Beneath the Fringe of Heaven

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Exegesis:

Stories:

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

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Abstract:

'Beneath the Fringe of Heaven' is a first draft collection of semi-autobiographical short stories set in the early to mid 1960s in the Waitakere Ranges, specifically in Titirangi, and in the surrounding west coast beaches of Kare Kare and Piha. The title is a provisional title only as I wished to emphasise the fact that the stories are set out in the Waitakeres and involve characters and families who, perhaps, lived on the 'fringe' of society, both metaphorically and literally. Titirangi itself is situated on the fringe of the city of Auckland. According to Simpson (2001):

> 'Titirangi – a Maori word sometimes translated as "the fringe of heaven" (p.6).

The collection comprises of a series of loosely connected stories, or vignettes, that may link to give the effect of a novel but with each story being semi stand-alone. The exegesis will outline the reason I am writing these short stories – basically that I would like to express how it felt, as a young girl, to grow up in the rich, vibrant and at times eccentric community of Titirangi, as it was in the sixties. There were many contrasts at that time; artists, and the poorest of families or individuals, often lived in damp baches, with no septic tank facilities, close to the beaches of French Bay and Titirangi Beach (which is in direct contrast to the residents who live there today). The more conservative or wealthier families, who owned businesses such as appliance stores or hardware stores, lived closer to the village itself. The artists, as such, were often referred to, or seen as being, 'Bohemian' and their lifestyle and so-called idiosyncratic behaviour would be discussed, and often frowned upon, by the more middle-class or conventional inhabitants of the area.

I am basing the stories from the perspective of a young girl - a child who has been transported from a fairly conventional and somewhat genteel country lifestyle, in a landlocked area of Scotland, to a life in New Zealand in the unfamiliar surroundings of bush and sea in Titirangi and the Waitakeres. This, I felt, would be a cultural shock - not only for her but also for the rest of her family.

I am aware many artists, writers and creative people were living in West Auckland and the Waitakeres during the 1960s and I wished to capture in my stories some of the events and challenges the family faced living not only in a new country, but also in such a totally foreign environment as Titirangi. Many of the previous inhabitants of West

Auckland and Titirangi have left behind a legacy of riches in writing, art, pottery and architecture. One of my art teachers at the time was local Titirangi artist, Lois McIvor. Lois McIvor had in turn been a contemporary of Colin McCahon.

As a semi-autobiographical work, the majority of the stories explore the life of a family that has recently moved from Scotland to Titirangi, Auckland, during the early 1960s and examines the relationship this family has with the surrounding environment of native bush and sea. This is in direct contrast with the environment and life-style the family has left behind in Scotland. It also explores the relationships the family forms with the local artists and other 'colourful' characters that resided in the area at the time. The stories examine not only the relationship the young girl has with the environment, including the bush and west coast beaches, her parents, siblings and peers, and also with different characters in Titirangi. There is an underlying theme to these stories of a childhood being fractured and of loss and grief due to the death of the father soon after arriving in New Zealand.

The exegesis will discuss, i) why I have chosen to write in this particular genre, as opposed to writing a collection of poetry, ii) how the short story has proliferated as a genre in New Zealand literature, iii) which authors have influenced me, and iv) the challenges I have faced. The exegesis will also discuss the impact that the landscape of the Waitakeres, including the influence of the many artists and writers who have proliferated there, has had on my writing.

The short story

The short story is a commonly deployed genre in New Zealand literature and, like the poem, is used because it has the capability and propensity for constructing an impressionistic style and the creation of a mood, which is therefore more suited to my style of writing. As such, the short story genre has become a favoured genre in New Zealand and writers who paved the way were Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame, Frank Sargeson and Maurice Duggan. Wevers (1998) notes:

> The quantity of published short stories and of writers who have specialised in the short story suggests that as a form the short story has enjoyed a privileged status in New Zealand and, more than the novel, been the genre in which the preoccupations of a colonial and post-colonial literature have worked themselves out.
> For a number of writers, particularly Sargeson, Duggan, and most of the writers publishing in periodicals, the short story is where New Zealanders have placed themselves; away from Europe but within European hegemonic cultural discourse (p. 245).

I am interested in the creation of mood as opposed to the stories being totally 'plot' or narrative driven and this is the reason I decided to explore an impressionist style (Quinn 1999) in my writing, as this closely resembles the way in which I write poetry. It seemed a natural segue to go from writing poetry to exploring the short story medium.

Regarding impressionism as a literary style, Quinn states that the success in the late 19th century of the Impressionist school of painters, which included Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Degas and Manet, inevitably had an impact on the literature of the period. The emphasis in impressionist literature falls on the creation of mood and to some extent is created by a 'painterly' style in an attempt to render images, reflections of light and sound that represent the literary equivalents of Impressionist paintings. Quinn goes on to state that a variety of writers, including Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, Rainer Maria Rilke and Anton Chekhov, made the pilgrimage to Paris to absorb the Impressionist ambience. The Impressionist

painters had an indirect influence on the writers; helping to infuse modern literature with a lyric element and the importance of capturing mood in which character and scene, observer and observed are merged. (Quinn, 1999).

When I originally started the Master of Creative Writing, I was looking to write either a theatre script or a collection of poetry perhaps interspersed with short stories. I wanted to include poetry with narrative prose because of poetry's ability to successfully convey emotional and psychological truth. Eventually, I decided to focus solely on prose and attempt to integrate an impressionistic and poetic technique while delivering a narrative feel to the stories. In the past, poetry has been a natural 'voice' for me so it was a challenge to expand my style of writing to a short story format. However, this was a challenge that my Master of Creative Writing supervisors also encouraged me to take. Furthermore, poetry, on the whole, does rely on brevity and, because I was basing my project on growing up in Titirangi during the 1960s, I felt that poetry might be somewhat limited in its ability to explore the numerous complex identities and mystique of the characters residing there at the time. Another reason I decided to write a short story collection is that I believe the short story has more scope for exploring language, structure, point of view, voice, narrative, and theme, and has the ability to capture the reader more intently, commanding their attention more fully, than perhaps my poetry would do. I also wanted to reveal more of myself as a writer.

I felt it necessary and important to continue within the style of poetic prose rather than experiment with what for me would be a more challenging style of writing. For example, using the technique of plot-driven narrative or choosing to write the point of view from an omniscient or all-knowing narrator, which is regarded as a more 'old-fashioned' or traditional style of story-telling. It was also a challenge to find a way of writing semi-autobiographical and inter-linked stories. Tim Winton's collection of short stories 'The Turning' (2004) gave me inspiration and was, in some regards, an important influence in the way I approached my writing. Even though his stories have a more narrative-driven style, the stories interweave and overlap (some of the same characters keep appearing in different stories and often the setting is the same) giving more of a novel-like approach rather than an isolated collection of vignettes, therefore giving a seamless quality to the work.

One of the first writers who inspired me to write semi-autobiographical stories is Bailey White (1994), an American author, who wrote a collection of autobiographical

essays, or vignettes. These essays are set in the southern states of America, in Georgia, and are humorous memoirs written with a deft touch, portraying eccentric people and unusual situations with a self-deprecating wit. These essays encouraged me to explore writing semi-autobiographical stories using the 'privileged observer' point of view, that is, as the narrator standing aside from the action.

Alice Munro (2011), the doyenne of short story writing, is a Canadian author who also inspired me to write short stories using the voice of a young child. In her short story 'My Mother's Dream', she writes from the perspective of the baby. The writing is taut and has a sense of mystery and calm intensity:

> When she got outside she remembered. She remembered that she had left a baby out there somewhere, before the snow had fallen. Quite a while before the snow had fallen. This memory, this certainty, came over her with horror. It was as if she was awakening from a dream. Within her dream she awakened from a dream, to a knowledge of her responsibility and mistake. She had left her baby out overnight, she had forgotten about it. Left it exposed somewhere as if it was a doll she tired of.
>
> What a reprieve, then, to find her baby lying in its crib. Lying on its stomach, its head turned to one side, its skin pale and sweet as snowdrops and the down on its head reddish like the dawn. Red hair like her own, on her perfectly safe and unmistakable baby. The joy to find herself forgiven.
>
> My mother, still thinking no doubt about the snow and the cold that usually accompanies snow, pulled the blanket up to cover the baby's bare back and shoulders, its red-downed head.
> (p. 79, 80).

Munro's story is a great example of the wise adage, given to beginner writers, of 'showing, not telling' and shows the balance between text and sub-text. The mother is suffering from post-natal depression but this is not overtly written, rather it is suggested by the use of sub-text and metaphor.

Regarding poetry, and keeping in mind my wish to use a more imagistic approach to writing my short stories, one of the poems I originally wrote is set out at Whatipu beach (Whatipu, 2009) on the west coast of Auckland and is an attempt at embodying the feeling I first experienced when visiting this beach. The poem set me thinking about how I could expand my writing to the short story genre using imagery to convey the fascination I have with the Waitakere environment, including my love of the sea. I wrote the poem as I was inspired by the Whatipu landscape and the history of the place (MacDonald, F and Kerr, R. (2009). Whatipu Cave was used to hold parties in the late 1800s and with its hung kauri floor and piano accordion music it became a unique venue for everyone who lived along the coast as well as for visitors from town. The poem goes on to describe a dance held in

the cave. I wanted to convey the many contrasts there would be by the use of imagery – the women dressed in their finery arriving at a beach with an unpredictable and dangerous sea rolling in, the black sand glimmering under moonlight and the stars shining. Dark and foreboding rocks, such as Paratutae, would loom large upon their arrival on to the shore and the women would then have to be transported to the caves; altogether quite an undertaking. This is an extract:

Whatipu
Where black sand
Brilliant as fireflies
Sparks and fizzes
Bronze/black/gold
At the touch
Of a wet footprint
Where a flash
Of seagull
Grey and white
Scatters fairy terns
As they nestle
Beside the lagoon
Now flying!
Dipping and hovering
Over fish
Quick-silver
As they dart under
Sailor-white waves
Beneath a tui-breasted sea

Where the darkest cave
Sings gentle songs
Remembering those
Dances of long ago
When partners
Sliding towards one another
On a hung wooden floor
Attempt
A sandy pas-de-deux
The women in rustling taffeta
Meet upright men
In stiff grey serge
They come together
With a slight sound of
Sandpaper rubbing softly
On butterfly wings
The women's pale
Colonial faces are
Now flushed with
Unexpected sunburn
With the promise of
Perhaps
More than just a tarantello
When the night is done
The strains of violin

Echo in the flame lit cavern
As the sea
Dumps and rolls with vibrato
Mumbling a deep black sound
While the morepork
(Not expecting an answer)
Calls out in faint alarm

This is old Whatipu
Where the men retire
To their cabins
Boil the billy for tea
Pick strings
Of oily muttonbird from front teeth
And spit into the long grass
They lie down on thin mattresses
Dreaming of girls
In shot silk
Dancing and reeling
On black sand
With their long skirts trailing
The froth and flotsam
Of a night-sea
Where waves
Of molten kauri gum
Glisten and spin
Under a pearl moon

Allen Curnow is a New Zealand poet whose poems have also inspired me with their use of imagery. He relates in (an extract of his poem) "A Small Room with Large Windows" (1962):

iv.
A Kingfisher's naked arc alight
Upon a dead stick in the mud
A scarlet geranium wild on a wet bank
A man stepping it out in the near distance
With a dog and a bag
on a spit of shell
On a wire in a mist
A gannet impacting
Explode a dozen diverse dullnesses
Like a burst of accurate fire. (Curnow, 1962, p. 42)

The writing of this extract is economic and imagistic – I can almost hear the sound 'like a burst of accurate fire' and I am able visualise the scene with its clear imagery such as 'the scarlet geranium wild on a wet bank, on a spit of shell, the gannet impacting'. There are no superfluous words. The use of repetition 'on a spit' and 'on a wire' gives the poem a sense of rhythm.

Curnow's poetic depiction of imagery is not novel or unique to New Zealand, Quinn (1999) states that a school of English and American poetry flourished in the years prior to and during World War I. The poets Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme and F. S Flint met to decide on an Imagist creed that enunciated three poetic goals. Firstly to treat the 'thing' directly, whether subjective or objective, secondly to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation and thirdly, as regarding rhythm, to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome. The first two principles represent the Imagists' reaction against the tradition of romanticism, which emphasised abstract ideas and to some degree ornamental language and the third concerned rhythm, constituting an argument for free verse. According to Quinn, Pound defined the term image as 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time…which gives that sense of sudden liberation…which we experience in the presence of great works of art.'(Quinn, 1999, p.159).

The Impressionist movement inspired many other writers during the early to mid 1900s and in Kathleen Jones' biography of Katherine Mansfield (2010), Jones notes that Katherine Mansfield had a kind of epiphany when she visited the exhibition of 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' in London, 1910. Mansfield realised that these paintings could teach her about narrative structure particularly when she viewed Van Gogh's paintings the 'Sunflowers' and a portrait of the postman, Joseph Roulin, and that they had taught her 'something about writing, which was queer, a kind of freedom – or rather, a shaking free'. Jones goes on to state that both the Impressionists and the Symbolists were after the same thing: the very essence of truth. (Jones, 2010).

Relating a text or portion of a text can also function as a visual piece if the imagery is strong. In an extract from a short story I wrote for the Master of Creative Writing, I explored the use of imagery - linking the images together in a pattern using the verbal equivalents of sense experience hoping to engage the reader and enabling them to 're-create' the text (Quinn, 1999, p. 157):

> *No more cart-wheeling on flat lawns or threading daisy chains in summer, no more sledding on steep slopes or riding the snow plough while deep drifts keep us out of school, no more watching as the plough makes giant waves of snow - parting the snow-sea in the middle - no more bundling of thick scarves around fat snowmen or smelling old jackets smoulder on stuffed straw-bellied Guys in November. No longer seeing leaves turn orange or feel them crackle underfoot on dark autumn afternoons, no more thrusting of marshmallows on burnt sticks into small bonfires. (p. 23).*

Janet Frame (1963), being one of those New Zealand authors mentioned earlier whose works have "privileged status"(Wevers, 1998, p.245) in New Zealand literature, has also been an influence and an inspiration in the way I have approached my writing. Michele Roberts (2009) states that Frame's writing gives a sense of perfect rightness and that the stories are made up of word patterns, and of the meaning of those word patterns created between author and reader.

> But it *was* a long way, and perhaps it would take all day and night, perhaps we would have to sleep there among the pine trees with the owls hooting and the old needle-filled warrens which now reached to the center of the earth where pools of molten lead bubbled, waiting to seize us if we tripped, and then there was the crying sound made by the trees, a sound of speech at its loneliest level where the meaning is felt but never explained, and it goes on and on in a kind of despair, trying to reach a point of understanding.
>
> We knew that pine trees spoke in this way. We were lonely listening to them because we knew we could never help them to say it, whatever they were trying to say, for if the wind who was so close to them could not help them, how could we? (Frame, 1963, p. 389).

The extract, above, from *The Reservoir,* by Janet Frame (1963), reflects on a feeling I was trying to convey in one of my own short stories I have submitted. The children in *The Reservoir* are attempting to be brave and confront their fears and in this extract the young girl is confronting her fear:

> *We drove for miles out towards south Auckland. I looked out the window; the sky was swirled in grey, bundles of sheep were grazing and the pine trees swayed towards me as though they had something important to tell. Listen, listen they whispered. I wanted to be somewhere else, I wanted to sit by an open fire with a bowl of soup, read my book while the pinecones blustered and crackled in the grate. I could lose myself in that fire. (p. 40).*
>
> *There was a nurse crossing the grass with a blue cape that billowed out behind her, a man sat on a bench and kept scratching his head, a piece of paper flew in to the air dancing its way down on to a rose bush and the trees kept swaying and whispering in the wind. I wanted to run outside and ask them what their message was. (p. 41).*

Here, I have tried to capture the feeling of uncertainty, loss (father in hospital) and veiled secrecy in this story – the child has no real knowledge or understanding of what is actually happening to her father while he is in Kingseat and, although she is aware that things are not quite as they seem, she believes it to be a 'normal' hospital. Her mother and siblings have not revealed the real reason for the father's stay or given the reason for the kind of treatment he is receiving, which is electro-convulsive therapy or 'shock treatment'; hence the 'secrecy' surrounding this situation. I have used the 'trees' as metaphor, in the

sense of personification, for the unease she is feeling as she believes the trees may give her some understanding of what it is actually taking place here and they may be able to answer her fears. An ongoing metaphor, in the collection of stories, is the use of the environment as a metaphor for solace as well as for highlighting any fears or unease the character is facing.

I originally wrote a poem (*We are going to visit your father dear, 2009*) as seen through the eyes of a young girl, regarding the event of her father being hospitalised in Kingseat, then used this poem as inspiration for the short story. The poem was written as a performance piece for the 2009 Poetry Idol at the Auckland Writers and Readers Festival in which I was a finalist and this is an extract:

We are going to visit your father dear
So make sure you are nice and neat
It's a long way to travel out in the country
To a place they call Kingseat
Does the royal family live there Mum
Will we get to visit the Queen?
Oh no my darling it's a
Kind of a hospital
Where most people don't want to be seen

Shall I wear my white socks
And black patent leathers
Shall I dance on his toes
As light as a feather
There will be no dancing
My mother replied
Your father's not terribly well
We'll sit at his bedside
And hold his hand
Then leave at the ring of the bell

What's wrong with him Mum
Why is he there
When is he coming back home
He won't be back for a while
My dear
He's having a kind of a rest
They are giving him some medicine
As his mind is really not at its best
Don't be too shocked when you see him
My darling
Your father doesn't look
Quite the same
They have let his hair grow long and wild
And he may not remember your name

Initially, I found it quite challenging to expand my writing in order to fulfil a more substantial piece of work. I was used to writing in a much more economic way in my poetry, by using a more concise format, so needed not only to expand the length of each piece but also to make sense of it as a complete story and not just as an elongated prose poem. It was important to set myself goals regarding the word count and to work on narrative structure and dialogue. I felt the structure of the story could not be as loose as some of my poems and I needed to explore this aspect. I also had to decide what kind of story I would write and eventually decided on writing semi-autobiographical fiction in a more poetic style, which felt natural for me. It was important to focus on the creation of mood rather than simply narrating a story.

This is an excerpt from the first story I wrote earlier this year and is part of the collection of short stories I have submitted. I am attempting to create a mood by exploring an interior monologue technique:

> *Perhaps Dad did manage to escape. Perhaps he's built a house out there and we can all go and live in it - away from the wet bush and concrete incinerator smell of burnt damp ashes by the yellowing kowhai, the chemical toilet emptied unwillingly in to the deep pit dug in the bush, mice scratches in the butter, pressure cooker whistling cruel steam threatening to explode, mildew in the bathroom making pictures of sea birds, witches, clouds on the ceiling as you lie in the bath, away from the squabs on the kitchen box seats under which my sister hides her peas, away from the gravel drive so steep my mother slides all over it in her poisonous frog car, away from ants in the sugar bowl and dead plums in the nikau bowl, away from the spot on the kitchen ceiling where pancakes are thrown, away from shiny guinea pig black poo pebbles on the couch and carpet, away from the spider webbed basement where I hid my friend. (p. 45).*

Annie Dillard is an American author whose writing has inspired me with her unique voice and the use of poetic language and imagery, which she uses to merge philosophy with her observations of the natural world. In this excerpt from The Maytrees (2007) the language is spare and employs a poetic technique to great effect:

> Bursting up hill through scrubs into the open excited her. She saw a wild array of sand dunes inscribing a sphere of sea and sky. She saw three-hundred-foot dunes swirl around the horizon like a school of fish: bright side, dark side, moving downwind. The world of town vanished as if wind tore it off.
>
> A low bump between dunes caught Lou's eye. It angled on a flat behind them near the trees they came through. She and Maytree neared it in a crescent of shade. It was a sail, a rolled canvas sail, a mainsail. From the roll's side, dark curls spilled like filling. They settled, these curls, on a green lobster buoy. It was their friend Deary Hightoe asleep and swaddled. Lou knew Deary slept in the dunes somewhere. She claimed to like the way starlight smelled on sand. Once Cornelius asked her how the smell of starlight on sand differed from the smell of moonlight. – More peppery. (Dillard, 2007, p.12).

Virginia Woolf, in her novel 'To the Lighthouse', uses imagery, symbolism and poetic elements and she is known for her contribution to the development of the stream of consciousness narrative technique:

> They went in and out all day long. There was an old woman gossiping in the kitchen, and the blinds were sucked in and out by the breeze; all was blowing, all was growing; and over all those plates and bowls and tall brandishing red and yellow flowers a very thin yellow veil would be drawn, like a vine-leaf, at night. Things became stiller and darker at night. But the leaf-like veil was so fine that lights lifted it, voices crinkled it; he could see through it a figure stooping, hear, coming close, going away, some dress rustling, some chain tinkling.
>
> It was in this world that the wheel went over the person's foot. Something, he remembered, stayed and darkened over him; would not move; something flourished up in the air, something arid and sharp descended even there, like a blade, a scimitar, smiting through the leaves and flowers even of that happy world and making them shrivel and fall.
>
> 'It will rain,' he remembered his father saying. 'You won't be able to go to the Lighthouse.' (Woolf, 1992, p. 152).

