet, listening to the conversation inside.

"What do you think about French kissing?"

"I think it's disgusting, I nearly choked last week. He nearly had his tongue right down my throat."

"Yeah? I like it. My little sister thinks that's how you get pregnant. Give us a light, my fag's gone out."

"I really copped it from dad, he saw the big love-bite on my neck."

"Use toothpaste, as soon as you can, that gets rid of it. Colgate's best."

"Give us a drag, yeah, look at my neck. Back seat of the pictures. And he had his hand on my left tit, but only on the outside of my clothes."

"True? Don't you care if people can see?"

One of the voices was Cathy's. Sandra wasn't sure she wanted to know about Cathy's love bite but she could feel her stomach cramps getting worse. She clutched her brown paper bag and pushed the door open.

They stopped talking when she came in. The tall, blonde girl holding the cigarette took a drag and drew the smoke up her nose. A smoke coil tried to escape, and was pulled expertly in. Sandra wished she could do that, but it'd only make her choke and feel sick.

"Hi Sandra," Cathy said. "Oh, you got the curse. Just finished mine. I tell you I was praying, it was a bit desperate for a week or so!"

"We'd better go, bell's just gone," said the blonde. "We've got English."

"Better not be late, Sandra, Miss will get you," Cathy said.

The door hissed back on itself after they left, closing with a whump.

Once in the toilet cubicle, Sandra pulled out the sanitary pad, the belt and the safety pins. The empty toilets echoed. Gingerly she pulled down her navy blue school knickers, sat on the toilet and she sighed with relief. Her period hadn't started yet so she wouldn't leave a stain on her school uniform. She'd escape more jeering from the boys in class.

She fumbled with the pins. At least she didn't have to worry about whether she'd get a period or not, that was some consolation. The hard part about not having a boyfriend was that she never got to go out anywhere any more. It seemed you either had the going out and worry or you stayed at home. She reached for the toilet chain. The chain clanged and rattled, the noise bouncing off the walls. She felt another cramp in her belly. Maybe she could go home, Miss would understand.

She was late for English class. The only seat left in the room was next to the new boy and she stood looking for some alternative.

"Sit down, Sandra, and hurry up. I'll give you two minutes to get yourself settled, otherwise it will be a detention," said Miss.

Sandra slid into the seat, pulling the desk away slightly, and the chair as far away as possible from her neighbour. She took him in with small sideways glances. He was sprawled with one leg long under his desk. His elbows were spread and he was drumming on the table top with one hand.

"Stop that noise, will you?" said Miss. "In fact you can be the next to read. What's your name, again?"

He sniffed and looked down at his offending hand.

"Rewi, Miss," he said.

"Rewi, you can read Macbeth, he's a dark king. We're on page ninety three, scene seven. You pick up *If it were done*."

Rewi started reading, faltering over the rhythm, his voice soft.

*"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly."*

"Come on Rewi, speak up. This is a man who is troubled, he's being pushed by his lady wife, by Lady Macbeth, to kill his king. He wants to, but he doesn't want to. Why does he want to? Anyone?"

Sandra stared. He was squirming in his chair. Rewi, that was his name, he only came to the school last week. His black hair was standing on end where he'd been running his hand through it. Under the wide nostrils of his flat nose

were the beginnings of a moustache. Sandra could almost feel his thick lips pressed on her thin English mouth. He turned his head, glanced, looked down, was caught by her stare. His brown eyes fixed on her green ones. He smiled.

“Rewi, pay attention, you might be going to be king, but stop ogling the girls. Come on, start again – *If it were done.*”

Sandra watched a deep flush come up from Rewi’s neck. She didn’t know a Maori could blush like that. She blushed too, fixing her stare down on her text book, trying to concentrate on the Scottish king. Rewi stumbled through the passage, his voice still soft.

“Right, everyone. I want you to spend ten minutes discussing with your neighbour. One of you keep notes. I want you to write a list of the influences you think there might have been on Macbeth to kill his king. The influences can be from outside of him, or they can be from his own thinking. Understand?”

The class settled, murmuring and rustling. Sandra didn’t hear the questions that several people asked because she was stuck on one thought. She would need to talk to Rewi, the boy who had smiled at her, and whose blush was a deep brown blush, not a bright red like hers. She bent down to get a pad of paper out of her bag, pulling up her long grey socks as far as she could, to hide her bristly knees, in case he noticed she hadn’t shaved her legs in the last few days. Paper found, she started fiddling with her fountain pen. It fell between the desks. She bent down to get it, so did Rewi and their shoulders brushed. In the confusion of sorrys, the pen was left on the floor. Sandra felt her face flame up again, she took a deep breath. As she gathered herself to try and retrieve her pen, Rewi leaned down and picked it up. He quietly put it on her desk and started writing his own list. Sandra bent over her work, sneaking looks out of the corner of her eye. She stopped when one of her sly peeks was intercepted by Rewi. Her list had only one item on it. It said: *He loved his wife and she wanted him to do it.*

After the class had discussed their lists, the reading continued. Rewi stayed as Macbeth and Sandra read Lady Macbeth. When she read *I have given suck, and know how tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me...* there were titters around the class. She kept her head down, to hide her red face. So did Rewi.



At last the class was over, and Sandra packed her bag ready to walk home. She pulled out her beret and carefully placed it on the back of her head. Cathy had already gone with the blonde girl, probably to sneak a smoke in the toilets. Sandra lifted her heavy bag, full of homework, and turned to leave the room. Rewi followed her and he was still following her when she walked out the gate. He was stopped by the prefect on duty, told to tuck his shirt in, pull his socks up and put on his cap. She discovered she needed to swap hands with her bag, adjust her own socks. By the time she'd done that, he'd caught up.

“Walk you home, eh, Lady Macbeth?” he said.

She nodded, looking at the footpath, at the letterbox of the house across the road from the school, at her bag, at the cat running across the road, at anywhere other than that brown face that blushed when she did.

“Carry your bag for you?” he asked.

She blinked, focusing on his outstretched hand. Their hands touched as she passed her bag over. As if her hand was burned, she pulled back and folded her arms.

“I’m going to visit my aunty, she lives down Atkinson Street. Where do you live?”

For one moment Sandra couldn’t remember. They set off towards River Road, and plunged into the labyrinth that snaked its way to Weld Street. Her thoughts were running down every intersection, every dead end street they passed. Words seemed to have emptied out of her, leaving a vast, embarrassing silence. Rewi filled it up.

He told her he’d been living with his grandparents in Taupo since he was a baby and that he’d come to stay with his parents so that he could get to know his mother’s family. He told her he was only here until the end of the year, then his koro wanted him to go to boarding school – to Hato Paora which was a Catholic boarding school. Because his family was Catholic. Except that he didn’t go to mass and his parents thought he should.

Sandra nodded a lot. She was listening with every part of her body. She could hear his words, his Maori way of speaking, his pride in his future. Her body could hear his maleness, the depth of his voice reverberating somewhere in her belly. And she could smell him, this mornings’ Lifebuoy soap overlaid

with the salt of sweat and a flat smell of different food having been eaten and digested. Her body electrified when they accidentally, or maybe not so accidentally bumped each other. She noticed he was looking at her and that he'd stopped talking.

"Sorry, what did you say?" she asked.

"I said has Miss talked to your parents yet? She talked to my koro when he was up last week, about me doing more subjects for School C. She's talking to all the parents of kids she thinks will do well. That means you, doesn't it?"

"Um, I suppose so."

"What're you good at? English? That Shakespeare stuff is real hard. I think I'm better at maths than english. But we all have to pass english, eh?"

"Um, yes."

And Sandra didn't seem to be in control of the next words she said. Maybe it was Lady Macbeth who embodied herself and interrupted Sandra's silence - *But screw your courage to the sticking place.....*

"I can help you with the english. We could study together, and maybe you could help me with maths," she said.

They'd reached the corner with the sign that said Atkinson Street.

"See you tomorrow, Lady Macbeth," said Rewi.

When he passed her bag back, their hands touched again, just lightly. Sandra decided to shave her legs and stop biting her fingernails. She smiled back at Rewi with her whole self lifting as the corners of her mouth curved.

That evening, Sandra was doing her homework on the kitchen table. She'd normally be in her bedroom, at her desk that Ian had built for her when she'd started high school, but it was too cold. The chip heater had been going all day and the kitchen was warm. Betty reached for another potato and pared off a long dark peel into the sink.

"I got a letter in the post today, Sandra," she said. "From a teacher. She wants me and dad to go into school, she wants to talk to us. Have you been in trouble?"

"No, mum. She wants to talk about school certificate. About how many subjects I should be sitting. She wants me to do an extra one – do six exams, but it cost more."

“What you want to do that for?” asked Betty. “You don’t need all them exams to get a job. You could work in the Four Square, that’s good clean work.”

She blinded the last potato with her sharp knife, filled the pot with water and put it on the stove.

Sandra wrote in her exercise book. *C’est cinq Septembre, aujourd’hui, et il fait froid. It is the fifth of September today and it is cold.* She considered the next question – *Quelles sont les personnes importantes dans votre vie? Who are the people who are important in your life? J’aime*, she wrote. Who? She wondered if Cathy would be writing Lenny’s name, and if the blonde girl from the toilets this morning would be writing the name of the boy who made toothpaste on the neck necessary. Inside her own head she let herself finish the sentence *J’aime Rewi*, the boy with the Maori eyes, and the Maori hair and she wrote down the names of her mother, father and sister.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE; 1960

There was a cold wind and a grey sky. Betty came out of her warm womb of a kitchen to get the mail, pulling her thin cardigan close. The steam bores hissed and rumbled, safety valves releasing the earth power, and the noise carried on the wind. She pulled the letter box up again, it leaned, like a drunkard. There was a blue aerogramme in the box, from Kath, from home. She'd been worried, it had been almost a month since she'd seen that familiar handwriting. But the handwriting wasn't its usual neat, even script, it looped and shook, saying that something was not right, not as it should be. She ripped it open and stood next to the leaning letterbox, in her thin cardy and her slippers and read:

*Dear Betty,*

*I have some really bad news. I haven't been feeling so good lately, didn't tell you because I didn't want to worry you, what with you so far away and busy with Ian and the girls. Anyway, I went to the doc, a new one, not the old one we used to go to. And he sent me straight to the hospital. I was in there for a whole week, which wasn't what I wanted, I just wanted to go home. They said I had to have a whole lot of tests, then, blow me down, if they didn't have me on the table straight away. So they cut me open, Betty, and I'm afraid the news is all bad. I got cancer. They said I'm riddled with it and they as much said they was closing me up and sending me home, nothing they can do. So that's it. They wouldn't say, but I reckon on about six months at the most. I'm feeling right queer, but then they gave me lots of pills to take. Funny isn't it, it didn't hurt before, now it hurts to eat, and my poor old belly is all swollen. Still, you don't need the details. I know you can't come home, I know its too far and cost too much, but I can't see that I'll get myself out to have that holiday either. Anyways, that's the news. Sorry it's so bad. I hope you and the girls and Ian are still alright. It's good news about you being able to buy the house. Sometimes I wish I'd come with you on that boat. Lots of love Kath.*

Betty stared at the blue ink on the blue page. The words blurred and wriggled as she looked at them. They escaped the page, invading her and her

belly hurt and her strength seeped out of her and her head felt too heavy to hold up. She was in a dark bedroom, the blankets heavy on her legs, she couldn't escape the sour smell of herself and she was being swallowed by the words in blue biro on the blue aerogramme – *I got cancer*. She heard someone sob, someone standing in a street with a drunk letterbox, and her breath was pushed deep into her belly as the steam bores hissed at her – *Come back*.

She clutched the aerogramme, stared around at this street where she lived, with its wooden bungalows and its Australian wattle trees. Where were the brick houses all in a row, with the chimneys back to back and the gas lights that leaned out over grey footpaths? Where were the prams out in the tiny front gardens and the front doors all painted different colours? Where was she?

She had to find Ian, that was what she had to do. He was at work, at the mill, over there where the smoke hit the clouds and the steam bores hissed. That was where she had to go. She hurried down the road, with the aerogramme in her hand. At the intersection of the main road and the loopy road that circled the town, she ran across, her slippers slopping on her feet. There were no cars to dodge, no people to ask where she was going with her wild eyes and her old slippers and her thin white cardy on this cold day.

A wood chip truck came past, its high sides rattling, its gears graunching. The wind of it and the size of it disoriented her and she ran down the nearest side road, towards the steam of the mill, towards the steam from the bores. The bore that once had raged, throwing rocks and heavy timber beams at the engineers who tried to drill into the earth's secret underground heat, swallowing the puny bulldozers in a cauldron of hot mud and water.

Ian. He'd know what to do. She pushed her way through a path that must go to the mill, there it was, over there where the steam and smoke pushed its way up to meet the clouds. Blackberries tore at her stockings, pulling at her clothes, slowing her down. She could hear her own breath, hissing and spluttering as she ran, one slipper falling into the bush at the side of the road, and the river gurgling at her, chuckling at her distress. And the steam bores hissed to say to her *Cancer, I got cancer*.

She was stopped by the shallow lake, its dark mud and grey-green water steaming lazily, as if to say the hot earth core is not in a hurry, it can wait. It

cooled itself, the mud belching its poisonous fumes. There was a trickle of hot water that had been directed, by the great grandfather of the old man who lived nearby, through wooden troughs, to fill a bath with blue, pearly water. A peaceful place for some, to watch the stars, soak sore muscles, and soothe a hurt soul.

She stood by the edge of the shallow lake and the mud sucked her other slipper from her foot and sucked her down, down to the heat of the earth, to smother her and bury her alive. Like Emma Edgecumbe, the woman who became a ghost and was never to be believed again. She could have sunk, slowly, into the mud, and her cells could have dissolved and her mind become blank and her troubled soul be soothed by the warm, viscous earth. She could have lain herself on the mud with the warm water soaking away her tiredness, her deep bone weariness and her ghost could have floated with the steam and the sulphur fumes and no-one would need to know, she'd once been alive, buried alive and now she was a wraith. The warmth of the steam was soothing her and her self slipped away, little by little so she floated in the place between the water, the earth and the grey clouds. The steam wetting her face tasted of sulphur and it pulled her to streets where the gas lights haloed and the grey stone houses came and went with the fog, now you see them, now you don't. And they were leaving the grey stone house, to go to some other place, far away, where the fog smelled of sulphur and the steam bores raged at the grey clouds –

*Come back, they said, come back.*

Something blue floated in the shallow water, just in front of her and she reached for it. The blue aerogramme, with its words smeared and muddy. *I got cancer.* She wiped it, carefully on her skirt, smearing blue ink and mud and she pulled her feet, one at a squelching time, out of the grey ooze. She backed on to the more solid white sulphur crust, clutching the letter, her link with home. She had to find Ian.

Shift workers were biking home, thinking of the beer they would have when they got there, thinking of getting their boots off and putting their feet up. Bike wheels swerved away from this woman with the wild hair and thick grey mud all over her legs and hands that grabbed and eyes that looked desperate, who babbled over and over again:

“She’s got cancer, Ian, Kath’s got cancer. She’s not coming Ian, she’s not coming to see us. She’ll die, Ian, she’ll die and I can’t be there and I’ll never see her again, Ian. And there’ll be no more Daily Mirrors in the post and no more letters and we’ll be here and she’ll be at home, Ian, she’ll be at home.”

One of the shift workers put on his brakes, swung his leg out and over the back of the saddle, held her by the arm and asked if he could help.

“She’s got cancer, Ian, Kath’s got cancer,” she said, grabbing at his swandri.

He put a hand on her shoulder and she stopped in mid sentence, and crumpled to sit in the gutter. Slumped over the mud drying and cracking on her legs, she curled into herself, shivering, pulling her muddy cardy close. He stood holding the handlebars of his bike, in his swandri, and looked to the bikes streaming past for help.

Ian’s brakes squealed as he stopped.

“What’s up mate? Been an accident? Is she hurt?” he asked, and the woman in the gutter looked up.

“Ian, Ian, Ian,” was all that she could say, over and over.

“Betty love, what on earth is the matter? Where have you been? What....”

“I’ll leave you to it mate,” said the man who had stopped. He swung his leg back over his seat and rode off, thankful he didn’t know that mad woman.

Ian walked her home, pushing his bike with one hand and letting her lean on him. They stopped because her bare feet hurt and because she was shivering. He took off his swandri and wrapped it over her shoulders. He tried persuading her to get up on his bike and he would push her home, but she refused. She told him the same thing over and over again, gabbling so he had difficulty making out the words, like a clock that had been over wound and was running too fast, until she finally slowed down, and stopped.

When they got home, he washed her legs on the back porch, with a wet cloth that soon turned grey and smelt of sulphur. Then he led her into the kitchen and pushed her passive body down to sit, and there she stayed, staring at the wet blue paper in her hand.

“I’ll run you a bath love, a nice hot bath. You’ve had a bad shock, that’s all, just a bad shock.”

When he came back into the kitchen, she'd not moved. She stared at the table cloth. The world had shrunk to the tiny spaces in the weave of the white cotton and to three words, *I got cancer*.

"I'll put the kettle on, Betty, you'd like a nice cup of tea, wouldn't you, lass?"

*I got cancer*. It beat in her ears. *I got cancer*. And like that Sunday, when the rogue bore blew pumice and wood and bulldozers sky high, Betty erupted.

"I want to go home, Ian, I want to go ho-o-o-me....."

She pushed hard at the table. It rocked, and the sugar bowl teetered, slipped, and shattered on the floor. The sugar burst out from its china confines and spread itself over the green lino.

Betty threw herself at him.

"I want to go home..." she howled, "Please, let me go home."

Pinning him to her, pulling at the front of his shirt with one hand, she hit him with a fist, sobbing in his face, her voice rising in shrill sharp syllables.

"Let me....let me....let me...."

Ian hit her, across the face, hard.

The sharp crack echoed around the kitchen, bounced on the cupboard doors. One of Betty's hands crept up from her side to her cheek. Her eyes widened to grey green lakes that spilled over and she slumped back on the chair.

"Betty, love. Betty, you're hysterical. Get a hold of yourself. Let's get you in that hot bath, love. We can talk about it then."

Ian went back to tend to the bath.

Betty sat looking at her muddy legs, and her torn skirt. She opened her fist, and the soggy blue aerogramme fell on the floor, leaking its words to puddle on the green lino.

Sandra came home from the library, riding up the driveway on her bike, no hands, with Rewi's smile and the pressure of his leg against hers keeping her warm and flying her home. She nearly ran Amy over. They came in the back door to silence, and to the cat licking up sugar from the kitchen floor.

"Naughty Smokey – look what you did," said Sandra. "We'd better clean this up."

She fetched the brush and shovel.



“Dad’s boots are in the wash house, he must’ve come home. I wonder where mum is.”

“Don’t worry, Sandra. That angry old woman was here last night. She went through the wall to mum. I was worried so I prayed to Mary. She helps, you know.”

“You’re talking rubbish, Amy. Here, you hold the shovel while I sweep. Get out of the way, Smokey.”

