

Long Thin Strands

MCW Thesis
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Hinges

Ryan read the note on the kitchen table: Hinges, paint, sand paper. Rose's writing. She'd been harping on about it for weeks - the gate. He scribbled a note underneath.

'Off with Ham and Sam. Home late. Don't wait.' He drew a heart shape with a sheep in the middle. 'Luv Ewe.' Make her smile, he thought, and headed off to meet his Friday team for another solid night out.

At four o'clock in the morning Ryan staggered up the stairs shushing himself so as not to wake Rose. The front-door key fell from his hands into the lavender bush beside the porch and after a failed attempt to retrieve it he made his way around to the back door. Taking hold of the handle he shook, with increasing force, till he was rattling the door frame. The dog started off next door and a neighbour's porch light came on.

Rose woke. Crashing out of a dream and a warm bed she tossed the heavy covers aside and stepped into the cold night air, down the stairs to the door.

'Keep it quiet. You'll wake the neighbours - all this carrying on.' She turned the lock and opened the door.

'You're a fine woman my lovely Rose. Sorry to wake you. I lost the key in the bushes...' Ryan's attempt at humour in his take on her Dublin accent was wearing thin.

'Shh. Come inside. Yer sleeping down stairs.' Rose locked the front door behind him and marched back up the stairs and into bed.

Ryan staggered along the passageway and into the spare room, crashed onto the bed and lay like a dead man sprawled out on the fairy print duvet.

At sunrise, the only movements in the room were his eyelids vibrating like the wings of a tiny hovering insect. His mind was locked in a frantic dream of rushing and hiding. He'd found a dark place, a cave or cupboard. And hid

himself. He could see the flash lights outside – through the cracks. For hours it seemed he'd been chased by wild ones with torches. The ground trembled. He was running again. Feet slipped on mud and slime. He grasped at mossy branches to gain his footing. He lifted his head and saw a dark silhouette of a house with a dim flickering light inside, yellowing the window glass. The earth rumbled, and the door to the house opened slowly, and there, in the doorway stood Chloe, bathed in apotropaic light. She beckoned, and he picked up his pace and ran into the house. He closed the door and fell to the floor in front of the fire. The terror slowly subsided with the earth tremors. He woke to the smell of coffee.

Ryan felt the bed move as Rose sat herself down on the edge of it and placed the tray on the flat place she'd sculpted in the bed clothes. The dream, already forgotten, had left a sea of nausea in his stomach, threatening a storm.

Ryan opened one eye. He groaned.

'Good God it's morning!'

Volume up. 'Indeed it is, and top of the morning to you.' Rose held out the cup of strong black coffee.

'Mourning it is – mourning my lack of sleep.' He tried to sit and settled for leaning on one elbow facing Rose.

'Well you've only got yerself to ... you know how it goes. Drink this. Your daughter is coming.'

'Err ... I thought. I thought it was. Later. Like next wee...'

'Drink the coffee. Now what'll you be having for yer breakfast? - A nice plate of eggs with rashers? - I'll whip it up in no time!'

Ryan felt weak, and he thought he might throw up on the fairies in their pink and violet dresses dancing in a hideous forest of vines.

'Maybe I can put cheese on top, lay it on nice and thick like.' Rose called from the laundry. She was ironing her shirt.

'I blame Ham and Sam. They went hard out all night. It's the last time...' he called to the laundry.

'You'll come back here drunk! Yer right about that! You can stay at Sam's next time.' Rose was standing framed in the bedroom doorway, hot iron in her hand, the other on her hip. Tall and slim in a turquoise dressing gown, her dark hair was loose around her shoulders. Her blue eyes fixed on Ryan.

'I've got to go,' he said.

Ryan's face was drained of all colour. The straggled ends of his fringe wet on his forehead. He slid himself off the bed and onto his feet, pushing past Rose he headed for the bathroom. Kneeling, he proceeded to expel the contents of his stomach into the toilet.

'Mind the lid doesn't hit you on the head now! Oh and while you're down there would you just clean round the back of the bowl. I never quite get there.' Rose had followed him into the bathroom. She passed him a damp floor cloth which he slapped on to his face. Slowly Ryan pushed himself into standing. He washed his hands and face in the basin and insulted a deity as he glanced at his face in the bathroom mirror.

There was a knock at the front door.

Rose opened it to see Chloe stood with Shauna. Chloe had on her back a canvas pack. Her blonde hair was cut into a fresh bob, her white sneakers tied with coloured elastic laces.

Chloe let go of Shauna's hand and slithered past Rose, looking for the cat.

'Sorry, but I need somewhere for her to go. I've got to go into hospital for some tests on Monday - this cough.' Shauna coughed. Convincingly.

'Well sure. I'll just fetch Ryan.'

Ryan stumbled out of the bedroom with one leg in his pants. Hopping. The other leg trying to find the hole. Still fastening his belt he walked past Chloe in the kitchen.

'*Hello Chloe,*' he signed.

Chloe clung to the cat. Its fur ruffled and tail flicking. She freed a hand for a wave.

Ryan stood beside Rose, his eyes narrowed against the harsh morning light.

'What's up...?'

'Shauna has to go to the hospital for some tests.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Yeah. Right then. I err. What tests?'

'Sorry. I ...I'll ring later.' Shauna raised her hand in a half-hearted wave and turned to leave.

Chloe was forcing the cat into a cardboard box she'd found in the kitchen.

'Chloe be nice to the cat. Chloe!' Ryan bent down to catch her eye and formed his own clumsy hand actions. '*Gentle Chloe. Gentle.*'

'That's perfect,' Rose said. 'No doubt you were about to phone up sick this morning, so now the two of you can keep each other company. I'm working. We're behind on the stock take.' Rose went to get ready.

It was eight o'clock. Ryan stumbled to the bench and put the jug on.

A loud screech came from the cat. Ryan startled.

'Chloe leave the cat,' he shouted. She looked up, crying and rubbing her arm. Three parallel red lines made their way down her forearm.

'You were asking for it. I told you!' He was pointing and shaking his hand at her. 'What do you expect? You come in and smother her.' She couldn't hear him, he knew that.

Chloe's cheeks flushed and her eyes were wide, fixed on Ryan. She turned from him and ran from the kitchen, burying her head in the couch she cried.

'I'm off now...Ciao.' Rose headed out the front door looking sharp in her office garb. She wore a short charcoal skirt with matching tailored jacket. White shirt. Her hair - twisted and held in a silver clasp.

'Oh yeah - see ya - we'll be fine.' He was digging deep for a witty come back. The door was shut.

He turned back to Chloe. 'Chloe come on now.' He rubbed her back and she shot up off the couch and waved her hands wildly, signing something. Her face wet, nose snotty and hair all mussed.

'Chloe slow down. I don't know what you're saying.' He reached to hug her and she pushed away looking for the cat. 'Chloe come! Come we'll put the tele on.'

Ryan switched on the television. 'Here, how about a DVD - The mermaid one?' He showed her the picture on the case. She glanced at the mermaid and turned away.

'I need a shower. Daddy's going to have a shower...' He signed, '*Daddy shower.*'

Chloe picked up the cat and looked back at Ryan. He mimed showering.

After a brief less than satisfying shower, he wrapped a towel round his waist and went into the lounge looking for Chloe. He couldn't help but call her name. The back door was open and the cat had moved out to find the sunshine on the back porch. No sign of Chloe in the house or out the back. Ryan stepped into the even brighter day, down the steps and into the yard. He held his head as if it was about to topple off his shoulders. The gate to the neighbours was open. Years ago the previous owners had been on friendly terms with their neighbours so they'd built the gate which now no longer closed; it hung ajar, tilted on its rusty hinges.