This is the kind of technique I wanted to explore in my writing and during the process of attempting to find my own natural voice in my writing, I did not consciously try to copy or emulate any of the above-mentioned authors. Rather, since having read their work, I have connected with and related to the style in which they write and it is their use of imagery and poetic technique that has resonated with me.

The point of view:

I decided to write the majority of the stories in the first person subjective point of view in order convey a more personal and intimate feel for my semi-autobiographical fiction. The voice dictates what it is you are saying and in choosing the voice defines the purpose. I needed to be aware that my characters voices remained consistent and true to their characterisation and that the narrative voice reflected the context of what was happening. The first person point of view concerns emotional and psychological truth primarily - it was important to be able to sustain the vernacular voice of the young girl and to reveal her authenticity, which is derived from the character's interior. I wanted the character to be an observer of the life around her. In approaching the point of view, it was important to ascertain who was telling the story and for me the child's point of view fitted best with what I was trying to say. It is also worth noting that the tendency to excessive

subjectivity, when embarking on writing in the first person, is hopefully balanced in my stories by a precision of observation therefore firmly grounding them.

Wevers (1998) notes that both Maurice Duggan and Janet Frame use the narrative perspective on New Zealand (which was originally established by Mansfield) of the experience and point of view of the child, and that the children are placed at the edge of, or outside of, a largely incomprehensible 'adult' world.

The short stories in my collection are, apart from one, depicted in the first person point of view and are seen from the child's perspective. The child comes from a middle-class, somewhat eccentric, immigrant family from Britain - a family who previously enjoyed relative wealth and status in their home country. However, since residing in New Zealand, it is now clear the family is suffering or has suffered from financial loss, mental health issues, grief and a sense of dislocation having been uprooted from Scotland.

Framework/Landscape:

I have used the physical framework of the Waitakeres and west coast beaches to 'hang' my stories on to. Regarding the use of metaphor, Titirangi itself is portrayed as a 'character' in the short stories as though having a personality of its own. One of my contemporaries, a friend of mine who grew up in Titirangi during the 1950s and 1960s, is the New Zealand artist Elizabeth Thomson who was born in 1955. Elizabeth was fascinated with the bush and insect life and with the Waitakere ranges as a whole, and this fascination is particularly resonant in her earlier works. Her work as an artist also gave me inspiration with regard to my writing. There was something about growing up in an environment as unique as Titirangi. The bush could be both fascinating and foreboding, intriguing and menacing, particularly at night with the sounds and feel of the bush being magnified. While driving at night, the car's headlights would magnify the shape of the trees and bushes, as though giving the bush a cardboard cut-out appearance; a theatrical set on the stage. Thomson used the Waitakeres as a framework for her earlier work in the same way many renowned New Zealand writers and artists have also used this particular environment as a framework for their work. These include writers, photographers, potters and artists such as: Allen Curnow, Dean Buchanan, Don Binney, Colin McCahon, Lois McIvor, Maurice Gee, Maurice Shadbolt, Len Castle, Jack Diamond, Stanley Palmer, Jovan Rancich, John Parker, Ted Scott, Kendrick Smithyman, Kevin Ireland, CK Stead, Denys Trussell, Peter

Stitchbury and Kate Wells (MacDonald, F and Kerr, R. (2009). Thomson's exhibition, *my sci-fi – my hi-fi*, at Waikato Museum (2007) is described as:

> "perplexing, beautiful, sometimes disturbing, often dazzling" and "Thomson's work is musical; it often evokes lightness, levity and flight. Investigating the long quarrel between order and adventure, the art is painstakingly precise, yet it is also marvelously, exuberantly free. Thomson is fascinated with the formal qualities and imaginative potentials she finds in nature." ("My Sci-Fi My Hi-Fi," 2007).

I wanted my stories to have a feel of something disturbing beneath the clichéd image of Titirangi as the 'Fringe of Heaven', hence the title of my work 'Beneath the Fringe of Heaven'. Further to this, I wished to portray my characters as having a connection with their environment and, whether as an immigrant or as a person having been born in New Zealand, this is ultimately what shapes us as a 'Kiwi'.

> For example, Wevers, Belich, Hill and Bonisch-Brednich (2008) state that the environment and how you live in it is a constant theme of what it means to be Kiwi. This has also been a strong consideration when placing my stories in the environment of the Waiatakeres. Wevers, Belich, Hill and Bonisch-Brednich point out that there is a darker side of New Zealand society – and that this is reflected in the writing of Frank Sargeson, James K. Baxter, Ronald Hugh Morrieson and in the photographs of Yvonne Todd: all reflecting a sinister side of Kiwi cultural identity and in turn exposing our innocence. (Wevers, Belich, Hill and Bonisch-Brednich, 2008).

To reiterate, framing my work against the landscape of the Waitakeres has been an important consideration when writing the short stories. Many artists and writers, including Colin McCahon, Brian Brake, Len Castle and Maurice Shadbolt, have used this environment as inspiration for their work. Harvey (1998) writes:

> Titirangi has long been a welcoming haven for the creative spirit. Colin McCahon lived for a time in a cottage in French Bay (Otitori), where he painted his famous Titirangi canvases.
> The late Brian Brake, the renowned Magnum photographer, built a spectacular glass-and-timber house above the village in a Japanese style, to house his extensive collection of photographic works and his dazzling Asian art collection. His untimely death took from the village a great local and New Zealand identity.
> Len Castle, one of New Zealand pottery's founding fathers, has lived and potted in Titirangi for most of his life.
> The novelist and playwright Maurice Shadbolt writes in a simple cottage overlooking the harbour. On the occasion of the local school's centenary, Maurice wrote a forward that included his homage to the area. (p. 30)

Peter Simpson (2007), when discussing McCahon, elaborates:

> Simultaneously with the kauri series, McCahon was working on landscapes with a more expansive aspect, taking in the wider Titirangi and Manukau Harbour setting.
> Later he wrote the impact of:
> "the whole magnificent spread of Auckland seen from Titirangi Road on the endless journeys into town every morning. The November light for that first year was a miracle. It remains an obsession and still a miracle. After the south, the drenching rain and brilliant sun, the shattered clouds after thunder and the rainbows that looped over the city and harbour through the Auckland light produced a series of watercolours called *Towards Auckland*." (p. 26).

In the first story I relate the image of the wet, green bush and rainbows as I felt this helped to define the character of Titirangi:

> *We finally arrive in New Zealand – how green it is and surrounded by water. The kind of green I used to mix from my paint box – a swish of cadmium and bottle green. In Auckland Mum finds us a house in Titirangi – the 'Fringe of Heaven' – up in the Waitakere ranges. The bush is full of wet ferns and wood pigeons swoop low. Tuis with white bibs sit still at the tops of tall kauri trees and when I look out over the Manukau harbour I see a double rainbow. (p. 23).*

McCahon's fascination with the bush is apparent - not only in his paintings but also in his correspondence. Simpson (2001) writes:

> In one early letter he wrote to Caselberg: "After dignified Chch. This is all up and down and lush with lovely light but I now see why Auckland painting is so dark – the clouds often are intensely black and darkness covers the land". Or again the following spring:
> "The bush is coming to life and the birds returning in great numbers – kowhai well out and the little orchids and all the unseen but sweet smelling flowers that are and are not out at the same time." (p.35).
> Caselberg's review was that of a close friend and committed disciple:
> "…Titirangi is bush, the earth out of which that kauri bush is bursting, sky, sea and light." (p. 37).

Titirangi in the 1950s and 1960s was described as a 'sylvan slum' as Simpson (2007) in 'The Titirangi Years' elaborates:

> Writing in 1979, historian Dick Scott said:
> "Thirty five years ago (c. 1945) Titirangi was nor more than a sprinkling of raffish cottages, the hideaway homes of society's casualties and the weekend baches of city dwellers. As late as 1957 'sylvan slum' was historian E. H. McCormick's description of this now expensive area." (p. 6).

I wanted to portray some semblance of this poverty in my writing when describing a family's dwelling at French Bay:

The Manukau was at low tide and the mud stretched for miles. A seagull flew low and called out raucously. (p. 74).
The bach appeared lopsided, fragile - as though it would blow over in a small gust. The outside walls were pale grey, fibrolite, with patches of damp like an old blotter that had been dipped in the sea. The roof was made up of different pieces of corrugated iron. I wondered how everyone managed to fit inside. (p. 75).

In the early 1960s, which is when my stories are set, nothing much had changed. The poorest families still lived down at the beaches of French Bay and Titirangi beach, including McCahon:

In the early summer of 1955 – 56 Brasch revealed in his journal a vivid account of a visit:
"Spent today with the McCahons at Titirangi; we sat on the beach before lunch while the children bathed, then all afternoon till dusk on their terrace platform that seems suspended amidst the forest, the slender kauris with their light spring green rising from the leafage below and soaring high above. A deep murmur of the insects in the forest, native pigeons flying now and then away from the trees, moreporks calling after dark…" (Simpson. 2007. p. 7).

Conclusion:

To conclude, the challenges I have faced when writing the short story collection have been: approaching the point of view and deciding who was telling the story, particularly when writing semi-autobiographical material, finding an authentic voice for my characters, experimenting with an impressionistic style while maintaining a narrative feel to the stories, finding the right language, exploring rhythm and sentence structure and not losing the 'poetic' voice, setting the stories in the environment of the Waitakeres and using the landscape as a framework in which to tell them.

Peter Simpson (2001) discusses the New Zealand 'voice' when he relates a letter McCahon has written:

"I've used up all my inspiration – all I can now generate on Rilke – on those others, I couldn't manage more drawings for that poem. So call it off…I can't agree with you about the writing – but it all depends on the way of looking. You using words look at them differently to me. I use them as abstract parts of the design with a new life of their own. Signwriting has always been a hobby of mine. The look of words. But it isn't done. Sometime perhaps, a Baxter or a poem like yours with the Waitaki School hill background. Rilke is foreign – and drawn out like a humming rubber band. Being a true Nzer I prefer something more hard – more hopeful and with a bit of our heaven." (p. 37).

"Beneath the Fringe of Heaven" is my way of celebrating the characters, artists and 'society's casualties', (Simpson. 2007), who lived in Titirangi at a time when writers and

artists were proliferating. It is these people and the Waitakere landscape that have given me inspiration.

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The day my father led a blind man over the mountains towards Braemar was the day my mother told us we were going to live in New Zealand. We would leave our ten acres of garden in the Pictish countryside of Angus in Scotland. Leave our soft-fringed Shetland ponies, our stone house with the steep staircase and bedrooms in the attic, leave our nanny with the checked apron and buttery Scottish voice – maker of cold porridge and plump scones - leave the long drive where we hurtle down on shiny Raleigh bicycles and play hide-and-seek between the chestnut trees and copper beech. No more cart-wheeling on flat lawns or threading daisy chains in summer, no more sledding on steep slopes or riding the snow plough as deep drifts keep us out of school, no more watching as the plough makes giant waves of snow - parting the snow-sea in the middle - no more bundling of thick scarves around fat snowmen or smelling old jackets smoulder on stuffed straw-bellied Guys in November. No longer seeing leaves turn orange or feel them crackle underfoot on dark autumn afternoons, no more thrusting of marshmallows on burnt sticks into small bonfires. We would be leaving all of this to travel to a country that has upside down seasons and brown flightless birds.

My father's hike over the hills is being filmed using his Bell & Howell cine-camera. Years later we watch as the grainy film shows Dad wearing his kilt in the clan tartan, his shirt tied around his waist and his chest bare – his blind friend, also shirtless, waves his wooden walking stick in the air and grins. Two other friends are with Dad. One of them is a teenage boy who may be my cousin. Spectacles perched on his nose and springy hair – his white chest matching the shirt flapping around his waist like abandoned laundry. It is the hottest summer on record. On reaching Braemar, Dad turns to the camera and gives the thumbs up then leads his friends straight in to the pub.

Under the copper beech tree my sister Molly and I make up stories about the animals that live in our magical garden. We wonder if there will be red squirrels in New Zealand. Will there be Forfar bridies or stovies, bannocks, Scotch broth, bashed neeps or beef and Yorkshire pudding? Will there be silver birch trees with faery wallpaper behind the stripped bark and will there be spreading oaks with dangling branches where we swing by our legs? Will there be snow-touched Christmas trees that reach to the very top of the staircase – topped with a silver-winged angel the one my sister told me was real. Molly said it flew on Christmas nights decorating angel cakes with tiny silver balls, leaving moon-dust under our pillows and whispering dreams in our ears at midnight.

Mum says we have to start packing our things in to tea chests to send to New

Zealand. I pack some comics and toys. We can't take everything. In goes the Beano, Eagle, Robin and Swift – what would Rupert the Bear, in his yellow tartan trousers, get up to in his next adventure - will there even be comics in New Zealand? My brother, Joe, packs his Meccano set and Dinky toys, carefully wrapping his Hornby train in an old pillowcase. Molly packs her precious life-sized baby doll. The doll I always wanted. We have to leave our bicycles behind.

When Dad returns from his jaunt to the highland games, he films us packing our things to take on the plane. He films us playing on the lawn, riding our bicycles – these we will give to our cousins - and sliding down the staircase on wooden trays. Before we leave we go and visit Dad's work and say goodbye to everyone. There is a fox in a pen outside that smells of urine and damp hay. We visit Granny and Granddad in their pebble-dashed cottage and have oxtail soup and scones. Granny gives me a hug with her warm arms and Granddad sings a Scottish ballad with my father. My brother is allowed to use the cine-camera to film us all. Mum is wiping her eyes with a handkerchief and Molly is doing handstands. Dad will stay back in Scotland to sort out the business and to sell the house.

We travel to Karachi where the sun burns our throats like hot lozenges. The countryside is white with dust and the women wear bright saris. Our family is as pale as the dust and people stare wherever we go. In Hong Kong we are invited to a banquet. My mother adores Chinese food. I don't eat a single thing except to dip my finger in the bowl of sauce – it is salty and black. The women at our table wear red satin dresses with golden dragons on the back – their hair is black as liquorice and their nails are sharp and pointed as chopsticks. I'm hungry and long for a bag of salt and vinegar crisps.

In Thailand, the hotel has lizards sliding up the walls and the heat feels as though I am breathing in over a bowl of hot water. We visit the temple with the Golden Buddha where my sister Molly accidentally touches a monk wearing saffron robes – we are told he will need to wash and pray for seven days.

In Sydney, Mum takes us to visit Taronga Zoo. Molly and I are wearing matching navy sailor-suit dresses with white collars and cream boaters on our heads. I peer in to the cage that houses a very large gorilla – he gathers up a leathery handful of urine-soaked straw, which he then proceeds to pelt at visitors. My boater and face is soon covered. Mum leads me away for a wash and ice-cream cone while my new boater lies crumpled at the bottom of the rubbish bin.

We finally arrive in New Zealand – how green it is and surrounded by water. The

kind of green I used to mix from my paint box – a swish of cadmium and bottle green. In Auckland Mum finds us a house in Titirangi – the 'Fringe of Heaven' – up in the Waitakere ranges. The bush is full of wet ferns and wood pigeons swoop low. Tuis with white bibs sit still at the tops of tall kauri trees and when I look out over the Manukau harbour I see a double rainbow. There are no squirrels or daisies that I can see.

Molly and I make friends with a family down the road from our house. They are fascinated by our Scottish accents and white skin. We are fascinated by their Kiwi accents and smooth brown skin. They have blonde hair with skinny bodies and range in age from four years old up to thirteen. We play a game called 'Ajax' which involves spending a great deal of time running around the bush trying to hide from Ajax. Ajax is a villain who lives underneath a kauri tree and loves to catch wriggling children to boil up in a pot. The pot (an old beaten up saucepan) would be set on top of twigs of manuka – plants and leaves thrown in for extra taste. Only the eldest kids were allowed to be Ajax and they would take it in turns. The thrill of hiding and running reminded us of playing hide-and-seek in our Scottish garden. But how different is the bush! How different are the tall kauris and manuka trees, the nikaus and ponga ferns dripping with moisture and the quiet feel of the land. All we hear is an occasional swoop of a wood pigeon over our heads, the clear bell trill of a tui darting among the flax and the buzzing of cicadas on hot days. On filmy summer days we play in the bush. I run and hide, my breath short and gasping as I realise I'm hiding here alone. Where are the others and where is Ajax? The bush does not seem so friendly now, the dark unfamiliar greenness of it, the way the shadows toss dark patterns at my feet. A weta crawls on a leaf towards my head - giant insect so dark and spiky monstrous. I run.

In the playground at my new school, I stand in my hateful grey pleated Scottish gymslip while the girls, in fresh summer print sundresses, stare at my white-as-a-slug-skin while the boys call me 'Scottie'. The brave ones ask me to recite, "It's a braw bricht moonlit nicht the nicht…" over and over again.

There is a Maori boy in my class who performs a haka so fierce I'm certain he will go through the floorboards - he has flat feet and they hit the floor so hard that chalk dust from the blackboard sifts over him and his nose bleeds. I watch as ruby drop after ruby drop slides down his chin to mingle with sweat and chalk on the stained floorboards making small pools of pale pink liquid. We have leather satchels that smell damp and hang from brass hooks. At lunchtime my sandwiches are soggy with tomato and smears of marmite.

We drink milk through straws from small glass bottles - the milk is warm and disgusting.

Titirangi village is full of 'Bohemians' who gather downstairs in the local coffee bar – the tables, covered with red gingham, have candles placed in squat wine bottles. They flicker and drip into the night. The Bohemians, as Mum calls them, drink black coffee, sing folk songs, share poetry and wear jeans with black polo necked jumpers. Some of the women wear long floating skirts and brown leather sandals. Abstract watercolours and oils hang on hessian-covered walls, brown shiny pottery sits on the shelves and an old guitar stands in a corner. Molly gets a job after school serving coffee and picking the wax off the tablecloths.

Our tea chests full of clothes and toys have arrived from Scotland. We haul out our much-loved games and comics and spend hours sorting and playing in our bedrooms. Dad has arrived and has bought us a hula-hoop. Molly and I practice in the garden spinning the hoop around our hips - soon Molly is able to have it spinning around her neck. My brother uses the hoop as a giant quoit, flinging it over the lawn and on to our dolls that are stuck feet first in to the grass.

A friend of Mum's has offered us their bach at Kare Kare for our summer holiday. We pack up the old green Peugeot with food, rugs, a thermos, togs and towels, clothes and games that include Cluedo, Snakes and Ladders and a pack of cards.

On the way through the Scenic Drive we pass a family of five blonde children being led by their mother. It is the family from down the road, the same children we play 'Ajax' with. They are walking along the winding road that has no footpath. One of them is leading a white kitten by a piece of red ribbon. Mum stops the car beside them, winds down her window and talks to their mother. She tells Mum they are walking to Kare Kare and will stay the night in the camping ground. Mum says she will go back for them after dropping us off at the bach.

The woman is mad! Mum says.

We all stare as we go by. Monty, our golden retriever, drools out of the window his ears flying back like soft velvet bats. I gaze out the window hoping that this time I won't be 'car sick'. Mum has to stop the car twice. The road is full of dusty metal and we have to wind the windows up. Monty's damp breath steams up the glass. As we drive down the hill to Kare Kare the sea is there blue as a polished marble.

The bach is set deep in to the bush with a grassy drive leading to it. Monty leaps out, rolling around on the grass while we unpack the car. After sandwiches and cups of tea

Molly and I explore the bush. There are no daisies. Perhaps they don't grow in New Zealand. The bush behind the bach is close enough to swallow it up whole. We can hear the sea in the distance. Mum tells us not to go swimming as she returns to pick up the family who are walking to Kare Kare.

God knows what she is thinking trying to walk all that way. With children - and a kitten!

As Mum drives off, Joe suggests we go for a walk and take Monty with us. We walk down the dusty road towards the beach. The sun is fierce on my shoulders. Cicadas buzz and the air is hot and still. Monty stops to stare at a tui that has landed on a flax bush. When we arrive at the beach we have to cross a little creek – I am wearing brown socks and sandals. I am not used to having bare feet. Not like the kids at my school. Everyone there seems to have bare feet. I take off my socks and sandals and dip my toes in the cool water then wade over to the black sand on the other side. It is hot! Molly shrieks as she tries to stand on her shoes. Joe runs off over the sand dunes yelling at us to hurry up. Monty shakes his wet fur all over us as we try to put our socks and shoes back on.

Hopeless! Molly says, running after Joe.

I put my sandals on and hold onto my socks. The hot black sand drizzles through to my feet as I try to run up the sand dune. When I get to the other side I see Molly and Joe standing over by a huge rock that looks like a cliff – Monty is there dashing in and out of the small lagoon that sits beside it. I run to the lagoon, take my sandals off and plunge my feet in to the water. Joe starts climbing the cliff and Molly follows him.

Wait for me! I yell.

I start to climb, my small white feet gripping the rock as I slowly clamber up. Molly and Joe are way up further standing on a ledge. As I get closer, I can hear Monty barking at us from below the rock. Molly helps to haul me up on to the ledge and I stand looking out over the beach. I can see for miles! I see the surf throwing itself on to the slick black sand and further down the beach there are more rocks and hills in the distance. There is no one else on the beach. A few birds stand by the water's edge. It is beautiful. Joe says he's going back and starts climbing down.