They were on their hands and knees, sweeping the sweetness from the green lino when the loud voices seeped down the hallway. Sandra looked up at Amy and, like mirrors one of the other, they sat very still, each holding her breath. One of the voices became a high pitched sobbing –

“Home,” it insisted. “Home, home, home.”

There was a sharp crack and silence. A low, insistent keening welled from the bedroom, bubbled and flooded the house, swallowing every other feeling that may have been. It filled the kitchen and condensed on the windows, tearing on the glass and flowing down to the window sills, splashing down on Amy and Sandra and threatening to sweep them into the torrent of it. It rose up in pitch, up until it spat –

“Get out,” it said. “Get out.”

Sandra helped Amy up off the floor. They crunched the sugar underfoot as Ian came into the kitchen.

“You’re mother’s had a funny turn,” he said, “Look after her will you, I’m off out.”

He was met with silence, two pairs of eyes looking blank.

“Get your own tea,” he said as he slammed the back door.

Sandra and Amy finished sweeping up the sugar, tipping it into the sink. They tip-toed down the hallway, opening the bedroom door very carefully. Betty was a lump in the bed. She seemed to be asleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO; 1960

“Do you think he lives in the back of the church?” Amy asked.

“I don’t know,” Robert said. “The Anglican minister lives next door to the church he’s the boss of, but there’s no house here.”

“I don’t think Catholics have a minister,” Amy said. “Colin said they have a Father. A Catholic Father for all the Catholics.”

They’d ridden their bikes to the Catholic Church from school and were standing outside, on the footpath. Sheep grazing on the hills behind were kept away from their chance at heaven by a fence. The wooden building sat in a field with no gardens or trees for leaning their bikes on, so they laid them down on the pumice. The front door of the church was open, inviting them inside to the empty, cool darkness. Candles flickered in one corner. Amy hadn’t noticed when she’d come for the christening, she’d been sitting behind a big bunch of white lilies, but in that corner was a little statue of Mary, with candles flickering on a stand underneath her. In the darkness Amy could see a white dress catching the candle light, glowing. *Ah, Mary’s still here.*

“Do you think I could light a candle too, Robert?”

“I think they’re Catholic candles. You have to ask first.”

“There’s no-one to ask, except Mary, she wouldn’t mind.”

“She’s prob’ly not the boss of the candles. And anyway, she’s not real. We better ask the Catholic Father.”

“Let’s go round the back, maybe he lives in the back,” said Amy.

As they walked out, Amy stopped and looked at Mary. She didn’t look real today. She didn’t move, just stood there in her white dress, looking at the ceiling. *Maybe she’s busy.* Amy gave her a wave.

Around the back of the church was a yellow and white caravan, parked against the fence, with a little ladder coming down from the closed door and two wooden deckchairs set up outside.

“Do you think someone’s having a holiday at the church?” Robert asked.

“I don’t know. He might know where the Father is, though.”

“You knock, Amy,” Robert said, standing behind her.

Amy nearly stood on him as she stepped back from the opening door. A man in dark trousers, with braces over his white shirt stood on the top step, blinking at them through his little round glasses.

“Well, hello there,” he said, “and what can I do for you two?”

“We’re looking for Our Father,” Amy said. “Do you know where he is?”

“Well, no, did you think he came by here? How long ago?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s his name then? And what does he look like?”

“I don’t know.”

The man came down the little ladder, scratching his head. He put one hand on Amy’s shoulder.

“Do you think we could start again, little miss? I’m Father Searle and I’m the priest for this church. Would you like to tell me your names?”

He had a soft song in his voice. Amy knew it wasn’t Scottish, her father was Scottish and his voice made a different song. It sounded kind, and she liked the warm feel of his hand on her shoulder. Maybe this was the father of all the Catholics that she was looking for.

“Does that mean you know about Mary?” she asked.

“Which Mary do you mean, little miss. Don’t tell me you’ve lost a Mary as well as your dad,” he said and he laughed.

Amy stared at him. He can’t not know about Mary, she lived in his church. If he didn’t know about Mary, no-one would and then she would be just left with the angry old woman and with the emptiness in her mother’s eyes.

“Sorry,” he said. “Now, little miss serious, what’s your name and what’s your little friend’s name.”

“I’m eleven,” Robert said, pulling himself up. “And my name is Robert.”

The man put out his hand. Robert looked at it, then he put out his own and the two of them shook hands.

“Well, Robert, pleased to be meeting you,” the man said. “Maybe you and your friend would like a drink of orange?”

“Yes please,” Robert said. “Amy’s my friend. She wants to ask you lots of questions.”

“Well, then, sit down. I’ll be right back.”

He pointed to the deckchairs and went back into the caravan. Amy and Robert sat down, leaning forward, not quite comfortable, not quite at ease. Although they were getting an orange drink, this wasn’t the beach, and they

weren't relaxing in the sun after a swim; they were waiting for a Catholic father who laughed about Mary with his eyes wrinkling up behind his round glasses.

He came out of the caravan with two plastic cups of orange cordial. He handed one to Amy and one to Robert and sat down on the top step of the caravan. His eyes were at the same level as the two children. He wriggled on the narrow step and waited. Amy turned her cup round and round. Now she was here she was finding it difficult to know what to say. Robert sat back in the deckchair, sipping his orange drink.

"Now, what do you want to know, Amy?" the Catholic father on the caravan step said.

"I want to be a Catholic, Our Father," Amy said.

"People call me Father Searle, Amy, just so I don't get mixed up with Our Father, you know, the one which art in heaven. Our Father means God, Amy."

"Good," Amy said, "because I've got a father already and I don't need another one."

"What about God, Amy? He's your father, too."

Amy thought about her own father who, although he was kind, was inclined to drink too much beer. She took a sip. She decided one father was enough but let that pass, after all it was Mary she was interested in.

"I want to be a Catholic because of Mary, Father Searle. Mary with the white dress. You know, the one in your church, with all the candles."

"Mary, mother of God. Yes, Amy, I do know who you mean. But tell me, what church do your parents go to?"

"They don't go to church. Mum used to go to Anglican church and I used to go to Sunday school, when I was little. They have Mary too, but she seems to like you Catholics more."

"And what do your parents think about you wanting to be a Catholic?"

"Oh, they don't know. They wouldn't mind. I came to Max's christening and they didn't care and I came to church on Christmas Eve once."

"Who did you come to our church with, Amy?"

"The Simperinghams. They live next door to us."

"Oh, yes. Bea Simperingham. She's a strong woman in our church. I'm coming to her place for dinner this week, I believe."

“That’s Mrs Simperingham. Colin’s our friend, well, sometimes, and Cathy used to be my sister Sandra’s best friend, before she got boys.”

Father Searle smiled again.

“It would be a good thing for you to come to catechism classes, Amy, if you want to be a Catholic. Then you can learn about the Holy Roman Church and all about Mary, and the meaning of the Blessed Sacrament.”

Amy thought she was learning enough already, what with maths, and vocabulary, and now Sir wanted them to start learning French. It was a problem of space inside her head, where would it all fit?

“Would you teach me about Mary and how she can help?” she asked.

“Well, you would learn about all sorts of saints, as well as Mary. Is there something you need help with?”

Amy looked at her feet. Swimming season was about to start again, which would mean she’d be back in the water, three times a week, and that was where the old woman with the long weedy hair and the terrifying face lived. That would mean the dreams would start again, the waking dreams in the middle of the night, when the old woman got all mixed up with mum’s empty eyes. Mary with the white dress and kind eyes was the only one who seemed to be able to calm the old woman and fill up the emptiness. She didn’t think she wanted to tell this Father about all of that, it seemed too difficult, and anyway, then he might tell her she couldn’t be a Catholic.

She finished her orange drink and handed the glass back to Father Searle. She looked intently at his face, peering to try and see behind his glasses and he smiled, a long, soft smile and nodded his head. She knew she would tell him one day.

“Mary makes me feel good,” she said.

“Tell you what, Miss Amy. I’m going to dinner at your neighbours this week and I’ll come over and have a little talk with your mother and father, just a little chat. Meanwhile, you can come to church with the Simperinghams if you want to, I’m sure Bea would be happy to have you tag along, and your little friend here.”

“I’m going to see how things go, for Amy, I mean,” said Robert. “We’re going to get married and she wants us to get married in this church, you see.

So I'll just see how she gets on, with being a Catholic, if you see what I mean."

"Thank you for coming with Amy, Robert. I'm sure she appreciates having a good friend like you."

He shook hands, gravely, with each of them.

Before they collected their bikes from the side of the building, Amy went back into the church. She hadn't asked particularly about the candles, but Father Searle had said that she could come to church and that was enough. Robert waited by the door as she walked up the red carpet, one leg striding strong, one leg tentative, unsure. She reached the corner with the plaster statue of Mary, the candles a small ring of flames around the folds of the white dress. Carefully taking a small candle, she lit it from one of the many on the metal frame, and placed it in an empty spot. Amy took a deep breath and looked up at the still, blank face and the blue eyes gazing at the ceiling. *Mary, look at me Mary*, she willed those blue eyes down to meet her own. Nothing happened. The hands that reached out from the sleeves of the white dress stayed still. The little finger of one hand was broken, the end of it missing. Amy put a kiss on her forefinger, and carefully placed it on the broken plaster. *It'll be better when I'm a Catholic* she thought.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE; 1960

Sandra sighed as she packed her French text book away. Behind her Cathy was giggling with her new friend, the one she sneaked smokes with, and shared ways to hide love bites. Sandra seemed to have lost that friendship. She was missing something, some experience that would make her part of that group. The girls who knew the secret language: a certain lift of an eyebrow; a look from the corner of half closed eyes, with a half smile; a tongue run slowly along slightly parted lips; heavy eyes and pouted mouths; backs arched to show breasts under gym frocks, and the top of a thigh as a suspender was adjusted. Sandra just did not have the password for that club.

She headed for the classroom that doubled as a library, trying to think about the English essay on Macbeth that she was working on, trying to ignore the fluttering in her belly and the flush coming up from her neck. Shakespeare came on her dates, or geometry, or algebra. But they came with Rewi.

He was already there when she went in. Two desks were set up, side by side, facing the book-lined wall. He smiled. Sandra tried lifting one eyebrow and giving him a look from the corner of her half-closed eyes. His smile faded. She dumped her bag, arching her back and smoothing her gym frock as she sat down.

“French was bad?” he asked.

“Oh, you know, it was all right. We’ve got to do a translation for Friday. You need to do it too. How was cadets?”

Sandra had sat by the window in French. The class was small, girls only, and most of them had done the same thing as Sandra, looked out the window at the boys. Up and down they marched, with sticks over their shoulders, and their socks pulled up tight. The Corporal was Gary Chalmers. He was about to turn twenty and this would have to be his last year at school, and everyone was hoping this time he’d pass School Certificate so he could join the army. He marched precisely and his voice carried right over the football pitch. He’d make a good soldier. Rewi wouldn’t. His shirt was hanging out again, and one sock kept slouching down to his ankle. Sandra had counted three skips in a row as he tried to get himself back into step.

“Attendez-vous, mes demoiselles,” demanded the teacher.

Five minutes later the mademoiselles' eyes drifted off out to the make believe soldiers again. It had been a long French period.

"Cadets was boring. I don't want to be a soldier."

Rewi was hot, his shirt had sweat stains under the arms. Sandra could smell the salt and the heat of him. Her body ached.

"You want to do that algebra?" he asked. "It's due tomorrow."

She nodded and the letters, that could become numbers with enough imagination, settled themselves on the page. They added and multiplied, almost automatically, in orderly progression under Rewi's pencil. His explanation marched with the letters, the drill precise.

"Then you can substitute the *b* with that number, eh? And if you know that number, then you know the answer," he said, leaning back in his chair, as if to say, "That's the order of the world."

Sandra's imagination was looking for another answer. His calf was leaning on hers, that sock slouching down his leg was resting on her shoe. His shoulder was pressed against hers so they leaned one against the other. She held the pencil up to her mouth, tracing her bottom lip. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Rewi's lips moving and, with just a bit more imagination and a substitution or two, she felt their softness on her neck.

"Do you get it?"

"Um, I think so."

"You try the next one."

"Um, how do I start?"

"You haven't been listening, Lady Macbeth, have you?"

Sandra blushed and Rewi laughed, pressing his leg against hers.

"I got to go. Got rugby practice. See you tomorrow, no, it's that work experience day. See you after school, meet you at the gate."

He was out of the room, his shirt tail behind him. Sandra looked down at the letters on the page. Somehow they wouldn't transform themselves. The magic was missing.

The next day Sandra waited outside the doctor's surgery with the other girl, Aileen, who had also said she was interested in nursing. They were to accompany the Public Health Nurse for the day, visiting new babies and sick



people in the community. She was a stout woman, with her hair pulled back in a bun and she wore a navy suit, and a sensible pair of flat shoes.

“Girls,” she said, “When we go to a house, you’re to stay in the car, and I will ask the patient if you can come in. I only want one of you at a time, so you’ll have to take turns. Do you understand?”

Both girls nodded.

“I don’t want you talking to the patients, either. You’re not to intrude.”

Sandra exchanged a sidelong glance with Aileen. It didn’t look as if the day would be much fun.

“In you get, both of you in the back. We’ve got to check on some meds and change two dressings in town first, then we’ll be off out to Onepu, there’s a new baby and a man who’s just been discharged from hospital. Any questions please save to the end of the day, I need to be able to concentrate, is that clear?”

Sandra wondered if the nurse was related in any way to Gary, the old man of the school, he was good at orders too. She thought nursing was looking after people, not being this bossy. She looked out of the window as they drove off from the surgery. There were six little children playing on the swings on the traffic island. One of them was stumbling along, just new at walking, and fell on a nappy clad bottom. An older child came over and lifted him up, almost falling over with the weight.

“Where’s the mother, I ask you. Look at that, no supervision at all,” snapped the nurse as the car bunny hopped down the road.

The first three visits the nurse made were not suitable for young ladies, she said, so Sandra and Aileen stayed in the car. Aileen went with the nurse to talk to Mrs Liikanen about her medication, and Sandra held the clean bandages while the nurse undid the dressing on Mr Anderson’s leg wound. The tusk of a wild boar had left a long, deep gash. She looked away when the nurse started going on about how the pus was reducing.

The thick smell of sulphating pulp followed them as they drove out past the mill to Onepu.

“I don’t know how you people put up with that smell. It can’t be healthy,” said the nurse, winding up her window. “Now, we’re going to visit a young mother with a new baby. She’s not married and she’s probably about your

age. Yes, you're both fifteen? Maori girl of course. Pay you two to take a lesson from this."

They pulled up outside a small shed, that sat on the edge of the river. Sandra got out of the car. She could see the river from where she was standing, it was not the luminous green of the water that flowed under the bridge in the town, it was black. On its surface were rafts of brown foam, like the dirty suds from the washing machine when her dad's work clothes were washed. She gagged on the stink. There was the stench of the mill, with its sulphur tang and its rottenness and intertwined in the miasma was the putrid smell of dead fish. Two of them floated between the foam islands, white bellies bloating towards the sky.

"Terrible how some people live. This is it. I'll just pop in and see if one of you can come," said the nurse.

She pushed the door of the shed open.

It sat in a field of yellow ragwort, a green rusting shed made of corrugated iron, with paint clinging to the wood of the windows and door, and a barrel at one corner to collect the rain from the roof. There were no power lines, or phone lines coming up to it, just a lean to on one side, full of firewood. Someone called it home. Lace curtains were carefully tied back and a rag rug with bright colours woven into it sat on a concrete step, to welcome visitors. A pair of gumboots had been neatly placed together in front of the open door.

"Come on, one of you can come inside," the nurse called.

"I'm not going in there," said Aileen, through the car window. She wrinkled her nose.

Sandra shrugged. She stepped over the concrete step. Inside the house was one room, with a curtain to make another. There was a makeshift bench with a small pile of dishes on it, and a big plastic bowl full of water. An old wood stove, clean swept, with pots piled on it, took one wall. A sofa, its flowery pattern rubbed and stained, was covered in a patchwork blanket, bright wool stitching together its grey and brown patches. On one of the chairs at the red formica table sat a young mother with a baby wrapped up in a towel. Above her was a picture taped to the bare wood wall. Jesus with his ambiguous eyes had one hand pointing to his flaming heart, accusing or inviting.

“Baby’s had her morning bath,” said the nurse, “I’m just going to get the scales to weigh her,” and she went out to the car.

The mother’s dark head bending over the baby and the hands softly patting the swaddled bundle looked familiar in some way.

“Hello Miria,” Sandra said, “I know you. We went to primary school together, remember?”

Miria nodded and beckoned Sandra closer. She pulled the towel away from the baby’s face and Sandra looked into eyes that were neither blue nor brown, eyes that were waiting for the world to happen. They focused softly on Sandra, as if inviting the possibility of her. She found a smile slipping across her face and she reached a finger to stroke the damp, black down on the baby’s head. She thought of Rewi’s soft moustache.

“It’s a girl, her name is Anihera,” said Miria.

“What do you think you are doing?” said the nurse. “I specifically asked you not to talk to the patients. You can go and wait in the car, Miss. Now, give baby to me, we’ll get her weight.”

Miria wrapped the towel securely around her baby and passed her carefully to the nurse. She pointed at the navy suited back and made a face at Sandra – *crabby old bitch* it said. Sandra pretended to cough, to hide the giggle, gave Miria a wave and went back to the car, cloaked in the smell of the dead river.

At the end of the day Aileen had asked all the questions. Sandra was thinking about the stink of the river and the little curtains in the windows of the shed. The odd word from the nurses’ lecture surfaced belly up in her thoughts: *shame* the nurse said, *pregnant, not married, Maoris breed like rabbits*. Sandra was thinking about the look on the face of the baby’s mother. Mostly, she was thinking about Rewi’s soft, black moustache.

She walked back to school. At the gate, she watched the prefects on duty insisting on berets and caps and socks pulled up. Rewi was late. She was about to give up when he arrived, sneaking up and grabbing her arms from behind.

“Ho, Lady Macbeth, you nearly knocked me over,” he laughed when she turned and flung an arm out. “Stroppy woman, eh? Come for a walk by the river, Sandra. We don’t have to do any homework tonight.”

Rewi had one hand on his chest as he spoke and Sandra had a flash of Jesus with the eyes that invited or accused, giving his heart away. She nodded.

They walked along the river bank. She was revisiting the same river, but here it was green and swirled over rocks with clear, light foam that dissolved back into the water. The air, cleaned by the river, carried a slight spice of trout and eel. Forget me nots were a blue drift across the pumice banks. Young willows draped into the water, branches like hair drifting with the current.

Rewi and Sandra sat down under a plantation of willows, the canopy of twigs with a beginning of bright green budding, the roots drowning in the water.

“How was the railways today?” Sandra asked.

“Waste of time. I didn’t even get to go on the train, the driver wouldn’t let me. Uncle just got me to make them cups of tea in the office. Did you know some dumb hua built the station round the wrong way? They had to make new windows and a new door on the side the train comes. Dumb eh? How was your day?”