'Chloe!' - Still calling. The nausea had returned. Ryan went through into the yard next door. The grass was long. Lichen covered the old fruit trees in the garden. A baked beans' can and an empty whiskey bottle lay on the ground beside the full wheelie bin. And there was Chloe, at the bottom of the wooden steps that led steeply to the door of the house. She was patting a dog – a yellow Labrador Retriever.

Riley Keeton was sitting in an armchair at the top of the stairs holding a cracked coffee cup. Smoking. But for a long thin strand of grey hair that swept over his scalp he was totally bald.

'There you are Chloe. I was looking for you.'

'Nice skirt! – Is that what all the fellas are wearing this year?' Riley sniggered.

Ryan looked down and adjusted his towel. 'Oh yeah. I could be arrested in this.'

'You don't need the outfit for that. Trust me.'

'Err...Yeah. *Lets go Chloe!*'

'She's a quiet one aye?' Riley smiled.

Chloe looked up. '*What's the dog's name?*' she signed.

'She wants to know your dog's name.'

'Mustard.'

'*M U S T A R D.*' Ryan signed the letters individually. He didn't know the sign for 'mustard.' But Chloe signed it back.

'Oh right. Come now let's go.'

Back at the house Ryan tried to explain to Chloe that she should stay away from the neighbour's place. He would research the sign for 'creep.' Not sure what you tell an eight year old – 'dirty old man?' The leaflets had been distributed the week he'd moved in: 'Convicted pedophile in your neighbourhood.' And Rose had started on about the gate.

At the end of that week Chloe was skipping in the lounge when Rose arrived home and sat herself on the couch. Rose slipped off her shoes and pulling at the end of her tights she wriggled her toes free. She stretched her legs out, rested them on the coffee table and watched Chloe show off her new skipping skills.

'Rose did you have a good day?' Ryan asked. 'You must be tired at the end of the long week.' Ryan was walking into the lounge waving a bottle and a glass. 'How about I pour you a nice glass of red and I fix you some medium-rare steak with salad?'

'What's up? What do you want?'

'Not a thing, we're good. Chloe wanted to see her mum after school so we went up to the hospital.'

'So when's she being discharged?'

'Well that's the thing see. She's not done yet – there's a few more tests and maybe an operation.'

'What? So what about Chloe?'

'Well, she could go to her Aunty Sheryl's for the weekend - only she's a cow. She treats Chloe like she's stupid.'

'So what about your night out with the boys? You can't take Chloe.'

'Well that's what I'm thinking - You wouldn't mind looking after her for a couple of hours would you?'

'I'd love to Ryan.' He'd missed her attempt at sarcasm. 'Tonight's my yoga class – all paid up for too.'

'Well I'm sure she'll be fine waiting in the car with a big bag of lollies.' He smiled.

The bastard! 'Now Ryan don't do this. I'm not staying home so you can go out drinking with yer mates all hours now am I? She is your daughter!'

'I'm not really cut out for this Rose.' He reached towards her to put his hand on her shoulder and withdrew at her flinch. 'You are so much better with kids,' he said, rubbed both his hands through his hair and looked over at Chloe teasing the cat with the skipping rope. 'I hope Shauna gets sorted soon.'

'I know what you are doing here.' Rose slammed her hand down on the table and Chloe jumped. 'Wake up. For God's sake Ryan when are you going to grow up?' Rose pushed past Ryan to the bathroom.

Chloe watched her leave and looked back at Ryan looking as if he had forgotten something. He sat down on the couch and Chloe took the rope and tied his feet together. The cat settled on his lap and pummeled him with her paws, claws extended.

In the morning Ryan was woken by the cat on his bed. Chloe was standing at the end of the bed waiting for the cat to wake him.

'What the? Get off cat! I don't want your fleas in my bed. Oh Chloe. You're up early. What's up?'

She held out a picture of a garden she had drawn, and she pointed to the flowers and trees. She had drawn a dog and a cat sitting on the grass under an apple tree. Large round red apples hung off green stems.

'I want a garden. We could make a garden,' she signed. Her brown eyes flashed from her drawing back to Ryan's face.

He pulled the pillow over his head and groaned. Rose came into the room.

'What's all this - awake so early, the two of you?' Rose signed, *'What's up?'*

Chloe volunteered the drawing.

'It's lovely. I wish I had a garden like that.'

Another groan from behind the pillow. Rose gave a 'what's wrong with your father?' gesture.

A muffled voice - 'She wants to start a garden,' said Ryan.

'A garden! Oh now that's a charming idea.' Thumbs up for Chloe. 'But does she not know Ryan, that you have an allergy to grass and pollen, soil and spades – sweat and toil?'

Rose and Chloe went downstairs and wrote a list.

Trips to the hospital were interspersed with trips to the garden centre. The surgery took place and the chemo was started and Shauna became thin and grey.

The two bare-root apple trees leaned against the wall of the house in the rain - waiting for planting.

'Rose. What if she dies? I don't think I can keep doing this.' Rose was sat at the kitchen table working on a Sudoku puzzle from the newspaper. Chloe was sat at the table drawing – flowers.

Rose clipped her pen to the edge of the paper and lifted her head.

'What you mean? Take responsibility?'

'No! Give up on my life. I didn't choose this!'

'No I guess you didn't. Shall we pack her off then? Send her off to welfare?'

Rose moved to the sink and soaked her hands in the warm water. She squeezed out the dish cloth and wiped down the bench. She looked up at Ryan.

'I don't suppose Shauna had much choice either do you? You know if you are going to be a lousy father then you'll have to do it on your own. I am out of here. I want a bloke that will be a good Daddy you know. I've promised myself that at least.'

'I'm trying here. But I can't keep this up. I've got a job I'm supposed to be doing but I have to look after her,' said Ryan.

'Watch yerself. She's right here you know.'

'Yeah, and she can't hear me you know. She's deaf! I can stand behind her and yell my heart out and she still can't hear me. She doesn't even read my lips. She can't talk. If she needs help she can't even scream. How the hell can I watch out for her? I can't even understand her. She needs her mother!'

Chloe looked up from her sketch. Her eyes switched from Rose back to Ryan. She stood suddenly and her pencil case fell off the table. The pencils spilled like a fan onto the floor. Chloe gestured wildly with her hands. Her face flushed, she pushed passed Ryan and headed to her room. The slam of the door shook the house and Chloe felt it through her feet. She sunk to the floor, hugging her knees.

Rose stood at the sink strangling the cloth. 'What did she say?'

'I don't know. I don't know what she says half the time. I wish I knew.'

Before heading after Chloe Ryan looked back at Rose. 'Did you mean that? What you said before. Was that a threat about leaving?'

'I guess it was. It is.' Rose dried her hands on the towel. 'I want a better life for my kids, if I ever have them ... that's all.'

Ryan, searching her face, and for his own response, stood silent.

'Go on now, see to her.' Rose flicked the towel towards the door.

He could hear the whimpering from outside Chloe's room and he tried to open the door. He could feel the resistance of her body pushed up against the door and he banged on it. The white door had chipped paint and old kick marks on both sides near the floor, the handiwork of past tenants.

Chloe felt the pounding through her back. Three strong bangs. She stopped crying and returned the thumps on the door. Bang. Bang. Bang. Then Ryan, four beats on the door, two long, two short. Chloe, two long, two short.

Ryan tried the door again. She wasn't budging. So he waited, and next Chloe knocked on the door. Boom did di boom boom – crotchet, quaver, quaver, crotchet, crotchet. Ryan mirrored the rhythm.