Wait for us! You have to help us down! Molly yells at him.

But Joe keeps on climbing down. Molly and I are stuck. Molly's hair is whipping about her face. She tells me that she will go down first then I can follow. But when she starts to climb down, she freezes.

I can't do it! It's too far down!

I look down to see Joe in the distance running towards the surf with Monty. There is no one to help us. I sit on the ledge and talk to Molly.

Go down slowly – and don't look down!

Molly is facing the cliff with her hands clinging to the rock face. Slowly she starts to move down until she finally gets to the bottom. I hear her yelling at me but can't make out what she's saying. I start to climb down thinking if Molly can do it then so can I. When I get to the bottom I see Molly standing in the lagoon cooling her feet.

I'm going to kill Joe!

We run down to the surf. The waves look enormous. Joe is throwing a stick to Monty and he bounds in to the water to fetch it. Joe's jeans are rolled up.

You left us up there! Molly yells.

So what? Joe came towards us. You got down didn't you!

I'm telling Mum!

Big deal…

Joe throws the stick out to Monty. It skims along the waves as Monty tries to catch it. His tail flaps like a flag. I walk into the water feeling a shock of cold as the surf hits my ankles. The sand is smooth beneath my feet. I wonder what it would be like to walk in to those waves right up to my neck to feel the water freeze my spine - tiny icicles of bone dissolving in the surf.

We walk down to the end of the beach then on to black rocks. There is a hole where the sea shoots out straight up in to the air. It is terrifying and beautiful at the same time. Back on the beach I find a large stick and write SCOTLAND on the sand. Molly comes over, takes the stick from my hand then draws a line through it and writes NEW ZEALAND underneath. She walks to the edge of the surf then throws the stick out as far as possible. It bobs for a while then disappears under a wave and is swallowed up.

Molly and I walk back to the bach while Joe and Monty run on ahead. Perhaps we will find some daisies and make a chain.

Mary Henderson takes her terrier, Fraser, for a walk along bush-clad Park Road. She has a bent back and wears her tartan hat pulled low over her forehead. Fraser snuffles along lifting his leg at each lamppost and flax bush even though he has nothing much left to deliver. Mary uses the same route every day, walking to the Old Soldiers' Memorial Church and back home again. The church is made of stone and sits between the Toby Jug restaurant and Betty Evans' house.

Betty Evans lives in a white stucco house that has green mildew climbing steadily up the walls like an invading fungus. She is hardly ever seen in Titirangi village these days although is occasionally spotted in a taxi. As Mary approaches Betty's house Fraser starts barking, leaping forward on his leash. Mary tries to restrain him.

No, Fraser! Mary pulls him back but Fraser doesn't give up. He continues to bark jumping up in the air like a small firecracker.

Goodness! Mary stands beside the letterbox while Fraser lunges forward down the path towards the front door. She has no choice but to follow him. Fraser continues to bark skittering about on the faded mat.

Mary Henderson and Betty Evans haven't spoken to each for several years. It is assumed that this was due to Mary's husband Tom deciding to paint Betty. He had studied at Elam art school and since then several commissions had been forthcoming. He was one of the members of the Titirangi group of artists. They would meet regularly to discuss art, drink cheap wine and to rail against the world.

Betty Evans had the look of a porcelain doll - a blonde china doll with a head full of straw. So people presumed. There was no straw inside Betty's head – she could finish cryptic crosswords while making toast, sing arias while basting the lamb and had a secret passion for astronomy. Her husband, Laurie, owned a telescope and they would spend many nights gazing up at the Milky Way and Southern Cross. Laurie had been an officer in the Second World War. His medals lived in a small tin box kept in the basement. They were never taken out – he refused to speak about *that* war.

Next door but one to the Evans' house stands the Old Soldiers' Memorial Church. Betty never attended. She told Laurie she regularly witnessed God while looking through the telescope on moon hazed nights - didn't see the need to sit on a wooden pew to feel *his* embrace. Laurie had died a few years earlier from septicaemia – a piece of shrapnel that had lodged in his spine during the war decided to turn.

It was during one hot summer when cicadas buzzed and clacked and the pohutukawas splashed red against the blue Titirangi sky that Betty met Mary at the local fair. Mary had a stall selling home made preserves and Betty was carefully examining a jar of picallili when Mary commented on the nature of Betty's alabaster skin.

Oil of Ulay and a large umbrella, said Betty promptly buying the picallili.

My husband would love to paint you. You have an interesting chin - you *must* come to one of our musical evenings! You and your husband, I mean. Do you play? Mary asked.

Actually, I am a widow. I do sing a little, replied Betty.

On the evening of the soiree, Betty arrived in a swathe of green velvet carrying a plate of fish-paste sandwiches. Mary greeted her and promptly placed the plate at the far end of the dining table away from the assorted canapés that sat on the lace tablecloth.

This is my husband, Tom, said Mary introducing Betty to the lanky man who towered above them.

Yes, I could definitely paint you, he said cupping Betty's chin in his hand examining her as though she was under a microscope.

Let me introduce you to the others, Mary said.

There were several other people in the room lounging in chairs. A couple of women were sitting on the floor with colourful shawls draped around their shoulders. Mary introduced them as the Wilson sisters. The room glowed with candles and brown shiny pottery – the shelves were covered in jugs, bowls, mugs and plates. On the coffee table oranges and feijoas sat in a large fruit bowl made from a nikau pod. Prints of Picasso, Modigliani and Matisse sat between brilliantly coloured oil paintings by an artist unknown to Betty. These were hung haphazardly. There was also an abundance of macramé.

When Tom started to play the piano, Betty Evans swore she heard the sound of celestial angels tapping their feet on stone. The Wilson sisters appeared to writhe on the floor – two bejewelled snakes locked in a mad dance. Betty did not know quite where to look so instead gazed at Tom's angular fingers as they flew over the keys. The music now reminded her of deep blue water with phosphorescence jingling diamonds on sand.

After supper (*her* sandwiches still sat forlornly at the end of the table) Tom asked if anyone would like to sing.

Betty will! Mary offered.

Betty stood by the piano as Tom asked which key she preferred. The room was hushed as she trilled - her voice almost splintering a set of crystal glasses. Even the shiny pottery appeared to shake on the shelves.

Well, said Mary after the round of applause had died down. I think we all need a drink…

Later that night Tom asked Betty when she could sit for him.

I'm free most afternoons, she said.

We'll start tomorrow then, said Tom. I have a studio out the back – just come down the path and you'll find it. Say two o'clock?

Before she left Mary's house, the Wilson sisters grabbed her in a tight hug and made her promise to visit them for tea one afternoon. As she untangled herself from the embrace of shawls, Mary offered to walk her down the path saying she would be out when Betty came for her portrait sitting.

I go to my pottery class but I'm sure we shall catch up again soon.

Thank you so much for a lovely evening, replied Betty as she gamely found her way down the path covered in Wandering Jew. Betty could smell ginger plant and something else besides - a smoky smell that seemed to linger.

When Betty arrived at the studio the next day Tom was standing outside having a cigarette.

Like one? He proffered the packet.

Oh no, I don't smoke, said Betty.

Which is why you have the voice of an angel, said Tom.

Oh…well...you play beautifully…she murmured.

We won't get anywhere complimenting each other – inside so I can start…! Tom stubbed out his cigarette and held the door open for Betty.

The studio was full of light and there were several canvasses leaning against the wall with their backs towards the room.

May I have a look?

No! I never show anyone my work until I feel ready. Take your jacket off and sit on that chair. Tom pointed to a wicker chair in the corner of the room.

And remove your hat.

Betty did as she was told. Suddenly, there was Tom holding her chin.

Best if you sit straight up with your head leaning slightly to the left.

Tom started working at his easel while Betty sat. The room was quiet apart from the sound of Tom sketching and the occasional bird calling out in the bush.

How long have you been painting? Betty asked.

No talking until we have a break!

Betty jutted her chin out slightly as though to remonstrate with him. He didn't appear to notice. The sunlight fell on her shoulder and her head nodded forward.

Christ! he yelled. Betty started from her chair. Tom flung down his pencil.

Can't see your left ear. Tuck your hair behind it.

Betty felt as though her ear wasn't quite behaving itself properly.

That's better, said Tom. Stay like that!

Her back began to ache as she sat quite still and straight. Tom seemed to fill the small studio with his energy and she felt small and insignificant in the chair. She concentrated on the sounds of the bush. The swoop of the wood pigeon and relentless buzzing of the cicadas, the tui calling occasionally and the far off drone of a small plane.

Right I need a smoke, said Tom after a while. There's water over there if you need a drink. And no looking!

Tom went outside for a cigarette while Betty eased herself out of the chair and went to get the water. She stood looking out the window and could just make out a small patch of bluish green beyond the flax bushes. The Manukau lay out there full of flounder, cockles and pipis. She could almost smell the mud from low tide. Not the prettiest of harbours when the tide was out. Tom came back in and the session continued until he finally put down his pencil.

During the next few weeks as Betty continued to sit for Tom, Mary would often invite her back to the house for a coffee. She would pour strong black coffee in glazed pottery mugs as Betty sat on the sofa trying to avoid dog hairs.

Mary wore long skirts of indeterminate colours and baggy woollen cardigans. The dog was a small terrier called Fraser. He would sit as near to Betty as he could without actually perching on her knee. Betty would move inch by inch further down the settee. Fraser had a pungent scent of wet fur and damp bush. Mary was besotted with him.

You must miss your husband, asked Mary. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to Tom.

It was a long time ago. Of course I still miss him but I've learned to battle on as it were. One just does….

Is there someone in your life now?

Oh no, no…quite happy on my own! Betty replied, rather stridently.

After being given a jar of relish to take with her, Betty walked home along Park Road. The sun was strung between the ferns and kauri trees. A tui warbled up high. She thought about Laurie and wondered if he'd have thought she was foolish still living on her own, still looking through that telescope as though she might catch a glimpse of him on a far off star.

I have my crosswords, the night sky and a few friends, thought Betty.

Laurie had loved to hear her sing, said she could be world famous one day. Betty had laughed – you need to be trained in London, how on earth would I be able to do that? We couldn't afford it and I couldn't leave you to go trotting around the world! Laurie hugged her and said well I bet I'm the only lucky bloke who has an opera singer for a wife…!

When Betty arrived home she picked up the newspaper that was sitting in her letterbox. The house was damp and small and had a view of the Manukau that never ceased to surprise her. There was the orange red cement ship making its way to Onehunga, there were a couple of fishing boats and she could see a small yacht with its handkerchief white sail in the distance. She put the newspaper on the table, shoving other papers out of the way and sat down to read.

Betty enjoyed her daily walk to Tom's studio and felt almost sad that the portrait would soon be finished. There was something peaceful about sitting in the wicker chair as Tom dipped and weaved with his paintbrush. Listening to the sounds of the bush made her feel alive.

Finished! Tom sauntered around the easel and placed his brush in the milky water.

Brought some fizzy wine to celebrate! He pointed to a bottle that was sitting on the bench, got up, washed a couple of jars under the tap, popped the cork and poured.

Here you go, he said handing Betty a small jar. Bottoms up!

Betty took a sip and felt the bubbles tickle her throat.

I don't usually drink in the middle of the afternoon. She hiccupped.

I've done a bloody masterpiece, he said.

Can I see it?

No! Much rather surprise you at the unveiling.

With that he walked over to the easel and stood in front of the painting.

Think you'll like how I've captured your essence – you are a very beautiful woman you know. He stared across at her as she stood with her back to the studio window clutching her jar of wine.

I'd love to see it now.

Tom walked towards her. Beautiful things are worth waiting for, he said.

He took her small jar of drink, placed it on the bench and leaned down to kiss her.

Betty felt his fingers at her skin and pulled away. I must go…

You haven't finished your drink.

He picked up the jar and placed it against her lips. She managed a mouthful then spluttered. He then put the jar back down and began to kiss her. He pulled her to the floor and they lay along the rug that covered the wooden floor.

Tom's fingers exploring, Laurie spying up beyond cloud blankets, Mary whipping up relishes with delight, chopping gerkhins, smelling onions, sorting jars of promise. Other jars full of opaque water paintbrushes dipped and cleansed. Rough hessian tacked on the studio walls. Back of the easel wooden crossed and crucified. Tom's pale misshapen big toe, the rug frayed as though clipped with pinking shears. The air still and trapped, a fly walking in aspic, breathing through jelly. Lolloping wet leaves on damp windows the wind thrumming through cracks. Dust travelling on sunlight.

We have an open relationship…Mary won't mind, Tom said pulling at her blouse.

God no! Betty was already on her feet. She stood by the door.

Tom caught her arm and grinned. I'll let you know about the unveiling, he said.

Betty scurried down the path covered in weeds. Once home, she ran a large bath and soaked in it as she looked out over towards the Manukau. The sea was a dull grey.

Weeks went by. Betty avoided going up to the village or walking anywhere near Mary and Tom's house. Mary then phoned inviting her to another musical evening. Betty declined.

Then you must pencil in the date for the unveiling…! We shall bring the painting over to you. I'm inviting a few people. Is there anyone you'd like to ask?

I will let you know, said Betty.

As the day drew nearer Betty reluctantly invited a few people she knew. She bought some sherry, wine and a selection of canapés. She didn't want to see the bloody painting, let alone have Tom standing in her sitting room.

An open relationship! Leaping off with someone and pretending your wife or husband didn't mind! Betty had heard of parties in Titirangi where guests would put their keys in a bowl and people would then choose a key and partner up with the owner of that key. How on earth would one be able to face one another in the butchers or the dairy the next day or see their children get off the school bus or bump in to one of the wives at the library!

The village was now a den of 'Bohemian' types. Betty had gone up to the dairy recently and thought she would call in for a coffee at the café next door. Going downstairs to find a table, she was appalled – the café walls were now covered in dark hessian with garish artwork and candles placed in raffia bottles. There was a young man playing the guitar in the corner sounding off-key with a whining voice. She didn't wait for her coffee. She thought of leaving Titirangi - perhaps to live somewhere more sensible.

The little white stucco house by the sea called her back. Reminded her of waking up to the sound of birds in the dawn chorus, hearing the wind riffle through the kauri trees, the hum of cicadas during the summer, the mournful call of the morepork with the moon skudding silver across the water, the same water out in the Manukau in daylight changing from grey sludge green to Prussian blue, watching boats as they trawled the coast, walking along her beloved Park Road.

Betty vowed to stay home, concentrate on her crosswords and look for stars. She would listen to the radio; to classical music, sing along to opera or play one of Laurie's old albums. 'Madama Butterfly' was her favourite. When she heard 'One Fine Day' or the 'Humming Chorus', she thought of Laurie - he would be sitting in his favourite chair with the Black Watch tartan rug on his knee, his pipe nearby. They would have a glass of Bristol Cream, listen to Bach, Beethoven, Rimsky-Korsakov or Rachmaninov.

On the evening of the unveiling, Betty made mushroom vol au vents for the gathering. She was curious to see how the portrait had turned out, to see whether Tom had actually 'captured her essence' as he said he had. After getting dressed and splashing a dab of Chanel on each wrist, she went down to the kitchen to prepare the supper and to lay it out on the table. Some of her Country Women's Institute friends had been invited (acquaintances more than true friends) and she wanted things to look their best.

The damask tablecloth was on the table and the vase of deep blue hydrangeas she'd recently picked were looking fresh against the stark white cloth. The fire was laid with pine

cones sitting at the ready. Betty put on one of Laurie's albums and fortified herself with a glass of sherry.

As she sat listening to the soft sounds of Bach she pictured Tom's skeletal fingers as they danced over her back, as they nestled in to the nape of her neck. She lit the fire and waited.

Knock at the door – Tom and Mary! Tom wearing his rakish beret and Mary dressed in what appeared to be an old curtain sewn up as a kaftan. Tom carefully carried in the covered painting while Mary set the easel down in the sitting room.

Over here by the window I think Tom, she said. She went back out to the car to bring in her plate for supper.

Haven't seen you around lately, Tom smiled.

Would you like a glass of wine? Betty asked.

Betty moved swiftly in to the kitchen and brought out a cold bottle of white wine.

Or would you prefer a glass of red?

Don't you have any champagne…? Tom winked.

Mary returned with a plate of cheese cubes on sticks (with olives) and placed it on the table.

I have brought some homemade pickle and a bottle of Tom's home brew – be careful it will blow your head off. Well now, this does look lovely!

Mary looked around the room then poured herself a glass of wine.

Must be a fabulous view during the day!

People started arriving, bringing several 'plates' and wine. Some of the men had brought an assortment of whisky and beers. Eventually Tom stood, stoked the fire and coughed…

Time, people, time!

Betty stood close to the kitchen. Some guests were seated, some remained standing and chatting while others refilled their glasses. They all turned to look at Tom as he walked over to the painting and whipped off the velvet drape - there was Betty Evans portrayed in shades of purple and green with one of her ears situated at the top of her head while the other one sat below her neck. One eye looked straight ahead, and the other eye meandered off somewhere in the direction of heaven.

There was a collective gasp.

Oh how clever you are, Tom! You have really captured her elusive quality, said Mary.

You have Betty down to a tee, the Wilson sisters chorused with their long scarves hovering dangerously near the fireplace.

Enigmatic! Jocelyn Burrell whispered to her husband, the local dentist. She didn't quite know what else to say. He raised an eyebrow and carried on drinking his Scotch.

The women from the Country Women's Institute looked at each other and said nothing. Marjory Preston, the leading light and President of the women's group, managed to nudge her friend Patricia Williams in the ribs while Patricia caught the eye of the small Dutch woman, who owned the local haberdashery up in the village, receiving a lopsided grin in response before quickly dabbing her mouth with a napkin.

After that evening, whenever Betty was spotted at the local shops children would point and laugh. There's the lady who has an ear on top of her head!

From then on Betty stayed home, collected newspapers, did crosswords and stared out over the Manukau. Peered through the binoculars at oyster shells lying discarded as many shucked pirate bones – bleached and razor dangerous. Stared at people picnicking on the grassy edge of the beach, the wind whipping strands of hair, sandwiches curling under hot sun. Stared at the low tide mud slick glugging with holes where pipis hid. Sipped at her sherry and grew older - old and pale as beached driftwood.

The years slipped by and one calm day as Mary walked Fraser to the end of Park Road, Betty Evans lay on her kitchen floor covered in old newspapers. Her heart had given out. The newspaper covering her cheek had the faded headline, 'New Zealand to send troops to Vietnam'. Betty Evans was a pacifist.

Someone reported seeing a lady wearing a tartan hat holding a small excitable dog peering through the window earlier that afternoon.

A painting was later discovered beneath several piles of newspapers. It was covered in mould.

My mother uses several voices. There is her phone voice, her theatrical voice, her voice that lowers in pitch when demanding our attention, her soft, slurry, sherry voice, her voice that could freeze the Mojave desert and her voice full of English plums (this one she uses on a daily basis).

The voice I hear this morning is none of the above.

It is Labour Day morning. Light oozes through the net curtains and the blankets are up to my chin. My sister snores softly in the other bed. My mother walks over to my sister and I hear her say, in a voice I don't recognize,

I'm sorry, darling. Daddy died this morning.

I pretend I haven't heard. She then walks over to my bed - I hold a fistful of blanket, keeping my eyes shut. She repeats her words – I refuse to look at her.

She tugs softly at the blankets and I bury my head under my pillow. She walks out of the room. My sister is crying. I get up and look at her then crawl into her bed and we hold each other tight.

Ooh, yuck your pyjamas are all wet, Molly snuffles. Move over!

Is it true - about Dad? I ask.

I guess so. We'd better get up.

I go into the bathroom and run a bath. I put my head under the water and hear an echoing sound as though I'm in a submarine. I want to stay down here forever.

When I am dressed I pick up my violin case with the faded red velvet inside and carefully take out my golden honeyed violin. I rub resin over the bow, walk into the kitchen and start to play. My mother looks at me in astonishment, a cigarette in the side of her mouth the ash falling slowly on to the Formica table. Her hand shakes as she picks up her cup. My sister stares at me as she pours herself a cup of tea from the brown china teapot. I keep on playing. Then I put my violin on the table and walk in to my mother's bedroom. I open the wardrobe door and find my father's shirts. There is a green woollen tie hanging over one of his shirts. He has those shirts with the checks in them that came from Scotland. I hold it and breathe in his smell.

A few weeks ago, before Dad went in to Kingseat, my sister and I put on a play in the garden. We wrote it ourselves and wore costumes my sister had made out of old curtains. Calico sprinkled with gold glitter. Molly wrote most of it and gave me the part of a dying fairy. Mum, Dad and Joe sat on the garden bench and we performed our piece.

Towards the end of the play I fell to the ground then put my head up and said, 'I've withered.' Molly yelled that that wasn't in the script and walked off. Joe laughed.

Later, we sat on the grass and had a picnic. Mum had made a bacon and egg pie. Dad had a flask with his special drink in it and we drank cups of tea and ate sweets that look like poached eggs – the orange yoke made of jelly.