“I met a girl I went to school with. She’s got a baby and she’s the same age as me. She lives out in a shed, by the river, on the other side of Tasman. At Onepu. It’s just a shed. She doesn’t even have a tap for water, or any electricity.”

“What’s the baby called?”

“Annie Heeda, I think she said.”

“Anihera. That’s Miria, the mother. She’s my cousin. On my mum’s side. Lives with my koro and nan. Cute baby, eh?”

“But why does she live in a shed?”

“That’s Maori land, belongs to my mother’s people. You can’t get money to build a house on Maori land.”

Sunlight patchworked an eel nosing at the edge; fatter than the sinuous willow roots, its fins flicked under the surface.

“Look,” said Rewi, “Eel. That’s a big one, must be a paewai, not a good one to catch, it’s bad luck.”

The eel disappeared in a gap in the roots.

“So why doesn’t she move into town?” asked Sandra.

“Can’t leave the land. It’s like your whole family, the land, can’t just leave it.”

“But the river stinks down there.”

“Can’t leave your whanau when it’s sick, Sandra.”

Sandra stopped asking questions. If she had a baby like Miria, one she loved as much as Miria did, she would want to live in a house with a bathroom, and running water, and a heater. Not a shed in a paddock with a stinking river.

“Sandra,” said Rewi.

He put an arm around her and pulled her close to his body. She shuffled over and one of her arms draped itself over his knee, as if it belonged there.

“Lady Macbeth, eh. Will you hit me if I kiss you?”

And his big, soft lips landed on her smile which seemed to know how to change to meet the soft sweet sensation of being kissed. And kissed again. The fantail flicked in the willows, chirping at the feast of insects disturbed by these two melting each other into the pumice bank. The gritty pumice bank, warmed by the sun, shifted under their weight, remembering eruption and the lightness of flying. Their bodies pressed, softness holding and yielding to urgent hardness. Almost. Almost. *Shame, shame, pregnant, shame* ....the fantail scolded.

“Stop. Stop,” Sandra disentangled herself.

The eel slipped away, snaking off from the roots of the willows, carrying its omens to another darkness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR; 1960

Sandra sorted the towels and tea towels into one pile on the corner of the sofa. The underwear and socks, blouses and teeshirts went into another at the other end. Her father's work clothes made a greasy pile on the floor, and the woolen clothes a separate warm nest on the sofa back, for special treatment. She pushed her arm down into the sleeve of Amy's blue cardigan. The warmth of the wool against her skin stopped her.

Warmth, her body said, closeness, being held, Rewi's arms wrapping her, his legs twining with hers, his body pushing into the edges of her own and the heat from her belly bringing the fingers, knees, ears that made up Sandra into one pulsing, singularity. Us, her body yearned, us.

"Penny for your thoughts, Sandra?" Amy said from the floor, leaning on her elbow and turning her face up to her sister.

Sandra startled. For a moment she felt Amy look straight into her, she knew that Amy could read every sensation, every wicked thought. She shook Amy's jersey out, shook her sister's sentience away with it.

"Nope," she said, "not for sale."

Amy smiled and went back to the colours spreading themselves on the white puddle of paper on the floor. The cat tapped at the blue pencil as it stroked the page. Amy blew in his face. Shadows showed through the frosted glass at the front door and the door bell croaked.

"Someone's at the door, Mum," yelled Amy.

"Well answer it then," came a voice from the kitchen.

"I'll get it," Sandra said.

She couldn't make out who the two figures wavering through the glass were, and hoped it wasn't Miss from school. Mum hadn't gone to school to keep the appointment about extra exams. She opened the door. It was Mrs Simperingham from next door, and a small man all in black - a black suit, a black hat, a black shirt, with a white band around his neck.

"Hello, dear," Mrs Simperingham said. "Is your mother in?"

"Yes, I'll go and get her," she said.

She poked Amy with her toe as she went past, mouthing "Who's that?"

Amy rolled over. She pulled herself up from the floor, balancing carefully before she stood up.

“Oh, it’s you, Our Father, I mean Father Searle,” she said. “Have you come to talk to mum about me being a Catholic?”

Sandra stared from the lounge doorway; goodness knows how mum would deal with this. Father Searle removed his hat.

“Well, yes, we have Miss Amy,” he said. “And your father too, if he’s home.”

“Oh, no, dad’s not home. He doesn’t come home much. He’s working, you know, or he’s down the pub with his mates.”

By the time Sandra came back into the room with Betty, Amy had swept all of the washing into a pile on the sofa and Father Searle and Mrs Simperingham were sitting awkwardly on the edge, damp towels and crumpled underwear behind them. Sandra stood close to Betty.

“Mrs McLeod,” Father Searle said, “You have two lovely daughters here. I haven’t really talked to your biggest girl yet but I’ve met your Amy, she came to see me.”

Betty wiped her hands on her apron. Sandra watched her mother closely. She could see the look tiding into her mother’s eyes, the one that came when the world was too big and threatening to engulf her. Betty kept wiping her hands, the apron pulling tight as her hands clenched and unclenched. The cat weaved its way between her legs.

“Mum’s a bit busy, right now,” Sandra said.

“Oh, it’s all right Sandra,” Mrs Simperingham said. “Father Searle was wondering what Amy meant. She told him that she wants to be a Catholic, you see. And he was wondering what your mum and dad thought about that.”

Sandra narrowed her eyes at Amy.

“Dad’s not here,” she said.

“Mrs McLeod, you’re lovely little girl here wants to come to our church. And I was wondering, you see, it would be so much better, I was thinking maybe it would be a good idea to talk about your whole family. Would you all be interested in coming, to St Gerard’s church I mean. God welcomes all-comers you know.”

“No thank you, I don’t want any, thank you. Thank you for coming. No, I don’t want any today,” Betty said and, with her hands still twisting her apron, she backed to the door, held the door frame for a moment, then bolted for the kitchen.

Sandra watched her mother’s retreat. In the silence that followed she stared at Father Searle’s shiny black shoes and blinked, hard.

“Are you all right dear,” asked Mrs Simperingham.

Sandra nodded.

“Oh, dear,” Father Searle said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset your family. Your little sister is so clear, you see, she wants to come to the Catholic church. She’s welcome, but she can’t become a true Catholic without the teaching of the catechism and we can’t do that without your parents’ permission, preferably with them coming too.”

“I don’t think mum can give that, um, Father,” Sandra said. “I could ask dad and see what he says, if you like, except he’s not here right now.”

“Well, Bea,” Father Searle said, “I think if Miss Amy wants to come to church, she can come with your family. But I want to know about you, young lady, what about you, how are you keeping your spirit strong?”

Sandra looked down at Amy’s drawing on the floor. Coloured pencils were placed neatly in their tin next to a large sheet of newprint. Looking up at her from the floor was a woman in a blue and green flowing dress, with enormous eyes, ambiguous eyes that invited and accused. She was holding a very small swaddled baby. Sandra could feel the hugeness of the woman, and how she was flowing in and around the tiny body.

“I, um, I’m all right,” she said.

“Well, we won’t keep you any longer dear,” Mrs Simperingham said, “Looks like you’re really busy. Don’t see you so much these days. Don’t you forget, we’re just next door if you need us.”

Sandra opened the door to let them out. Father Searle was almost the same height as her. As he went past, he put one hand on her shoulder and she could see herself in his little round glasses.

She shut the door behind them. She could just hear what they would be saying as they walked back to the Simperingham house, about dad being at



the pub or at work all the time, and especially about her mother's strangeness. A deep sense of shame soured her belly.

"Get your stuff up off the floor, Amy," she said. "Look, it's a real mess. I don't know why you keep drawing that same stupid picture all the time anyway."

Amy carried on drawing. With her red pencil she drew a heart in each of the corners of the paper, colouring them in hard. They sat like bright red blood on the page.

"I'm going to be a Catholic, Sandra," she said, "Even if mum and dad don't say I can. I don't think they care anyway."

Sandra sat down on the dirty clothes. She tried to bring back the feeling of warmth that Rewi imprinted on her body, the hard strong arms and the heart beat that promised the same rhythm forever.

*I don't think they care anyway*, oozed into her, and made itself a little nest.

The dirty little words rubbed themselves inside her, smudging and soiling. She grabbed at the washing, her careful sorting for nothing, pulled it into one big heap and stamped to the back door. She stood there with her arms full of the everyday dirt of her family, stopped by the impossibility of turning the door handle. A small hand came up from behind her.

"Here," Amy said, "I'll open the door for you."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE; 1960

Sandra sat Betty by the mirror in the bedroom.

“Let’s give your hair a bit of a tease up, Mum,” she said, “Give it a bit more height.”

“Ooh, I don’t know dear.” Betty said. “It makes it all tangled and the knots are hard to get out.”

Sandra looked at the two faces in the mirror. The same green eyes, and straight nose and the same high cheekbones that her mother once joked they shared with Lauren Bacall. Sandra didn’t like her face. She didn’t particularly want to look like her mother. She ran the tail comb through her mother’s hair. It was the same thick, dark hair, hers straight and long and tied back, her mother’s permed with chemicals that smelled of ammonia, from a box bought at the chemist. Ian used to help Betty apply the lotion and rinse it off in the kitchen sink. Now it was Sandra who put on the rubber gloves and guarded her mother’s eyes from the caustic chemicals.

“Oh, come on mum, it’ll look real nice. I won’t do much. We’ll make you real glamorous, look, I’ll put some of my hairspray on too.”

“I hope your father hasn’t forgotten,” Betty said.

Her face in the mirror began to pucker and the frown lines settled in. Sandra hoped he hadn’t too. It was Betty’s birthday and Sandra had suggested to her father they all go to the pictures in the new Civic. He’d agreed to be home in time for the dinner that Sandra was cooking.

“He won’t,” Sandra said. “It was his idea, anyway. Now, look, let’s get your hair all done, then you can get changed after we’ve had tea. Dad will want a wash anyway. He said we’ll take the car.”

“Sandra,” Betty said, “Sandra, love, you’re fifteen now, you’re a woman. You need to watch yourself, with boys I mean. You’ll be getting a boyfriend soon, I suppose. They’ll have their hand up your skirt quick as all look out. And you know what that means.”

Sandra could feel that heat in her neck. It would creep up into her face any time now and she would be hotly, redly exposed. She held her breath. She did not want her mother, or her father either, to know about her and Rewi and the kisses and the hands. She pulled a strand of her mother’s hair tight and pushed the metal comb back against its natural growth. It tangled under her fingers.

“I don’t know, love,” continued Betty, “It all seems so exciting when you’re young. And then it all seems to change. I don’t know if it’s, you know, men need, well you know, and if you don’t feel like giving it, they seem to just not love you any more.”

Sandra breathed very quietly, allowing the blood to settle back from her face and neck. She smoothed the top layer of Betty’s hair over the tangled teasing she’d caused. She picked up the hairspray can, shook it hard and sprayed Betty’s light, buoyant curls so they sat rigid. She checked her handywork in the mirror, avoiding looking in the eyes that were like hers, that were oozing tears again.

“Mum, you’re making your powder run,” Sandra said. “Here, here’s your compact. Do your face again. I’m just going to check the dinner.”

Sandra was wearing her mother’s apron. She pulled the shepherd’s pie she’d made out of the oven and sat it in the middle of the table, its cheese top browned. Amy set the table, with paper serviettes pushed into glasses and the red, plastic tomato with its dribble of tomato sauce. Still in his work clothes, minus his boots, Ian stood by the fridge. In one hand he had a beer bottle, in the other a bottle of lemonade. When Betty came in, Sandra pulled out a chair for her - her mother’s face was freshly powdered and held rigid to match her curls. Her party hair, teased and lacquered, looked out of place with her old house dress.

“Well, Betty, happy birthday, love,” Ian said. “Thought you might like a shandy, and the girls too. We can all drink your health.”

“Your hair looks really good, mum,” Amy said.

“Do you like it?” she said, touching it gently.

Sandra wiped her hands on her mother’s apron. She nudged her father, made a surreptitious gesture towards her mother.

“You look beautiful, my bonny lassie,” Ian said.

He placed a pale glass of half beer, half lemonade next to her plate and bent to kiss her. She lifted her head, hesitantly, her lips trembling into a pucker. Ian dropped a quick popping peck and turned to fetch another glass of not beer, not lemonade. Sandra watched her mother carefully. Her mother’s face stayed uplifted for a few seconds longer, the lips still puckered, the face expectant. Then it started to slide into the folds and lines of sourness. She saw

the decision point, when Betty pulled her back straight, took a breath and made a smile. *Thank goodness, no dramas.*

"I'm going to church tomorrow morning, with Mrs Simperingham," Amy said. "Does anyone want to come? Father Searle asked me last week if any of my family were interested."

Sandra kicked her under the table. Nothing had been said about Father Searle's visit. Ian didn't know, and Sandra was unclear what Betty had understood that day. Amy glared at Sandra.

"What's this?" asked Ian. "You going to the Catholic church? What do you want to do that for?"

"I want to be a Catholic, dad, and Father Searle said I could go to church but he would rather we all went."

"There's no way I want to be a Mickey Doolan," Ian said.

He frowned at Betty.

"Did you know about this?"

Betty shook her head and one hand crept up to pat at her hair.

"Oh, it's just that Amy wants to go because her friends go, dad," Sandra said. "She thinks its neat because they do stuff together, picnics and socials and things. Can we have icecreams for pudding, at the picture theatre, please dad? I didn't make a pudding. Me and Amy will do the dishes because we're already dressed. You need to get your good dress on, mum. Are we walking or are we going in the car?"

As she spoke she picked up her plate and a small dribble of tomato sauce stained the table cloth. She rubbed at it and stood up.

"Now hang on," Ian said. "Let me get this clear. No-one in this family is becoming a Mick. If you want to go to church, Amy, with the Simperinghams, that's all right. I know them, they're good people, but there'll be no more talk about becoming one of them."

"Give me your plate, Amy," Sandra said, interrupting the breath that Amy was taking. "Come on, we're going to do the dishes. You can borrow some of my lipstick, if you like, the pink one."

They were early for the film and sat in the best seats, at the back, as the cinema filled up. Ian shook hands with a number of men, leaning across the

seats to discuss who was working when and how the last shift had gone. Their wives nodded at Betty, and turned back to face the heavy red curtain.

The leather was cold against Sandra's stockinged legs. She slumped in the seat, trying not to catch the eye of her classmates who'd come with boyfriends and friends. She seemed to be the only one in the cinema with her family. Finally the lights went down and everyone stood up together as the National Anthem played. The Queen, sitting straight on her horse, had her lipstick precisely applied and it glowed red to match her neat, military coat. A sideways look at her mother and a frown at Betty's blurred red lipstick that smudged into the lines around her mouth. She'd refused to let Sandra repair it, saying her hair was enough. Sandra ran her tongue around her own pink lips. The lipstick tasted soapy and unpleasant. She so wished she hadn't come.

The film was *South Pacific* and by interval the American nurse was washing an unwanted man out of her hair and a marine was being encouraged to talk happy to a brown girl. When the lights in the cinema came up and the screen showed "Intermission" in loopy writing, Sandra looked around. There were three girls from her class, leaning against their boyfriends, one blonde girl was smoking a cigarette. Sandra wondered if her parents knew.

"Can we go and get icecreams now, dad?" Amy asked.

"Not for me, lass," Ian said. "But I'll get some for you three."

They were standing out in the foyer, carefully holding soggy ice cream cones, when Miss came over.

"Hello, Sandra," she said. "This is lucky. How are you? This must be your mum and dad – hello Mr and Mrs McLeod, I'm Sandra's English teacher."

She held out her hand. Betty swapped her icecream over, fumbling with her handbag. Ian's forefinger went up to touch his hat, he corrected himself and shook the hand that was offered, clearing his throat.

"I'm so glad I ran into you," she continued. "We tried to make an appointment to see you both at school. Never mind, I can tell you briefly what we would have discussed. Your Sandra is doing very well, she's a clever girl. The school has registered her to sit an extra subject in School Certificate, so she'll be doing six subjects instead of five."

There was no response from Ian or Betty.

"Thank you Miss," Sandra said.

“You should do well, Sandra,” she continued. “I expect a university career for you. Just you keep studying, don’t let yourself be distracted by that boy Rewi that you have been seeing so much of.”

She smiled and walked away. Sandra’s high collar hid the red flush, but it was well on its way up her jawline. She scowled and tipped her face forward over the icecream. The bell for the end of interval played and she was the first back to her seat.

In the second half of the film the jilted man with the brown children mourned that this nearly was his, and the marine sang about needing to be taught before its too late to hate all the people that your relatives hate. He didn’t have a happy ending, neither did the brown girl he was supposed to learn to hate.

As soon as Ian started the car, Amy started the questions.

“Why couldn’t he just marry that brown girl?” she said. “He loved her, didn’t he? And her mother wanted them to get married.”

“It would have been a mixed marriage, Amy,” Ian said. “They’re not a good idea.”

“Why? You came from Scotland and mum came from England. And you got married.”

“If there’s a mixed marriage the children don’t know where they belong. They don’t know if they’re from one race or the other.”

“I know I’m from New Zealand,” Amy said.

“That’s enough. I don’t want you girls marrying anyone with a bit of the tar brush in them. It’s not right. It’s not good for the children when you have them.”

Amy made a face at Sandra. They sat back on the leather seat, its plastic covers cold and slippery. Sandra looked out at the black road, its white markings stark under the street lights.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX; 1960

The Simperinghams had a new rooster. The fat black hen had hidden her eggs in the corner of the chook yard and Mrs Simperingham had let her sit on them. The old rooster turned up his fine yellow claws to the sky not long after the hatching, leaving a space in the flock for strutting and ordering about. The one candidate for this looked exactly like the old rooster with the same bright orange markings on his feathers. The little comb and wattle that was beginning to frame his beak promised to wobble with just as much authority. But he wasn't yet ready to claim it. He would hide in the back of the chook house in the morning, to practise his crowing. His crow would falter and end in a squeak and his timing was not yet synchronised with sunrise. This Sunday morning he was late and it was seven o'clock when his half-formed cock-a-doodle woke Amy up.

Today was the day she was going to start going to church with the Simperingham family. She put on her best dress, the corduroy one with the fake fur at the neck and the sleeves. She pulled on her long white socks and tied the lace of her heavy builtup shoe. Mrs Simperingham had told her that she wasn't allowed to take the Blessed Sacrament, because she wasn't a proper Catholic, but she decided against breakfast, just in case. She stood in the bathroom a long time, wondering if she should clean her teeth. Did toothpaste count as 'breaking your fast'? She decided it didn't, so long as she didn't swallow it. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror as she scrubbed with her toothbrush and with one wet hand she pushed her wild blonde morning curls down. The blue eyes looking back at her were the same colour as Mary's, she hoped that counted.

Robert was waiting at the Simperingham letterbox. Amy had said he shouldn't come, because he wasn't sure about being Catholic. He said he still needed to know what it was all about. He won the argument when he said that his father thought that a man needed to wear the pants in the family, and what with them getting married.... Amy had let it pass, she liked dresses.