She had sat on his knee at only four years old when he and Shauna were still together. Chloe had started it – tapping his arm. And the last rhythm was the one Chloe had used when she was ready to come around after a fight. Ryan had taken it to mean, 'I forgive you, for being an idiot,' or something.

Chloe opened the door and let Ryan into the room and they sat on the bed with the cat undisturbed between them.

'I'm sorry, Chloe. Daddy is stupid sometimes.' Ryan's clumsy hands signed the words.

'It's OK. You are not stupid sometimes. Just all the time!' Chloe laughed.

'You are so cheeky! And I love you.'

'So why don't you learn to talk to me?' Chloe paused - the question remained on her face. *'And then you might not be so stupid!'*

Shauna was discharged and had Chloe back - but only for a week. She was too weak to cook and for half the day she slept. Chloe just sat in front of the TV when she wasn't at school and they phoned up for pizza each night. Her sister Sheryl had moved in again.

Ryan fetched Chloe back.

Back at the house, Chloe sat still and heavy on the couch – the cat curled beside her. Rose sat on the other side of the cat and stroked it until it purred loudly. She took Chloe's hand and rested it on the back of the cat's head so she could feel it - the vibration. Chloe held her hand there.

Hamish rang. 'Now isn't it time you had a night out with the boys Ryan. You're hardly pulling your weight leaving all the drinking up to me and Sam. It's time you did your bit.'

'I think you're more than capable of drinking the pub dry without me,' said Ryan.

'Are you fobbing off your mates? Its Friday night man. Have you forgotten we're a team?'

'I err. I've got Chloe here. Hey why not bring Sam over for a beer tomorrow morning? When you're awake.'

'I don't do Saturday mornings. You know that! Maybe later on. Hey, Sam is sleeping here now – Lily sent him packing.'

'Yeah? They do that.' Ryan looked over at Chloe and Rose sitting with the cat between them. 'If you come just make sure you're sober - there's a child here,' he said.

'I know I know. At least we can swear our fucking heads off!'

'Just you try it! Oh and bring a couple of spades will you?'

'Who are we burying?'

'Digging. That's what we're doing. It's called gardening. A new kind of sport. You'll love it.'

Chloe and Rose carried pottles of colourful perennials to the freshly dug bed. Ryan heaved bags of compost round the back and began digging the

compost into the soil. Hamish and Sam arrived at noon, pale and disheveled, squinting at the light.

‘Is this where the garden party is?’ Sam carried two spades and looked around the garden as if seeking an escape route.

‘Yes this is it. Sorry it started without you. We couldn’t wait till the crack of noon,’ said Ryan.

Hamish, walking in after Sam, took out his sunglasses from his shirt pocket. ‘Ouch. Bright light.’ He put them on. ‘So where do I dig?’

‘We need two holes for the apple trees in the lawn,’ said Ryan. ‘There and there,’ he pointed. ‘I’ll get you a beer.’ Ryan went inside and brought out three beers.

Rose used a trowel to dig holes for the flowers and Chloe placed them in the earth, pushing the soil in firm over the roots.

Sam and Hamish placed the two apple trees in the centre of the yard and dug the holes. The day was heating up.

Hamish stood back and wiped his forehead with his grey t-shirt that he’d been wearing on his head.

‘That oak at the back looks good for a tree hut,’ he said, leaning on the spade. He pointed down the garden with his chin.

‘The sun getting to you Ham? Perhaps you’re getting dehydrated already. Look you’ve hardly even touched your beer.’

‘I always wanted one – a tree hut.’

‘Well you shall have one – if you bring the timber and manpower. It can be your very own club house mate,’ said Ryan.

‘Na – for the girl – she’d like it. Wouldn’t she?’

‘Why don’t you ask her yourself?’

And he did. Chloe fetched her paper and pencils and Hamish drew the tree house from his dreams and checked Chloe’s face for approval. Her eyes were bright as she mirrored Hamish’s thumbs up.

Rose placed a tray with a tall jug of cold orange juice on a small table under the tree. They gathered in the shade.

Mustard was running towards the gate barking and carrying on and Chloe went to pat him and he ran towards the house. Chloe opened the gate and followed.

'Come back.' Ryan waved his arms at Chloe but she was already with her back to him following the dog to the side of the house. There they found Riley Keeton, at the foot of the steps, half-sitting, holding his leg and groaning with the pain. It turned out, he had broken his hip and Chloe was charged with looking after the dog while he was in hospital.

Riley lay on his back in the medical ward, slightly propped up with pillows. He wore a white gown with ties at the back. Frail and gaunt.

'So how is hospital?' Ryan stood beside the bed.

'There's better food in prison. But the staff here are prettier.' He began to laugh and stopped himself. Put his hand over his hip. 'They say I've gotta go to rehab.'

'When do they think you'll get out of here?'

'A couple of week's maybe. I've got my name down for the retirement place. No stairs there.'

A young nurse came in to the room. 'Mr Keeton I need to take your temperature and blood pressure please.'

His eyes just above her left breast. He read her name. 'Certainly Susie.' He lifted his arm for her to wrap the cuff around and threw a wink at Ryan. She popped a thermometer in his mouth and Ryan left.

In the evening they were back at the hospital. Oncology, room seven.

Shauna was slumped in the bed. She looked at Ryan. 'I've thrown you in it, haven't I?'

'We're all right. You just get yourself well again aye?' Ryan attempted to sign to Chloe: 'We're all right aren't we?'

Chloe hugged Mustard and smiled at her mother.

'Nurse let her bring the dog in,' said Ryan.

'*Nice dog.*' Shauna signed to Chloe and reached down to pat the dog.

'Your partner likes dogs?' Shauna asked Ryan.

'Rose? Yeah she doesn't mind them. She likes kids though. Gets on all right with Chloe. But we can't understand her like you can. Chloe wants us to do

that course. The one they run at the university in town - the sign language course.'

'So will you?'

'Yeah we might now. Rose and I. What ever happens. I mean, what ever you end up doing. Err ... oops it wasn't supposed to come out like that. You'll have to excuse me I've been sober a lot lately.'

'Yeah? It suits you.'

Shauna smiled, and then she fell forward into a coughing fit. She pointed at the tissue box and Ryan passed it to her. Shauna removed her oxygen mask and coughed into a tissue. She slowly regained her breath and turned to Chloe.

'Now what's all this about a tree house?'

Ryan, catching only snippets, looked on at the two, watching their hands and faces. Mother and daughter, lost in their mime. Chloe's face bright. Light reflected in her eyes. Mustard beside her.

And her hands - they danced a ballet of the garden and the tree house, of the flowers and the cat, and the yellow dog.

When Shauna was tired, they left her to rest and joined Rose waiting outside.

Cystitis

'Paradise Residential Health Care' sits in the centre of an acre of manicured lawn, scattered chalets and deciduous trees. Between the roof tops of adjacent houses there is a glimpse of the harbour. The driveway is lined with low-maintenance flax and orange sedge and the grass under the trees is a golden carpet in this late autumn. A man rakes damp leaves into mounds and behind him a car drives up the broad concrete stretch and parks in the visitor's car park. A woman steps out and walks through the main entrance and past reception, stopping briefly to sign in. Carry bag over her shoulder and a bunch of flowers in her hand she makes her way down the dimly lit corridor, through the fire doors and into D wing. Room fourteen.

Her face looks familiar and you watch her, in your room, stooped over the drawers. She's taking some things out, and placing other things from the bag inside the drawer. She stuffs the things she's taken into her bag. You are thinking she must have slipped in while you were dozing. She sees you are awake now.

After a greeting with a kiss, she busies herself with the flowers, filling the air space between you with words - a cheerful banter. She replaces the wilted display of carnations in the vase beside the bed for fresh yellow something.