Later that night, when we were in bed, I heard Mum and Dad arguing and crawled in to bed with Molly. We covered our ears. The sky was bleeding – blood red with a haze. I could smell fresh cut grass and cigarettes. A morepork called. There were no other sounds except for my mother's cut-glass stinging voice. I couldn't hear what Dad said. In the night I woke up and grabbed the Milk Arrowroot biscuit I had hidden under my pillow. I wanted a glass of milk so went out in to the kitchen. Dad was beside the fridge drinking from the milk bottle. I went back to bed.

. When dawn came, I felt a kick on my leg and Molly shoved me out of bed. My pyjamas were sopping. Mum had taken me to the doctor and he suggested I wear a harness thing that gives an electric shock when you first start to pee. My brother came in once and turned it on, on purpose. Mum took it back.

When I started at my new school I made a friend called Jenny. I invited her to stay the night one weekend and met her off the bus. She was carrying her bag and had a bundle under her arm.

Hello, I said.

Hi – I have to tell you something, she blurted. I wet the bed…I had to bring a rubber sheet…

So do I…! We jumped up and down on the footpath and hugged each other.

After dinner, when the wind rustled the pine trees in the garden and the stars became tiny sequins in the night sky we sat in the dark hallway and told each other ghost stories. All the doors were shut. Molly told the best ones. Joe spoiled everything by bursting through the door with a sheet over his head.

I had been worried at dinner that Dad would have too many whiskies but he had gone out. To see a man about a dog, he had said. Mum made 'toad in the hole'. Jenny had never heard of it before – it is sausages baked in a pie. Like a big Yorkshire pudding with sausages hidden in it.

Later that night when we were supposed to be asleep in bed Molly said, Let's go down the road and meet the others!

The ‘others’ were our gang – mostly made up of me, my sister, and the Crawford kids, Linda, Janie, Runty and Flats. Runty’s real name is Mick - they call him Runty as he’s short – he’s the leader of the gang. Flats has large feet like paddles, never wears shoes and is really called Trevor. Joe calls us the Clawful gang – thinks we’re stupid.

We climbed out of our bedroom window and ran down the drive. We met the others under the streetlamp. It was glowing orange and when you looked out from the hill you could see the whole of Auckland lit up, shining. We crept down to the Taylor house and Runty told us to stuff clumps of mown grass through the boys’ bedroom window. Jenny didn’t want to but Linda talked her in to it. Janie got the giggles so Flats threw damp grass at her and we ran back home. We didn’t like those Taylor boys much. One of them always has a snotty nose. Runty said they were dumb. My heart was hammering and Jenny couldn’t stop laughing.

Jenny has hair that falls like a curtain covering half of her face – just like Veronica Lake. Mine is cut like Dinah Lee’s - short and cropped. We call each other Veronica and Dinah and think we will be film stars when we grow up. Molly doesn’t agree. I wished I had long hair – hair that I could twist and plait, thread daisies and weave magic through. Mum said my haircut is stylish and urchin-like - gamin.

When Jenny went back home Mum took me out to visit Dad at Kingseat Hospital. She told me I could wear my black patent leather shoes and white socks, which are usually only for best. We drove for miles out towards south Auckland. I looked out the window, the sky was swirled in grey, bundles of sheep were grazing and the pine trees swayed towards me as though they had something important to tell. Listen, listen they whispered. I wanted to be somewhere else, I wanted to sit by an open fire with a bowl of soup, read my book while the pine cones blustered and crackled in the grate. I could lose myself in that fire. When we arrived at the gates of Kingseat, Mum stopped and lit a cigarette.

You might get a shock when you see Dad but just try to act normal, she said.

What’s wrong with him, Mum?

He’s not well, the smoke curled through her nostrils. He drinks too much and they’re trying to cure him.

Oh, I said. I thought you had to have a disease to go to hospital.

Come on, we better drive up, she said.

The gates were creamy concrete and the buildings were tall and block-like. We found the reception desk and a thin woman wearing a mustard cardigan pointed down the corridor.

First ward on the left, she sniffed.

The brown linoleum was worn and scuffed and the walls were painted dirty cream at the top and a dull green halfway down reaching to the floor. There was a strong smell of disinfectant and something like burnt porridge. We walked in to the ward and there were several beds lined up – cream iron beds with sail-like covers in blue stripes that looked as though they could sail down a purple sea creaking as they crossed the harbour. The men in the beds had sea-dog beards. Some of the beds had curtains pulled around them. One man was making a strange noise. Perhaps I could launch Dad's bed boat and help him escape to Rangitoto. Mum pointed and we walked towards the bed. The man in the bed wasn't my father – this man had grey stringy hair down to his shoulders and long nails.

Give your father a kiss, said Mum .I didn't want to - then I saw that the finger on his right hand was burnt orange from his smoking and thought then that he *might* be my Dad but he wasn't my *real* Dad. He just didn't look the same. My real Dad was back at home pouring tea from the brown china pot asking if I wanted it long or short. Long was pouring the tea in to my cup from a great height and short was, well, short…He asked me this every time I had a cup of tea. He would laugh, tell me jokes and dance a highland fling before he ate his porridge, he would sprinkle salt on his porridge and never ever have sugar….

Perhaps this man in the bed was a *pretend* Dad – I wondered where my real Dad had gone. I sat on the chair beside the bed while Mum put things in Dad's locker - some chocolate and a bottle of Lucozade. Pretend Dad looked like a prisoner wearing a striped pyjama top. Mum talked to him while I looked out the window. There was a nurse crossing the grass with a blue cape that billowed out behind her, a man sat on a bench and kept scratching his head, a piece of paper flew in to the air dancing its way down on to a rose bush and the trees kept swaying in the wind. I wanted to run outside and ask them what their message was.

Right, time to go, Mum said. Give your father a kiss goodbye.

I stood up. I've got my black patent leather shoes on, Dad – can I dance on your toes?

When Mum and Dad went out dancing, Dad would wear his shiny patent leather shoes and I would stand on his toes as he danced me around the room.

Dad just shook his head and tried to give me a smile. I leaned over to kiss him and his cheek scratched my cheek – I was kissing my pretend Dad.

Bye Dad, I said.

Mum looked strange as we walked back down the corridor and held my hand too tightly.

We drove back. Mum smoked a cigarette in the car, the smoke tailing and twirling out of the window. I made up songs in my head, watched the cows in the paddocks, pretending I was travelling through a foreign country. Mum didn't say much on the way back.

How long will he be in there? I asked.

I don't know darling, until they say he can be released I suppose.

When will he be cured?

I'm not sure he will be. We'll just have to hope for the best. Bloody shock treatment doesn't seem to be working. They say it's supposed to work. I don't think they bloody well know what they're talking about. Just look at the state of him, he's not even…

Mum suddenly stopped and looked at me.

Sorry darling, you weren't supposed to know that.

I fingered my hair. Shock treatment - what do you mean? Does someone give him a shock like those times we tell ghost stories in the corridor and we get a fright if suddenly the door opens or Jenny screams like she did last time…?

Mum sighed. No, no, not like that... Now, what I really need is a cup of tea.

The car smelled of smoke and sadness and of our dog. We stopped at a little café for a cup of tea and club sandwiches. The sandwiches had tinned asparagus in them so I gave mine to Mum and had a mince savoury instead. The tables were covered in floral tablecloths and there were bottles of tomato sauce on each table. There were several old people eating at a table. One man was dribbling.

Don't stare! Mum said.

The tea came in a stainless steel pot and leaked every time Mum poured – I got the giggles.

Sssh, she sort of laughed.

I kept thinking of my Dad – the one that didn't seem real - in his bed and hoped he would have sailed off by now with some of the other pirate patients. Perhaps they could wash up on a deserted island, drink coconut juice and eat pineapples. I could come and visit. I could take the dinghy and row out with some provisions and my dog for company.

Come on slow coach, said Mum. We have to go home.

We drove all the way back to Titirangi. When we reached the foothills of the Waitakeres the air was misty. The Manukau was dark and grey. I was glad to get home.

Molly was in the bedroom when I went in. She asked how Dad was.

He isn't our real Dad, I said.

Don't be stupid, of course he is!

He isn't, I insisted. He doesn't look like our Dad.

Well he is our Dad silly. It's because he's sick that he looks different. Molly carried on painting her fingernails.

Why didn't you come with us? I asked.

I was busy and anyway I went last time.

When do you think he'll come home, Molly?

She sighed. I don't know - you'll have to ask Mum. Then she looked at me. He might never come home you know…

Molly put the nail polish on to the dressing table and stood up. You'll have to be brave. Mum doesn't think he'll get any better.

Mum said he was having shock treatment, I said. What does it mean?

You shouldn't know about that!

I don't know what Mum means - she wouldn't tell me…I replied.

I don't want to talk about it right now, I'll tell you later. Anyway I'm off to Youth Club and you'll have to stay here because Mum's coming too.

Mum helped out at Youth Club once a week. The hall was across the road from our house. I couldn't wait to be old enough to go too.

Well, I'm going to watch Doctor Who and The Avengers and you'll miss them! I said.

Too bad! Molly said, opening the wardrobe door.

She pulled out a green mini skirt and her Beatle boots. From the chest of drawers she found her black polo-neck jumper and put that on, then the skirt and boots. Then she started putting on her make-up.

Mum will go mad at you if you wear too much pancake!

Mum had chased Molly once, all the way down our drive and along Park Road because my sister had put on too much pancake make-up and thick black eyeliner.

You look like a clown! No daughter of mine is going out looking like that! Molly had to stay home. She was furious with Mum and sulked all night.

I don't think Mum will even notice – too much sherry…

Molly drew a black line under her left eye, then under her right.

You just want to look like Twiggy! I said.

Ha ha… Molly sniggered.

Mum was in the kitchen when I came out. There was a glass of sherry beside her as she peeled the potatoes.

I'm going to put these in the pressure cooker then have a lie down. You girls will have to keep an eye on it. She put the potatoes on, finished her sherry then walked to her bedroom and closed the door.

I loathed that pressure-cooker and avoided having anything to do with it. When Molly came out I told her that Mum said she had to keep an eye on the potatoes, then went and turned the television on. Monty our golden retriever curled up by my feet as I watched Mister Ed.

When Mum got up, her eyes were swimmy and red. She started putting the dinner on. You girls can lay the table. God knows where your brother is!

My brother had an old Triumph motorbike and would ride it most weekends out to Piha and Karekare. He would wear jeans and a black jumper, sharp pointed boots and my Dad's old flying jacket that was lined with sheepskin, even in the middle of summer, and once covered his face with Coppertone quick tanning lotion and was completely orange when he woke up the next day.

Sometimes he would drive my Mum's car up to Titirangi village – it was an old Peugeot painted green the colour of a poisonous frog and it had no muffler. I used to ask Mum to drop me down the road from school and not by the front gate when she took me there. When Mum and I drove through the village I saw a group of boys wearing jeans and duffel coats standing outside the café. They gave us the fingers. I told Mum and in her lemon tart voice she replied that she would be speaking to my brother.

Later that night, while I was watching the creepy Daleks on Doctor Who, Monty got up and walked over to my Mum's bedroom and started whining.

When Mum and Molly came back from Youth Club, I told them about Monty who was still sitting outside Mum's bedroom door.

Maybe he needs to go outside, said Mum. Come on Monty.

He wouldn't budge. No matter what Mum said he wouldn't move so she had to step over him to get to her room.

Monty had always been 'Mum's' dog and would follow her everywhere. Once when she was collecting mussels out at Piha he jumped in to try and save her. Ended up pushing her right under the sea.

After we went to bed Molly had a cigarette, slyly puffing out of our bedroom window. As I lay in bed I asked again about Dad.

You have to tell me what shock treatment is, I said.

Don't worry about it! It's too late and I'm going to bed. Talk about it tomorrow.

The next day Mum came in and told us the news that Dad had died in the night. Maybe that was why Monty had been acting strangely. After breakfast I took my violin back to my room and put it carefully in the wardrobe. I stared out the window and thought about the dinghy rowing out to the island.

Perhaps Dad did manage to escape. Perhaps he's built a house out there and we can all go and live in it - away from the wet bush and concrete incinerator smell of burnt damp ashes by the yellowing kowhai, the chemical toilet emptied unwillingly in to the deep pit dug in the bush, mice scratches in the butter, pressure cooker whistling cruel steam threatening to explode, mildew in the bathroom making pictures of sea birds, witches, clouds on the ceiling as you lie in the bath, away from the squabs on the kitchen box seats under which my sister hides her peas, away from the gravel drive so steep my mother slides all over it in her poisonous frog car, away from ants in the sugar bowl and dead plums in the nikau bowl, away from the spot on the kitchen ceiling where pancakes are thrown, away from shiny guinea pig black poo pebbles on the couch and carpet, away from the spider webbed basement where I hid my friend.

I wondered how my brother would get his motorbike over to the island. He hadn't spoken to anyone and had taken off earlier in the morning. Mum sat at the table smoking and pouring cups of tea.

Mrs Henderson from down the road brought Mum a casserole, some Anzac biscuits and lemon honey spread. Mrs Walters made us a fish pie.

We didn’t go to school the next day. I woke up remembering my dream. Dad was in a dinghy floating out to sea carrying a large brown teapot pouring long and short in to the cool water.

I'd like to paint your daughters, said the man standing outside the Titirangi chemist.

Mum looked at him in surprise.

I whispered to Molly, Why does Jesus want to paint us?

He's not Jesus!

Well he looks like him - look at his beard!

The man had a flowing beard that rippled off his chin and eyes that looked like the Jesus painting at my friend's house – *his* eyes followed you round the room no matter where you stood.

Anyway, said Molly, it's Mr Henderson, Mrs Henderson's husband, stupid!

Oh, I said.

The Henderson's lived a few doors along from us in Park Road. Mrs Henderson had brought us preserves and casseroles when Dad died and sometimes she would bring us homemade biscuits. I often saw her walking along the road with her little dog, Fraser. Whenever I bent down to pat him he always smelled of damp wool.

Ok, Tom, said Mum, I guess that would be all right. When were you thinking of?

I was hoping Mum would say we could do it on Saturday morning then get out of doing the chores.

How about Sunday afternoons? Tom asked.

Molly and I looked at each other…

Fine, said Mum. I'll send them over.

In the car I asked her why he wanted to paint us. Mum said he was getting a name for himself as one of the group of 'Titirangi painters' – he'd said to Mum that we looked a little lost.

I wasn't lost, I thought. Molly looked out of the window. I knew she was hoping that none of her friends were up in the village as Mum drove by in her noisy car. Mum could never quite see above the steering wheel and drove peering through it as though using a periscope. Mum suddenly hooted at a car in front of us as it stopped on the side of road.

As we passed by she went to shake her fist then realised it was the Vicar's car and changed it to a wave.

I'm not having my portrait painted if it comes out looking like Mrs Evan's one! Molly retorted.

Mrs Evans had had her portrait painted by Mr Henderson and the whole village had talked about it for weeks afterwards.

It was supposed to be an abstract painting, said Mum. I'm sure you girls won't be painted in that way...

Mrs Evans had died a couple of years ago - her body had been discovered under piles of old newspapers. Mum said she was a true eccentric. I never liked walking past that house.

When we arrived home, my brother was standing at the bottom of the drive with his motorbike.

We're going to have our portrait painted, I said.

Big deal, said Joe. Some friends are picking me up soon so I need you to guard my motorbike until I come back.

Okay, I said. Where are you going?

I dunno. Off to Muriwai, I think. I don't want anyone pinching my bike while I'm gone!

Joe sometimes wore brylcreem in his hair and once sat in the bath with his jeans on to make them shrink and ended up with piles.

When will you be back? I asked.

Dunno I said!

My brother could get mad really quickly but other times he was okay. He used to shoot our toys with a slug gun and at dinner was often sent to the laundry as Mum said his manners were *deplorable* and that he had behaved *abominably*. She would use her ice cube voice. Abominably was her favourite word lately.

I went up the drive to tell Mum I would be guarding the motorbike.

Well, tell your brother he'd better be home soon as I want some wood chopped.

Okay, I said.

I drank a glass of milk, took some cushions, apples and my book and went back down the drive. Joe had gone so I sat beside the bike and waited. I'd finished my apple and was reading my book when a wood pigeon flew low over my head with a swishing soft sound.

The bush was alive with cicadas. Fat hydrangeas and dust-covered agapanthus grew along the side of the road. I sat on the bike and pretended I was a secret service spy in the French resistance - wished I'd worn my beret.

Hey Smoko!

I looked around, couldn't see anyone and hoped it wasn't a Nazi hiding in the bush.

Boys at school called me Smoko because I was short.

Who is it? I called.

What are you doing on that motorbike?

Come out and I'll tell you.

Only if I can have a ride, said the voice.

Okay.

Out of the bush walked Campbell. He was in my class at school and had a brother with cerebral palsy.

That's not your bike! He walked around it touching the metal trying to kick the wheels.

Stop it else I won't let you on, I said. Anyway it's my brother's and he'll kill you if you damage it.

All right, all right keep your hair on!

I knew he was just repeating what his father always said to his mother. I got off and Campbell climbed on pretending to rev the handlebars.

I could ride this it's easy.

No it's not and anyway you need to have lessons and you're not old enough.

Who cares? I'll have a bigger bike when Dad buys me one.

I ignored him.

Can I've an apple?

I gave him one of my apples and he sat on the bike crunching it, dribbling out of his mouth.

So where's your brother - why isn't he riding it? Spittle ran down his chin.

He's gone out and I have to guard it for him

Some guard, said Campbell throwing the core over my head.

You need a real guard for this job, how much is your brother paying you?

Nothing. He's going to give me a ride when he comes back,

Yeah well I'll help you then I'll get a ride too.

I didn't want his help. I could do this job by myself.

My brother's going to be ages, I said.

I can wait, he said and sat on the bike leaning over the handles as though he was in a race.

Brrrmmmm….brrrmmmm…

I heard my mother calling me up on the drive.

Come up for lunch!

I didn't want to leave the bike with Campbell still on it.

Your Mum's calling you, he said.

I know!

I stood at the bottom of the drive and called up to her, I can't come up can you bring it down!

Mum came down with Monty following her, barking and twisting around her legs.

Get off Monty – they're not for you! This is ridiculous, she said handing me some sandwiches, you can't stay down here forever. Oh hello Campbell, shouldn't you be going home for lunch?

He's about to go, aren't you? I looked at Campbell willing him to move.

Yeah s'pose so….

He reluctantly got off the bike and sauntered down the road. Mum went up the drive with Monty. I sat down on the cushion and ate my cheese sandwiches. Sun shadows crept through the tea trees. I drifted off.

Mum says you have to come up now!

Molly was staring at me. You have to come up and help with dinner.

But Joe said I'm not to leave the bike!

I uncurled myself from the cushions and stood up. Noticed shadows had now covered the road. The air was cool.

You've been down here for hours. Mum says you're mad. Joe won't be back for God knows how long!

She sounded just like Mum with her spiked voice.

I don't care - I promised!

He won't even notice and I'm not peeling all those vegetables by myself.

Molly flounced back up the drive as I slowly gathered up the cushions and my book. The bush was gloomy. I was kind of glad I had to go back up.

Over dinner we argued about what we should wear for the painting session the next day. Joe arrived back late and Mum was furious.

Where have you been! You've behaved abominably – you do realise your sister waited down the drive all day and half the night guarding your precious bike!

Well I didn’t make her!

See told you he’d forgotten! Molly smirked.

I made patterns in the gravy with my fork and stabbed at the roast meat. Joe got up and took his dinner in to the laundry.

We were going to have our portraits painted. Molly wasn't very happy about it but I was curious. How was Mr Henderson going to do it? Would we end up looking like Mrs Evans with ears on top of our heads or maybe perched somewhere else on our bodies – the kids at school would laugh if that were to happen.

Or perhaps he would paint us like a pair of Siamese twins 'joined at the hip', which was one of Mum's favourite expressions. Perhaps Molly and I would have our heads stuck together – one huge bulbous head with four pairs of eyes swivelling at you as you walked around the room. Like one of those hydrocephalus babies I saw in an old medical book. My sister once said there was this place that kept vials and jars full of murky solution with floating foetuses inside - misshapen babies not made for this world. I felt slightly sick when she told me this.

I wore my forest green corduroy trousers and brown skivvy and Molly, who had wanted to wear her vinyl mini skirt, had to wear a pair of navy trousers and a dark blue polo neck jumper.

No make-up! Mum said. And be polite!

We walked up Park Road towards the Henderson's house. The bush was dripping and the misty air was thick. Tendrils curled out between kauri trees. It was two o'clock on a wet Sunday afternoon.

Do you miss Dad? I asked Molly.

Of course!

I could talk to Molly about Dad. Even though she could be grumpy at times it was okay to talk about him. I would still feel a tightening in my chest as though he was squeezing me. Felt worse if someone else asked about him - if it was one of the neighbours or adults up in the village or any of the kids from school.

Do you miss your father. What did he die of. How is your mother managing. You poor kids fancy your mother having to deal with that. Is your brother helping your Mum. You girls look so pale and wan. What was the funeral like. Did you see him in his casket. How did he die again?

My throat would close up and a large fist would sit in the space where I swallowed.