Mrs Simperingham shut the front door behind her. Colin and Max, the only two Simperingham children who could still be coerced into going to church, came racing down the path.

“Oh, hello Robert, you’re coming too,” Mrs Simperingham said. “Amy, it’s so nice you could come with us. Father Searle will be really pleased to see you. He was a bit worried after visiting your house. He thought he might have upset your mother. Is she all right, Amy?”

Amy nodded. Sometimes her mother was fine, her eyes looked like mother eyes and she did all the mother things – growling when they misbehaved, burning the stew, sewing Amy’s dresses, telling them what to do. Then sometimes she’d go into the bedroom and shut the door, as if there was another place there she had to disappear to. Just lately she had been doing it a lot more often in the kitchen, in the haze of her cigarette smoke. Amy knew she’d disappeared because her eyes were empty.

“I heard your new rooster this morning,” she said. “He sounds really funny.”

“He isn’t quite bossy enough yet,” Mrs Simperingham said. “But he’s learning.”

“The rooster’s called Patrick, the same as dad,” said Max.

“Did you know that Colin is an altar boy now? He’ll be helping Father Searle. How Father managed to talk him into it, I really don’t know.”

Amy hoped Colin wouldn’t turn his eyelids inside out when he was supposed to be around Mary, it might mean that the little statue just kept looking at the ceiling. Amy needed Mary to take notice today, because of swimming starting. She crossed her fingers.

“Amy,” Mrs Simperingham said, “You and Sandra know you can always come and see me if there is anything you need, or anything you’re worried about, don’t you dear?”

“Thanks, Mrs Simperingham,” Amy said. “Swimming club starts again this week.”

“Are you doing swimming again this year, dear?”

“Yes, if the old lady lets me.”

“Amy, you shouldn’t talk about your mother like that. She’s no older than me.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean mum, she doesn’t mind if I do swimming.”



Amy decided Mrs Simperingham wouldn't understand. She thought about the little round glasses of Father Searle. He knew Mary, and not her mother, so she might choose to talk to him first.

She liked the funny language that the Catholic Father Searle used to talk to God. She thought their God must be much cleverer than other people's God because of speaking another language. She watched Colin very closely, to see what he did with his eyelids. He looked very different in his long white robe, with his hair slicked down and his serious expression. His job was to wave a container on a chain that gave out smoke. It curled up past the picture of Mary, blurring her edges. Amy held her crossed fingers very tight and Mary with her red heart wobbled slightly. A cloud of smoke came up past her as Colin did an extra big swing. Amy coughed. When she opened her eyes again Mary was back in her picture. That Mary wasn't listening, maybe she could try the little Mary, the one with the candles.

After the real Catholics had lined up and got the Blessed Sacrament, and they'd left the church, shaking hands with the real Catholic Father, Amy went up to the little statue of Mary. She stood there waiting. She crossed her fingers again. She whispered *Mary, Mary*. Nothing happened. She was reaching for a candle when Father Searle came back in with Robert and Colin. He put his hand on her shoulder. She jumped, maybe she wasn't allowed one after all.

"Hello, Miss Amy," he said. "Nice to see you in the House of Our Lord. The Blessed Mary would like a candle. Do you have a special prayer you want answered?"

Amy was quiet. She wasn't sure if prayers were like wishes when you blew out the candles on your birthday cake, if you told they wouldn't come true. She looked up at Father Searle. He had kept his hand on her shoulder, her low shoulder, the one that sat down a bit, because of her foot, and he was looking at Mary. Maybe if she talked about the old woman when he was here, it would help.

"There's an old woman who comes and sees me," she said. "Sometimes it's at night when I wake up. And now she's in the water when I go swimming. She's an old woman who knows when bad things are going to happen and she's always angry."

Father Searle nodded. He kept his eyes on Mary, and his hand on Amy's shoulder.

"I don't know who she is but she seems to live here, in the water all the time and sometimes in the clouds," she said. "I think she's lived here a long, long time. I don't think she likes me being here."

Father Searle nodded again. He didn't tell Amy she was talking nonsense, like Sandra did. He looked very thoughtful about it all.

"Must be very frightening, Miss Amy," he said. "You were right to tell me about it."

"I want Mary to help," Amy said.

"Well, maybe she can," Father Searle said. "Or maybe someone else can. Let me talk to some of our Maori parishioners, Miss Amy. It may be that they know something about this old woman. Meanwhile, finish lighting your candle, Mrs Simperingham's waiting for you outside."

Amy looked up at his face. The eyes behind the little round glasses were serious, he wasn't laughing at her. He turned and left her holding her unlit candle. As she watched him stride down the long red carpet she was glad she'd told him, maybe now she could get on with her swimming training.

"You've got a ghost, Amy, a real live ghost," Colin said. He looked at Amy, his eyes wide. "I thought I might get a ghost, after going in that cave, with the bones, you know, when I was nine."

"You need to just tell it to go away, Amy," Robert said. "Tell it very loudly. You could even tell it you told Father Searle about it, then it might just go away."

"We could get rid of it," Colin said. "I know we could scare it away. I scared away the ghost from the cave. You and me, Robert, lets make a plan."

Amy lit her candle. The smoke drifted past the face of Mary, and Amy was sure that she'd been listening.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN; 1975

“Good morning, dear,” says a voice from somewhere in the room.

You’re swimming just under the surface of sleep, in the dark silt filled water, with the weeds that brush against you, winding around your legs, clinging, pulling. You push them away, and a dead fish, released from the dark weed, turns belly up in your hands, one eye staring at you, accusing. Your own dark hair is drifting across your face, winding itself around the fish, around your nose and your mouth and you don’t need to breathe any more. You can just sink down, down.

“Wake up, I brought you a cup of tea.”

You keep your eyes closed, and the voice reels you up to the surface, to the meniscus between asleep and awake. You float there, try to feel some familiarity. *Where did these fluffy sheets come from? Why are the walls so close and where is the door and what happened to the darkness that is your bedroom, in your flat, in Auckland? Who’s that person insisting on tea?*

There’s a clatter of teacup in saucer and you know you’re in a single bed, in a bedroom that opens to a hallway, that leads to the room where your mother is, no, where she was. You open your eyes and Bea is looking at you. She sits down on the end of your bed. You move your feet up to accommodate her.

“How are you, today, dear?”

You can’t lie here, on your back. You need to be face to face with that concern, to ward it off. The bed head creaks as you pull your pillow up and settle against it. You push your hair behind your ears. Today, how are you today?

“I’m all right,” that’s the best you can do.

A sound pushes in from next door, through the high hedge. It’s a child screaming in tantrum, a high pitched wail of anger, incoherent rage that winds higher and higher. You tense with it. It stops as suddenly as it started and leaves you jangling.

“The funeral director will be here in half an hour,” Bea says. “Pat’s home. He did a double last night. Honestly, the man is too old for double shifts, but he won’t be told.”

“Oh,” you say. “Pat, yes.”

“You know our Cathy’s in Australia now, don’t you?”

You didn’t, but you nod.

“They’ve just moved to Western Australia, for the mining.”

“Really? That’s a long way away.”

“Yes. We miss the kiddies. Still, we see Peter’s little ones, and Stu’s.”

She stands up and walks to the doorway. You reach for the teacup. She pauses.

“I don’t suppose you ever.....”

The teacup almost tips over. It clatters in the saucer, and some of the tea spills. You grab for the handle, hold it very hard. The question dissipates.

“Anyway, you need to get yourself up, Sandra. The bathroom’s free.”

You sit at the kitchen table to meet with the funeral director. He doesn’t look much older than you - too young to be doing this job. You wish you’d put on your lipstick. You look around at Bea, with her greying hair, and at Pat, with the lines that tell you the years have not been easy on him. These two were almost family to you, almost. He interrupts your thoughts, the man in the dark suit, says his name is Tom Sharp, and he’s sorry about your loss. You wonder if he practises that solemn voice, and the slow movements as he gets out a pad of paper and unscrews the lid of a fountain pen.

There’s a knock at the back door, and you know before he comes into the kitchen that it’ll be Robert. He slips into a chair, with a nod. Almost family.

“I believe, Sandra,” says Tom the funeral director, “We helped with your father’s funeral. It was a few years ago, before I joined the firm.”

You can feel a panic rising. The funeral you never came to. You just nod.

“I’m glad we can be of service again. Now, we have several things to do. First, there’s the notice, for the papers. Do you want a notice, if so, which papers do you want us to put it in?”

You look blankly at his empty page. He’s written *I. Death Notice*. You realise you don’t know the names of the local papers. The paper you get is *The Auckland Star*. That wouldn’t be any use. Isn’t there a local paper? There used to be. You remember headlines that screamed at you once, told you there was a hole in your life that would never be filled.

“Well,” Bea says. “Just the local papers, I think. The Gazette, and the Beacon. That would do, don’t you think, Sandra?”

You just nod.

“Very well,” says Tom. “Now, how much do you want it to say? If it goes in the Births and Deaths column, a brief announcement of death and the details of the funeral will cost you ten dollars. A longer announcement with names of family will be around thirty dollars. What would you like to do?”

They’re looking at you, Bea, Pat, Robert, and the dark suited Tom. They want you to make a decision. About how much to spend on telling the world that your mother is dead. You cough, to hide the laugh that’s threatening. If you start laughing, you won’t stop. Your eyes water. Bea hands you a handkerchief and pats your shoulder.

“What about a longer notice?” she says. “It could say after a long illness.”

Yes, you think, it was a very long illness. How about it says after she gave up on life, after she disappeared, into her bedroom, and shut the door. You stir your tea, stare at the teaspoon, remember pushing food on to a spoon just like this one, coaxing her mouth open to force some of it in. Closed mouth, blank eyes, lost in some alien dream where nowhere was home.

“Can I check Mrs McLeod’s full name, please?” says Tom. You blink at him.

“Betty,” you say. “She was called Betty.”

“Yes,” he says “That can go in brackets. But we need her full name.”

“Betty McLeod,” you say.

“I think he means the name on her birth certificate, Sandra,” Robert says.

You look at him blankly. The panic is rising again, you’re not sure you know.

“That will be Elizabeth Ada McLeod,” Robert continues. “I’ve had power of attorney for several years. That’s the name on her birth certificate. And do you want her date of birth? I have that, too.”

You stare at him. This is all news to you. Once there was a stranger who was your mother, and you carry the pain of her lostness, and you do not know her full name, or her date of birth. It’s written down, in black ink, on the blank page.

“And who would you like to have acknowledged in this notice?” asks Tom.

Those eyes are looking at you again. *Who would you like to have acknowledged?*

“Me,” you blurt.

“Yes, of course,” says Tom. “How about *Much loved mother to Sandra?*”

You stare at the words he has written down on the page and search for a match inside yourself. *Much loved*.....

“What about other members of the family, Sandra? Who else?”

They linger unbidden at your edges. There’s your dad, sprawled asleep in the chair, his head nodding, the cat curled on his chest. And on the floor is a small girl, with white curly hair, intent on drawing, on a big sheet of paper almost as large as she is. On the paper is a sprawl of green and blue, moving, coalescing to a figure that is absorbing her, this small girl, until she’s gone, and there’s just the drawing, on the page, of the old woman.

You push the chair back, it falls on the kitchen floor with a loud clatter. Escape, that’s all you can do, escape. And your way is blocked by Robert. He stands in the kitchen doorway. A solid impediment to your flight.

“No,” he says. “No, Sandra, don’t.”

You try to get around him, to push him out of your way, but he won’t be moved. He holds your shoulders, pushing his hands down hard and it hurts. You hurt. And his eyes are full, of rage, of pain, of the same substance of which you are made. And you see him push it down, with hard hands, before it can erupt. You go limp in his grasp, turn to the table and slump in a chair. They’ve gone. From your edges. Leaving a grey emptiness where the ash drifts.

Robert’s voice pulls you back, from that alien place.

“The notice needs to say “*And Amy. Much loved mother to Sandra and Amy.*” The hardness of his voice grates at you. You wait in the silence that follows.

“Well,” says Pat. “I suppose it also needs to say *Much loved wife to Ian.*”

You look out the window into the open door of the garage. There’s a rusty skeleton of a bike in there, its pedals missing, and its handlebars askew. The cover on the seat still has a bit of green on it. You recognise that bike, or, at least, you knew it when it was still intact.

“Where do you want the funeral?” asks the efficient funeral director. You watch them take over, this almost family.

“Oh, it will only be a small one,” Bea says. “I think your chapel will serve nicely.”

You watch the fountain pen note that down.

“And who would you like to take the funeral service?” he asks.

“Your mum was still an Anglican, wasn’t she Sandra?” asks Bea.

You have no idea. All you know is that she wouldn’t have converted to Catholicism.

You shrug.

“I’ll get the Anglican minister who does services at our Chapel to get in touch with you.”

He writes that down, too.

“Do you know if she wanted to be cremated?”

You shrug again.

“I think both her and Ian wanted cremation,” says Pat. “What do you think, Sandra?”

You nod.

You stare out of the kitchen door, the one that goes through to the lounge. On the wall is a mirror, and in the reflection you can see the Virgin Mary, looking straight at you, with her heart aflame and one hand pointing, accusing. There is no escape, she’s saying, no escape.

## CHAPTER TWENTYEIGHT; 1960

“Mum,” called Sandra down the hallway, “Do you want bacon and eggs?”

She listened for a moment, but there was silence. She could open the door to the bedroom, but Betty had been there when she came home and was probably asleep. With dad on four to twelve shift, someone needed to get Amy some tea, swimming club started promptly at six and it was after five already. Amy had her togs on, with her school dress over the top, and she was crouching on the kitchen floor, wrapping up her underwear in a towel.

“She prob’ly doesn’t, but can I have her bacon? And some baked beans too?”

“Oah, Amy, look at those knickers. When did you last have clean ones?”

“There aren’t any clean ones.”

“Didn’t mum do the washing on Saturday?”

“I don’t know. But there’s no clean knickers in my drawer.”

Sandra sighed. She sometimes did the washing, but Betty had seemed to be coping a bit better lately, maybe not.

“I’ll do some washing tonight, when I get home,” she said, “And hang it out in the morning. You’ll have to help me hang it out, Amy, or I’ll be late for school again.”

“Where are you going tonight? And why are you all dressed up?”

Sandra blushed. She leant down to get the frying pan out of the cupboard.

“I’m not dressed up,” she said, “I just finished making this in sewing so I want to wear it. Anyway, I thought I’d come with you to swimming club. I need to talk to Rewi about the homework Miss gave us, and he said he’d meet me by the swimming pool.”

“Rewi’ll like your dress. Are you going to marry him, like I’m going to marry Robert?”

“Don’t be silly, we just help each other with our homework,” Sandra said.

She reached for the tin full of fat from the fridge.

“Do you want your eggs all runny?” she asked.

“Is there any bread to dip in them?”

Sandra looked in the cupboard. The bread was mouldy on the edges. She could cut it off.

“I’ll make toast,” she said.



They left the dishes in the sink. Amy promised she'd do them when they got home. Amy wobbled out of the driveway on her bike and there was Robert, carefully pushing his foot back so the back brakes didn't lock and stepping off his bike next to the letterbox.

"I never noticed before, Robert," Sandra said, "You've got a girl's bike. Don't your brothers tease you about it?"

"Sandra," Robert said, "I have learned to take no notice of my brothers. They are so immature. Are you going to win tonight, Amy?"

"I'm full of baked beans," Amy said. "Maybe I can blow off lots, like a jet boat, and be first."

Robert nodded, his face serious.

"You need to be careful, Sir says you get cramp if you go swimming straight after eating."

They wobbled off slowly on their bikes, and Sandra had a sudden glimpse of the two of them, middle aged, going shopping for groceries together, discussing what colour curtains to put in the lounge.

The smell of sulphur got stronger as Sandra came closer to the fence around the swimming pool. Sulphur Hill was steaming quietly, its blackened manuka hiding the Boy Scouts sitting on the patchy grass outside their den, promising to do a good turn every day and to always tell the truth. Life should be that simple. I'm not telling the truth, but I am doing my parents a good turn by not telling them about Rewi. She crossed the road, following Amy and Robert to the bike stand.

"I have to go and get ready," Amy said. "It's my freestyle race first. Can you look after my things, Sandra, someone's been stealing from the changing sheds again."

"Oh yeah, they'll really want your dirty undies," Sandra said.

"You shouldn't say things like that. You make Amy feel embarrassed."

Married twenty years, thought Sandra as she watched the two of them go in the entrance. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Rewi peeling himself off the concrete wall, keeping his hands in his pockets. This was the first time she'd seen him out of school uniform and he looked much older, even though his white shirt was still hanging out.

“Nice dress,” he said.

Sandra glowed at the way his eyes went from her face, to her feet, and back to her face. She smiled.

“Thanks.”

“Shall we go and watch your little sister in her race?”

He was standing very close and his hand brushed hers. Sandra remembered Amy’s question. The answer was that her parents wouldn’t agree to her marrying Rewi.

They sat on the scrubby grass, at the far end of the pool, away from the starting blocks and parents looking official with their clipboards and stop-watches. Some discreet sense had informed Robert that he should sit a distance away. Amy teetered alongside the pool, her towel fat with her belongings, with her mismatched shoes in one hand.

She dropped her shoes and used one hand to balance herself as she knelt down on the concrete edge. She unrolled her towel, pulling out her swim cap. As she stood up, she staggered and Robert was at her side, catching her elbow, catching her balance for her. He bent to get the swim cap.

Amy stood against the evening sun and the gold caught her blonde hair and it haloed around her small, intent face. She’s thin, thought Sandra, she’s so thin she looks as if she’ll blow away, she could just fly off, any time. She felt a shiver go from her hairline and feather its cold prescience down her spine. The cold lodged itself deep in her middle. Robert handed Amy her swim cap, thank goodness for Robert, he’s holding her here.

Amy stuffed her hair into the rubber swim cap. She looked even smaller.

“You’re shivering, Amy,” Sandra said.

“Here, you need to wrap yourself up in your towel, keep warm,” Robert said.

He grabbed the end of the towel and pulled. Amy’s underwear went flying. Sandra tidied quickly, hiding the not quite clean knickers from Rewi. She and Rewi weren’t an old married couple. Amy and Robert walked back along the side of the pool, to wait for the beginning of the race.

“Your little sister,” said Rewi. “She’s like patupaiarehe.”

The word floated, not easy to catch.

“She’s what?”

“She’s patupaiarehe. She’s a fairy child, like a spirit of something.”

Sandra frowned. The cold in her core deepened.

The whistle sounded and the under thirteens stepped up on the diving blocks. Amy was at the end where the shadow of the hill was reaching. She stood half in its dark. The starting gun sounded and six bodies threw themselves into the water.

“She’s staying under the water a long time,” said Rewi. “Is she all right? Look, all those others are up and swimming, can you see your sister?”

The last of the sun was catching the fractured surface of the pool, glinting back its light. Sandra squinted, trying to see below. There it was, a white, shrunken leg, paddling the water away, then it was gone again. Now you see it now you don’t.