'These carnations lasted well – just looking a bit sad now. Time to go,' she says. 'I thought you'd like chrysanthemums this time.'

'What ...What are you taking?' You say it so quietly she doesn't hear. 'Why is everyone taking my things?' Your trembling arm reaches out to point at the empty off-white walls and the bare shelf and then falls limply to the bed and rests on the white sheet. There are droplets of sweat on your forehead and you feel in your chest as if you have run a marathon with the beat of your heart. You used to know it as tachycardia.

'I am putting some clean clothes back into your drawer,' she says and looks up. And you look into her blue, blue eyes, and she is Marilyn.

'Marilyn help me get my things back. The puppies have taken them,' you say and try to reach out to her. She comes over to the bed.

'Mum it's me, Lillian. You are in the nursing home. There aren't any puppies here.' She leans over and kisses your cheek.

'You're hot,' she says and touches your brow with her cool hand.

'Find those naughty puppies. They've run away,' you say.

'They were always running away weren't they? Scampy and Fresco. They needed more space didn't they?' She has her fingers on your wrist and her face shows deep vertical lines between her eyebrows.

The puppies - they jump up at the gate and run off to the park where the children play. And Billy, at just two, is laughing, holding on, with his chin over the top of the gate. The girls chase the puppies and bring them home again. Farm dogs really. They went to your brother's farm soon after that, before Billy's birthday.

You feel bloated and you tap your hand on your distended tummy and then she lifts the sheets and checks some tubing and presses in several places on your tummy.

'Ow!' you say.

'Sorry Mum - I need to find a nurse.'

She pulls the sheet back up and leaves you and you really wonder about her saying that. Why would Marilyn say that? She called you Mum. You look again at the walls. Why is the office so bare? There should be photos. A framed certificate showing your nursing qualification. A patient list. A filing cabinet. You feel cross and suddenly aware of the pressure in your pelvis. You need to get to the bathroom. You lean forward and try to move yourself off the edge of the bed but you are weighed down by the weight of your left side and so you roll and heave and tug on the side of the bed with your right arm. Your body moves like a roll of bed linen discarded and pushed to the end of the bed on a warm summer night. Just on the edge.

And then you are off the side of the bed and only your left leg trails behind hitting hard on the floor after your limp body smashes on to the ground. The catheter bag is dislodged in the decent and the tension of your distended

abdomen is immediately released as the urine is spilled. You are half lying in a giant puddle, wedged between the wall and bedside table. You cry out with the sharpness of the pain in your right hip and it is a young Tongan girl, who's name is Ofa, who responds to your call.

'Mrs Jamieson, what happened?' She is reaching behind your head and placing a pillow for your support and she lays you straighter.

'Easy now, we'll get some help.'

'Ow,' you say and the girl sees that you are holding your hip.

And then they are all around you. They are fussing. The walls close in. They've taken the air you breathe.

You wake in another room. An intravenous drip is inserted into your arm. You turn your head to the side and there you see a glimpse out the window of Rangitoto Island. Sleeping. You have never been able to imagine its previous life; Spectacular volcanic power, which rips open the earth and fills the sky with fire and ash, shaking the foundations of the sea and land.

Dr Harper is standing beside your bed and there is Lillian beside him and a young Thai nurse.

'Mrs Jamieson, how are you feeling?' says Dr Harper.

'Well. Thank you Doctor,' you say.

'You've been very ill. You had cystitis which led to septicaemia. You were very poorly for a week, but luckily the antibiotics have done the job. Welcome back.' He was a young registrar on your medical ward before you retired and you like that he remembers you there.

'I don't remember anything.'

'Your hip is a bit bruised and will feel a bit uncomfortable for a while, but you are very fortunate Mrs Jamieson, that it wasn't broken. Now that you are so much better you can be discharged tomorrow,' says the Doctor, and with a gentle squeeze of your hand he leaves you.

And there is your lovely Lillian and she has brought in blue hydrangeas.

'They are so lovely Lillian.'

'It's great you are feeling better mum.' She leans over and kisses you on the cheek and you can smell her fresh cologne which reminds you of summer. And she is so lovely and the image of your sister Marilyn, with her auburn hair and blue eyes.

'Mrs Jamieson, I can take out the drip now,' says the nurse who is Thai, and she gently removes the drip and places a bandaid on your arm. 'There now, good to go Mrs Jamieson.'

'Where are we going?' you say.

'YOU are going Mrs Jamieson,' she says.

'Am I?'

'Yes Mum, Doctor Harper said you will be discharged tomorrow.'

'Did he?'

'Yes mum, just now he came in, you have been very ill with septicaemia. You were admitted to hospital one week ago. But now you are better.' She rubs your arm as she talks.

'Yes. Yes I suppose so.' Lillian looks tired you think, and so does the nurse - too many shifts. Tired, but they are smiling. So you smile back and tomorrow they will return you to Paradise.

Angel

The day Gloria received her pay rise she was on her own. Jack had joined his brother in Dunedin for his studies, so the house was quiet and tidy. She had taken to working late with the intention that she would not have to bring work home. The company had been sucking the life out of her lately and with the fear of more redundancies there were few complaints among the staff as they continued on the same old salaries while doing the work of two or three people. It only came – the rise, through her chats with Tina, the receptionist, and executive's office mole. Tina was dating the CEO, Simon Lattimer, who had recently become separated from his wife of twenty years – another corporate casualty for the cause.

The house being empty, on this, her first free Saturday, as much as she would miss the boys - the company in the home, a part of her looked forward to the peace, to her own music, food – and cooking for one – or not if she pleased. And no more picking up the wet towels off the bathroom floor.

With the well over-due pay increase she now had the power to do something for herself. A bit of her own version of retail therapy. She looked at Brie. She would wait. Gloria filled Brie's bowl with water and set it down in the shade by the back door. The area at the front of the garden needed a tidy up first, but there was a sale of natives up the road so she'd save the hard work for later.

She pushed her cart of hebes, flaxes and grasses to the car park from the garden centre. Gloria stopped at the notice board by the exit advertising gardening services, and her eyes focused on the one hand written note: *'Need help? Try Angel in your garden'*. The number at the bottom. It looked less professional than the printed ads, and so possibly the cheaper option she thought. She wrote the number down.

At home Gloria picked up the phone and punched in the number: 'Hello, I am ringing about the ad at the garden centre, is there someone there who does gardening?'

After a pause, 'yeah that's me.' Flat, one toned. That was enough for Gloria to hang up, but it was the answer to her next question that fed her interest.

'I wonder, can you tell me how much you charge?'

'Ten bucks.'

'That's an hourly rate?'

'Of course.'

Gloria had had better conversations with her mop but against her better judgment she asked the girl if she would come and see the work that needed doing.

The girl came straight over, and standing at the front door they introduced themselves.

'Angel,' she said. Apart from her pale face she might have been a silhouette there on the doorstep in her dark clothes.

'Gloria.' She reached out her hand and they shook.

Gloria smiled at their combination of celestial names.

Angel walked on through to the lounge, looked around at the furniture, walls. 'Nice,' she said. 'Tidy.'

Gloria hovered in the kitchen. 'Isn't it hot? Would you like a cold drink? ...' she asked. 'Orange juice, water?'

'Coke. Have you got any coke?' asked Angel.

Gloria may have visibly cringed, but Angel was by then picking up the river stones that lay in a perfect circle surrounding a candle, on the glass coffee table.

On her knees, Gloria stretched towards the back of the pantry and reached a Lemon and Paeroa can lying on the floor.