A heart attack or cancer, I would reply. Depending on who was asking - I couldn't say 'cirrhosis of the liver' it sounded unmentionable, snake-like. There was something embarrassing about it as though normal people didn't die of things like that. Mum didn't like to talk about it. A heart attack sounded clean. Or cancer.

Wonder where he is now, I asked.

Up there somewhere, said Molly.

I looked up - the clouds were dirty grey like old woollen hospital blankets thrown carelessly into the sky. I hoped Dad would have had his hair trimmed by now and his nails cut - hoped there were endless hot baths, porridge with salt and glasses of whisky. And shortbread biscuits, he liked those.

Come on, said Molly. Hope Mrs Henderson has made Afghans!

We loved those Afghan biscuits. Crispy chocolate, crunchy walnut. The biscuit dissolved in your mouth like sherbert. Fraser skittered down the path to meet us.

Hello Fraser you silly little dog!

That's not Fraser! He died. This one's called McTavish.

Molly always knew more about what was going on in the neighbourhood than I did. I was too busy making up poems and plays to notice if anything much had changed.

But he looks just like Fraser!

That's because Mrs Henderson always chooses the same sort of dog; small, silly and Scottish, aren't you McTavish!

She tickled his tummy. The dog had a dark green tartan jacket on and he rolled around on the wet leaves. We arrived at the house and Mrs Henderson opened the door.

Hello girls. Tom, Tom, she called. The girls are here!

I could smell baking. Wished Mum would bake. Wished she would wear an apron and have floury hands when we got home from school like the other Mums did - make scones or gems, sponges with fresh cream, Anzacs or coconut chocolate clusters. She cooked things like ratatouille, beef stroganoff, borscht, toad-in-the-hole or curried sausages with sultanas. Nothing sweet. Except for steamed pudding or blancmange, which I hated. The thick skin sitting on top of the bowl waiting to be peeled back like the sunburned skin on my brother's back. He loved someone peeling it off him. Not me. I wouldn't, but Molly would.

Mr Henderson with his tangled Jesus beard took us up to the studio and asked us to stand in the middle of the room

I'm going to paint you two standing together so hold hands and just look towards me. Oh and take your shoes off.

He stood behind his easel. I wanted to giggle when Molly took my hand but she shot me a look.

That's it now just relax.

We seemed to stand there for ages. My neck and back started to feel stiff and Molly's hand felt clammy.

I looked out of the window and saw the kowhai tree full of flower, buttery yellow - it reminded me of eating pancakes and my stomach gurgled. Molly tightened my hand.

Thought of Dad and wondered what he would think of us standing in Mr Henderson's studio. Dad had laughed when he saw how Mrs Evans had been painted. He had been at the Henderson's with Mum on the night of the 'unveiling'. Said he had to have a stiff scotch before he could face anyone. Dad liked landscapes in watercolours or oils - paintings of stags standing in the Scottish highlands or of waterfalls or the sea. Mum preferred abstracts. She liked the artwork on the walls and the way Mrs Henderson would fuss and bake and make everyone feel comfortable, even though she said at times they weren't exactly 'their sort of people'…and why would anyone call curtains drapes or napkins serviettes. Or have a toilet seat cover. And of course it should be called 'lavatory'.

Quite beyond me, she said. They were very good when your father died, though.

Many of Mum's friends didn't appear until the funeral. She said it was people like the Henderson's, 'who really didn't have two coins to rub together', and Mrs Walters, the local house cleaner, who provided the most support. Bringing casseroles and stews, baked puddings, home made relishes and biscuits.

Salt of the earth, Mum had said.

After our painting session had finished we had tea and biscuits with Mrs Henderson and admired her latest pottery collection. She was now making small glazed people – tiny people that seemed to be wrapped in blankets. All you could see were their little faces peeping out. They were done in colours of mustard and shiny orange.

I'm going to be selling these at the market on Sundays. What do you think, girls? Do you think the ladies will buy some? Collector's items if I'm not mistaken! Give or take a few years…

Lovely, we said simultaneously. They're so sweet!

Actually I wasn't sure they would sell. We thought they were cute but couldn't see the ladies in the neighbourhood snapping them up. They liked proper pottery – a mug or bowl not funny little people swathed in clay blankets. These little figures reminded me of the Wombles.

Here you are, she put one each in our hands. Show your mother, she might like to buy some. Tell her I'll be having a stall at the market every Sunday end of the month.

Okay, we said.

As we walked back home fingering our little people Molly said, Mum will think she's dotty.

Mum had brought her antique pottery out from Britain; there was a beautiful Chinese vase in blue and white picturing a blossoming tree and under it a path that trailed right around the vase leading up to a mountain pictured on the neck of the vase. I always imagined being up in that tree jumping off and finding my way up the path, way up to a magical fortress where clouds drizzled soft rain and dragons held the key to the door.

We kept on walking along Park Road. The cabbage trees swayed above us and there was a whistling sound. The wind had picked up and the road was littered with cabbage tree leaves and fallen kauri leaves all mottled in burnished gold and wet green. The air was chill and I shivered.

Hope Mum is up, I said.

These days, Mum would take to her bed in the afternoons and not surface for hours. When she did finally get up, the side of her hair would be flattened and her eyes glazed. She would go in to the kitchen and pour herself a Golden sherry. She kept the bottle under the sink.

Yeah, said Molly. Guess we'll have to put the roast on.

We always had a roast dinner on Sundays. Often the curate from the Anglican Church would visit. Mum worked there part-time as a secretary and he started coming over on Sunday evenings after Dad had died.

We walked up our steep drive. Mum was in the kitchen peeling potatoes. Molly and I looked at each other in relief.

How was the painting session? Mum asked.

Okay. Except that we had to stand there for hours. Mrs Henderson gave us these.

I showed her my little person wrapped up in its mustard blanket. Molly had already gone in to the bedroom. She didn't speak to Mum much these days.

Oh, that is very sweet, Mum said.

She is going to sell them at the market. She wants you to buy some.

I don't think so, Mum said, not really my cup of tea. Children would like them though. Is that what she's thinking?

No, I think she wants the grown-ups to buy them - she said they would be collector's items in time.

Mum just snorted and carried on peeling. You girls can put the roast on at four thirty. When the oven has warmed up turn the top off and bottom to low.

Mum said this every time we had to put the roast on.

Yes Mum, I know.

Well make sure Molly pulls her weight. Tell her to haul herself out of that bedroom and get cracking. I've done the potatoes so make sure the pumpkin and kumara are done as well.

Okay.

I wondered why she couldn't tell her herself. It was always me that had to pass on the messages both to Molly and Joe.

Also, tell your brother to get cleaned up when he gets in especially with the curate coming for dinner.

Joe would probably end up having dinner in the laundry – he always did when he had had an argument with Mum and that was nearly every night. But Mum wouldn't want him to be having it in the laundry tonight.

And don't forget to lay the table properly. Crystal glasses and silver napkin rings.

Mum always had to have everything 'just so' – even in our damp little house in Titirangi. Mum and Dad had brought back the family china, silverware, antiques and beautiful leather-bound books from Scotland. None of it seemed to fit in this house but Mum insisted on using them whenever she could.

Reminds her of home, Molly had once said. Reminds her that once she was *somebody*, once she had *money* and once she walked the stage with *famous* people. No one gives two hoots about that out here. No one cares… Now look at us – shabby furniture, cat scratches on the mahogany, guinea pigs running around the house, mouldy old bathroom, chemical bloody toilet or 'lavatory' I should say.

Molly put on Mum's theatrical voice. Oh and you must not say 'pardon', you must say 'I'm terribly sorry, what did you say?'.

We'd giggled and giggled over that. Molly could take Mum off to a tee…

The curate came and Joe managed to stay at the dining table throughout the whole dinner. He just switched off when religion or church was mentioned and Mum would eye him whenever his elbows stuck out at right angles or when he slurped his water. The three-

legged chairs that circled the round mahogany table stayed upright for a change. Mum had had many dinner parties where guests would suddenly hurtle off in to space ending up on the grey and yellow patterned carpet. It all depended on how much they'd had to drink as to whether the chairs behaved themselves or not. The curate had only the one glass of wine. Mum asked me to make him a cup of tea after dinner. I asked if he took sugar.

Two please, he replied.

When I went in to the kitchen the sugar bowl was covered in ants.

Sorry we don't have any, I told him. Would honey be all right instead?

He nodded and Mum gave me a quizzical look. When the curate went to leave he had to walk through the kitchen – the sugar bowl was now entirely empty of ants.

After dinner, we had to do the dishes so Joe brought out the pack of cards.

Whoever gets the Jack doesn't have to do them, he said.

I picked an eight of clubs and Molly the ten of hearts. That meant I had to wash and Molly dry. Joe always seemed to pick the right card. He sloped off to his bedroom to listen to Bob Dylan. Mum had already gone to bed.

The next day I had a sore throat and stayed home from school. Mum had told me that the real estate agents might be calling in. I was listening to 'Portia Faces Life' on the radio when there was a knock at the door. Monty gave a deep bark so I got up, put on my dressing gown and went to answer it. There was a man and a woman standing there.

Call the dog off will you, the man glared at me.

Oh Monty won't hurt you his bark's worse than his bite Mum says.

I stood there and the woman gave me a watery smile. Monty wagged his tail furiously.

Well, can we come in? We're here to look at the house.

I let them in and stood on the cold linoleum in the kitchen.

Mmm, they sniffed. How many bedrooms again?

Er, three. No four. Mum turned the verandah in to a bedroom.

We will have a look around then, the man said.

They walked in to the sitting room. I was hoping they wouldn't notice the stains on the couch. Molly had once dropped tea all over the side. We'd tried to clean it up before Mum came home but she had noticed straight away and had tried to scrub it. The ashtray on the mantelpiece was overflowing so I went over and stood in front of it.

Could you show us where the bathroom is?

I kept standing and waved in the general direction.

Through those glass doors – you'll find it, I said.

They went through the doors and were away for quite a while. I wasn't sure whether to move or not when suddenly the woman came back through the door closely followed by the man.

I see you have a chemical toilet facility?

He said this in a slightly pinched voice. I nodded.

Can I ask why your television set is sitting beside it?

I was mortified. I'd forgotten Mum and Joe had shifted it to the lavatory. Mum hadn't paid the television licence. She was terrified they would come to the house to demand it, so decided to hide the set in there as it would be the least likely place to search for it. I ignored him and asked if they'd like to see the bedrooms.

No, I think we've seen enough. Here is my card. Ask your mother to give me a call.

I gave Monty a cuddle. Stupid people, I said, and crawled back in to bed.

Mrs Henderson rang Mum one weekend to say the painting was finished and would we like to see it.

Yes of course, said Mum.

Come for lunch tomorrow and please don't bring a thing, Mrs Henderson replied.

I wasn't going to, Mum told us. I cannot get over this 'bring a plate' palaver. No one at home would dream of asking such a thing!

Mum was still getting used to how things were done in New Zealand. Some things she loved and others were 'just not done'. Molly said she was a snob.

When Molly got the bus back home from high school Mum would often get on at New Lynn. She would spy Molly down the back and call out in her actressy voice,

Darling, darling! There you are! Molly would squirm in her seat trying to hide beneath her schoolbag.

We went over to the Henderson's for lunch the next day. Joe was off somewhere on his motorbike. He wouldn't have come anyway. Mr Henderson led us up the path to the studio. Mum chatted all the way up in her breathless voice.

I do wish their father could have been here to see the painting. He would have been so proud to see his girls on canvas!

Mr Henderson puffed on his pipe the smoky smell mingling with the smell of damp bush and burning incinerator. We walked in to the studio and there was the painting propped up in one corner of the room. It was called ‘Two Girls in an Orchard’.

Modigliani! Mum exclaimed. Very clever, Tom!

Our bodies appeared elongated. So did our necks. We had huge eyes. The background was muddy green with two trees. We stood side by side holding hands looking forlorn. My sister’s feet were bare and sludgy pink. The toes on her left foot weren’t finished properly - they dissolved in to the grass.

You have a deformed foot! I laughed.

Molly didn’t say a word. Mr Henderson puffed on his pipe and twinkled.

Think I’ve captured their essence.

Molly glared at him, walked out of the studio and ran all the way home. I liked the way it made us look interesting - pale with eyes like saucers. It reminded me of Dad. The colours washed out green like his old Harris Tweed jacket – the one our Scottish hampster had eaten its way through. Reminded me of standing with him in the garden in Titirangi talking about bird cries and how they were so different in this country. The mournful cry of the morepork and chittering of the tui. Dad said he missed the golden eagle and red kite soaring over the highlands - birds of prey.

Winter dawdled its way through to spring. The house didn’t sell. Mum thought it might do better in the summer. The painting was hung over the fireplace much to Molly’s disgust. Joe had made snide comments when it was first hung then seemed to forget all about it.

When summer arrived and the snowball tree was bursting outside my bedroom window Mum announced that she would be renting the house out. She was taking a job as a housekeeper on a sheep station in the Waikato. Molly and Joe would be boarding with friends. I would be sent to boarding school. When Mum told me this I went outside past the old incinerator, sat up on the concrete step in the bush that seemed to lead to nowhere and wrote a poem to Dad. I called it ‘Two Girls in an Orchard’.

Ngaire. Red chapped lips and flaming patches on her cheeks, the way her hair fell stringy and dull to her shoulders and the scattering of white flakes on the cheap woollen jumper she wore. I would say hello to her as she struggled to tie up her sandshoes or when she hung her satchel on the brass hook in the cloakroom. She would give me her banana at lunchtime, usually brown and mottled by then – she never seemed to eat any fruit or sandwiches and would guzzle the milk that was left for us in small glass bottles at morning playtime. The warm milk was disgusting.

At lunchtime one day several girls surrounded the wire fence that ran the length of the playground. I could hear them squawking like seagulls. 'Your knickers are brown your lips are red, you drink milk like a cow there's snot on your head'. I walked over to see what was happening and as I did a teacher blew the whistle. The girls floated away like a small school of predatory fish and turned towards their classrooms. Ngaire was slumped against the fence. I could see that her face was wet.

Come on, I said. Better get back to class.

I grabbed her arm and helped her up then handed her my hankie. She snorted in to it and went to hand it back.

Keep it.

Thanks, she said.

Ngaire walked slowly back to the classroom with me. Can I tell you something after school? she asked. Her eyes were red, her cheeks more flaming than ever.

Okay. Meet you by the murder house, I said.

The other girls tittered as I walked in and went to my desk. I ignored them. Ngaire sat at the front of the class as usual – her desk was nearest the teacher's as she was often in trouble.

The afternoon dragged on – I felt sleepy as the teacher droned on about New Zealand geography. Made up poems in my head and stared out the window. The caretaker was taking bundles of old newsprint and other papers over to the incinerator. I could see him stuffing them down the old corrugated iron incinerator that had several holes in it. The flames licked out the top and several charred pieces flew in to the air - flew in to the air like escaping black birds or tiny kites dancing over the lower fields of the school. Wished I could fly away. Build a fire on an island in the gulf and make a bed of leaves and bracken. Swim when I liked, eat fish roasted over my fire…

Again, what are the three mountain ranges in the lower half of the North Island!

I turned my head away from the window. Mrs Simpson was glaring at me over her glasses. The class giggled.

Quiet! Well…?

Umm…

I have been discussing this throughout the entire lesson! You will write out thirty times 'I must concentrate during class' and you can do it after school.

She faced the blackboard and wrote in thick white chalk, "Rimutaka, Ruahine and Tararua ranges'.

As she wrote, the flesh on her arm wobbled reminding me of pale jelly. Tongue in aspic, which my mother loved. I shuddered.

I stayed back after school wrote the lines then left them on her desk. Went to the cloakroom and found my satchel. It had an old banana skin hanging out of it. I remembered I was supposed to be meeting Ngaire. She was waiting by the 'murder house' – the dental nurse had gone home and the small building was locked up.

Sorry, I said. Had to do those lines.

That's okay.

What did you want to tell me?

Can I come and stay at your place? She wiped her hand over her nose then spread it down the sleeve of her green jumper.

Er…I paused. Do you mean tonight?

Yeah…

Oh! Well, Mum's at work so I'd have to ask her. I'm not sure…

I have to! Ngaire suddenly shouted. I can't go back there…

Ngaire lived with her foster parents. They lived in one of the best streets in Titirangi in a large two storeyed wooden house. They didn't have any children of their own and often had a collection of foster children staying. There was only Ngaire there this time though. Mr Preston was the local councillor and Mrs Preston was the President of the Country Women's Institute. Mum couldn't stand her. When Mrs Preston invited Mum to attend one of the meetings she had asked her to bring a plate.

Bloody woman turned her nose up at my mushroom and garlic vol au vents. Said she was expecting a layer cake or ginger gems!

Mum never joined the Women's Institute after that. She joined the Titirangi Drama group instead. They may be amateurs but at least they're not wowsers, she had said.

Mum had been a professional actress in Britain and had toured in productions such as ‘Dear Brutus’ and ‘Blythe Spirit’. She had acted with Winston Churchill’s daughter and would remind us of it every so often. My sister used to get fed up with it. Mum always thought that she would make a ‘fine’ actress. Molly was more interested in boys and smoking.

I looked at Ngaire. She was standing with one foot twisted around the other. Her brown socks sat frayed above her dirty boots. She was clutching her satchel to her chest, her nose streaming.

Okay, I said. Why can’t you stay there?

Ngaire’s eyes swivelled toward the building behind us. It’s worse than the murder house, she murmured.

Nothing could be worse than that! Didn’t the Prestons live in a posh house - didn’t they have lots of money to spend on fat sugary doughnuts, hot chips after school, clean sheets and a proper lavatory? A warm fire and a mother who was home during the day baking, cleaning (or did Mrs Walters do that?) and welcoming Ngaire back from school.
I looked at her. She was staring over my left shoulder, fiddling with the worn out leather strap on her satchel.

Come on then. Let’s go to my place, I said.

We walked over the path above the road and down past Lopdell House, the building that looked as though it belonged in another country. Tall, pale concrete, strange looking. As though it could propel itself forward - a ship high up on a curled wave. The deaf girls used to live there. Mum had two of them to stay with us once and they punched Molly. Mum said it was because they were frustrated and wanted to be able to communicate. I knew it was because Molly wouldn’t share her cigarettes.

We walked on down the road. When we got to the Toby Jug restaurant I looked up at the roof. The small cat was still sitting up paw outstretched as though trying to catch a bird. Ngaire saw it and said,

Look at that cat how’s it going to get down?

It’s not real, I laughed. Been up there for ages. It’s made of pottery.

Nah it’s real look at it! Ngaire stared up at the roof.

I could almost see it move. It was made of clay or something. We walked along Park Road. Part of the road was dark with shadow and there was a gravel area leading to a

path in the bush that led down to the sea. I always ran down this stretch of road. Always thought Nazis were after me.

We've got to run. Nazis might be after us.

I started running - Ngaire followed. I could hear the whump of her schoolbag on her back and heard her breathing hard, blowing like a carthorse.

What's Nazis? she panted.

Bad people, I replied.

We reached the bottom of our drive. Two cars had passed us on the road. I checked the letterbox. There was another brown envelope. Another bill. Mum would hide it in the drawer along with all the others. I led Ngaire up the steep gravel drive and heard Monty barking.

What's that? Ngaire's eyes were round.

That's our dog Monty. His bark's worse than his bite Mum says.

I took the key from under the stone and unlocked the door. Monty leaped out knocking Ngaire backwards down the steps and started licking her face. She sneezed and started laughing. Once inside, I put the kettle on. I always had a cup of tea when I got home after school. Always drank tea ever since I was small - Dad used to make it for me in the brown china teapot.

Want a cup of tea? I asked.

Ooh no, have you got any Fanta?

No. You can have a glass of milk though. I opened a packet of Milk Arrowroot and Gingernut biscuits and dunked a couple in my tea. Ngaire slurped on her milk and ate four biscuits. I tried to think what to do. Mum would send her straight back to the Preston's house if she found her here.

Where's your family? Where's your Mum? Ngaire asked.

Mum's at work, I replied. Molly's at high school and Joe's working down in New Lynn at the tyre factory. He rides his motorbike down there now. He's allowed to wear Dad's old flying jacket.

Ngaire wiped her mouth with her sleeve. Flying jacket? What's that?

Ngaire didn't seem to know about *anything*. Didn't know there'd been a war where men had flown planes and dropped bombs, that people had died fighting the 'Hun' and the 'Japs' and that the Nazis had made everyone's life 'hell'. That my Dad had flown aeroplanes off the backs of big ships in the Mediterranean and had brought Mum tiny

crystal glasses engraved with grape leaves from Malta. They were still sitting in the cabinet covered in specks of dust. We weren't supposed to touch them. Except that once Molly and I wet our fingers, slid them around the rim and heard a high angel sound like singing in church. Mum had told us that's how you can tell if it's pure crystal.

My brother Joe used to get the bus to work but was embarrassed whenever Mum got on - she would call out 'Darling!' to him in her stage voice. He would sit right at the back of the bus after that. Now that he had his bike he could ride to work. Mum didn't like him riding it. Mum wasn't happy that he hadn't finished his final year at school either. He didn't see the point of school, he'd said. Dad had left his small village in Scotland at the age of fourteen, had run away to sea, had seen New York and Brazil, had fought in the war and he'd been only twenty by then. So why should *he* stay at school?