She pushed herself up from the ground, just as Amy surfaced. Amy had stayed under the water for almost a quarter of the length of the pool. Sandra’s heart pounded, she could hear it, like water surging in her ears. Rewi’s fingers interlaced hers, and he held her hand tight.

Amy came last in her race. She had to try three times to pull herself out of the pool. Robert wrapped her up in her towel. Sandra watched him fussing and he walked close to her as they came back along the pool edge. Amy was shivering.

“Amy, you need to get yourself dressed, you’re freezing,” Sandra said.

“She’s still there.”

Amy took her clothes and limped into the dressing sheds.

“What’s she talking about?” asked Rewi.

“It’s a ghost,” Robert said. “Amy’s got a ghost, an old lady who lives in the water.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Sandra said. “Amy’s got a vivid imagination.”

“Well, I believe her,” Robert said and he walked away.

Sandra and Rewi sat on the grass. Sandra smoothed her dress down over her knees. The surface of the pool was settling again, smoothing itself before the next onslaught of swimmers.

“My koro had Father Searle come and see him the other day,” said Rewi. “He said there’s a little girl who sees an old lady, Father said it’s a spirit. Is that your sister he’s talking about?”

“Oh, probably. She’s decided she wants to be a Catholic, and I bet she’s told Father Searle about it. She’s been seeing ghosts for a long time, since she was small. It’s embarrassing, all these people knowing about her silliness. I’m sick of her nonsense.”

“Sandra,” said Rewi, “I think Father Searle took her seriously. He and my koro were talking about coming round to your house and doing special prayers.”

Sandra put her head down, she didn’t want to meet Rewi’s eyes. She poked at an ant nest at the edge of the concrete. The ants scattered randomly, scrambling to get away from her stick, from the threat of something that was beyond their comprehension. When Father Searle had visited their house, her mother had backed out of the room, her eyes wildly looking for some reference point to anchor her.

“Here she comes, look, she does look like patupaiarehe,” Rewi said.

Sandra felt the coldness grow. Her mother had enough ghosts, without having to deal with Amy. She dropped the stick on top of the ant nest.

They walked home into the coming dark. The shadows crept up the mountain, eating the light, pulling the weight of its solidity into the night. By the time they reached the corner, the dark was almost complete.

“See you at home,” called Amy as she and Robert pedalled fast to get the dynamos on their bike lights to work.

“Don’t forget the dishes,” called Sandra.

Rewi and Sandra walked the long way, past the deserted garage, moving on to the pumice road when the footpath ran out. There were no sounds, no people, and they walked quietly. Sandra shivered.

“You cold?” asked Rewi.

“No, just a shiver up my spine. My mum would have said a goose just walked over my grave.”

“That doesn’t make sense. You haven’t got a grave, or a goose.”

“Neither does Amy being a, what did you say, a patu something.”

They were silent again. Their footsteps were absorbed by the pumice, which gleamed white in the last of the light.

“That’s a flash dress you’re wearing,” said Rewi.

“Mmm. I made it, in sewing. Miss made me undo it three times, to get the zip in straight.”

“Looks nice.”

Maybe she should have said, *glad you like it*, or *oh, this old thing*, or... anyway, he probably wasn't interested in how dumb she was at getting a zip straight. He took her hand. He ran the soft underside of his thumb on the inside of her palm. She breathed him in, soap, sweat, sweet. She swallowed. She could feel every part of her body, her bra strap cutting into her back, her hair heavy on her neck, the pumice sticking in her sandals. The night air pushed against her, tingling her. They reached the old pines where the darkness was thick and the air was heavy with a sharp pungency.

There were no words. The soft pine needles made no complaint as they sat, or even as they lay. A soft tentativeness of hands and lips began. Sandra wanted his lips on her neck, she arched her back and his hand reached and held her breast. His leg was over her hip, and he was hard against her belly. Her dress was up over her hips, and her knickers were around her ankles. She kicked them away and reached for his belt. Her hands were urgent, the blood was beating in her ears, and she was carried by a tide she could no longer stop.

He rolled her on her back, and arched his body over her as he pushed into hers. It hurt. A piercing hurt that went from her core, engulfed her and carried her with it to a place that was both pain and pleasure.

Then it was done.

“Are you all right?” asked Rewi.

“I think so.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Yes, but ....” But what. But she had wanted it as much as he had? That it was a pain that was worth it?

“But I'm all right.”

“Lady Macbeth, at this rate we'll have to get married and have ten kids.”

Sandra caught her breath. Then the cold crept in. The cold took over the warm pain in the centre of her being, it sat heavy and solid, more real than the red warmth of him deep in her body. She shivered.

“Another goose, Lady Macbeth?” he asked, and kissed her gently, his soft black moustache tickling her nose.

They lay in the bed of pine needles, wrapped around each other. The trees breathed with them. The sharp freshness of the thin leaves bathed them. Old bark oozed sticky resin into the needles, to mix with the blood and semen. A light dust of pollen drifted down from a stamen in its nest of sharp needles and caught in the open edges of a pine cone. Sandra closed her eyes and felt a faint, faint tremor from the earth beneath her.

She lay in bed that night, with a sanitary towel pinned between her legs, and a dull aching warmth in her belly. Elvis was still gazing out the window, longing for something far away. She touched her lips, softly, and ran her hand over her neck, to get to know this new person.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE; 1960

A letter for Mrs E. McLeod had sat on the table for two days. The queen on the stamp looked down her nose at the address. So she should, Kawerau had been misspelt – it said Kawareau and the letter had travelled the length of the country before finding its way to this town. Sandra put her porridge plate down, and a little milk slopped on to the envelope. She wiped it off and turned the letter over. A letter with an address typed on the back was unusual, the address even more so - Heffernan and Sons from somewhere in London.

“Do you want jam and cheese on your sandwiches?” Amy asked.

“No thanks.” *Maybe I should open it.*

“What about marmite and cheese?”

“No thanks.” *Maybe I should take it in to mum and make sure she opens it. Maybe if I took a cuppa tea in.*

“Well, what do you want?”

“No thanks.” *Maybe I should wait until dad comes home and make sure he makes sure mum opens it. Maybe....*

“What do you mean, no thanks,” Amy said. “You’re not listening. You’re away with the fairies these days, Sandra.”

Sandra propped the letter back up against the sugar bowl. She looked down at the porridge in her plate, grey lumps floating in milk looked back up at her.

“You’ll have to make your own lunch,” Amy said. “I’m on road patrol duty, I’ve got to go.”

Sandra waved vaguely at Amy. She didn’t feel much like eating breakfast this morning. Slimy dollops stuck in the drain holes when she tipped it down the sink. A knife was poking out of the chocolate spread, its handle sticky. She wiped the thick brownness on to a piece of white bread. It smelt strong and rich. That would do for lunch.

She decided to open the letter.

It was only one page, with an address in the top right hand corner. A formal address for a lawyer’s firm. The full stops and commas were all in the right place, just like in the text book. The words were correct too: *we regret to inform you* it said, and *as the next of kin*. It seemed to be about someone called Mavis Katherine Stokes. Sandra frowned. Who was Mavis Katherine Stokes? She’d leave the letter for dad, he’d be home tonight, probably, after

the pub. She took her jam sandwich with her to school. Double geography beckoned.

“You’ll need to be able to draw in the features of one map,” said the geography teacher. “You’ll have the outline in the exam paper. But it depends what the question is – it may be about geology, for example. If you’re asked about geology, what will you be marking on your map?”

A piece of chalk hit the blackboard. There were titters around the room. Sandra turned to the noise that was growing in the back. Two boys were pushing at each other, and a chair fell over, delivering one of them to the floor.

“Not again,” said Rewi, “Why’s it always in geography?”

“You, Smith, out, and you, what’s your name, out you go,” the teacher said.

“It’s not fair, Sir, what’s his name started it,” said Smith.

The class laughed.

“I don’t care, you’re upsetting the whole class and its only six weeks to your first school certificate exam. Some people want to pass exams, you know. Out, out, both of you.”

He pointed at the door. The two slouched forward from the back of the room, and left by the other door, and the class laughed again.

“That’s my cousin, the ‘what’s his name one’,” said Rewi. “My koro will be mad at him. He’s always in trouble.”

His hand brushed her cheek as he whispered. Sandra felt the tingle warm her and moved her leg over to lean against his.

“Now, where was I?” continued the geography teacher. “If you’re asked a question about the geology of the United Kingdom, you’ll be putting in the rock types. You’ll need to memorise at least two maps, the other one is the climate map. We’ve done both of these. I want you to find them in your notes, come up and get a couple of map stamps, and practise filling them in.”

“I’ll get your stamps, Rewi,” Sandra said. “You find the notes.”

She queued at the front of the class.

“Can tell what you’ve been doing,” said a voice behind her. “You and that Maori boy, you’ve been sleeping together.”



Sandra recognised the voice. Cathy was standing behind her in the line, her eyebrows arched. Sandra looked around to see if anyone else had heard. Once she would have blushed a deep red, but not now, not now because she was part of that club, with the password.

“So what?” she said.

She leaned down to press the curve of the United Kingdom on paper, tilted her head and smiled a little half smile.

In English they were revising letter writing. Business letters, letters of complaint, informal letters. The text book was boringly exact and there seemed to be a lot of people writing complaints about shoes that didn’t fit well.

“Class,” said Miss. “While you’re working I’ll be coming round to talk to each of you about your plans for next year.”

“How do you remember where to put all the full stops?” asked Rewi.

“Look, one after E S Q – what’s a esk anyway? Dumb language, English, should just call everyone matua, doesn’t need a fullstop.”

Sandra leaned down to get her ruler out of her bag. The floor slipped sideways, and, like when she used to go round and round the washing line, then lie on the grass, she lost direction and any sense of where she was rooted. Spinning in some other world, somewhere with no solidity, with a deep pulse pulling at its edges, a heartbeat world, pulling her into its darkness. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wooden edge of her desk.

“Sandra, are you all right?”

The floor was being anchored by a pair of black shoes. Sandra looked up past the stockinged legs. It was Miss, standing next to her desk. The world settled back into its curves and lines.

“Um, yes. I think so. I didn’t have breakfast this morning.”

“Well, that’s not very sensible. Gather yourself together, I want to talk to you about next year. Rewi, we’ve had the paperwork for your scholarship, for St Paul’s – I’ll be sending it off today. It looks good. Your exam results have been excellent, and a vast improvement in English. I think you can be thanked for that, Sandra, am I right?”

“Yes, Miss,” replied Sandra.

“And what about you, Sandra? I really want you back here next year for sixth form. What do your parents think?”

“I don’t know, Miss. They want me to get a job, I think.”

“Well, get them to come and see me. You’ve got a university career ahead of you if you apply yourself.”

It all seemed too hard. Rewi would be going. She’d have to talk to her parents about visiting school. She stared at the page in front of her, with its correctly punctuated address and the letter she had read at breakfast repeated itself in her head: *We regret to inform you as the next of kin of the death of Mavis Katherine Stokes....*

“It’s Aunty Kath,” she said, “My aunty Kath’s died.”

“What?” said Rewi.

“The letter, I opened it this morning. It said someone had died. It’s my Aunty Kath, in England.”

“What do you mean, didn’t it say her name in the letter?”

“No. I mean, yes. It did, and her other name, she’s got another name and I forgot. I forgot. I haven’t seen her for years. And I forgot her name.”

“You need to go home? Be with your whanau?”

“No. Dad will need to tell mum.”

And I don’t want to be there when he does, thought Sandra.

The letter was missing when Sandra got home. She went down the hallway and the bedroom door was shut.

“Mum, mum,” she called, knocking quietly, “Mum, are you all right?”

There was silence. She opened the door gently. The room was dark, its blinds drawn. It took a moment for Sandra’s eyes to adjust. She stepped into the room. The bed was empty, its rumpled sheets showing that it had recently been occupied. Her mother was sitting at the dressing table, staring into the mirror.

“Mum, are you all right?” Sandra said.

Betty kept her eyes on her reflection. One hand came up. With her forefinger, she pushed a stray curl away from her face. Her eyes focused on the world beyond the mirror. She was smiling gently at this place, beyond the glass.

“Mum?” Sandra said.

She looked down at the top of the dressing table. Doillies, crocheted with fine cotton, by Betty. A brush and comb with hair strands captured and entwined. A hand mirror with a crack across the surface. Cotton balls with smears of red lipstick. An ashtray with a half burnt cigarette, the smoke drifting, insubstantial. And a single page with a perfectly punctuated address.

“Mum, it’s Kath, isn’t it? It’s Aunty Kath, she’s died,” Sandra said.

“You can’t borrow my red dress, not tonight,” Betty said.

“Mum, mum, stop it.”

“You think you look better in it, don’t you Kath? Well, you don’t. I do. Ian thinks I look much nicer in it than you. You always wanted him, didn’t you? Well, you can’t have him, he’s mine.”

“Mum, what’re you talking about?”

“Look, look, just have a look at this.”

Betty pulled open the drawer in front of her, hunching over, scrabbling with one hand amongst the underwear. She turned away from the mirror, narrowed her eyes and pushed a piece of paper at Sandra.

“You just have a look at this. He liked my letters. He kept them. Look, he read them, all the time. Go on, read it. Go on.”

The goose had slipped across Sandra’s grave, and was shivering up her spine. She reached out and took the piece of paper. It was worn, its edges ragged where it had been folded and unfolded many, many times. She stood with it in her hand, impaled by her mother’s eyes.

“Now, get out of here, get out.”

Betty turned and put her hands up to her ears, her elbows on the dressing table. There was a smell of singeing hair. Sandra gently took the cigarette from her mother’s fingers, put it in the ashtray and left.

She closed the bedroom door, her hand shaking. In the hallway she opened the fragment of paper.

*One day soon there will be no goodnights*

*Just settle down hold each other tight*

*I will whisper to you sweet words of love*

*I know that God will bless us up above*

*Our love will grow stronger through the years*

*We shall know laughter kindness and tears*

*But when we are old bent and grey*

*We will keep on loving each other every day*

Sandra folded it carefully. There was no punctuation, she noticed.

## CHAPTER THIRTY; 1960

She checked the calendar in her homework diary and counted the days again. Nine. She checked her underwear in the toilet again. Nothing. She poked a finger inside again. No blood. She frowned at the mirror on the bathroom cabinet. She looked pale. She felt sick. And she was shaking, all of her was shaking.

She unlocked the bathroom door, put her diary back in her bag and went into the kitchen. Amy had left bread and a jar of jam sitting on the bench, plum, Sandra's favourite. As she screwed the lid down on the red jam, her stomach heaved. She filled a glass with water and sat down at the kitchen table.

"What's for dinner?" Amy asked.

"Bread and pullet."

"Ha, ha. No what's really for dinner?"

"I don't feel well. I think I've got a tummy bug. You can cook your delicious eggs for you and mum."

"You mean the scrambled ones, or the double fried ones?"

"Shut up, you're making me feel sick."

Sandra opened her French text book. There was a translation to do before the end of the week. She could concentrate on that.

"Where's your boyfriend tonight?"

"You mean Rewi? I don't know. He didn't turn up at the library. We were going to do this translation together."

"Not a good sign, Sandra. You need someone you're going to marry to be punctual. Robert is."

"Are you going to make those eggs or not? If you are, I'm moving to my bedroom. The stink will make me really sick."

Sandra gathered her books up. She'd waited for half an hour for Rewi. He hadn't said he was coming to the library, but then he never did, it was just assumed that he'd turn up, and today he didn't. Not a good sign, as Amy said.

The cat was asleep in the middle of her bed, in a puddle of sunshine. Sandra thumped down next to him, folded her arms and stared out the window. There was a lavender bush outside her bedroom, that Betty had

planted, to remind her of home. Tiny purple flowers were breaking out along the length of its plumes. She pushed open the window, catching a branch and it spilt its thick, heady scent. A bee had been industriously working the purpleness, and was catapulted into the room. It buzzed against the glass, as if trying to drill its way through, throwing its stripy body at the barrier again and again. Sandra stared at it. And suddenly she was crying, sobbing.

For the frustration of it.

For the blind, unknowing persistence.

For no clear reason she could think of.

By the time she looked up, it had gone. She wiped her face with her hand, and got on with her translation.

She must have gone to sleep, slumped against the wall. When she woke up it was almost dark and the streetlights were already pushing away the shadows outside. Across on the traffic island she could see two people on the swings, Amy and Richard. As one swung forward, the other swung back and for several breaths they were synchronised, in – out, in – out they went. Somewhere in the middle they amalgamated to make one figure. She reached for the bedside light, pushed the switch and they were gone. There was just her own reflection staring back at her. Now you see them, now you don't.

She stretched. Her neck ached from her awkward position on the bed. As her body woke up she felt the nausea again. And the shakiness inside.

"Sandra, Sandra," Amy called. "Come outside a minute."

Maybe a walk outside would help. She stood up. One leg had gone to sleep, she shook it. She left the front door open, shivering a bit as she stepped out of the porch, pulling her school cardigan close. One of the swings was still pushing its burden back and forward, and now there were two figures sitting on the roundabout. There was Amy's white cardigan and someone else.

"Hello, Lady Macbeth," said Rewi.

Sandra's heart pounded. She tightened her folded arms protectively over it. She wanted to hit him. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to run away.

"Oh, it's you," she said.

"Sorry about today," he said.

She looked down at the scuffed grass around the edge of the roundabout. She sniffed.

“Sorry about not coming to the library,” he said.

She looked over to the swings, in and out they went, in and out.

“My koro turned up, at school,” he said. “The one from Taupo. He’s the one I grew up with.”

She looked at his face. It was shadowed, dark. She wasn’t sure she knew this one, the Rewi who grew up in Taupo.

“What did he come to school for?”

“To talk to Miss, about the scholarship,” he said. “And to make sure I’m working hard. He had a big talk to me too.”

He sat down on the roundabout, patting the section next to him. She leaned on the iron bar between them and he put his hand over hers.

“My koro said I have to get this scholarship,” he said. “He told my mum and dad that I have to stay home every night and every weekend to study. He asked me if I had a girlfriend, too.”

Sandra caught her breath. That song went through her head: *You’ve got to be taught, before its too late..... To hate all the people that your relatives hate.* A wave of nausea radiated out from her belly.

“What did you say?”

“I told him about you, of course,” he said.

Of course. She hadn’t told her parents about Rewi.

“What did he say?”

“He just said that I had to get this scholarship,” he said. “So, Lady Macbeth, we’ll have to just do our homework together until after School C.”

“You’ll come to the library tomorrow?”

“Course,” he said. “Got to do that translation, for French.”

He kicked the concrete pad of the roundabout. They drifted gently round in a circle, light, floating.

“Who’s that fulla with your little sister?”

“That’s Richard. He lives over the road. He’s not the full quid.”

“He’s what?”

“He’s not the full quid. You know, one sandwich short of a picnic. Don’t you know what that means?”

“Na. I’d say he’s porangi.”

“Anyway. His dad doesn’t look after him, and his mum’s dead. Amy looks after him quite a lot.”