'Sorry, but I have got L and P.' Gloria waved the can in the air. She had gladly removed the last of the coke cans when Jack left. The best thing about the boys drinking more beer nowadays – there were less energy drinks, less sugar fizz lying around.

'That'll do it.' Angel placed the stones back on the table in a random fashion.

The day was hot in February, another record month. They sat outside in the yard under the puriri tree with Brie lying in the shade at Gloria's feet.

'It needs a bit of work aye?' Angel looked around at the lawn and side gardens: the ginger and moth plant, the morning glory and wandering Jew. They were all here. Two years of neglect and yes it was a big job. Gloria had stopped hoping the boys would get inspired and put in a bit of effort to sort the garden. It was all she could hope for to get Jack mowing the lawn every few weeks and Martin on washing the car. Great strapping lads, and all that energy spent at the gym, and when it came down to it, on a bright and fresh Saturday morning they were plain exhausted from the night before. And Gloria knew too that she had given one too many lectures to them about taking responsibility, about 'giving back'. She'd seen the glazed look in their eyes, the threat of the retreat into their man caves, and so had stopped herself short, and chosen instead, to live with a rambling mess of a garden.

Working full time, she could only just keep up with the cooking and cleaning. She'd let her young princes sleep in their beds on Saturdays, and Sundays and school holidays, and now they were gone. Their aversion to chores would be addressed another time by other women in their lives. At least she had avoided giving further grounds for their bitterness at their dad walking out.

Angel had dyed her hair: deep purple, possibly covering a natural dark brunette, Gloria thought. And her skin, pale. Her eyes, a deep and dark brown/black. She wore a long, straight, black tunic with a diagonal hem that fell to mid thigh, and purple leggings with boots. The top exposed her left shoulder, and a tattoo, who'd guess it? - of an angel.

The following Saturday they got an early start: in the garden by eight a.m., before the sun was high and hot. Angel seemed to know her weeds, and almost in one swoop she cast down the moth plant which was strangling the clematis. Then she took to the wandering Jew: gathering into her arms large bundles of prolific green, she drew it away from the ground, exposing the earth.

With the spade, she dug deep beneath the roots of ginger plants and prised them from the ground, leaving gaping holes. She smoothed the soil over.

Gloria took the long secateurs and dealt to the coprosma and pittosporam which loomed above them and shaded the garden. Blue morning glory which entwined the branches in its passage to light, made a sharp descent, falling with the pruned branches onto the grass. Two hours, and they had just begun to see progress on the one side garden. They had hardly spoken, working along side each other, puffing and heaving, and the sweat was running down Gloria's forehead making her blink. She wiped her forehead with her sleeve.

'Time for a drink?' she called as she turned towards the house to splash water on her face and fetch some iced orange juice. She placed it on the table under the tree where they sat.

'Angel. So that's your real name?'

'Yeah... it is now. I chose it.'

'It's pretty.' Gloria imagined she saw a slight twitch at the corner of Angel's mouth. 'Where do you live Angel?' she asked.

'In a house, in town. It's my Grandmother's.'

'Do you live with her?' Gloria poured some juice into the glasses and passed one to Angel.

'No ...not now. It's. Just me now.'

'Oh...I'm sorry.'

'And the cats. I have to look after the cats now. Three of them. She loved cats – my Grandmother. Smoking, drinking, and cats. Give me a dog any day.' Angel leaned forward and ruffled the hair around Brie's ears.

'So where's your man? Did he die or something?'

Gloria took a mouthful of juice and set her glass back down. 'He...err. We are divorced.'

'So did you get him to leave? Or did he just up and go?'

Gloria stood to move her chair a little further into the shade. 'You ask a lot of questions Angel.'

'Yep I do. What else is there?'

'The dog. I need someone to walk the dog. Do you do that?'

'Sure.'

'Maybe on week days in the mornings, can you come over before I go to work ... around seven thirty?'

After Angel left, Gloria filled the garden bag with the weeds and overgrowth, and stuffed them down to make room for more.

Jack rang. He'd settled into a flat with some other scarfies from the Bachelor of Arts course, seven in a three bedroom flat, but he sounded happy. Far away, but happy.

By the end of the week Brie was waiting by the front door for Angel first thing. Angel walked her for about an hour. Some days at the park, other days at the beach or she walked the streets with the dog, returning her after her walk to the yard where she had a kennel and water. Angel carried on doing a couple of hours gardening for Gloria, twice a week.

At work, things had got busy. The company had merged with another insurance company and for now Gloria was having to bring work home in the evenings and weekends. Tina, at reception wore a knowing smile, pleased with her role in facilitating her pay increase.

'So Gloria, are you going to celebrate? A new outfit? Dinner out?' Tina was immaculate and accentuated in her fitted and low-neck white blouse, blue pencil skirt, red nails and lips, and a recent gold bracelet which dangled on her wrist. Gloria had a twinge of compassion towards Simon Lattimer's wife. She hadn't stood a chance.

'Plants Tina. I am putting in some native plants.' She might have said she was buying an astronaut suit for the look on Tina's face.

'Oh ... lovely ... Let's catch up soon for a drink?' Tina suggested.

'Yes, lets.'

No actually. Not unless you want to explain to me how it feels to steal a husband and father, to break up a family... to crush hopes and dreams.

On a blustery wet Saturday morning, Angel turned up. When Gloria opened the door a rush of wind disturbed the files on the table and sent papers flying into the air. Gloria rushed and flapped, retrieving them from under the dining table and off the damp kitchen floor where the rain had blown in and

where Angel crouched, picking up the last few papers. Angel left her shoes by the door and made her way through to the lounge. She began to flick through a 'House and Garden' from the rack.

Gloria was still in her dressing gown. 'I was just about to have a shower, and then we can have tea. Poor Brie, too wet to walk.' Brie was in the kitchen still hopeful. Gloria patted his head on her way through to the bathroom.

When Gloria returned she noticed the drawer to the dresser in the lounge was ajar. Angel had made tea and toast with marmalade for them both and she was eating a muesli bar from the pantry. There were crumbs on the bench.

'Make yourself at home,' said Gloria, and as she did her eyes moved to the ceramic vase on the shelf above the sink: its craggy surface, its glue line from a botched repair job, its bright primary colours at odds with the pastel collection of Wedgewood ornaments and the marble 'Cavaspina' - the boy with the thorn in his foot. Martin was twelve when he brought his vase home from his after-school ceramics class, and unveiled it to the family. And his father had praised the work: '*The colours – so vibrant!*' he'd said and he'd placed it, '*for all to see*', on the shelf where it remained.

Angel finished her mouthful. 'Err ... I am. Thanks.'

She walked with her plate to the couch. 'Do you mind if I watch TV?' She picked up the remote.

Gloria felt herself stiffen, 'Angel, do you mind eating that at the dining table – save me cleaning.' There, it was said.

Angel shrugged and moved back to the table. 'Must have driven them nuts!'

'Sorry?'

'Your house – it's perfect.'

'I like it clean and tidy. Why shouldn't I? ... Anyway Brie needs a walk.' She reached for the lead by the door.

'I thought it was too wet?'

'Sorry Angel, you have to leave, I am going out.'

Angel stood to leave, she walked out the front door, down the steps and into the rain. Gloria stood at the front door waving the spare umbrella. 'Take the umbrella, you'll get drenched!' she called after her, almost as an apology, as Angel opened the gate and stepped out to the street.

'No thanks,' she called back, and then turned and headed off down the path and with skip and a jump she placed her boot in the centre of a large puddle and an arched wall of water splashed out and on to the road.