Mum couldn't say anything after that. Joe would never listen to her anyway.

I took Ngaire outside, opened the small door on the side of the house and in to the basement. The air was musty and the earth dark clay. I gave her a tartan rug, white china potty that Mum was going to put a plant in, a torch, matches and some candles. She also had some magazines, several Milk Arrowroot biscuits and some McIntosh toffees I'd found in the kitchen drawer. She wouldn't take the apple I gave her so I munched on it instead.

Bit dark in here, she said.

Well you can't stay in the house else my Mum will send you back! I'll light a candle.

I took one of the long white candles that we had in case of emergencies and stuck it in a milk bottle. Placed the bottle on the damp clay and lit the candle. It flickered in the cold air. I could see several cobwebs strung from the wooden beams above my head - hoped there weren't too many Avondale spiders lurking. Or wetas.

I'll come back down and see you before Molly's back from school.

Okay.

I closed the small door behind me. While I was sitting at the kitchen table doing my homework there was a knock at the door. My heart jumped. I thought it must be Ngaire. I opened it to see Mrs Anderson, Brown Owl, from my Brownie group standing there.

Have you seen Ngaire Turner from your class?

Umm, no…Brown Owl, I squeezed out in a whisper.

Well that's funny. You were seen walking with her after school going past Lopdell House. Where did she go after that?

I think she went to the chip shop. My chest felt tight.

Are you sure?

I think so.

She looked at me strangely.

Well, I just hope you're telling the truth. The Preston's are worried sick. Ngaire didn't go home after school. Can you think of anyone she would have gone home with?

No. She doesn't have many friends, I replied looking past Brown Owl's shoulder.

Looked towards a small patch of blue above the kauri tree and fixed my eye on a puffball of cloud.

She's not in your house is she?

No. Brownie's Honour!

I gave her the Brownies' salute.

If you do know anything you must tell your mother when she gets back from work. I will be giving her a ring.

I nodded and watched as Brown Owl made her way down our steep drive. I made myself another cup of tea to settle my stomach and helped myself to another Gingernut. I hoped Molly would stay up at the village for a while – she often bought chips at the fish and chip shop after she got off the bus – and dawdle home. I once saw her sitting in the bushes along from the stone church wearing her navy school uniform puffing on a cigarette.

Tell Mum and you're dead! Molly passed the cigarette over to her friend Janice.

Mum didn't approve of Janice – said she was common and wore too much make-up. And her school tunic was far too short. She always had holes in her thick black stockings and filthy shoes.

You can tell a person by their shoes, Mum said.

I put the potatoes in the pressure cooker and turned it on. I was hoping that Molly would be back in time to look after it. That pressure cooker always looked as though it would explode at any minute – I was sure the lid would burst off and a jet of hot steam would propel me out the door, our iron roof would lift off and land in the Davis' house next door. Probably decapitate Mr Davis. He was often locked out on a Saturday evening. He'd arrive home blind drunk, yell at Mrs Davis and pound on the front door. Mum often said those Davis girls were far too quiet and pale. Said Mr Davis was a bully. Mrs Davis would lock him out and there would be hell to pay the next day. He would climb in to his maroon Hillman Humber and sleep there all night. Mum didn't feel sorry for him.

I went there for dinner one night. Laura Davis, who was in my class, invited me because I lived next door. We weren't really friends. Just neighbours. I was curious to see what the house was like inside. It was spotless. There were cream lace covers on all the arms of the chairs and on the back of sofa in the sitting room. The entire house smelled of Pledge and malt vinegar. Laura shared her downstairs bedroom with her older sister Nancy. Nancy was training to be a secretary. She wore glasses thick as milk bottles and when she looked at you her eyes appeared large as moons.

The bedroom was cold, icy cold. Laura had a shiny pink satin quilt - Nancy's was purple. They had cushions to match. The dressing table had three mirrors attached to it. One large one in the middle and one smaller one on either side – they were on hinges and could move. There were several little crystal ornaments – some birds, an elephant, a hedgehog and a tiny horse with a crystal mane. They were beautiful. I picked up the horse and turned it around. The mane was delicate and swirled around the horse's neck.

Don't touch those! Laura yelled. My Aunt brought them back from Europe and they're very expensive. Most of them are Nancy's.

I put it back down and went and sat on Laura's bed. The cover so shiny and slippery and perfectly pink was pretty but so cold. I wouldn't want to sleep in that bed. It didn't look very cosy. The room was too tidy. There were no clothes on the floor, no school uniforms thrown hurriedly on the chair no shoes left topsy-turvy and no sock unmatched waiting for its partner. On the table by the bed was a faded rose coloured jewellery box.

Whose is that? I asked.

It was my Granny's. Laura opened the lid. A little dancer in a pale lavender tutu twirled as music played. It was a sad tune. Laura shut the lid.

She died in her sleep. Last year.

I couldn't think of anything else to say. During dinner Mr Davis asked me what my father had died from. We were drinking cups of tea. Mrs Davis had made a fruit cake with marzipan icing. I hated marzipan.

Heart attack, I said and splurted a mouthful of tea in his direction. Some of it landed on his shirt. He just looked at me while Mrs Davis went to mop it up.

Heart attack. Is that right.

He sort of grinned while he said this. His hair was plastered to one side of his head. To cover his bald spot Mum had told me. I apologised and asked to use the lavatory. Didn't want to talk about Dad in front of Mr Davis - couldn't tell him that Dad *hadn't* died from a

heart attack. Couldn't tell him that Dad had been in Kingseat and that he had haemorrhaged, that pools of dark blood had soaked in to the clean blue and white striped cover on his iron bed. Couldn't tell him that Mum had blurted out, 'cirrhosis of the liver' and 'shock treatment' all in one breath. Those words just didn't sound good. I came back from the lavatory and Mr Davis was swigging on a beer bottle.

That's funny, he said. Could have sworn your Dad died from something else.

He belched and scratched the thin hair on his head.

Thanks for dinner, I said to Mrs Davis. I have to go home now. See you tomorrow at school.

I looked at Laura. She was doing the washing up. I didn't offer to help. Wanted to get home and sit in front of the fire. Wanted to hold Monty, to rest my head on his golden fur.

How was dinner? Did Mr Davis behave himself? Mum asked.

It was okay. Mr Davis burped while he was drinking his beer and I saw his bald spot. They don't have any books in that house.

I'm not surprised, said Mum.

Didn't tell her anything else – didn't tell her how I'd spat my cup of tea over him or about the conversation we'd had.

Before Molly arrived home I went down to see how Ngaire was. Hoped she was still under the house and hadn't run away. I opened the door – the candle was spluttering and Ngaire was holding the torch.

There are spiders here, she stammered. Heaps of them!

Don't look at them - they won't hurt you! I have to go back up, Molly will be home soon. Be back later.

I ran back up to the house just in time to hear the pressure cooker whistling its head off. I grabbed a tea towel and gingerly went to turn it off. The door burst open and Molly walked in.

Scaredy cat! she said dumping her schoolbag on the kitchen table. She took the tea towel off me and turned the pressure cooker off.

I'm off to Youth Club later, so is Mum. What are we having for dinner?

Chops, I said.

I hoped there might be a spare chop I could smuggle down to Ngaire if Joe didn't come back for dinner.

Is Joe coming home for dinner? I asked.

I don't know. He'll probably go up Mt. Atkinson and get drunk.

Joe and his friends would go up Mt. Atkinson on their bikes to smoke and drink beer. Mum didn't know about it but one of Molly's friends had seen them there a few times. I finished my homework. Molly made a cup of tea then went in to the bedroom to get changed. By the time Mum came home it was getting dark. I hoped Ngaire wouldn't make a noise down there. Hoped she wouldn't knock the candle over and burn our house down.

I saw your brother up the road eating fish and chips so doubt he'll be home for dinner. I'll have a word with him later. It's getting beyond a joke this staying out and not letting me know whether or not he'll be home. Wish your father could have dealt with him…

Mum poured herself a sherry and put the chops on. They sizzled and smoked - the fat bursting in tiny sprays over the stove. I hoped the phone wouldn't ring.

Can I have two chops seeing Joe's not here? I asked.

Your eyes are always bigger than your stomach. You'd better eat them all!

If I don't, I could have it tomorrow for lunch.

Mum just sighed, sipped at her sherry and put the peas on.

I sat at the dinner table eating slowly. Mum and Molly had finished and were clearing the dishes. I carefully put the chop in my napkin and hid it under my jumper along with a potato I hadn't eaten.

Hurry up! Mum said. We're going down to the Youth Club so you'll have to wash the dishes. Joe can dry them when he gets back. Dinner or no dinner!

While she was out of the room I stuffed the napkin in to my schoolbag and started washing the dishes. Once Mum and Molly had gone down the drive I waited a few minutes and grabbed the napkin. I took it down to Ngaire with a glass of milk. She was huddled up on the tartan rug. The candle had gone out and the light from the torch was getting dimmer.

Here's some food and milk.

I lit another candle. She'd grabbed the food and was gnawing at the chop when I heard Monty bark. I slowly opened the door and saw Molly coming back up the drive.

What are you doing? Molly called.

Nothing, I said. Why have you come back?

Forgot I was going to lend Janice my Beatle boots.

She came towards the door to the basement, which I'd hurriedly shut.

What's going on, why were you in there?

I stood with my back to the door.

Open the door!

She shoved me out of the way and opened the door – Ngaire was standing there with a chop in one hand and the torch in the other. Shadows from the candle danced over the cobwebby beams.

Bloody hell! What are you doing in here? Molly stared at Ngaire.

She can't go back! I said. Can't go back to the Preston's house – they're horrible to her.

Well she can't stay down here! Everyone's been looking for her - they're all talking about it at Youth Club. Mum will be livid when she finds out! Why didn't you tell me? And what were you going to do – keep her under here forever?

I pressed my hands on the wooden door, felt the rough wood under my palms.

No. I don't know!

We have to tell Mum. You'll just have to face the music.

With that, Molly raced back down the drive before I could answer.

Sorry, Ngaire. I said.

It's okay. Knew I'd have to go back sometime. She kept on gnawing at the chop.

Ngaire went back to the Preston's later that night. Mum was furious at first then realised I was only trying to help. She said if only I'd told her earlier she would have tried to work something out. Mrs Anderson drummed me out of Brownies. I would never have made a Girl Guide anyway. Ngaire never came back to school. I saw her years later in the Children's ward at Auckland Hospital. I was seventeen and training as a student nurse. Ngaire was holding her sickly baby – the baby had bronchiectasis.

This is my second baby, she said. I had to give the first one up for adoption years ago.

She carefully laid the baby in the cot. The back of its head was flat. I thought of Ngaire hiding under the house, mud brown eyes swimming in pools of candlelight, spider webs dangling above her head. She still had those livid marks on her cheeks.

The theatre sat low and hidden in the bush. It was really just an old hall with a stage. The path leading to it meandered into the bush from the main road. The building was painted in dark creosote with green trim. Mum had made me wash my hair that morning then rinse in malt vinegar to give it shine – I thought it smelled like a bag of fish and chips. I was going to audition for my first ever role in a play. The play was 'The Blue Bird' by Maurice Maeterlinck. It was a fairy tale, magical, and I was determined to get one of the main roles - Mytyl the young girl.

I walked in to the hall and saw the stage on which Mum had acted in several plays. I could see her up there, hear her crystal voice projecting loud and clear to the very back of the hall. In one play I went to she was on stage with one of the principle actors, Ted. He was sitting in an overstuffed velvet armchair talking to Mum's character when he suddenly slumped on to the arm of the chair. His skin looked grey. Mum kept on with the dialogue as though nothing had happened. It turned out he was having a heart attack mid-speech. Another actor, who happened to be in the audience at the time, took over while Ted was taken away in an ambulance. The play went on with Bill holding the script. His performance was so believable the script soon became invisible.

Downstairs, in the dressing room, I would often sit with Mum while she applied her make-up. She would lay a small towel and put her bits and pieces on top. A large jar of cold cream, cotton wool and sticks of Leichner greasepaint numbers 9 and 5 would be placed on the towel. Plus a carmine stick – Mum would put a dot of red carmine either side of her eyes, nearest her nose, with a wooden toothpick. She said it made your eyes stand out while on stage. She would put fresh flowers in a small vase and have Dad's photo, the one with him in his Fleet Air Arm pilot's uniform, leaning beside the mirror. By the end of the run the flowers would have wilted. I loved the smell of that dressing room – the sweetish smell of cold cream and greasepaint mixed with the smell of fresh flowers and musty air. The nervous excitement of opening night, the occasional actor throwing up while others paced frantically in their dressing rooms, or in the corridor. Some actors would chat non-stop or go over and over their lines as they sweated and peered at their reflection in the glare of the light bulbs that surrounded the mirrors. Mum preferred to concentrate on putting on her make-up while sipping her tea and honey - warm honey to soothe the throat. She would lie on her back on the frayed rug, do her breathing exercises and hum.

The warm-up would take place on stage before the audience arrived. Actors would stand and fling their voices out in to the barren and cold little hall - run on the spot and

wave their arms round and round like windmills, take deep breaths and bend over to touch their toes then come up slowly – vertebrae by vertebrae – yelling out once their arms were raised to the heavens. Some actors didn't want to take part – thought it was stupid – Mum didn't think so; said it was the 'professional' way to work, to be prepared before going on stage, to give your best performance and to be fresh each and every night. Depending on who was directing, most actors would be told to go and warm-up no matter what. Those who tried to evade the warm-up were soundly told off…so they begrudgingly and half-heartedly took part while seething underneath, grimly undertaking a shallow yell, turning floppy 'windmill' arms then scurrying back to the dressing rooms to sulk before pulling themselves together to go on stage. Mum in a stinging voice said they were fairly typical of the 'amateur' lot she had to put up with.

I would sit in the front row watching the play unfold and wonder at this woman as she strode on to the stage with steely voice and flashing eyes - this woman who became each and every character she took on. No longer our 'Mum', no longer the small well-dressed woman in navy Crimplene trousers who charmed the butcher or chatted to the Anglican curate up in the village, who smoked cigarettes until the ash pooled grey and soft, who told us red sky at night was shepherd's delight or that a small patch of blue in the morning sky was just enough to cut out and sew up a pair of sailor's trousers…

Our mother *became* Lady Macbeth with murderous intent and dark insistent voice - she *became* Stella with the perfect Southern lilt, flirting embarrassingly with Stanley while anxiously fumbling with her handbag – she tottered and yelped as Martha, slinging scathing verbal abuse in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf'. This one was too close to home. This one reminded us of the flagon of Golden Sherry she tried to hide among the washing up liquid and rusting ball of Goldilocks under the kitchen sink. Reminded us of the jagged cut-glass voice she would throw at Dad - before he died.

Friends would remark on how dramatic she was! We were used to it, at least most of the time. Molly and I would be watching television or doing our homework when there would be a sudden yell from the kitchen.

Christ!

We'd turn to see Mum slapping her forehead, the fridge door wide open in front of her. Molly and I would look at each other thinking some dreadful thing had befallen Mum.

Who put the empty milk bottle back in the fridge!

Or, there would be a 'God!' followed by a resounding thump on the kitchen bench.

Your brother forgot to take the rubbish out – again!

We could see why everyone remarked on what a ‘marvellous’ actress she was, but to us she was just Mum.

Sit!

I sat on one of the old velvet chairs near the stage. The director, Mrs Gardyne, was sorting pieces of papers on a low wooden table. She wore a shapeless brown dress and her spectacles sat near the end of her nose. She turned to look at me.

Ah! Hope you take after your mother. Such a wonderful actress…

Er, yes. I said.

Need to speak louder than that if you want to be heard in the back row!

She slid her glasses back up her nose with a gnarled finger.

Now - have you learned your piece?

I nodded.

We are just waiting for Philip to arrive then you can go up on stage and go over your lines with him.

As she spoke the door opened and in walked a boy who was in my class at school. Philip Johnson. Philip the boy who always got the highest marks in arithmetic – the fastest runner in the school. He had floppy brown hair and very skinny legs. He wore a knitted vest over his shirt – in summer and winter - and it was always the same one. Brown with green knitted patterns as though wearing a remnant of a faded forest close to his chest. Mum said the family lived in an old bach down near the beach. His father had been involved in the wharf strike. She said they hadn’t much money.

Ah Philip! There you are. I need you both to go up on stage and go over your lines. I’m going to make myself a cup of tea as I’m parched.

Mrs Gardyne went over to the small kitchen to put the urn on. Her sandals slapping on the wooden floor as she walked. Philip and I looked at each other as we gripped the scripts in our hands. I got up off the chair and walked over to the little door beside the stage. There was a small set of steps behind it, which led up to the stage. Philip followed. He was auditioning for the part of ‘Tyltyl’, Mytyl’s brother.

The stage smelled of dust and old clothes. Dark blue velvet curtains hung at each end of the stage. The floor was made of dark wood and needed sweeping. I walked over to the middle of the stage. So this was where magic was made!

After our audition (during which several ‘splendids!’ were heard from below the stage) Mrs Gardyne said she would be in touch. I walked out of the hall with a tingling sensation in my stomach. I wanted this part very, very much.

Philip walked along the road with me, his bare feet scuffing the dirt as we went.

Didn’t know you liked plays, Philip? I said.

Yeah well, there’s a lot you don’t know about me.

He picked up a stone and flung it in to the bush.

My Mum’s a poet and she’s writing a play. Said it would be good if I had a go at acting then I might be able to be in her play.

Oh really? I said.

I tried to picture what his mother looked like. Vaguely remembered she wore knitted shawls over long faded skirts. She seemed to have several children clinging to her whenever I saw her up at the village or down at the beach. They walked everywhere.

I hope we get the part! I said.

Yeah. Me too.

Another stone whizzed over my head.

See you.

Philip disappeared down the track that led to beach. I wandered home imagining myself playing the part, wearing a costume and having my face made up in the little dressing room with glittering light bulbs around the mirror.

Mum took the call from Mrs Gardyne the next day to say I’d got the part and so had Philip. The following Saturday while I was dusting the furniture and Molly was mopping the kitchen floor there was a knock at the door. A woman stood there wearing a flowing skirt and a brightly coloured scarf wrapped haphazardly around her head. Three small children clung to her skirt. They wore shorts and faded cotton shirts. I couldn’t tell if they were boys or girls. Their hair was long and straggly against their shoulders.

Hello, I’m Philip’s Mum. I’ve come to see if you’d like to come down to our place and go over your lines with Philip today?

Oh. I replied. Um, I’ll have to ask my Mum.

I went inside almost hoping that Mum would say I had to do the chores, but she told me to go. I grabbed my script and we walked down to the beach. Through the bush track swaying with feathery toi tois on each side - through patches of cutty grass that nipped at my ankles every so often. The children shrieked and whined asking to be carried or held up

above the stinging grass. Mrs Johnson ignored them and they bounded beside her like wayward puppies. She told me about the poetry she was writing, reciting screeds of it all the way down the path. I couldn't understand much of it. It seemed to be about bodies writhing on the beach, burning fires and sunlit mornings.

I'm also writing a play. You could be in it, or your mother. I've heard she's a great actress.

Oh. Thanks, Mrs Johnson. I replied.

Call me Ishtar! I used to be called Mary, such a dull name, so I changed it to Ishtar. It means Goddess of Fertility. The play is about a family torn between trying to live on the land and moving back to the city. I am going to set it in a pond – the water will not be real of course. It will be painted a dull green to show the murky side of life and the overpowering feeling of being lost. The possibility of drowning will be the overriding metaphor. The play must reveal feelings of isolation and abandonment. The actors will sit on a raft in the middle.

Oh, I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

Yes. It's going to be wonderful!

She strode off ahead of me. I hoped I wouldn't have to stay too long at the Johnson's. When we arrived at the bach, Philip was throwing a stick to a mangy looking dog. The children ran over to it and rolled around on the scrubby grass – the dog rolled around with them yelping with pleasure.

Hi, I said to Philip.

Hello.

Come on children, we'll leave them to do their lines.

Mrs Johnson disappeared inside, the children followed. She returned carrying two glasses.

Real lemonade.

She gave us each a glass. There were pips floating around in my glass and tasted sour.

We don't believe in sugar.

Philip and I sat on the grass and opened our scripts. We knew most of the words. As Philip went over his long speech, I looked out over the water. The Manukau was at low tide and the mud stretched for miles. A seagull flew low and called out raucously.

The bach appeared lopsided, fragile - as though it would blow over in a small gust. The outside walls were pale grey, fibrolite, with patches of damp like an old blotter that had been dipped in the sea. The roof was made up of different pieces of corrugated iron. I wondered how everyone managed to fit inside.

Your father's dead.

I looked at Philip. Then down at my script. Those aren't the words, I said.

I know. I was talking about your Dad.

Oh.

I didn't want to talk about him. Not to Philip. Not to a *boy*.

My Dad may as well be dead.

Philip threw his script on the ground and guzzled back the rest of his lemonade. I could only sip at mine.

Why? Where is he? I asked.

Inside staring at the water most probably or rolling his ciggies. Hardly ever gets out of his chair.

I fiddled with my script. Tried to spit out a few pips without Philip noticing.