“Poor fulla,” said Rewi. “He needs a whanau, everyone needs a whanau.”

Richard jumped off the swing and headed across the traffic island to home. His shadow slipped past the letterbox and the dogs started to bark.

“Holy! What’s that racket?” said Rewi.

A white cardigan hovered, materialising into Amy.

“That’s the pig dogs. They nearly eat him every time he goes home,” she said and disappeared again towards her unlit house.

Rewi kicked at the concrete base. Round they went again, into the dark. On the shoulder of the mountain sat a thin moon, it was either the last of the old moon, or it was the beginning of the next. It was hard to tell if the tiny sliver of a moon was held in the arms of the old, or if the new was holding the old.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE 1960

“Can you answer the door?” Sandra said.

“It’s probably only Robert,” Amy said, “He’s early, it’s only quarter past eight.”

She scraped the last of the porridge from her plate, put it on the bench and went out of the kitchen to the back door.

Sandra poked the bottom of the pot. The porridge had stuck, it was slightly burnt. At least she’d eaten some today. Murmurs came from the back doorstep. It can’t have been Robert, Amy would have just let him in. The back door slammed, shaking the kitchen window. The acrid smell of burnt milk jarred Sandra’s nose and her mouth filled with saliva. The porridge in her belly shook itself upward. She pulled her hair back and bent over the sink as she vomited.

“Oh, dear, you’re not well,” Mrs Simperingham said.

Her voice floated in from the kitchen door, as Sandra heaved up a second installment of her breakfast. Leaning on the kitchen bench so that she wouldn’t fall over, she scooped some water into her mouth and rinsed out the sourness. Mrs Simperingham put a hand on Sandra’s back. Sandra blinked back tears and took a shaky breath.

“What’s wrong, dear?”

“She’s got a bad tummy bug,” Amy said. “She’s had it for two weeks and she can’t eat much without being sick. She gets real sick when she eats porridge.”

“You’re trembling, poor little love,” Mrs Simperingham said. “Come and sit down.”

Sandra was crying, tears trickled down her face, without any effort on her part. The vomiting had been getting worse. It left her cold, cold and shivering. It was hard to concentrate at school when she was hungry and feeling sick at the same time and she was tired to her very core. She’d almost fallen asleep in French yesterday.

“How long has this been going on, Sandra?” asked Mrs Simperingham.

Sandra sniffed, the sour smell of recycled porridge in her nose. Mrs Simperingham handed her a handkerchief, a big man-sized handkerchief.

“Sandra. How long?”

“About two weeks.”

“What else is happening?”

Sandra worried the handkerchief into a ball. There was a matching hard lump in her throat and she was cold. What was happening was that she was heavy with fear, and worry, so heavy that she wished she could just sink through the floor. A tear tickled the end of her nose. She dabbed at it. She’d checked the calendar last night. Fifteen days. Today would be the sixteenth day, long days, days full of trying not to think about it.

“Well, I think I’m getting my, you know. I’m sure I am. My breasts are sore.”

“How late is it?”

“Two weeks.”

“Sandra, look at me. Come on, look up. You know, don’t you.”

Sandra nodded. Yes, she knew. She stared at Mrs Simperingham, willing her not to say it. If it wasn’t said, it may not be true. She stopped breathing with the effort of getting Mrs Simperingham not to say it.

“I know about pregnancy and it sounds to me as if you are. Can your mum take you to the doctors? He can do a test to confirm it.”

Sandra slumped in the chair. She put her head down and shook her head, and kept shaking it. Another tear and another tear and another crawled down to gather on her chin. She’d have to tell her mother.

“Betty’s not been out much lately. She’s taking your Auntie Kath’s death quite hard, isn’t she?”

“Mum’s gone to live in her bedroom,” Amy said. “We’ve been doing the washing and making the dinners, except Sandra’s been sick so we have to have my special eggs a lot.”

Sandra took a shuddery breath and looked up.

“You and Rewi will just have to get married,” Amy continued. “When you and him are sixteen, next year. Like me and Robert are, when we’re sixteen.”

“It’s that Maori boy, is it Sandra?” Mrs Simperingham said. “Oh dear. Look, I’ll get an appointment with the doctor for you. You promise me you’ll tell your mother today. Then if she isn’t up to taking you, I will. Your dad should be home tonight, he’s not working is he?”

“Dad goes to the pub after work,” Amy said. “He doesn’t come home for dinner any more. I don’t think he likes my special eggs.”

“Well,” Mrs Simperingham shook her head. “I’m picking Pat up at four, so I’ll get your dad to come straight home. Now, promise me you’ll tell both of them, won’t you Sandra?”

Sandra nodded.

“Right, that’s settled then,” said Mrs Simperingham. “Now, you two get yourselves off to school. Oh, and Amy, what I came for was to tell you that Father Searle’s going to visit with Mr Watene. He said something about coming round to do special prayers for you.”

After Mrs Simperingham had gone, Amy and Sandra sat at the kitchen table in silence, staring out the window. The mountain had on its morning sunshine, the long, sleek slopes proud against a blue sky. The world still existed out there. The sun finally caught the small mound at the side of the big solidity.

“Look,” Amy said. “The mountain’s got a baby, like you. I’m going to be an aunty. Do you think you’re going to have a girl or a boy? I want a little niece. A nice little niece.”

Probably the day had no more hours in it than any other. Probably the sun shone all day. Probably Sandra managed to make sense when she talked. She didn’t remember. She was only partly present to that sixteenth day of her late period. The one that Mrs Simperingham called pregnancy. Most of her was worrying at what to do. Would she make a cup of tea and take it in to mum? Would she get dad to get mum out of the bedroom and sit them both down in the lounge? Would she say congratulations, you’re going to be grandparents? Would she say your grandchild’s got a touch of the tar-brush?

The words from the Public Health Nurse floated between her and the map of the United Kingdom, *shame, pregnant and not married*, they said. Rewi asked her if she was all right, he believed her when she said she’d sat up late studying. The first exam was in two weeks, he’d sat up late too. They agreed not to study together after school.

Amy turned the mince off when she heard Ian’s bike come up the side of the house. It was her idea to make shepherd’s pie, it would help, she said. She stood close to Sandra, leaning slightly against her sister’s body. As they

waited, Sandra could hear the murmur of voices down the hallway. Her heartbeat counted the interminable moments, they stretched longer and longer. She started when Ian came into the kitchen, with Betty trailing behind him. Betty was dishevelled, her hair was unbrushed and it was as if she was sleepwalking. She sat on a kitchen chair, perching on the edge.

“Is this about your exams, Sandra?” asked Ian. “Pat told me that the teacher’s been singing your praises, girl.”

He sat down opposite his wife.

“I’m pregnant.”

Just like that. The words were out. They were said. They could never be taken back. They were out in the world, heavy words, sitting on the table. Betty looked over Sandra’s left shoulder as if she was talking to someone else.

“Can you get the spuds on, Sandra? I’m just going to lie down for a bit.”

“Sit down, Betty, for Chrissake,” Ian said.

Sandra opened and shut her mouth. Maybe she hadn’t said *I’m pregnant*. Maybe she just thought she had. Maybe she wouldn’t need to. Maybe it was a mistake. A sour taste came up to tell her she’d have to try again.

“Did you hear me? Mum? I said I’m pregnant.”

Ian’s fist came down on the table.

”What do you mean, you’re bloody pregnant,” he shouted.

The sugar bowl rattled. Sandra jumped and Amy’s arm came round her middle. They leaned on each other. A small island stranded on the cold, green lino of the kitchen floor.

“I heard you the first time, Sandra. I don’t know what you want me to do about it. You made your bed, now you have to lie in it. Now I’m going to have a little rest.”

Betty walked out of the kitchen.

“Jesus bloody Christ,” swore Ian. “This bloody family. You’d better see to your mother, Sandra.”

Ian stormed out of the kitchen and slammed the back door. His bike flashed past the window.

Sandra was looking down a long, long tunnel. At the end of the tunnel she could see a young woman sitting at a kitchen table. The young woman had her head in her hands. She was curling herself inwards, like a hedgehog protecting

its underbelly. She was curling herself inward over a handful of cells that were making her feel sick, and over a deep, deep hurt. She could hear a heartbeat, lubdub, lubdub. It got louder, until it filled the world and rocked her hedgehog body in its sound. No, it was her, Sandra, she was rocking herself, her curled up self on the hard kitchen chair, with the cold, green lino at her feet. The heartbeat subsided, burying itself again in her body.

“I don’t know what to do,” she told the sugar bowl.

And she put her head down in her arms and cried from her soft underbelly. A small hand reached in, under the sheltering arc she’d made for herself, and pulled. Amy. She insisted they try again, that Mum would be all right, she really would.

They stood in the doorway of the bedroom.

“Mum? Mum? I don’t know what to do, mum,” Sandra said.

Betty squinted at her through the smoke of her cigarette.

“Do?” she said. “I’ll tell you what to do. You get a douche, from the chemist. You know the ones? The orange ones with a long nozzle, it’s got to be a long nozzle. And you fill it up, you fill up the douche bag.”

She was talking very fast, in a monotone.

“And you get a knitting needle, not a big one, about a size eight, one you’d use for double knitting wool. And you wrap the knitting needle with a clean bit of old sheet. It has to be a clean sheet, mind. And you get your sister to help you push the knitting needle up inside. Not just a bit inside, right up, right up inside. And you push hard on the douche bag. Then it’ll all come out, the whole lot. With lots of blood. And you’ll have to take the day off work.”

She was sitting very still, her face was stone, her eyes were glazed. Her cigarette had burned down to the filter. She hadn’t noticed.

“Except that sometimes it won’t work. Sometimes nothing comes out. Sometimes you stay pregnant and the baby comes out crippled, because you stuck a knitting needle into it. And the knitting needle makes the baby have a crooked foot and then you have to look after a cripple all your life. And people know and they hate you because of a knitting needle.”

Sandra reached out for Amy, softly pulling in the rigid little body of her sister. Cradling her.

“What’s the matter now?” Betty snapped. “Oh, it’s you two. Sandra, have you put the spuds on yet? The spuds need to go on. For dinner.”

They stood in the doorway, holding each other, holding soft underbelly to soft underbelly, staring at their mother. Then Amy reached up and wiped Sandra’s face with her sleeve. With her woollen sleeve, knitted on number eight needles.

“Come on,” she said. “Come on Sandra.”

It was a bad night. In the kitchen, the mince sat congealing in the pan. The only one to eat dinner that night was the cat, sitting up on the stove and licking at the half cooked meat. Sandra cried, wiping her nose on the sheets she’d washed just the day before. Amy curled her body up next to her sister on the bed, folding into herself, silent. And the dark swallowed Elvis and crept into the room as if it would never leave.

At nine o’clock the pig dogs started barking, and then one of them kept vigilance, barking an intermittent warning into the night. At eleven o’clock the sisters stared into the dark.

“Sandra,” whispered Amy.

“What.”

“Sandra, by your wardrobe, look.”

“Don’t start that again”

“No, look. She’s smiling. The old lady, she’s not angry any more.”

“Go to sleep, Amy. I’ll look after you.”

When Robert knocked on the back door in the morning, he woke them up. Amy uncurled herself from the foot of Sandra’s bed, and went to open the door. Sandra tried to blink open her swollen eyes. She must have a cold or something, she had a headache and didn’t feel well. Then she remembered. She was pregnant. Her breath caught. She was pregnant and not married. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. She would try and eat some breakfast. That was the next thing to do.

Robert and Amy were sitting eating weetbix when she went into the kitchen. Their whispering stopped. In the small silence Robert held a spoon half way to his mouth. His face was serious.

“Do you want to have a baby, Sandra?” he asked.

Sandra stared at him.

“It’s just that, me and Amy want to have babies, when we’re sixteen. And you’re nearly sixteen, so do you want to have this baby?”

“What if I don’t?”

“You have to want the baby, Sandra,” Amy said, “You just have to.”

The eyes that looked up at Sandra from Amy’s eleven year old face were the eyes of Mary, full of a millennia of sadness.

Sandra opened the weetbix packet. The next thing to do was to eat breakfast. Breakfast. That would take some effort. She wasn’t really listening when Amy spoke.

“Me and Robert and Colin are going for a long bike ride today,” she said.

“I’m just going to get dressed, Robert, I’ll meet you at your place.”

“Where are you going?” Sandra asked.

“Oh, just somewhere,” Amy said, and left the room.

“We’re going up to the Falls,” Robert said. “We’ve got to do something there.”

Sandra didn’t ask what. She poured milk on her weetbix and carried the bowl to the table, taking care not to spill. She’d put in too much, and the weetbix floated. Like the little thing inside me, she thought, it’s floating around inside me, a little bit me and a little bit Rewi. Floating, she was floating herself, not enough sleep and crying did that. She didn’t notice when Robert left.

It took two bowls of weetbix to get some to stay. But it did stay. There was the washing to hang out, and the bathroom needed cleaning. Maybe she should take some breakfast in to Betty. Maybe if she did all of those things, they’d still love her, her mum and dad.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO; 1975

Bea pulls the gate closed on the chicken coop. The hens are squabbling over last night's potato peelings. You pause with the wet sheet half over the washing line, straightening it, trying to find the edge. These are the sheets from Betty's bed, the ones she died in. They're clean now, and smell of washing powder. She's been washed away, to a coffin in a funeral parlour in the next town. Tidied away, neatly, for now. You push a peg down on one corner of the sheet.

"Have you got something suitable to wear, Sandra?"

"Do you mean for the funeral? Well, I've got that red trouser suit. You know, the one I had on when I arrived. And a dress, I've got a dress."

"What colour is it, love?" asks Bea.

The second peg jumps out of your hand. It was the 'love' that did it. You can't see where it's gone, that other peg. The sheet and the washing line are blurry, and your throat aches. You hold on to the wire, it will support you. As you let out a shuddery breath, there's a hand on the middle of your back.

"Come on, Sandra," Bea says. "Leave the washing. We'll do that later. Come on, love, come inside. I'll put the kettle on."

It's gone again. That crack. It's closed up again. That second 'love', no it will not get in. You straighten up and reach for another peg.

"I'm all right," you say. "I'll finish this."

By the time you get back into the kitchen, the kettle's boiling. You pull your cigarettes out of your pocket. The packet's empty.

"Oh, I'm out of ciggies," you say.

"Do you want to pop round to the dairy, Sandra?" Bea says. "I'll get you to get some more bread anyway, for lunch."

The streets are quiet. There's no-one at the playground, on the broken swings, or the broken roundabout that leans crookedly on its concrete base. You hurry past. How many days have you been here? It must be several hundred, except that you arrived on Saturday, and it's only Monday. Monday. On a Monday you used to walk this way, to go to school. At the corner here, on a hot day, you would take off your roman sandals and put them in your bag. Your mother never approved of bare feet; you never approved of roman



sandals. That house didn't used to have a lawn, the front yard always had kumara growing. You get a glimpse of a small body, crouching on the pavement, looking for the big green caterpillars that lived in the heart shaped leaves, and the wind coming from the mountain lifting her white blonde hair. Then she's gone, flown from the greedy caterpillars, carried on the wind. You walk faster, try to pay attention, stepping over the cracks so that you won't let these memories in.

At the end of the street with the dairy on the corner, trees have been planted along the grass verge. They're straggly, with few leaves. One of them has been snapped off at the base, the remaining thin trunk a sharp stake. A bike leans drunkenly in the bike rack outside the dairy. It's rusty. You wonder how long it's been there and whom it used to belong to. You walk into the dairy with your heart pounding. Maybe someone will recognise you and then what will you say?

The bread is bought, the cigarettes are bought, from a stranger who asks if you're visiting. You say you are, and that's all. You light a cigarette as soon as you're out the door.

You walk very fast, to beat those glimpses, that sneak in from the past, the ones you've run from for so many years. And you turn the corner back into that little dead end street with its broken playground and its ghosts. There's someone on the roundabout, a young woman in a school uniform. She's sitting on the high part of the metal drum, facing the road, waiting. It may be the way she's sitting, with her feet pulled up underneath her, hugging her knees. Or it may be the way she holds her head, on the side, while she rocks back and forth. You think you might know this girl, this waiting girl. Then it's gone and she's a stranger on the playground again.

You wipe your feet on the doormat. The door is opened before you can knock.

You want to stay just where you are. On the doorstep. You don't want to step into this past. On the sofa is an elderly man, his white hair carefully combed over his balding head, his hat on his knee and next to him is a walking stick. You stare at him. He's nodding. For a long moment you stand at the doorway, not going in, not leaving, you stand at the doorway and you know if you step in, there will be no turning back.

He's struggling to stand up, holding on to the arm of the sofa, reaching for his walking stick. Bea pulls you inside and there's no decision left to make. He's standing up now, leaning on his stick and he reaches out one hand, one unsteady hand for you. You can't help it. You stumble in, grasp the brown, gnarled fingers and the two of you lean on the walking stick. His old man eyes are watering as his mouth struggles with the words.

"My daughter," he says. "You've been gone too long."

Someone else is crying, someone else is bowing down to it, the grief, the pain. You can see that person. Someone standing on a swirling carpet, holding an old man's hand, leaning with him on his stick. Someone. You watch her from a corner of your mind, where you sit with your feet pulled up underneath you, hugging your knees, rocking back and forth. And you wonder who she is. And what happened to her that she's so mortally wounded. You must help her, bring her back, before she's lost.

"Sandra."

It's Bea's voice that does it. Her voice and that hand in your back. You step back, just one step. The carpet stops swirling. You watch as Bea helps Rewi's grandfather sit down. You calm.

And you know that it has started when you see the girl standing at the door, the one who was sitting on the roundabout, the one who's now staring at you with eyes that are now brown, eyes that were once neither blue nor brown, eyes that had invited the possibility of you. And you had not been able to say yes.

Your eyes are drawn to her widow's peak, that matches your own, where the hair makes a point in the forehead, forever denoting mourning.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE; 1960

On the day before the eruption of Tarawera mountain, on June 10 1886, a war canoe was seen on the lake. Not from this world, this phantom canoe was said to predict this world's end. An old woman, returning from a tangi, pointed at the canoe, and muttered. But the ghost warriors kept pulling their oars through the cold, still water. And the next day, the earth broke open and the world did come to an end.

The water from this lake stopped being calm, with black swans, and slowly gathered momentum to become a deeper, urgent, moving river. Its journey was interrupted, and the river, being young and unsure of itself, was lost. It remembered its volcanic beginnings, and diminished, some of its water disappearing into the rough, tumbled rocks of older eruptions. Now you see it, now you don't. Deep fissures of the earth carried the water, into dark places, fathomless, secret places that held and caressed, that ensnared. When it escaped, this hidden water, it plumed out in fierce joy, falling, falling down the steep escarpment, bruising itself on the hardened lava, and pausing, misting the air, hanging suspended then falling, falling. And the river remembered itself, flowed again.

This was where they went, Amy, Colin and Robert on that day. They rode their bikes along the old forestry road, and left them at the base of the hill, where the falls escape from the hold of rocks. They climbed up the hill, to the disappearing river.