Gloria was certain she had left her camera in the drawer of the dresser. Just in case though, she had searched the whole house. She had checked in the garage. In the car. Hand bag. It was gone. She felt sick. Sick that she had let someone invade her home. She plumped up the cushions on the couch and planned to confront Angel next time she came. Two weeks went by and she didn't return. Gloria took it as proof - proof she didn't need. She had tried to think about when she last used it. What photos would she miss? Some of Jack's going away party. The summer holiday at Mangawhai. She was still trying to create fresh holiday memories - building on the rubble.

Gloria started with some planting, the beds were clear now, but after an hour she was done. She wanted to talk to someone about where the plants should go. She went inside, switched on the TV and lay on the couch. She was mesmerized by the constant coverage of the earthquake, the grieving families, devastation. Gloria stood and walked to the bifolds that led to the garden and thought about Angel. How little she knew about her. *She lived alone, liked gardening, took stuff, liked dogs and coke.*

She'd put off cleaning Jack's room, apart from stripping the bed on the day he left, she'd avoided it - its wake of boyhood, its emptiness. His jackets still hung in the wardrobe - *he'd be needing them in autumn.* She entered with caution. The computer, dusty. He'd taken a lap top with him. And then, there it was. Still plugged in. Jack had taken the camera to download some photos to his face book account just before he'd left. He'd left it there.

Gloria found that number again, scribbled on a note on the notice board. 'Angel,' she paused, 'are you able to help me with some more gardening?'

'I guess. What? Saturday?'

On this day her hair was green, and Angel had pierced her eyebrow.

'New piercing?' asked Gloria

She shrugged and walked over to the dog and stroked her on her back.

Brie responded and followed Angel to the garden.

'So what have you done out here?'

'Nothing really. I couldn't get inspired.'

'Better hurry before the weeds come back – all that empty soil. Like the parable.'

'The parable?'

'The one about the empty, clean house after the bad tenant had left. All those others came and took over. Likes demons.' Angel noticed Gloria's puzzled expression. 'Like weeds.'

So they made a plan and began to plant. The hebes at the back, small flaxes in the middle, and then the grasses at the front edge. On the last row, Gloria calculated they were going to be short of a few plants, so she left Angel with Brie in the garden, and shot up to the garden centre.

Angel took a break and went inside. She opened the cabinet where Gloria kept her CD's and flicked through them. She listened to odd tracks on various albums, largely disapproving of the bias towards 'easy' listening, which she found far from easy. More like 'queasy' listening. She found Pavarotti at the bottom of a stack. *A name like that should take you some place.* And so with the volume up nearly full, Angel lay on the cream carpet between the speakers, and listened to Luciano Pavarotti.

Minutes later Gloria stepped out of the car to 'O Sole Mio' ringing through the yard and into the garage. Leaving the plants in the boot, and between the garage and the house, she had managed to form her 'What the?' response, but when Angel didn't hear her open the door, and Gloria halted and stood watching the girl on her floor, and Pavarotti's voice flooded the house – something fell away. At the end of the song Angel rolled on her side and looked up, startled she looked at Gloria in the kitchen. She moved to stand. Gloria could see that her eyes were wet.

'Don't get up Angel...join me when you're ready.' She indicated with her hand, as Luciano went on to 'Una Furtiva Lagrima' and Gloria left the girl on the floor in her gardening clothes, without knowing if the girl's hands were clean, and she fetched the plants from the boot of the car and dug the holes in the garden and let the music pervade. She had tried to fathom, even before the separation, how the quality of that voice, how those soul-full tones, could at that same time both disrupt and soothe you.

'Nessun Dorma' slowed her planting. The day was heating up. Gloria lay back

on the grass and let herself remember a love she thought she'd had. They had agreed that this was the one - their favourite of Pavarotti. Seventeen years ago Gloria's husband had been in Europe attending a dentistry conference and they had followed it up by meeting in Paris for their wedding anniversary of twenty years. That is when they heard him - Luciano Pavarotti, at a live performance. And Gloria had thought that night she could almost believe in heaven.

Angel turned off the music and finished up the planting with Gloria, the two worked in silence - an interim pact. When the last native sedge was in the ground Angel broke the peace. 'My mother is in the house now, with her partner...', she rubbed her hands on her pants and looked at them. 'I can't stay with meth addicts.'

'When did they move in?'

'Last week they got evicted from the house in Christchurch. She'll move on soon enough though ... never stays anywhere for long.' Angel's voice had flattened, she looked at the grass.

Gloria followed her gaze, the tools were scattered on the ground, needing a scrape. Then she looked at Angel's face: pale, a flick of hair falling forward over her eye, a brush of dirt on her cheek. 'Stay here for a while.' Gloria said. And the words hung for a moment in the air between them.

Angel looked up. 'Yeah?' she said. 'You sure? Just for a few weeks ... I guess.'

'Sure. I've got an empty house. We'll work it out.'

Gloria drove Angel to fetch her gear. The garden was tidy with flower beds of marigolds and daisies edging the path, and there were several plum and apple trees. Three cat saucers sat by the back door and three fat tabbies lay in the shade of the porch on an old red and thread-bare couch. Inside, there were cigarette butts scattered on the bench and floor, and food on plates in and around the sink. Flies lifted, circled, and landed, on the dirty plates, and crawled on a half dozen half drunk cups of coffee which sat on various horizontal surfaces. Clothes were sprawled out on the floor. A woman lay on a mattress in the lounge watching television. She rolled on her side and spoke to Angel. 'Hi honey - what you up to?' She turned back to the screen.

'This is Gloria. I'm going to stay at her house for a while.'

'What ..Err ...yeah...suit yourself.' She changed channels when the ads came on. 'I'm not feeding the fucking cats.'

'I know that! I'll come back and feed them.'

Gloria followed Angel and helped her to stuff clothes and books from her bedroom into some bags. As they left, Gloria stroked the cats on the porch.

'How do you think they'll like Brie?' she asked.

'What? ...What about Brie?' asked Angel.

'She's a real softy, she'll be fine. We can try anyway...saves you coming back here in a hurry.'

So Gloria drove them all home, fat tabbies yowling and exploring the car, leaving their fur on the back seats. Brie hid in the laundry for the first few hours after the tabbies moved in, and over the next few days the cats made themselves at home in the garden. The house was a little messy for the weeks Angel stayed, but the garden looked a picture.

It was odd to Gloria that she did after all end up meeting Tina - for a drink. It turned out that Tina had considered Gloria a friend, and she seemed to need one. They sat on the water front drinking wine at a French wine bar overlooking the dream boats. A super yacht made its way out of the marina, happy guests with their laughter and drinks sat on the deck, out for an evening on the harbour. Tina was subdued, older somehow.

'So its over now is it?' Gloria resisted speaking her thoughts. *So what did you think...?.. da!*

'He's trying to work it out with his wife.'

Gloria dreaded her crying. She really wasn't up to that level of empathy. Tina sat crumpled, diminished, untailed; her brown shoes were sad company for the dark blue over-sized blazer. And Gloria found herself reaching out across the table and giving her hand a squeeze. But still, what could she say?

'I'm sorry,' she said. And right then Gloria could see clearly what Tina should do. Move on. Change jobs. Do what she loves. Find her joy. Stay away from married men.

The following day Gloria walked right on in to Simon Lattimer's office, placed her resignation on his desk and slipped away just before he returned from lunch.

Mangawhai Dream

They were walking from the office to the car park. He rattled his keys.

‘So what exactly do you want?’

‘Just space, open space.’

Tania walked around to the passenger door and the agent unlocked the car and held the door open as she slipped inside. The agent pulled his four-wheel drive out of the car park and they headed away from the village. Tania watched out the window at the flashes of green between the houses as lawns became paddocks. She felt the surge pressing her back against the seat as the car accelerated along the tar-sealed road.