Lost his job. Down at the wharves. Has a gammy leg now and can't do much.

Oh. Can he get his leg fixed? I asked.

Philip spat out a pip. Course not.

We continued with our lines. I kept looking back at the door expecting to see Mr Johnson hobble out but he never did. I was curious to see inside the bach. What was it like in there? Where were all the children and how many of them were there?

How many brothers and sisters do you actually have, Philip? I asked.

There are seven of us – four girls and three boys including me.

Gosh, that's a lot for your Mum to look after!

She's used to it. Loves kids. Always busy writing something though so Valeria looks after the younger ones mostly. She's the eldest.

Valeria? I asked.

Yeah well it was Valerie but Mum changed it. I wouldn't let her change mine though.

I couldn't think what his mother would have changed 'Philip' to.

A child in a grubby dress appeared from behind the bach and ran towards us. She held something in her hand.

Here, she said breathlessly, handing me a daisy chain.

It's to put on your head. When you marry Philip. Or you could wear it now.

Oh, thank you, I said blushing.

Don't be silly Flo! Philip laughed.

I'm Florence. But everyone calls me Flo. I'm four and three quarters.

With that she ran over to a flat part of the grass and tried to stand on her head. Several other faces peered around the corner of the bach. I put the daisy chain on my head.

How lovely! My sister and I used to make these in Scotland.

Where's that?

Florence looked at me with her upside down face. Her legs started wobbling and she fell over on to her back. The little dog ran over to her and started licking her face.

Stop it, Parsley! Florence giggled.

Parsley? That's an unusual name for a dog, I said.

That's 'cos he did lots of green poos when he was a puppy!

Loud giggles came from the side of the bach then several children tumbled towards us.

You're marrying Philip! You're marrying Philip!

They sang in unison while dancing and cartwheeling around us. I picked up my script and said that I had better get back home.

Thank your Mum for the lemonade. See you at rehearsal.

Okay.

Philip rolled around on the grass with several small children clambering over him like Lilliputians. I walked back up the path wearing my crown of daisies.

Rehearsals went on over the next few weeks. Mrs Gardyne would yell and stamp with her leather sandals when the actors fluffed their lines or ended up standing in the wrong place. Philip and I quickly learned to stand in the right place, trying to be word-perfect. During breaks we would drink stewed cups of tea poured from the large aluminium pot and eat the homemade biscuits Mrs Gardyne brought in. They were often slightly burnt. Philip didn't mention his Dad much during those few weeks. He talked more about his Mum and how she stayed up all hours writing poetry and working on her play. Told me how she needed to go and clean houses during the day. Had to take the little kids with her.

Said she was exhausted - he thought his Mum stayed up mostly to keep an eye on his Dad.

Why is that? I asked.

We were experimenting with our make-up for the dress rehearsal. Philip drew streaks of greasepaint over his cheeks. He looked like a Red Indian.

He's been talking to himself.

Another streak went on his chin.

Wakes us all up. He won't go to bed. Sits in that chair smoking and staring out the window.

Philip picked up the little wooden toothpick as though it was a sword, plunging it in to the stick of carmine. Then stabbed a dot on the inner side of each eye – near his nose.
I carried on putting on my make-up. Glanced at the little circle of daisies I had placed on my towel.

The following week I arrived at the hall ready for the dress rehearsal. I had a tumbling feeling in my stomach. My costume hung, neatly ironed, on the door of the dressing room. It was a lilac dress with a white lacy pinafore. Philip's costume was hanging next to it. I started applying my make-up wondering where Philip was. He was never late for rehearsals.

Bill put his head around the door. You need to come upstairs!

He was playing the part of Bread. I went up to the main part of the hall and saw all the other actors standing around in a huddle. Mrs Gardyne told us to sit down as she had something important to tell us.

We sat on the chairs that had been laid out in rows for the audience. She stood at the front in her shapeless brown dress twisting her hands over and over. Finally she spoke.

There has been a fire. Last night. Down at the beach. A family has perished - Philip's family.

My hands were covered in greasepaint - number 5, the ivory coloured one. The pale silky texture so smooth - I rubbed my fingers on to my jumper pulling at a loose woollen thread. Stood up and ran down to the dressing room.

The wooden toothpick Philip had used was still there. I snapped it in half. Picked up the dried daisy chain Florence had made me - crumbled it in my hands and sprinkled it over the towel Philip had laid on his side of the dressing table.

Molly said someone had been in her room last night. Someone had been there rifling through her wardrobe fingering the coat hangers sliding them along and breathing in a low rasping way. Said she felt hands pressing down on her chest – heavy and insistent. The windows were open folding outwards over the garden but too high up for someone to climb over in to the bedroom. Mum didn't believe her. Too many stories being told of George Wilder hiding out in the bush, she said.

Molly ignored her. Told me it was true. There *had been someone* in the room.

Who? I asked. How did he get in and why didn't Monty bark?

I don't know! But someone was there.

Maybe it was Dad paying you a visit!

Don't be bloody stupid – he's dead!

Maybe it *was* George Wilder. Mum says he breaks in to baches, takes some food and leaves a thank-you note, I replied. Although I hadn't see any note this morning.

It wasn't him! Anyway I don't want to talk about it.

Molly got up and started getting dressed.

Molly's been doing some interesting things lately. Things like checking that the stove is off. She got up in the night to see that the lights were off. I saw her switch them on and off three times. She went in to the kitchen and checked the stove again. *Three times*. I watched her from my bedroom. She didn't know I was there.

Just last week she got the bus in to town and when she got there she rang me at home from a phone box, asked me to make sure the iron was off. I had to go in to the kitchen to check. The iron was there – stored in the cupboard. It was cold. I had to check three times before she would hang up. Mum hasn't noticed. But I have.

Perhaps the house is haunted - I've often heard strange creaking sounds at night - the wooden walls breathing and sighing. Sometimes there's a faint singing sound – high-pitched – a thin kind of wailing. But then again I could have been dreaming.

I mentioned it to Molly once and she said she had heard sounds from her bedroom. It was as if someone lived deep in the recess of the wardrobe and was trying to tell her something, she told me. This time was a bit different – someone actually in Molly's bedroom! I didn't know what to believe.

Mum had told us not to be so silly. Joe just ignored us and turned up the record player. He had a new Bob Dylan record and played it over and over again. He was starting to look like Bob Dylan.

After breakfast I ran up the road to get some things from the shop. Joe had asked me to get him a box of matches. Said he'd time me and if I beat my record he would give me a surprise. Before I left the house he picked up his watch and said 'Go'!

I ran down the drive and along the road, then up Butcher's Alley. I didn't much like going up there but it was the quickest way to get to the top. When I reached the path I took a deep breath and ran up. Hoped like hell Miss Barrett wasn't lurking beside her gate. She didn't approve of us going up *her* path. It was supposed to be for the residents who lived on either side of Butcher's Alley. She would often lie in wait and pounce on some unsuspecting child who had been taking the short cut. Hide behind a hedge and grab your arm as you went past. Mr Burrell, the local dentist, lived in one of the houses near the top. I didn't want to bump in to him either. Sometimes when I walked up the alley he would be coming out of his house at the same time.

Aha! he would say. Walking up *our* short cut are we? Hope we aren't buying any sweets up at the dairy. High time your mother brought you in for a check-up. Please remind her!

He would stare down at me and I felt he was about to prise my jaws open to examine me there and then.

I would mutter something about reminding Mum then make my escape. Mum said *he* was the butcher of Titirangi – we never had any fillings until we came to New Zealand. She thought he was just after money. And he was rough – with hairy fingers smelling of disinfectant poking and prodding around my gums.

Up at the shops, I bought Joe's box of matches and rushed over to the butcher (the actual butcher and not the dentist) to buy some meat for Mum. There was a calendar with a glossy picture of Lassie the dog on the wall. I loved watching the butcher wrap up the meat - carefully wrapping it first in greaseproof paper then in a smooth sheet of brown paper. He would pick up a large purple pen and write on the brown paper with a flourish. I thought I'd quite like to be a butcher when I left school. Only so I could use that purple pen - on the brown paper. Not to carve up hunks of raw and bloody meat.

We were going to have roast lamb for dinner. The next day Mum would get me to put the cold leftover meat through the mincer. It was an old green one that could be attached to the kitchen table. I would feed pieces of cold lamb through the opening and it would come out all squiggly at the other end. It was a job I liked. Monty would sit eyeing me – his tongue flopping from the side of his mouth willing me to drop him a morsel.

I ran back down Butcher's Alley with my parcel of meat and Joe's matches. As I passed by Miss Barrett's house there was a shout from behind the hedge.

Stop!

Miss Barrett flew around the corner and stood there with her wild red hair piled on top of her head and her apron strings flying out from behind her. Her face was screwed up like one of the purple crinkled passionfruit that grew behind our house.

What do you think you are doing running down our alley – I've told you children time and time again. This. Is. Private. Property!

Her hands did a kind of dance in the air flying around one another like escaping birds.

Sorry! I yelled as I jumped to the side of her and kept on running down the path.

Just you wait until I tell your mother! Oh yes, she'll be hearing from me!

Her voice faded as I reached the bottom. I ran all the way along Park Road and up our driveway. Monty was barking furiously as though he could smell the fresh leg of lamb from the bottom of the drive. I burst through the front door and went to find Joe. He was sitting outside the laundry puffing on a cigarette.

I'm back! I threw him the matches. What was my time?

Oh, go and get my watch. He blew smoke from his nose. Don't think you beat your record though.

I picked the watch up from the dining table but couldn't be bothered giving it to him. I knew he wouldn't have a surprise for me so I put it back down. Then I put the meat in the fridge and went to see Molly. She was lying on the bed reading a magazine.

Where's Mum? I asked.

Having a bath - she's been in there for ages.

I sat on the side of Molly's bed. She looked pale with dark patches under her eyes, which could have been her smudged eyeliner from last night.

Did you really feel someone touching you?

Molly sighed. Yes, but nobody believes me.

Maybe it was a ghost, I said helpfully. I'm sure this house is haunted.

Yeah well if it is I don't want to stay here!

She threw the magazine on the floor, got up and went over to the dressing table.

Was anything taken? I asked.

Don't think so.

Molly started rearranging her things – her Mary Qant lipsticks stood in line like glossy tin soldiers, her pancake make-up and sponges sat in a pink glass bowl. There was a glass jar with a lid where she kept her coloured cotton wool balls – they looked like fluffy marshmallows in an old sweet shop. Everything was neat and polished. I wasn't allowed to touch any of it. Inside Molly's wardrobe, her clothes were hung in rows of purple, pink, green, blue and mauve. Her black clothes were hung at the very end of the metal rod. Shoes and boots lay side by side in a neat row. Not like my wardrobe where they were all flung in a heap at the bottom.

When we were younger and used to share a bedroom, Molly actually put a line down the middle of the floor between the beds with a long cord. Her side was immaculate – bed always made with the shiny counterpane smooth over the pillows, toys lined up along the shelves and dolls sitting together on her bed - a tidy little family whose children were never grubby, never misbehaved and always ate their peas.

I was not allowed to cross that line or mess anything up. My side was full of scattered toys with pages of drawings, colouring-in books, crayons, pencils and paper cut-out dolls with their changeable outfits lying all over my bed. A couple of one-eyed china dolls with unsuccessful haircuts would stare out over at Molly's side of the room. She used to turn them over to face the wall. Said they gave her the creeps.

I'm going to see if there's any history of this house being haunted, I said to Molly. Maybe I can find something at the library then Mum really will believe you!

Yeah well let me know if you do. Don't want to spend another night in here if it happens again.

I went to find Mum to see if she would give me a lift up to the library.

No, you'll have to walk. I'm going out later but need to have a rest first. Mum was always having rests - lying down on her bed for hours at a time.

After lunch I walked up to the library. There was stillness in the air, the trees stood like sentinels on either side of the road. Behind them, the dense bush with its secret paths leading down to the beach. Anyone could be hiding in that bush – George Wilder could be sitting below a kauri tree eating the spoils taken from the many baches that lay damp and quiet amongst the tee trees and ferns. He might be writing another note to leave at his next break-in.

He could be eating luncheon sausage and tomato sauce sandwiches – the white bread slightly curled and stale – flinging his crusts to the wood pigeons and tuis. In his bag

he could be carrying tins of pineapple and fruit salad for pudding. If he couldn't find a tin opener he would pierce the lids with an old screwdriver and slurp on the juice then leave the tins to lie brown and rusting under flax bushes. Birds would hover over them then fly off leaving the sweet scent of pineapple to linger in the air.

I walked quickly past the gravel lay-by where one of the main paths led from the bush down to the sea. What if he leapt out and took me hostage? Would I fight him off giving him a Chinese burn like the one my brother showed me – would I scream, kick him in the shins and run? Or would he be very polite and ask if I had any spare food – I had an apple in my bag guess I could give it to him. Wished I'd thought of bringing more food with me. Perhaps I could offer to leave him some under a specific tree - third kauri on the left going down the track. What if he was injured and lying in the bush not able to move – someone might find his body curled up months later. A pencil in one hand a piece of paper in the other. As though about to write his final thank-you note.

He didn't appear so I kept on walking. Past the Old Soldier's Memorial Church and the Toby Jug restaurant that had the fake cat on the roof. The same one Ngaire had thought was real.

It was the school holidays and the library was packed with children choosing books with their mothers. Fat babies sat in prams and toddlers ran around the aisles. A harried looking librarian followed them saying 'shush shush this is a quiet place!' trying to find their mothers.

I asked one of the librarians if there were any books on the history of Titirangi and she pointed to the history section. There were only a few books so I chose a couple and went and sat down to read them. It took me a while to find anything but there was a section that mentioned the historical battle between two Maori tribes that took place in the Waitakeres in the 1700s - apparently thousands of warriors had been slain. I wondered if this had happened near our house – or down by the beaches in Titirangi. Would warrior spirits still be hovering in the bush - had someone been killed right where our house sat?
I took the book up to the librarian to see if I could take it out.

No dear, this is a reference book only, she smiled. It seems quite a grown-up book for you to want to take out. Is there anything particular you wanted to find out - are you studying something at school?

I can read grown-up books you know, I said tartly.

Yes, dear I'm sure you can. Now maybe I can help you if you tell me what it is you need to know. You could always take some notes from it?

I took a deep breath.

I need to know if our house is haunted and maybe it's because the Maoris had a big battle and people were killed and maybe their ghosts are still hanging about and my sister said there was someone in her room last night but our dog didn't even bark and she says there really was someone there but Mum doesn't believe her so I need to find out if there are any stories of ghosts haunting houses in Titirangi…

Ah, she said. Well now why don't you come and sit down over here with me.

She pointed to a desk in the corner and we went and sat down

Yes, there was a big battle between the two tribes but it took place miles from here you know – way up in the Waitakeres. I don't believe in ghosts by the way.

I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Perhaps your sister just heard something in the night, the wind perhaps?

Well, it could have been George Wilder looking for food! I insisted.

No dear, I don't think so. Now are there any other books you'd like to take out today?

I shook my head and got up leaving the reference book with her.

I walked on up to the dairy to buy a packet of milk bottles and raspberries and blackberries – I could share them with Molly. That would cheer her up.

As I walked past the building where the deaf children stayed, I thought about all the ghost stories we used to tell each other. We would sit in the dark hallway of our house and scare each other to death. Molly always told the best ones – she would terrify my friend Jenny and me with tales of ghosts hiding under beds, ghosts visiting at night leaving vapour trails and silver threads on the walls like phantom snails crawling up in to the eaves. Perhaps Molly had told too many stories – perhaps she had believed in them so much that they actually had become real to her.

After buying the sweets, I sauntered along the road thinking I might chance Butcher's Alley again. After all, it was the quickest way to get home. I went down the path that led to the alley and quickly walked past the dentist's house. Crept past Miss Barrett's place but there was no shout this time. I did hear a sound though so I stopped and listened. There it was again – from behind the hedge. I slowly walked around the hedge and saw

Miss Barrett lying on the grass near her house. Pegs were scattered all around her – her hair streaming out like wild red seaweed.

Miss Barrett, are you all right? I called.

Of course I'm not. Help me up you silly girl!

I ran over to her and helped to sit her up. Wooden pegs fell down on to her lap - a couple of them remained entwined in her hair. The purple scarf wrapped around the top of her head was now lopsided.

What happened? I asked.

My rascally cat ran straight in front of me and tripped me up. Nothing broken it appears. It would take a lot more than that to break these old dancer's bones!

Oh, I replied. I didn't know you were a dancer Miss Barrett?

Used to be - I'm not one now of course!

I helped her get to her feet and she leaned on me as we walked in to her cottage. The front door was ajar and was painted fire-engine red with a brass door knocker in the shape of a dragon. I had never seen one like it before. Miss Barrett pointed to the sitting room and we went in. The wooden floor was covered in rugs – made of 'tatting' Miss Barrett said. She sat down on a tapestry chair that had wings on each side of it and asked me to get her a glass of water as she picked the pegs from out of her hair.

I brought her a glass of water then noticed the photographs on the walls. The photos pictured a ballerina in various costumes. A beautiful ballerina with her hair swept off her face. The photos, in black and white, showed her wearing different kinds of tutus and pictured her balancing on her toes in her satin shoes. Another couple of photos showed her dancing with a male partner. He had thick dark hair, wavy. I gave her the water and sat down.

Were you a ballerina, Miss Barrett? Is this you in the photos?

The name on the photo was 'Leonora Barrett' – *Leonora*!

She sipped at her water. Yes, indeed. I grew up in London, won a scholarship and performed with the Royal Ballet in Covent Garden - a Prima Ballerina in my youth. The young man in the photos was my lover. Brilliant, brilliant dancer…

Oh, I blushed. Where is he now?

Dead as a doornail - killed himself over another man.

I didn't know what she meant – another man? I'm sorry, was all I said.

We made such a wonderful couple – the toast of London and the toast of the ballet world! Far too long ago now to reminisce about, she said briskly. If you know how to put a kettle on you could make us both a cup of tea. Tea in the tin marked 'tea' and use the teapot beside the stove. There are a few biscuits in the tin. You'll find it in the cupboard over the sink where you will also find the china cups and saucers. I have milk and two teaspoons of sugar – sugar bowl is beside the teapot.

The teapot was made of china and had a tea-cosy covering it - a little pixie hat in red blue and white knitted stripes with a bobble of wool on the top. The cups were bone china with dainty pink flowers painted on them and each had a golden rim with saucers to match. Cups for a Princess, I thought. The tin of biscuits showed a picture of the Queen on her Coronation wearing a sparkling tiara – although now rather faded. After making the tea I brought over the two cups and placed them on the small round table beside her with a plate of biscuits. Gingernuts - my favourite.

Miss Barrett, I'm sorry about running up the alley, I said dunking my biscuit in my tea.

She looked at me over her teacup.

Hmm – I won't tell be telling your mother this time. But in future just come and ask me. Is that such a hard thing to do?

No, I said taking another bite of my soggy biscuit. My sister Molly used to go to ballet lessons. She was really good at it.

Then why did she stop? Miss Barrett asked.

Our father died and Mum said there wasn't enough money for lessons. She's been doing some strange things lately.

Oh. Are you referring to your mother?

Er no, I meant Molly but Mum has been too. Molly keeps checking that things are turned off, in the house. The stove, lights and even the iron - checks everything three or four times. And last night she said someone had been in her bedroom- while she was asleep in bed.

For some reason I felt I could talk to Miss Barrett.

And was there someone there? Miss Barrett asked.

No, I don't think so. But then again it could have been George Wilder.

Don't be ridiculous! she snorted. I do think your sister may suffer from an enhanced imagination. And how old is she?

She'll be fifteen soon.

Mm, probably too old to take up lessons again… I think I've seen her running up here as well. Lots of make-up, eyes like a panda?

Um, yes that would be her, I replied.

I used to teach ballet you know. Still have a studio out the back. Perhaps you could ask her to come up and see me – see if she has any talent – no promises mind!

Molly would love that! I put my cup down.

Yes well, as I said, no promises, she said gruffly.

I cleared the tea things away and asked if Miss Barrett needed anything else. She shook her head.

Are you sure you're not hurt? I asked.

Suffering from wounded pride, that's all. Now off with you – go and talk to that sister of yours. She waved me away.

Bye, Miss Barrett. Thanks for the tea.

I ran all the way home. Couldn't wait to talk to Molly - imagined her being able to have ballet lessons again. With Miss Barrett of all people! Grumpy Miss Barrett – the madwoman who lived up Butcher's Alley a famous ballerina! She didn't say what the lessons might cost – but then again she might not want to teach Molly at all.

Once I got home I went to find Molly. She was painting her toenails.

Well did you find anything out about ghosts? she asked, dipping the brush in to the small pink bottle.

No, nothing really but listen Miss Barrett might give you ballet lessons!

I sat on Molly's bed.

Who?

Miss Barrett the lady who lives up Butcher's Alley.

What, the crazy woman with the dyed red hair?

She's not really crazy you know – just lonely I think. Anyway she used to be a famous ballerina in London and she was in love with a dancer who died – he killed himself. There are photos of him on the wall and he's really handsome!

Molly eyed me suspiciously. You're making all this up. Are you writing one of your plays?