And Sandra did not stop them.

It was late afternoon when Ian came home. Sandra heard him take off his boots and sit down at the kitchen table. She kept her attention on the pot she was scrubbing. She was tired, tired in a way that she didn't ever remember being tired. She filled the pot with water, to rinse out the egg that had stuck, and as she tipped it, the dirty water spilt on the bench and splashed on the floor. She stood looking at it, not moving.

"Here, lass," Ian said. "Sit yourself down, let me."

He put his hands on her shoulders, and Sandra leaned into her father, leaned herself and all of her younger selves into his strength and his care.

"There, lass, there, there. We'll work it out," he said.

The knock on the front door startled them both. It was Ian who went and answered it, with Sandra trailing behind him. Standing on the doorstep was a young policeman, with his hat in his hand. And next to him was Robert. His clothes were muddy, and one knee was badly scraped. He was clenching and unclenching his fists, and his breath was ragged.

“Mr McLean?” asked the policeman. “Constable Collins, may I come in?”

Ian stood to one side and the policeman came in, one hand guiding Robert. They sat side by side on the sofa, Robert with his head down and one knee jerking up and down.

“Is Mrs McLean in?” asked Constable Collins.

“Is she Sandra?”

She nodded.

“I’ll go and get her, Constable,” he said.

Sandra stood holding the front door, as if to close it. The late afternoon sun slanted on to the mill felt covering on the floor. Sandra stood and stared at the top of Robert’s head. Dust motes caught in the sunlight between them hung suspended, bright, as if they’d been there forever, then they were gone. The policeman cleared his throat.

Ian brought Betty into the lounge. She was in a nighty and a housecoat, with her slippers on the wrong feet.

“My wife’s not very well, Constable,” Ian said.

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir,” said the policeman. “And I’m sorry to be here with what may be bad news.”

Betty was clutching her cigarettes. She pulled one out and then seemed unsure what to do with it. Ian reached into his own pocket and lit it for her. She took a big lungful of smoke.

“This young man here turned up at the police station this afternoon. He told us that he, your daughter and another boy, called Colin, had gone up to the Tarawera Falls this morning, on their bikes. He told us that Colin and, Amy, isn’t it, were walking on the rocks at the top falls, the ones where the river disappears underground, and that one of them, Colin, slipped. Amy tried to catch him. Robert alleged that they both disappeared, behind the falls. He said he tried to find them, and that he almost fell in himself, but they were gone.”

There was silence. Betty breathed out her lung full of smoke. Out of the open front door, Sandra could see Richard, swinging back and forth. The empty swing next to him was going back and forth with him. It was as if she'd already known this visit was going to happen and these words were going to be laid out, still, immovable words that settled into her cold core.

"They drowned," she said.

Robert looked up. His eyes were looking somewhere far away.

"She took them," he said.

The silence returned. Somewhere in the room a low moan started, a moan that carried so much hurt that it faltered, and stopped, and sank into the thick molasses of shock. The stillness was broken by Ian.

"You can't just sit there and tell me Amy's drowned," he said. "We got to find her, a search party, that's what we need, get everyone on a search party."

"Sir," said the policeman. "We've got the police from Whakatane on their way. They're getting volunteers. We've already got a search party started."

"I'll come," Ian said, standing up.

"With all due respect, sir," said the Sergeant, "You're needed here, with your family. We'll keep you informed. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go and tell Colin's parents, and get this young man home."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR; 1960

There were no bodies, no inert arms and legs to be lovingly straightened, no hair to be brushed back from empty faces, no cold, cold lips to kiss goodbye. The only thing the police brought back to the house was one shoe, with a built up sole, size two. They said they'd found it at the foot of the Falls.

Sandra placed the shoe on Amy's unmade bed. She washed Amy's clothes, trying to remember how the stain on Amy's white cardigan got there. She searched for the lost sock so that the pairs could be neatly lined up in Amy's drawer. Amy would need clean socks. Then, when all of Amy's clothes were clean, waiting for her, she slept, most of the night and some of the day. When she woke up she listened for Amy's voice, for her clumping walk in the built up shoe, size two. When she came out into the kitchen, she looked for the halo of Amy's white blonde hair in the morning sunlight. She put a bowl out, for weetbix, crunched up so the sugar soaked in.

For two weeks after the police visit, no-one came to the house. After one week Ian gave up his trips up Fenton Mill Road, to search the disappearing river for his daughter. He sat in the lounge with the curtains drawn, and drank whiskey, as a sort of wake for his lost girl and he didn't even get drunk.

Sandra watched hands pick up casseroles that appeared on the doorstep. She watched feet walk up the hallway and one hand push food into her mother's mouth. She supposed they were her hands and her feet.

The house became full of closed doors, Sandra closed the door to Amy's room, Betty closed the door to her bedroom, and everyone closed and sealed the doors to themselves. There was silence, a holding of breath, a waiting: for Amy to come home.

Eventually there was a knock on the door. Sandra let Pat into the house. He asked if they'd like to be part of a memorial service, at the Catholic church, for Colin and Amy. He said that Father Searle had offered to do a service, a requiem mass in memory of the two children. For some completion. Ian said he would see. Sandra said she would come. She said she wasn't sure about Betty.

On the Saturday morning Sandra dressed. She didn't have anything black to wear, so she wore her school uniform. It, at least, was navy blue. She didn't

bother looking in the mirror to do her hair, just pulled it back into a pony tail. She went alone to the Simperingham house.

Before they climbed into the car, Bea took her hand. Her own was shaking. Sandra looked down at the hands, gripped hard, as if to stop both of them being swept away.

“You were as much a mother to little Amy as Betty was, you know Sandra,” she said. “It’s a terrible loss, for both of us.”

Sandra’s tongue was stuck. She’d spoken so little this last week that it seemed to have forgotten words. She nodded.

“They’re both with God, now.” Bea continued. “And Sandra, remember our conversation, about you maybe being pregnant?”

Sandra took a gulp of air, and it shuddered out. She didn’t want to think about it. Maybe then it would just go away.

“Are you?” Bea asked.

“I suppose so,” Sandra said. “I just haven’t been thinking about it.”

“Let me help you, Sandra, get that doctor’s appointment,” Bea said.

Sandra nodded. The rest of the Simperingham family came out, one black clad blur. They squeezed into the car, Sandra jammed between Mr and Mrs Simperingham in the front seat.

“How’s your dad?” asked Pat.

“He’s good thank you,” Sandra said.

“No, I mean how is he?”

“Oh. He’s drinking whiskey.”

“Lots?”

“Yes.”

“We need to get him back to work. I’ll come over later. I’m going back tomorrow, we both need to get back to work.”

“What about your mum?” asked Bea.

“She’s not doing anything. She lives in her bedroom,” Sandra said.

“Has she seen the doctor?”

“No.”

“That’s two appointments.”

They passed the swimming pool, alive with children’s bodies as they jumped and dived, the water splashing up into the sunlight. Sandra sat

constrained by the two warm bodies each side of her, staring at the suspended water, feeling the affinity of the cold, cold water with her own frozen being.

Father Searle was waiting for them at the door of the church. Sandra heard him murmur something to each of the Simperingham family as they filed inside. She pulled herself forward, one step, two steps, taking care not to stand on the cracks in the concrete. She felt the hand on her shoulder and looked up into his face. There was a tear on Father Searle's cheek. She stared at it. It was a foreign water that she could not comprehend.

Sandra's body sat in the front pew, and her self floated into some other place. Jesus didn't seem to care, with his heart that glowed, showing no shadow. She tried to catch his eyes, the eyes that invited and accused. If only she'd stopped them going, when Robert told her they were going to the Falls, if only she'd said no.

Father Searle was a blackness standing at the altar, with his back to her. He could not accuse. Not from where he was. The little statue of Mary stood looking at the ceiling, ringed with candles that spluttered. One went out, submerged in its own wax. Sandra wondered if Mary had met Amy yet, and if she cared that Amy didn't have her special shoe. She closed her eyes. *Send her back*, she pleaded, *I'm sorry, please send her back*. She hurt, all of her hurt.

Words floated into her body, and they caught, snagged her attention. Amy. Mary. Father Searle was talking about her sister. She listened. He was talking about Amy's special love of Mary, mother of God, and how Mary was a mother who had known loss, and that loss was bigger than the world, bigger than the human soul could hold and that it needed to be given to God.

Sandra stood up. She had to get away from this mother who had not stopped Amy, who had not helped her. She stumbled for the aisle. It was a long way to the open door, and each side of the red carpet were faces, faces of people who knew it was her fault. *You should have stopped her*, they said.

She took a deep breath at the door, and sat down on the steps, on the cracks in the concrete and stared at the bare ground in front of her.

"Sandra," he said.

Nothing else, just her name.

"Sandra."



He sat down beside her, the warmth of his body seeping into her. He put an arm around her shoulders. A sigh was pulled from deep inside her.

“Your little sister, eh. Stink,” he said.

She leaned on Rewi and a tear, foreign water, crept itself on to her cheek. He wrapped his arms around her and rocked, rocked to the crooning of Father Searle’s Latin wafting out from the church.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE; 1960

Exams started on Monday - Geography. Tuesday was General Science. Then there were two exams on Wednesday - French and Maths. English was on Friday morning. The sixth exam fell off the schedule. They were done.

On Friday afternoon Sandra came home and went to bed and slept for several hours. She drifted half awake in the dusk. Her window was open, the evening air was cold and with it came the soft smell of lilac. There was a memory with that lilac scent, from a long, long time ago, a summer evening memory from somewhere that was soft and crooned of delicate, tiny cups, and plates of leaves set out for dolls, sitting in a row. Except that there was one muddy doll, a rag doll, with china hands and one crooked and bent china foot; with a thin intent china face, haloed by wispy blond hair, flying away hair. A doll with a cracked cheek that stared ahead through one cracked blue china eye. That stared. Accusing.

The dogs across the road barked.

"Amy," called a voice. "Amy, will you marry me Amy?"

Sandra pulled herself up off the bed, slowly, heavily, pulling her body up through the thick air.

"Amy, I love you Amy," came in through the window.

She lifted the metal stay and pushed the window wider.

"Go away," she yelled, "go away."

The dogs barked again, a cacophony of barks, vicious noise that jarred.

"She drowned," whispered Sandra in the noise, "She drowned."

The air thickened around the wardrobe.

The toilet flushed. Sandra peaked out of her bedroom door and Ian came out of the bathroom.

"Let's get some dinner ready, lass," he said. "I'm starting nightshift tonight, going back to work."

He disappeared back into the bedroom. Sandra went down the hallway to the bathroom and splashed water over her face. She stared at the person in the mirror. Who's this person, she thought, this one who's pregnant, pregnant and not married. This stranger with some small alien sitting inside her, changing her, using her body to make a new one. She shuddered. There used to be a

game called let's pretend. Let's pretend it isn't happening. This stranger couldn't play that game.

"Exams all done," Ian said as he came into the kitchen. "Are you happy about that, lass?"

Sandra nodded. She couldn't remember anything about any of them, they were a blur of words that ran into each other and bled onto the page. The sensible had seemed nothing but a vague beckoning as her pen made marks and the clock ticked.

"We'll get through this business, Sandra. We'll manage. We'll all miss her, but we'll manage."

"Mum's not managing."

"Oh, don't you worry about your mum. She'll be all right."

"Mrs Simperingham thinks she should see the doctor."

"What for? What's a doctor going to do? Tell her she's sad about her sister, and her daughter? She'll get over it. It'll just take time."

The butter was melting in the frying pan. The yellow knob got smaller as she pushed at it. It caught and started to smoke. Ian reached for the pan and took it off the element.

"Careful," he said, "You'll have us all going up in smoke. Now, what about you, lass? Now you've done your exams it may be time to look for a job. What about talking to Reg, down at the Four Square? That's good, clean work."

Sandra broke four eggs into a bowl. The yellow yolks stared up at her. She stabbed the slimy viscosity, again and again and the incipient life broke and spread.

"Dad, before, before, you know, before Amy....."

She stared at the yellow mess of eggs in the bowl. It was too late for knitting needles. It was too late to pretend this wasn't happening.

"Dad, remember, I told you. I told you and mum. I'm pregnant."

"Here, look, lets pop those eggs in the pan, you get some plates out."

"Dad, did you hear me?"

Sandra felt her father, like a brick wall beside her. He stirred the eggs in the pan, divided the rubbery mess into two parts on the blank, white plates. He

carefully picked up the two plates and, with eyes fixed on keeping them steady, placed one each side of the kitchen table.

“Dad? I’m having a baby.”

“Yes,” he said, “There’s that too. Come and have something to eat, lass, come on, you need to keep your strength up.”

Sandra sat opposite him and watched him eat the egg. He gestured to her to do the same. She moved her hand automatically from plate to mouth. The noise of the fork scraping on the plate tore at her.

“How old are you, Sandra?”

“I’m fifteen. I’ll be sixteen in February.”

“Good. You can get married then. In February, when you’re sixteen.”

A picture of Rewi’s flat nose, his brown eyes, his soft, large mouth, his Maoriness hovered. *You’ve got to be taught, before it’s too late... A bit of the tarbrush.* Sandra held her breath.

“He will marry you, won’t he? The father? He will if I have anything to do with it anyway. Who is he, Sandra.”

“His name’s Rewi. Rewi Stanton.”

“Rewi. Rewi. What sort of name is that.”

“He’s Maori, dad.”

Ian stood up. His face twisted, his hand came up, and he leaned forward with a promise of force that had all the power of anguish in it. Sandra stared, transfixed as it froze in the matrix of tense muscles and pain. The matrix shifted. The kitchen filled with the sound of his long, slow sigh. Despair, a soft, slow slipping away, like breath from a collapsing lilo, it seeped out to sit heavy in the space between them. Ian slumped back on the chair.

“This isn’t what we came for. Not for you to get off with some native. Not for your sister to...to.... Not for your mother to go dolally. This isn’t what we did it for, lass. It just isn’t.”

It pulled her in, the despair of it. Her mother first, now her father. They sat, the two of them, staring at empty white plates.

There was a knock on the front door. It broke the trance.

“I’ll get it,” Sandra said.

It was Bea Simperingham. She followed Sandra back into the kitchen. She said it was good that Ian and Pat were both going back to work. She said it was good that exams were over. She hesitated over what to say next.

“I’ve told him, Mrs Simperingham,” Sandra said. “He knows. He knows it’s Rewi’s baby.”

“Well, then,” Bea said. “What do you want to do, Ian?”

Ian looked blankly at her.

“What do you want to do about the baby?”

“I don’t know. I suppose she needs to get to a doctor. I don’t know if Betty can take her.”

“I told Sandra I’d go with her. And while I’m at it, I’ll take Betty.”

Rewi. It’s Rewi’s baby. The words echoed inside Sandra. Rewi’s baby, not just an alien taking over her body, but Rewi’s baby. They were soft words, words that remembered the soft pine needles, and his soft, black moustache.

“That boy, what’s his name. He’ll marry her. She’s almost sixteen. He can marry her.”

“I know the family, Ian. They’re Catholic, some of the family come to our church.”

“Oh, bloody norah. They’re bloody left footers as well.”

“Well, yes. They’re Catholic like we are, our family.”

There was an awkward silence. Ian sighed.

“All right then,” he said. “She’s pregnant to a Hori left footer. What the hell did you get yourself into here, girl?”

“Dad, dad,” Sandra pleaded. “He’s really clever, and he’s kind and he’s, well, he’s, well, I love him.”

Ian pushed his chair back so hard it rocked and crashed back on to the floor.

“What’s that got to do with it? Just what did you think you were doing, you stupid girl.”

“Now, now, Ian,” Bea said. “You’re not helping. I suggest we get a meeting together with the family. We can get Father Searle to help, and meet with the Stanton family. They’re good people, Ian.”

“Make good bloody in-laws will they?” he said.

“Will you come, dad,” pleaded Sandra. “Please.”

It was back again. The slow death of despair. Sandra felt it, and she felt it pull Ian back into his chair. He nodded.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX; 1960

Sandra was counting the cracks in the floorboards as Rewi and his family came into the hall. From the edge of her vision to the beginning of the pews facing her, there were twenty-nine cracks separating the rimu boards. With her eyes down at floor level, she could see shoes walking in. Three pairs of black men's shoes, newly polished; two pairs of women's shoes, with stockinged feet. Her heart raced as she recognised Rewi's worn school shoes, with the backs trodden down.

She risked flicking her gaze up, underneath her lowered eyebrows. With the first flick she saw Rewi, sitting with three older men. With the second flick she worked out that one of the men seemed to be his father, he looked about the same age as Ian. The other two were older, much older. One of them had a walking stick. She assumed they were his grandfathers. *Pregnant. Not married*, floated in the air between them.

Sandra willed Rewi to look at her, but his head was down, his eyes on his hands folded in front of him. Next to the men were two women. One looked so like Rewi that she knew it must be his mother. She stared past the neon of those words, flashing in the space. *Pregnant. Not married*. They flashed bright red, and Sandra felt her face flaming to match. She rubbed her hot cheek. *Not married yet*.

They were all dressed as if they'd come to church, in one way they had since they were in the Catholic church, which was now a hall with the pictures of Jesus and his Mother hidden behind a heavy curtain. Behind the curtain was the little Mary, with the broken finger, the one whose feet were singed by candles.

Her father was fidgeting next to her. Sandra inched away, towards the solid black clad Bea on her other side. Father Searle stood up and cleared his throat.

"Let us pray. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

As he said Amen, there was a concert of hands, up, down, across they went. Sandra lifted her hand and let it drop again. Ian crossed his arms tighter.

"As we meet here today, may Blessed Mary, ever virgin, pray for us and all sinners."

Sandra pulled her shoulders up to her ears. She could feel the disapproval of the little Mary behind the curtain, ever virgin.

“As we meet, we pray especially for the souls of the recently departed, our beloved children Colin and Amy. May they rest in peace.”

Ian started up from his seat, Bea reached across and put a calming hand on his arm. Sandra’s throat hurt.

“We’re most grateful, Lord, that the people have gathered here, in your holy church, to discuss important issues that sit heavy on their hearts and minds. May the grace of our Lady help us today to plan for the future.”

Sandra was sinking, in the Amens that finished the prayer, in the tears that had flooded her. The cracks in the floor blurred as if her heavy, heavy un-virgin body could sink, oh how she wished it could sink, and disappear.

The flurry of whispering beside her pulled her back. Ian was spluttering and hissing, his body tensed to leave. Bea frowned at him and nodded towards Sandra. Through her tears, Sandra watched his jaw tighten, and the soft stealing of despair into his eyes. He folded his arms again.

One of the old men was standing, leaning on his walking stick. He was nodding towards Sandra. She blinked hard and she was at the back of the Simperingham’s chook house again, with this old man, who was crooning at the bone that he tenderly lifted and cradled. With his nodding he was saying, *yes, I remember too.*

He was telling a story. A story about the mountain, about Putauaki, also called Mt Edgecumbe. How Putauaki took Tarawera, the mountain who split herself asunder, to wife and she bore a child, a son, Whatuira. But Putauaki could not settle with her and he looked towards Whakaari, a steaming island out at sea. His love for her grew so big that he travelled, at night, as mountains do, to join her. He did not know his son had followed him. When the sun rose, they were frozen on the plain. And now Tarawera forever mourns for her lost husband and her lost son, her tears making the Tarawera River and the Falls. Putauaki stands sentinel on the plain, with no wife, and with his little son at his side.