‘And the sand dune – if possible a peak of the sand dune.’

She had fond memories of the dune. As a small child she was carried on her grandmother’s strong shoulders over the hot sand to the top of the dune. Seated at the top, with her feet buried in the soft sand, she had welcomed the breeze coming up off the sea. They had looked back at the land together and her grandmother had sung out a karakia over the bay. It wasn’t the first time Tania had taken a handful of sand home in her pocket and made her own dune on her windowsill back at the house.

The agent glanced across briefly at Tania riding beside him.

‘Just bare land?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘we live on a stamp size in the city – so we’re looking for a big garden to play on.’ Twenty years she’d waited. Twenty years it had taken her, to convince Stan. Now with the boys surfing she’d had them on her side and Stan had come round. With his mother dying in June, the inheritance was coming through, so cost was no longer the barrier, and besides, he was already looking at tractor pamphlets.

They passed farmland and drove on to the gravel. Disturbed stones rattled and spat underneath the car. Dust splayed from the wheels; The road was flanked with grey shrubs and paspalum.

‘So you’re looking at - what five acres or so?’

‘At least - or bigger - depending on price.’

‘Well it is a buyer’s market.’ The agent shrugged.

Everyone knew it. The recession had hit hard at building industries – property sales shot through the floor. Companies had down-sized and unemployment was up. Though Stan was busy as ever - people still needed their cars fixed.

The agent showed her south facing land with steep valleys. They drove on to north facing land with beautiful views over farmland which was in the process of being sub-divided. She saw a poorly maintained ten acre citrus orchard.

‘Maybe I’ll come back with Stan sometime,’ she said as they were driving away from the orchard.

‘I’ll show you this recent development – it’s a mortgagee sale – so bank’s keen to sell – it’s a bit bigger than you said. It’s twenty acres. They’re asking three-twenty.’

‘That’s cheap!’ Tania laughed. It humoured her the way these agents chopped off the zeros. He missed it.

‘Yes, it is well below valuation.’ He checked his rear vision and pulled to the side to let a ute pass.

The road narrowed and the agent slowed the car to a crawl - eventually pulling up to a wooden gate, not a house in sight. Tania got out of the truck and they walked to the gate and climbed over. Ushered by the light sound of a stream flowing behind the trees they came over a gentle rise in the land. Making their way along a cattle track they stepped high over tussock grass and walked alongside native bush. Tania looked up the hill and saw mature gorse in clumps scattered over the property.

‘There’s a lot of gorse.’ She lifted her chin and looked to the hill. The yellow blossom’s promise of growth. ‘That will take a bit of work.’

‘The owners have let it go - bankrupt and divorced in the same year - took its toll.’

They trudged up the hill to the highest point where they turned and stood taking in the landscape. Breathless from the hike, Tania shot her gaze down

over the fields - over the new olive groves – over the brown and white alpacas clustered around a pile of hay in the nearby paddock. She looked towards the valley, down over patchy brown and pale green summer grass lining the valley with old kauri and totara and kahikatea shooting up, standing tall – as if saluting an ancient path. Her eyes followed down over the trees to the horizon where she could see a broad strip of blue and the sand dune rising up out of the bay – bone-white sand. She took a deep breath.

‘So - the view is amazing.’ She wished she hadn’t said that, ‘amazing’- not a good starter for negotiating. But it was, for her it was. ‘What is the history of this area?’ Tania asked as much to test him as to be informed. She crouched and parted the long grass to find the soil. She scratched at the ground with her finger tips and scraped some soil into the palm of her hand and examined it. Dark, rich, brown earth sat in a pile in her hand. Tania wanted to put it in her pocket and take it back to Stan.

‘You mean who owned it?’ The agent stood with his back to the view and the sun behind him, and his long shadow fell over Tania’s face as she crouched, one hand resting on the grass, the other cupping the soil.

‘Well originally, yes,’ said Tania. ‘Isn’t this Hongi Hika country?’

‘ Yep – all this area,’ the agent’s arm swept over the valley ‘- they sure had their massacres with those muskets.’

Tania rose and placed the soil in her pocket. She took one more look at the dune before walking down the hill towards the car.

Tania takes the soil out of her pocket and places it in the centre of the glass coffee table, forming a tiny hill, and she waits for Stan and the boys to get home.

1825

Hine sat crouched and still amongst the harakeke with her hands over her ears, waiting for her mother to return.

The day had been hot and humid and they'd had an early start with all the commotion. The men, their faces stern, had gathered their weapons and laid them out while the women shooed playful children away and spoke together in whispers.

Hine had spent the night outside in the cool air and had been woken early by pre-dawn light.

'Take your blanket and sleep outside – it's much cooler.' Hine's mother instructed her. She was lying on her bed beside her father watching Hine as she carried out her evening chores.

'Your father and I will keep you awake with our talking.'

Hine looked over at her father leaning on his elbow - long and stretched out on top of the blanket. With his free arm he reached out to her.

'Come Hine, my girl.' And Hine went to him and folded into his arms, her cheek squeezed against the skin of his soft rounded shoulder. Gentle and warm. His scent like the earth of the forest floor, the rich peat beneath the ferns by the stream where Hine played with her cousins: Rawiri and Teina.

Next and last she would see him as the warrior.

'Hine we are going early to fetch harakeke, get ready. And take a food kit for later,' Hine's mother called. Hine was puzzled at the instruction. They had never taken food to the plantation. Her mother kept her busy with her tasks, and only as they were walking away from the settlement did she turn and see her father standing with the men, their weapons at hand. He looked up - raised his hand – a wave – a look - and he turned back to the men.

Hine carried a large basket for the harakeke and they walked up and over the soft rolling slopes above the swamp, across fields of tussock and up to the pa harakeke. They sat in the clearing and rested after their climb, and looked out over the valley. Hine's mother spoke about the trees.

'There it is - that tallest tree is a kahikatea, the queen of the forest rising towards the sky,' she moved her arm and pointed further to the right.

'And there – there beside it – the puriri, with the red berries. The puriri attracts kukupa and the kukupa spread its seeds.' Hine knew the kukupa well,

the largest of the forest birds made its clumsy passage through the forest with its noisy flapping alerting any hunter. Her father was all smiles when he brought a fat kukupa home for the hangi.

Hine and her mother got on to cutting the harakeke. After singing their karakia, each took the sharp edge of a mussel shell and began to take sharp diagonal slices at the base of the outer leaves. Hine had been taught by her Grandmother not to take the inside leaves.

'Leave the rito and the awahi rito, just take the old ones, like me. The ones on the outside.'

Surrounded by the sounds of the birds and the stream in the forest they could still hear in the distance the men making their way up the valley, heading towards the ridge. Stepping out from behind the harakeke and into the clearing they saw their men swiftly making their way up the slope on the opposite face of the valley. Men and boys of Ngati Whatua, armed with tao and taiaha, waha, mere, hoeroa. And two muskets.

Brothers and uncles, fathers and cousins, marched on up. Hine remembered hearing the talk over the years as the men had gathered in the evenings in the meeting house. They had sounded confident and were in fact more prepared for this battle than for the last. Even so, the last - more than a decade before, was a victory for Ngati Whatua. At Te Kai a te Karoro they had overcome Nga puhi, even with Nga puhi's muskets they had overcome them. And Ngati Whatua rangatira (Chief) Taoho had drawn a line on the sand beyond which Ngapuhi would be safe in their escape. The defeated survivors were permitted to return to their homes and tell of the Ngati Whatua victory; Nga puhi rangitira, Pokaia had been killed along with up to one thousand men.