I am not making it up - it's true! I saw all her ballet photos on the wall. And her name is Leonora! We had a cup of tea and biscuits and she told me everything - she used to

give ballet lessons and she has a studio in her house and she said if you go up and see her she can tell if you've got any talent and if you do then maybe she'll…

Stop! Molly put the bottle of polish on her dressing table. How did you get in to her house - I don't believe you just walked up there and knocked on her door!

No, of course not! I was trying to sneak past her house when I heard a funny noise from behind the hedge – I saw Miss Barrett lying on the grass so I helped her. Her cat had tripped her up. I made her a cup of tea and everything! She was really nice after that. You should see her photos – she was beautiful when she was young. Anyway, she said if you go up and see her she'd be able to tell if you're any good at ballet – I told her you used to have lessons. She might even teach you.

Molly looked thoughtful. We can't afford lessons.

Maybe she'll teach you for nothing, I said.

I can't believe that mad woman used to be a ballerina – are you sure you're not fibbing?

If you go up and see her you'll know I'm telling the truth!

Molly thought it over and decided she would go up and visit Miss Barrett and I would have to go up with her. We went over the next day - didn't mention anything to Mum. Molly wore her leotard and tights under her clothes and carried her old ballet shoes in her bag. We knocked at the door and Miss Barrett opened it – she was wearing a black silk kimono covered in red flowers. Her hair was piled on top of her head – a wild and empty bird's nest. Her feet were bare. Classical music was playing loudly.

Ah, the sisters! Not sneaking up the alley this time I see?

She beckoned us inside. Molly stood in the hall staring at the photos. Her mouth was open.

Stravinsky – wonderful! Miss Barrett said as she went to turn the music off. So, you are the ballerina?

Molly nodded.

We will go into the studio and see if you have any grace - or any promise for that matter…and I will need to examine your feet. Have you brought suitable clothing?

Yes, replied Molly.

Miss Barrett looked at me. You can stay here and make us all a pot of tea. I'm sure you remember where to find everything?

She led Molly to the end of the hallway, opened a door and went inside. As I put the kettle on I heard piano music being played. The notes fell tingling my spine. Out of the window Miss Barrett's black cat stretched and rolled on the path. I wondered how it would feel to be so flexible. Pictured Molly flying through the air with feet pointed - hands soft and fluid. Fluttering hands that switched things off at home – always checking.

After a while, Miss Barrett and Molly came back in to the kitchen. Molly's cheeks were flushed.

I have told your sister to stop wasting her time with make-up and boys and to take her dancing seriously. Now, where on earth is that tea!

In exchange for ballet lessons, Molly helped out with housework and the occasional bit of shopping. At home she laughed more. Stopped checking things were turned off. There were no more reports of disturbances in the night. Mum even seemed happier.

A few months later, Molly bumped in to her old ballet teacher Mrs Robertson and told her she had started lessons with Miss Leonora Barrett. Told her all about the photos, of Covent Garden, Miss Barrett's lover and how famous she had been – how *they* had been the talk of London.

Miss Barrett? You mean *Linda* Barrett, the lady with red hair who lives in Butcher's Alley? Mrs Robertson asked in a silken voice.

Yes, said Molly.

What utter nonsense! Linda Barrett used to run a small dance studio down in Te Puke. You do know that the man in the photographs, the man pictured dancing with her, is her brother. They moved to Titirangi after their parents passed away. The brother died rather tragically a few years later. Miss Barrett has never ever danced in England, my dear. By the way, such a shame your mother couldn't afford my lessons…

Mrs Robertson picked up her bag of groceries and walked out of the store. Molly carried on down Butcher's Alley. When she reached the hedge she paused to pat the glossy black cat that lay so elegantly on the path, then with her pink silk ballet shoes in one hand and a bag of shopping in the other she lifted the polished brass dragon and knocked firmly on Miss 'Leonora' Barrett's door. There was no answer. Molly peered through the window and saw Miss Barrett dancing wildly on the tatted rug. She was completely bald.

A dead plum sat in the nikau bowl. This last plum had a patina of mould – it was not going to be picked up and treasured. It would rot until the juice leaked watery and thin pooling at the bottom of the bowl.

I was with Mum when we collected those nikaus. We waded up the creek at Piha in our jandals. The water cool on our ankles soothing last night's mosquito bites. We carefully picked our way between the stones gathering fallen nikaus beside the stream. Dragged those nikaus back to the bach where Mum hacked the branches off, turning the curled nikaus in to fruit bowls. Mum varnished the bowls and gave them as Christmas presents. Waited as family and friends remarked, How unusual. How useful. Oh, a nikau bowl. Mmm…

My family felt much the same about Mum's wooden surfboard - the one with the faded red stripe down the middle. The one she'd take out in bumpy waves. Lying flat on her stomach she would zoom in grinning impishly beneath the tight rubber bathing cap sprinkled with yellow daisies.

Mother's just don't do that sort of thing! Molly said.

Mothers don't wade up creeks hacking dead nikaus or plunge in to rock pools grabbing mussels. Mothers made sponges with floury hands – mothers didn't have hands dipped in saffron smelling of garlic, onions and spice. Or have one finger stained burnt orange yellow from cigarettes.

When we went down to the beach, Molly sat apart from us gazing at bronzed Gods striding along with their 'real' surfboards. I sat and waited for Mum to come out of the sea. She'd sparkle with salt and the wooden surfboard would be plonked down on the burning black sand. She would light a cigarette and lie back contented as a seal. I would have a turn on the board much to Molly's disgust. I loved taking it out battling over giant waves then sliding back in, swimming costume laden with sand and eyelashes stinging and salty. Laughing! Until the board dug in to the sand and I'd flip off grazing my nose.

The day I nearly drowned was a calm New Year's Eve day. Mum had told me I was finally allowed to go the surf club's New Year's Eve dance that night. Jenny was staying with us at the bach. We had already chosen what we were going to wear – I had a tent dress with red hibiscus flowers on it and Jenny had a blue and green one patterned with leaves. Molly said I could borrow her shimmering pink lipstick and the black eyeliner that peeled off - hoped Mum wouldn't notice we had make-up on.

The bach was set back from the road with pohutukawas lining the sandy drive. It was cool under those trees. The drive was a red carpet when you walked down it – covered in tiny pohutukawa needles. It wasn't our bach – it belonged to friends of Mum. They lived in Titirangi and had offered it to Mum after Dad died. Mum said we all needed a holiday. A whole six weeks! No more class, no more wearing my satchel on my back walking up the steep path to school, no more sitting in the classroom hearing our prickly teacher in her monotonous voice teach us about rivers and mountains, no more leather strap zinging it's way down on to my outstretched palm. We were free.

Jenny brought her Monopoly board set and a pack of cards. She was going to teach me some card games. The feel of new cards, slick and so easy to shuffle! I loved those pictures of the Jack, Queen and King. If you turned the card up, the same picture sat at the top of the card that was at the bottom. I imagined being that Queen – her dark hair curled at the shoulders, wearing a red and yellow crown. I would live in a palace with turquoise peacocks strutting in the gardens with mazes and shapes made out of the shrubs. I'd eat fairy cakes, animal biscuits with pink frosted icing, purple grapes and honey sandwiches. Cups of tea in small white china cups rimmed with gold poured from a teapot with a golden spout. And never go to school.

We took out our crisp new dresses Jenny's mother had sewn for us. Each dress had tiny purple and green flowers scattered over the polished cotton with material strings that tied at the shoulder - they smelled fresh, hopeful somehow.

The bach was old, painted in dark brown creosote with cracked white paint on the windowsills and a corrugated iron roof. The floors were covered in a kind of grass matting that felt smooth to walk on, underneath were little piles of black sand that we had to sweep out. A faded calendar tacked on the wall pictured three fluffy ginger kittens sitting in a wicker basket with blue satin ribbons tied in bows around their necks.

Jenny and I slept in wooden bunks and Molly had her own room. Outside Molly's window, behind the bach, daisies in yellow white hundreds and thousands were scattered all over the scrubby grass. Joe had to sleep in the sitting room on a mattress. Mum had the room nearest the kitchen. Monty came with us, curling up beside Mum's bed at night. Nighttime at the bach meant late evening scent of pungent green mosquito coils, smoky bacon, coconut oil, and the sea - always the sea. Rumbling deep at night, soothing steady far-off roar. Moreporks calling out in faint alarm, insistent hum of cicadas, spitfire buzz of a lone mosquito in its death throes.

Joe had ridden out on his Triumph motorbike and wore Dad's leather flying jacket. He parked the bike under the coolness of the pohutukawa tree. Jenny and I hoped to have a ride on the back. Mum said no. Joe brought Dad's old cine-camera with him. He filmed us unpacking Mum's violent green Peugeot, filmed us lugging everything up the stairs, burning sausages in the kitchen, making up the beds, Molly unpacking her cases stuffed with clothes and hidden cigarettes, putting her make-up on and Mum clinking bottles as she unpacked the groceries. Mum threw a tea towel at him in the end but Joe just kept on filming.

Mum's friend Val came out as well – she pitched her canvas tent behind the bach. Her two children, Michael and Louise, were with her. Michael was a year older than me and Louise was only eight. She wore pigtails that stuck out either side of her head. Michael went to a private school and had heaps of freckles – Jenny and I imagined how red he would become under the hot sun. Fry his feet on the black sand and blind us with his white skin. Michael had two friends, boys from his school, staying in the camping ground. Jenny wanted to go and visit them after we had unpacked the car but I wasn't so sure.

Maybe later, I said.

I wanted Jenny to myself. Hold hands, talk about things, go for long walks on the beach, swig cold soft drinks from the dairy. The fizzing cold that would hit the top of your mouth making it ache. Drink creamy chocolate milkshakes - *not* vanilla or strawberry. I wanted my friend to be with *me* – I missed having someone to talk to. Molly was more interested in boys and music. Joe was my older brother, couldn't talk to him. Mum was Mum – couldn't talk to her either.

Before lunch, we sat under the shade of the pohutukawa making daisy chains - the thin green stems kept breaking so we gave up. Molly hid behind the tree and smoked, Jenny lay on her back while I dreamed of Scotland. Remembered how Molly and I wore wild daisies in our hair our milky skin stark against the splash of purple rhododendrons as we played hide-and-seek calling out in accents thick as churned butter.

Afterwards, Jenny and I went for a walk on the beach. Wore jandals as the black sand was hot as lava. Walked down by the waters edge, watched the sea smashing on to the shore. The sand glimmered bronze gold and black with wriggly patterns where the water ran in rivulets. Followed the early morning horse and dog prints on the beach. What it would be like to ride the length of the beach wind in our hair horses' manes whipping up dogs running barking by our side. Riding slick horses bareback and racing along the wet

beach kicking sprays of sand and water behind us hurtling towards the dark rocks and pools ahead – full of glistening green mussels with wavy beards.

We walked to the end of north Piha, fossicked about in the rock pools, poked sea anemones, watched them unfurl and quickly close up again. Prodded purple jellyfish washed up dead and rubbery on the beach. Threw sticks in to the water. Monty chased and fetched – he loved swimming in the sea his golden fur sleek, wet, body thin and whippet-like shaking droplets sprinkling cold little jewels on our skin. Gouged patterns in the sand with our sticks, wrote our names in huge letters – drew hearts with arrows through them. Vowed to be best friends forever.

For lunch we had thick white bread with slices of ham, tomatoes, lettuce and thinly cut cucumber. Mum had made curried eggs, which were Joe's favourite. He scoffed the lot. Michael came down to the beach with us. Louise had to wait as Val said the surf was too dangerous for her and Mum said they would be down later to watch us. Told Joe to keep an eye on us.

Joe took the cine-camera with him and a pair of flippers – Joe never usually swam. Molly wore her fake leopard skin bikini. She had smothered herself with coconut oil. Jenny wore blue shorts with hibiscus flowers, her new Jantzen swimsuit underneath. I wore my Mary Quant bikini I'd been given for Christmas – black with green flowers. It was actually a set of underwear but Molly said I could get away with it.

The heat hit as we walked out of the bach. Jenny and I had smeared white zinc on our noses - hoped we looked like real surfers. Surfers with zinc spread over their faces – warrior braves riding water stallions surging through waves so cool and balanced. Molly would never plaster zinc on her nose. I had wanted to bring Mum's wooden surfboard but Molly and Joe talked me out of it. Too embarrassing they said - wouldn't swim if I brought it with me.

The surf rumbled and tossed, there were people further down the beach swimming between the red and yellow flags. Molly eyed a couple of lifeguards as she sauntered past the surf club with her towel draped over one shoulder showing off her leopard skin bikini and oily skin. One of the lifeguards was using binoculars as he looked out to sea spying on tiny dots of people bobbing about. The sea was rough and the sand scorching. We had to run as fast as possible flinging down our towels and jumping on to them every few paces. Hot black sand sprayed over our jandals burning our toes. Joe filmed us the whole way.

Pointed the cine-camera at us as we leapt over the sand shrieking and squealing as the heat caught our feet.

Joe yelled at us to go up the beach further away from the surf club - said we didn't have to swim down there by the flags – up here at the north end would be much better as we'd have it all to ourselves. We ran along the glittering sand hot as tarseal laid under a blazing sun and sat on our towels – letting the hot sun warm our bodies before flinging ourselves in to the cold sea – that first shock of spray tingling your whole body making goose bumps screaming out as the cold hit then plunging beneath the surf.

Michael lay on his towel and asked Joe for a cigarette. Jenny and I had puffed on one of Molly's cigarettes once – made us feel sick and dizzy. Michael lit his cigarette and lay back on his towel. He looked comical with his white skin and freckles, smoking away beside Joe. I made a face at Jenny. Val would have had a fit if she saw Michael smoking. Joe had Dad's pale Scottish skin. He hardly ever lay on the beach or went swimming. At least he wasn't wearing the usual black polo necked jumper, jeans or Beatle boots.

Joe flicked his cigarette on to the sand wrapped the cine-camera in his towel picked up his flippers and yelled, Let's go!

We jumped up ripping off T-shirts and shorts then ran down to the water. Michael and Joe arrived first then Jenny, me, and lastly Molly who hated running. The water so cool on our burnt feet! Those first cold splashes shocking our skins as we dived under the waves. Bobbed up laughing as salty water stung our eyes. Molly's eye make-up dissolved in streaks of black sad clown tears as they ran down her face. The sea was wild with waves slapping our faces. Joe with his flippers swam further out diving under crashing waves as he went. The waves were huge, boisterous, as though giant toddlers were playing in a salty pool with me tiny as Alice desperately trying to keep afloat. Michael swam beside us for a while - his freckles standing out like little brown islands on a creamy sea. Suddenly he dived under and was gone. Waves pounded the top of my head as I choked with salt laden throat gurgling sea, watched as Michael's head bobbed away in the distance and tried to see if Jenny was nearby. I couldn't see Molly – where was she? Where was Joe?

Jenny sprung up out of the waves besides me gasping. Look at how far out we are!

I looked towards the beach the surf club small as a Monopoly house in the distance. Then spotted Joe as he dived under and came back up swimming closer and closer to the beach. He had flippers on why wasn't he coming back for us. Jenny and I trod water. My legs were getting tired as I propelled them to keep my body upright. The waves were

breaking way out behind us – we were beyond the breakers! Couldn't see Molly anywhere – hadn't seen her since we first went in to the water.

Have you seen Molly! I shouted to Jenny.

She shook her head. Where's Michael?

Don't know!

My throat felt raw and salty - my sea-stung eyes filled with tears and my voice wobbled as I managed to cling to Jenny's hand.

Stay with me! Don't float away…

Michael was swimming towards us. Try to stay afloat – save your energy. He swam closer and tried to smile. I have my bronze medallion – I can help you get back to shore!

How can you take both of us?

I could take you in one at a time.

Jenny and I held hands – who would go first? I turned to look at the shore and out of the corner of my eye thought I saw a brown head bobbing up and down.

Is that Molly - see if you can help her first! I yelled to Michael.

He started swimming – powerful strokes with those pale freckled arms motoring through the waves. Jenny and I watched as he got closer then turned and gave us the thumbs up. It was Molly.

We have to help each other now Jenny, I said spitting out a mouthful of sea.

Her white face matched the zinc smeared over her nose and cheeks. I wondered what drowning would feel like – would I slip under the cool waves, fall in to a deep sleep, be hauled upwards through a hole in the sky – up to heaven, up to see Dad. Or would Dad row out in his dinghy with golden oars and sweet biscuits on board. Would we row back to his island, drink coconut juice or make cups of tea over the burning fire on the beach.

Look! Jenny yelled. Over there, someone's swimming out to us.

I saw two or three people in the distance swimming towards us. As they got closer I could see they were holding a thin rope over their heads and were wearing red and yellow caps. One swam over to Molly and grabbed her. Michael started swimming by himself towards the shore. The other two came towards us. I was held by one of them, he told me to duck under the waves as he took me through the water.

I will push your head down so when I tell you to, take a breath and go under!

I did this the whole way back to the shore. Wave after wave pummelled me as he pushed my head down through each one.

When we finally arrived on the beach the lifesaver helped me to walk out of the water – my legs were wobbly. Molly was stretched out on the sand with a lifeguard bending over her. There was Joe walking up and down holding the cine-camera filming us.

Jenny was sitting on the beach with a towel wrapped around her shoulders. And there was Mum, with Val and Louise, white-faced and running towards us.

Darling! Mum hugged me then ran over to Molly. Joe kept on filming. A towel was put around my shoulders and I walked over to Molly. She was lying down on her side on the wet black sand her hair slick and stuck up in several places. Mum crouched down, stroking her head. We were taken back to the surf club and given hot cups of tea with shortbread biscuits. They lay Molly down on the bed. The lifeguard stood beside her. His name was Rob and he was holding her hand. Her oily skin washed clean from the sea, her hair damp and curling on her shoulders. I walked outside and sat on the dunes. The sea had nearly swallowed us – the sea that would have spat our bones out. Michael came and sat beside me his freckles pale, washed out.

Thanks, I said.

Didn't do much…

Yes, you did.

We sat looking at the water. I wondered if I'd ever get back under those waves - wondered if I'd ever take Mum's wooden board out again and skim in to shore.

. Jenny and I wore our new dresses to the New Year's Eve dance and borrowed Molly's shimmering pink lipstick and black eyeliner. Mum didn't even notice. She stayed back at the bach with Val and Louise. Said she'd come over to meet us later on.

Girls, I'll be there at 12.15 on the dot! Joe, this time keep an eye on them!

The night was dark as we walked over the road to the club with stars in the sky and the steady roar of the surf reminding us where we'd been that day – the sea had decided to let us go this time. The surf club was lit up when we arrived. Inside, on the ceiling, a glitter ball glimmered liquid silver around the walls and people were dancing to records of the Rolling Stones and the Beach Boys. Molly was there dancing with Rob. She wore her new paisley print dress, purple and green. Her silver bracelet glittered under the light. Laughing as she did the twist! When the dance finished she came over to me and I gave her a hug.

What was that for!

Because you're my sister, I said.

She squeezed my hand and walked off with Rob to get a drink. I went outside to look at the stars. Joe was standing there smoking a cigarette.

Sorry I didn't come back for you. Today. When we were swimming and that. He stubbed his cigarette out with his boot and ground it in to the grass.

That's okay, I said.

Wait till you see the film! I got everything!

Great.

Joe went back inside. I stood for a while listening to the surf then sat down on the damp dune and looked over at the water. The moon split silver and waves played catch up with each other.

Thanks Dad, I whispered.

Jenny came outside followed by Michael - we sat together talking and dreaming of what the New Year might bring. We walked to the edge of the sea – the sea with phosphorence glimmering under a pale moon – we held hands and kept on going. Waves tumbled over our bodies then we dove under - in to blackness - in to the cold sharp and salty water.

I woke with my arms thrashing inside my sleeping bag.

Darling, darling wake up… My mother was standing beside the bed. Her voice jagged, throaty.

I was at the New Year's Eve dance – where is everyone? I asked.

She frowned. There was no dance. Don't you remember?

I shook my head.

We lost Molly. Yesterday.

Mum held me tightly. Jenny was sitting at the end of my bed with her hair covering half of her face. Just like Veronica Lake. I always called her Veronica Lake – and she called me Dinah Lee. My hair was short – a sleek helmet.

Mum got up and walked in to the kitchen. Jenny held my hand.

Where's Joe? I whispered.

He's gone off on his motorbike. Don't know where.

One side of Jenny's face was wet and shiny. Her long hair mingled with tears and snot. I could smell smoke from Mum's cigarette.

I got out of bed and walked over to the window. The sun blazed outside. I picked up the nikau bowl with the dead plum inside and tossed it towards the glass – purple juice

dribbled slowly down the pane. In Molly's room I found a couple of things, put them inside the nikau and carried it down to the sea. Jenny followed me. I stood by the edge of the water, pictured Molly with her milky English-Scottish skin, with her freckles that shone like copper dots. Pictured her dancing - up there in heaven. Imagined she could teach those slick-backed-pompadoured angels a thing or two. Remembered how her laugh would bubble up from nowhere like bubbles that form deep on the ocean floor to burst suddenly through the tops of waves. I hurled the nikau with Molly's shimmering pink lipstick and black eyeliner in to the wild ocean.