“They are here,” he said, “Looking over us, the father Putauaki and the son. Tarawera may cry for her son and her husband, but they must stay here, with us.”



He sat down, leaning on his walking stick. There was silence. Ian pulled himself slowly to his feet. His words were strangled by his taut body.

“We are here. Because. Your son. Your grandson. Has got my daughter up the duff. Pregnant. You understand? She’s having a baby. That’s what we’re here to talk about. Not about some bloody story.”

As if his tight body was being pulled involuntarily, he walked forward, heading for Rewi. There was a shifting amongst the family around Rewi’s bowed head, an imperceptible barrier was raised. It stopped Ian, half way across the twenty nine rimu floor boards that separated the two families.

“Marriage.” He spat it out. “That’s what we need to be talking. Marriage. My daughter and this boy.”

Father Searle moved in behind Ian, quietly put a hand on his shoulder and walked him back to sit next to Bea. Ian folded his arms again. He sat clenching and unclenching his fists.

The other elderly man stood up, stepping in front of Rewi. Sandra shrank from his deeply frowning eyebrows and flashing eyes. This must be the grandfather Rewi had lived with, in Taupo.

“I sit here,” he said, “With my son, and his wife and her mother, and with our mokopuna, our grandson. And I hear your words with sorrow. I hear them with sorrow because, as you heard Mr Watene say, the child of this union must stay here, with its people. And my grandson must go to his other love. He’s going to go on to school next year. He carries the mana of his people with him. He must go on. That is final.”

He stood hard and straight, immobile as the mountain. Sandra caught her breath. *Pregnant, pregnant and not married. Not married now, not married ever.* Ian leaned back in his seat. He sneered.

“Are you telling me that this boy of yours is just going to bugger off. He’s just going to leave our Sandra here, with a bun in the oven, to deal with his little bastard by herself?”

“Now, now, Mr McLeod,” Father Searle said. “I’m sure that’s not what Mr Stanton meant.”

“Well what does he bloody mean?”

Mr Watene stood slowly. His weight shifted as he leant on his walking stick.

“My friend,” he said, “My moko loves your daughter, Sandra. He loves her. He told us so. But they are both very young. He must carry on with his education. And Sandra, your daughter, she is now our daughter too. She carries our mokopuna. We will help take care of her, Mr McLeod, as much as your whanau needs us to.”

Sandra caught a sob, it lodged in her throat. *Rewi loves me*. The words danced under her ribs and settled, quivering. It was, what was it? Like the soft tickle of a black moustache, like the quiver of the earth before it settles again on its hot core. Their baby, quickened by those words – *Rewi loves me*.

“Sandra,” the old man continued. “You are welcome to our whanau. Your baby has a home with us.”

“And now?” Ian said. “What about now?”

“We leave,” said Mr Stanton. “Rewi comes with me, now, back to Taupo.”

Of one accord, the other members of Rewi’s whanau stood up. Rewi was carried with them, eyes still downcast, carried out of the church hall. Sandra wanted to run after him and shake him and shout in his face *Is it true, is it true...*

“Well then,” Father Searle said, “Shall we close with a prayer?”

“Not bloody likely,” retorted Ian.

This time Bea’s hand on his arm was not enough and he stormed out of the church hall. As the door slammed, the heavy curtain over the picture of Mary with her son, both giving their hearts away, bulged and surged.

“Come on love,” Bea said. “Let’s take you home.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN; 1975

The girl stares at you, not smiling, for a long time, for an eternity. Between her brown eyes, so like her grandfather's and her father's, and the blue eyes of the Virgin Mary, so like your sister's eyes; you're transfixed. The accusation in those eyes, all of those eyes, expose you, pare you to the bone. Your mouth is dry as you open your lips, and only a tiny puff of breath escapes, soundless. There are no words for you to use.

"You must be Lady Macbeth," says the girl with the widow's peak, the one that matches your brow and that of your mother before you. "That's what dad said he used to call you – Lady Macbeth."

And now the full lips and the flat nose let you know that this is Rewi's daughter. You swallow, and the ache in your throat brings you home to yourself.

"I'm sorry about your mum," she says. "My nan. I'm sorry she passed away."

For the first time, you wish you were sorry too. One hand, under its own volition, has drifted up from your side and is reaching out towards this stranger. It's trembling. It sits, your hand, in the air between you and her, a bridge beyond your control. Her movement is subtle; she leans back. She looks over your shoulder, past you, as if you're not there.

"Koro, we need to go," she says.

You turn to catch the uneven movement of Rewi's grandfather as he moves over the swirling carpet to his great grand-daughter. He stops beside you, and there are tears in the furrows of his old face, and one drop of mucus sitting on the end of his flat nose. He places his free hand on your shoulder, nods, and your hand, the one that reached out for the girl, lands on his elbow. In his eyes – what is it, it's sorrow that brings that lump from your throat up to sit in your mouth, and hold you both silent.

He turns and his great-granddaughter helps him down the steps, gently moving his elbow away from you. Your hand touches hers, briefly, very briefly, and she pulls her hand back, fast, away from you. You want to reach out again, and you want to pull back. Petrified by indecision, your arm stretches out in supplication as you watch them walk down the path, and away

from you. He's uneven, his stick pulling him along the path, leaning on her, the girl who knows your name. Rocking as she walks, she holds the world for him, leaving you on the doorstep. It's as if there's a space there for you, cut out of time, where you should have been. It's too foreign, that space, too far away. And it's been empty for too long. You ache for it.

"They're going to come to the funeral," Bea says. "Mr Watene and Hana, they're going to come to Betty's funeral."

And what about Rewi, you want to ask, will Rewi come? But you can't ask. You can't get words past that sob in your throat, that's rising, pushing upward, threatening to erupt. You run, across the road to where that girl, that Hana with the widow's peak had sat, on the broken roundabout. It leans further as you cannon into it, holding on to the metal partitions to steady yourself. You pull your legs up, underneath, wrap your arms around yourself. This was where her father had sat that night, that last time he'd called you Lady Macbeth, with you, and the tiny beginnings of his baby, this Hana. You rock back and forth, back and forth.

As you rock on the broken roundabout, the swings move with you. The broken swings, one hanging drunkenly with the chain snapped, one slung up over the frame - suddenly they're swinging. In, out, they go, in, out. A halo of white curly hair is flying and she's laughing. Your hands freeze on the metal struts as Richard's voice echoes: *Amy, will you marry me, Amy?* And the pig dogs are barking, barking, barking and it turns into your name.

"Sandra, Sandra."

It's Robert's face in your face, and his hands shaking your shoulders and the fear in his voice that pulls you back.

"Sandra," he calls again.

And you shudder, a deep earthquake of a shudder and the metal beneath you is cutting into the top of your legs and the swings are still.

"Sandra? Come back," he asks.

You shake your head. All of you is trembling. You're being crushed by the weight of it: the weight of the air that breathes you, heavy with sulphur and steam hissing from the violence of the steam bores: the weight of the mountain that leans on you, insisting it will crush you. You shake your head, hard.

He holds your chin, forces your eyes up to look into that solemn face and those brown eyes. He makes you focus, on him, on now.

“Come inside,” he says.

He pulls you up from the roundabout, holding your hand to keep you here, in this present, as he walks you back across the patchy grass to Bea’s house. Most of you is walking with him, and part of you is not. Part of you is still on the roundabout, on a night when the new moon was held in the arms of the old, and Amy’s white cardigan showed like a beacon in the dark. *Lady Macbeth, Lady Macbeth.*

It’s Robert’s voice that stops the whispers.

“Bea wants you to help sort out clothes for Betty,” he says. “You’ll need to go through her wardrobe, and get something nice for her to wear.”

You’re almost jolted into laughing. Who cares what your mother wears, you want to say, she’s dead, no-one will see her. And the absurdity of it swings you back from the crushing suffocation of the past to your own feet walking up the pathway and climbing the steps into the house. You’re light-headed with relief, this you can do, choose a dress, even if it does seem ludicrous.

“The funeral director rang, Sandra,” Bea says. “We need to take some clothes in to the funeral home.”

You nod, trying not to smile, almost drunk on your choked laughter. You follow her into the bedroom that was once Cathy’s, that was once your mother’s. The bed, the chair, are empty. You open the wardrobe. You can do this. There are few clothes, little to choose from and you pull out a dress of pale blue. Somewhere you remember, this was her favourite colour.

“That will do nicely, dear,” Bea says, taking it from you and laying it down on the candlewick bedspread. “Now, what about some shoes?”

You bite your tongue. Shoes. What shoes do dead people wear? What’s the point? Is your mum going to need shoes to walk to heaven in? And anyway, there are only slippers in the wardrobe, as far as you can see. You pull out a box to peer into the back shadows. Still no shoes. You open the box, carefully pulling the cardboard aside. There’s a dress, you pull it out. Amy’s dress, her best one with the fake fur around its neck. And her school dress, and the white cardigan with the stain just above the elbow.

And under the clothes a built up shoe, size two. You reach for it. It's surprisingly light. You remember the weight it used to be. You hold it carefully. It's so small, so very small. Your little sister, what a tiny body she was, clinging to this world. A vortex of memories is pulling at you; you're patting that little body dry, piggy backing her when she's tired, holding her when there's nothing else that is stable to hold on to. You're lost in the memories, the quagmire is pulling you in. You hold the shoe, carefully carrying it out of this room where your mother died, back along the hallway to the lounge.

Robert looks first at the shoe, then at your face.

"We're going," he says. "It's time."

Your feet follow him, out of the house to his car.

"Get in," he says.

You do as he tells you. You can hear his voice, whispering underneath the sound of the car.

"You know where we're going, don't you?" he asks.

You nod.

"I have to go there often. It stalks me, that place. I go for real, like now, and I go there just as I'm going to sleep, or maybe sitting thinking of nothing very much. It's as if there's something I need to understand, some piece I have to find that I missed the first time."

You nurse the shoe. It's scraped and torn on one side, telling a story about a journey, one that Amy never made. You clench your jaw.

You can do this, you have to.

Robert drives silently, past the end of the tarseal, and on to the sandy pumice road. Whilst your body is jerked by the potholes and the sand humps, you're still. It's silent in the eye of the storm.

He parks the car, and locks it. You wonder what for.

"This is where we left our bikes," he says.

The path is not very well defined, but he seems to know it. The overhang of manuka gently pulls you in. It's holding its breath, this bush, as if it's been waiting for you. As you move through its quiet, your noise disturbs a fantail. It scolds you for your intrusion. Now there is another voice pulling you in, it's the sound of water.

And as you walk, the sound amplifies in you, from a soft falling to a loud insistence and the river is there, in front of you, and the water it carries dances and leaps as it settles from its journey back into its river bed. Now the noise is deafening you and you're damp from the spray of it and it's falling, a small fall of water at first, then a vast pluming out from the tumbled rocks half way down, where the earth has another opening, another doorway. Another doorway.

Then the water is becoming air, then water again as it throws itself down, gathers itself down the steep escarpment. This is the way out, for the water, and all it carries. This is where Amy's shoe was found, here in the shallows with one side of the leather scraped and torn.

"Follow me," shouts Robert and he pulls you away from the entrancement and violence of it. The path goes upward. The manuka reaches out with handholds, and your breath sounds loud in your own ears. You climb up to where the water begins its falling but you don't go there, to the steep cliff edge. Instead you follow Robert along a small stream, so small that you jump over it, twice.

"Some of the water goes down here," he's pointing to a vortex, a hole where some of the water disappears, to leave the small stream you've jumped over. The roar of the falls is muted here, it sings to you, enticing you.

*Come in, it says, come in. This is the real world.*

"Come on," he says.

And you follow him instead. Past an uprooted manuka, with its fingers that once clung to the earth, now curling in on themselves, clinging to the insubstantial pumice and drying clay, dying.

Around a rocky escarpment you go, to a churning pool and another fall of water. This one's not so high, but there's so much violence in the water that underneath - it's a churning mass of white. You know that this is where some more of the water goes. And you know this was the beginning of the journey for Amy's shoe.

"We came here to do a magic spell," he said. "To get rid of Amy's ghost. I'll show you."

He pulls you to the edge of the white water, around an old tree, one that digs its roots into the slippery rocks, clinging on to the solid land. You lick your lips, they're wet. A fine mist is settling on you. He's pointing to a flat rock at the very edge of the falls, slick, wet and weedy, it stops just short of where most of the water disappears. This is where they disappeared, Amy and Colin.

Your little sister. The one who was so lightly held on this earth. The one you loved, not just as a sister does, but as a mother. The one you failed. The one you didn't protect enough. The one that was drowned, engulfed by this violent water and never, never released.

It rises in you, a long wail of pain, of wounding, and pushes itself out up through your belly. It shakes you, and, gasping, you wrestle another breath which takes it deeper, to the very roots of you. The pain is wailing, the pain that has sat festering in your being, nesting in you so that you could never hold your own baby, nor grieve at the death of your own mother. This ancient wail of loss comes from your feet, from the unknowable depths below your feet, and is swallowed by the noise of the falls. And you're falling, into a deep hole, like this one where Amy disappeared, you can feel your body falling with her, and the violent, churning pain of it. Undoing you. The wet gritty ground is under your cheek and you're sobbing into this earth, pulling the wet air deep into yourself. The earth absorbs your sobbing, but holds your body out.

*Not you. I will not take you.*

There's a hissing under the insistent roar of water, a hissing you can almost hear. You strain to listen. Maybe she'll tell you, Amy's old woman, maybe she'll tell you what happened here. The roar of the water and the hissing persist, fill your head until you feel yourself dissolving, becoming particles of shining wet obsidian. But it will not let you understand. Your gaze is wrenched away from the violent water to the small remains of river that catch the sun, and dance around an islet. It's just out of reach of the violent water, this small island, and three manuka have managed to lodge themselves there. Under the manuka is a rock, with a mossy surface. It stares into the fall of water, into the violence of its churning.



*These waters are the tears of Tarawera. That mountain, she will always cry for her child, the one that was taken from her. She split herself apart with the grief of it, that mother. It is the way of the mother, to do that, and to eternally lament for her child. It is greedy, that grief, it will consume everything. It was the way of your mother, and of you, and it will always be the way. That is how it is.*

And in the deep sentience between your skin and the skin of this place, you know this is true, and you know you don't want it to be true.

*What about Amy? Why take her?*

But the guardian will not tell. There's a doorway here, at these falls, this you know, and it goes to the depths of the earth, the shattered earth, the earth that destroys and that holds. Somewhere in there are her bones, and Colin's bones, in wet caves in the place that you will never know.

You pull yourself away from the earth, the gritty obsidian ridden earth and under your belly is Amy's shoe. You hold it where the leather's been ripped, there at the heel, where support was most needed. A hand appears in front of you and you hold it. Robert helps you stand. He takes the shoe from you, and walks, carefully, each foot tested, on to the flat rock. He pulls his arm back and throws the shoe into the water. As he stands there on the rock, with the water suspending itself around him, the sun comes through the three manuka on the small island. For a moment you can't see him. Between you and him is a rainbow, for a brief moment it shimmers, dissolving him, absolving him. Then it's gone.

He makes his way back, across the slippery rocks, over the roots of the old tree, to stand beside you. His hand finds yours.

"Come on Sandra," he says.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT; 1975

You wake up to the light coming in through the window. You pull your pillow up and the bed head creaks. Out of the window are the broken swings and the stationery roundabout. Ribbons hang limp in the morning damp. Strips of corduroy and cotton, torn and tied. Amy's clothes. Tied there, last night, by you and Robert.

Today is the day of your mother's funeral. There are sandwiches and cakes to be picked up from the caterer. You'll help this almost family of yours, you'll help these people who loved Betty, in your absence. You swing your legs over the side of the bed and put on the dressing gown that Bea has lent you. You walk quietly down the hallway to the empty kitchen. You know where it all is. You plug in the jug and spoon the tea in, one spoon for Pat, one spoon for Bea, and one for the pot. You tip the boiling water in, put the lid on and tuck the orange woolly tea cosy around the pot. You turn it three times. It's a magic spell you learned once. The milk goes in first, then the sugar. You pour the tea, long brown streams of hot tea and you carry the cups, with your tongue protruding just a little, to keep the cups steady. Down the long hallway you go, to Bea and Pat's room. The door is ajar and you push it open with your foot.

"I brought you a cup of tea," you say.

And place one cup carefully, so carefully, on the bedside table next to Pat, and walk around, carefully, so very carefully, to Bea's side of the bed to place the other cup next to this almost mother of yours. It spills, just a little, into the teaspoon. The two bodies in the bed stir, under the pursed lips of the Virgin Mary watching the ceiling, her face blank. You tiptoe out of the room.

You decide to wear the red trouser suit.

The funeral is at eleven. The boot of Robert's car is full of food. As they get in the car you look at each of them; at Robert, he was born to wear a suit and tie; at Pat, his tie uneven and one wing of his collar sticking up; at Bea in a dark shapeless dress. You look at each of them and a small warmth sits between you and them, waiting for you to take it in. You blink back tears. To stop your mascara running.

The undertaker is waiting at the door of the chapel. He shakes your hand and reaches into his jacket pocket.

"I didn't ask you, Sandra," he said. "But most people want to keep this."

In his hand is a thin gold band, almost worn through on one side. It's your mother's wedding ring. You smile at him, and he takes both of your hands in his, smiles a smile that leaves his eyes somber and slides them away from you to Robert. Thank goodness you didn't have to take her ring off, you think, or your mother may have become a ghost forever, like Emma Edgecumbe.

You stand as the minister walks into the chapel, unfold yourself carefully from the seat, your stack heeled shoes sinking into the thick carpet. He's reached the coffin, with its lid secure. You look down at that small gold ring you're holding. You wonder if you'll ever wear it. Someone slips into the seat next to you. A pair of shoes, with one heel built up.

And you can hear those words again. *You'll have to be brave, Sandra. Look, you unfold the towel. Your baby, she's beautiful, but look carefully, there's just a little thing.*

And you can feel the weight of that slippery creature that you have just laboured so hard to birth, and the towel is soft and warmed, and the eyes that look at you are blue-brown, and they seem to know you and are inviting all of you in. A hand reaches over to unfold the towel and you can look down the small brown body to see the thin little leg, with a foot that looks like a beached tadpole, sitting bent over itself.

You drop the ring, your mother's ring, the one your father gave her to show he would love her forever. You stare at it on the carpet and your eyes go back to the shoes. One with its heel built up. When you met this child, the one with the widow's peak, she was not precarious on this earth. It is up to her to learn to stand upright on this land.

Next to her you can see someone else's shoes. Men's shoes worn down on one side, with the backs trodden down. And he's leaning down to pick up your mother's wedding ring.