'Come Hine,' her mother turned her back to the valley. Hine and her mother busied themselves cutting and storing the harakeke in the basket. Hine knew they were not gathering for weaving but for the binding and healing of wounds. As the morning had drifted on, and the sun became hotter, Hine had almost succeeded in convincing herself that everything was going to be fine; they would return soon and prepare for the evening meal and the men would return with their stories of battle victory, and she would play with her cousins in the stream as they bathed.

Suddenly seagull screams and thunder cracks rose above the sounds of the forest. And then they heard the sound of Ngapuhi coming up through the

valley the way their Ngati Whatua men had gone. Hine, bewildered, watched her mother's face: her eyes large and the colour drained from her skin. Then a sound - full, deep. Became a word. 'No ...No.' Nothing made sense to Hine. 'Hine go – hide now - and wait for me. I have to go fast. I have to warn them.' She turned to go. And then, as if she had forgotten something her mother turned back to Hine, and with their faces close and noses touching they exchanged air, and Hine's mother held her for a moment, 'kia kaha.' And she turned away and ran up through the clearing, her hair flicking behind her. Her strong arms swung high to give speed. She watched as her mother disappeared beyond the kahikatea and over the hill. Hine turned back to see one man amongst the Ngapuhi warriors shining as the light caught his suit and he made his way over the hill.

And then she hid herself amongst the harakeke and looked out to the bay, beyond the forest of Kahikatea to the white sand. She covered her ears and waited.

Just a Name

When the woman finally opened the door Anton could see the February heat had flushed her complexion. She was in her mid-fifties. Grey, muddy splodges beneath the orange letters 'ROMA' decorated the white T-shirt she wore. He'd come upon her name in an old news article: no photo, just a name. He was in fact searching for his own name at the time - checking out his internet footprint with Harvey, a friend from varsity, and old high school friend. It had been Harvey's initiative – Harvey, who had a habit of submitting bizarre stunts on you tube. Though too shy to audition for the high-school play only four years earlier, he had somehow managed to lose all inhibitions on the global stage. Harvey had eaten spiders upside down, walked around the local mall in Speedos and flippers and, more recently, though rhythmically challenged, he had taken to a form of Marxist rap with a cockney accent. Anton was one of a select few chosen by Harvey to brandish the camera and capture these 'Harvey Moments', which became the title of his you tube account.

'This is lame man, let's go and do something else,' Anton said, restless.

'There. There's your name man! What's it about?' Harvey's head moved in front of Anton's laptop screen, blocking his view.

'Yeah. It's about my mother – she went. She is ... missing.'

He put his hand on the side of Harvey's head and moved it away from the screen and pointed to the colour photo of his mother - just a head and shoulders. Her long black hair fell back behind her shoulders. It was the first image of his mother he had seen for as long as he could remember. Harvey read the headline: 'Missing Woman Last Seen in Queenstown.' They printed it.

It was in the end Harvey that had convinced Anton, while on their Australasian holiday, to look up the woman who was mentioned in the article. There was only one J. Patterson in the phone book for the area.

Anton walked the strangely familiar roads, passed the dairy, the post box, the old school, and eventually he found himself standing at her front door.

'Hello, I'm Anton Wilson. Does Jane Patterson live here?'

And for the moment, Jane Patterson forgot her manners. She simply stood, stunned, for what was only a few short seconds, yet long enough for Anton to feel the need to reintroduce himself.

Zuma stood on the step beside Anton, her long, black hair fell over her left shoulder. And then, like liquid, she seeped back into the walls of the front porch.

Anton wiped his right-hand palm on his jeans, in readiness to extend it.

'Yes...Yes I know... and I am Jane.' Jane swallowed, removed her gardening gloves and extended her right hand. They shook.

'Yes Anton. Welcome... welcome. Yes come in.'

He slipped his boots off at the door and she led him into the lounge where he sat on the couch – long and lean with unruly shoulder-length black hair. Skin that caught the light - a velvet sheen, smooth and dark.

Zuma walked across the room and brushed past the couch.

'Let me wash up and change this shirt, I'll be right back.'

Jane put the jug on before heading to the bathroom. She splashed water on to her face and checked herself in the mirror. Her cheeks rosy. Stay calm, stay calm woman! Three slow and deep breaths, and then she washed her hands, combed her thick wavy hair and appeared again, a modified version of the former.

'So Anton, it has been a few years since you were here. You were nine...or so..?'

'I'm 21 now. So...yeah, I guess. It's been twelve years.' Anton looked around the room hoping for the familiar.

'We've renovated since you were here.' Come on he was nine!

'It's nice. I like the couch.' He spread his long fingers on the brown leather upholstery. Jane didn't mention the couch was the old one. She wanted to tell him that it was just where his mother had sat, the last time she'd visited – the last time.

'Why did you want to visit me?' she asked.

'I saw your name in an article on internet about the... about my mother's disappearance.'

'Oh. Yes, there was quite a bit in the news at the time. In fact I kept a folder of all the clippings.' Jane moved to stand. 'Do you want to see it?'

Jane went into her bedroom to fetch the blue clear file that she'd kept for twelve years in her bedside drawer. She removed her copy of the affidavit and placed it back in the drawer. Not now.

Anton stood and walked around the room. The old piano. Walnut. They'd played Chopsticks. Heart and Soul. They'd played till a mother hollered from the kitchen.

'Go and play with the leggo in the bedroom, or get a board game out!' And along from the piano on the wall hung a recent photo. He studied it. Like him, Gloria's boys were now men. Liam wearing a graduation gown beside ... that must be John - with long hair standing beside him.

Gloria returned with a folder and stood beside Anton. She looked at the photo.

'That was Liam's graduation day. Taken in Victoria park.'

'And that's John?' asked Anton.

'Yes. He's studying down at Lincoln.' She handed the folder of clippings and photos to Anton. 'Here have a look at those and there are some photos in the back.'

'Yeah ... thanks.' He sat back down on the couch and turned to the photos at the back.

'I'll let you read while I get some afternoon tea. Cup of tea? Cold drink?' Jane asked walking to the kitchen.

'Err. Cold...thanks.' He spoke without lifting his head from the page.

When Jane returned, she placed the tray on the coffee table and turned to Anton. She had only a few photos of Zuma which she'd collected from people with whom Zuma had been friends. Anton was studying the one of his mother at

the kindergarten. She was sitting with a child stood holding a spade, on a bench, beside the sandpit.

Jane pointed to the child. 'That's you Anton. You must have been about four there - so cute.'

Anton touched the photo. He touched Zuma's hair.

'Your mother had beautiful long hair didn't she? And she was tall – like you ... long legs. She was very graceful.' Jane cautioned herself, not to say all she'd waited to say - not today.

Anton took one last look at the dark beauty surrounded by the pale skinned women at the kindergarten, and he closed the book and looked directly at Jane.

'My father had to bring us up alone, because she left us... when we were small.'

'Is that what you were told?' asked Jane. 'That she left you?'

'She came to us the night she left and said goodbye. Then she left - with a man. We were on holiday in the South Island. I remember.'

'Yes, that's what you told the police when you were interviewed.' Does he remember the interview? Does he remember going to his mother when she was locked in her room saying, 'Daddy's wrong. Mummy you're not crazy'?

'My father didn't want us to be interviewed. He tried to protect us.'

Anton's voice was brittle.

'She loved you all, and would never have chosen to leave.' Jane hadn't intended to sound confrontational. The ground was fragile.

'My father said she only married him for his money.'

'Her family were very poor. They lived in a village in South India, near Chennai – or Madras back then. Her parents were farmers, and so she was used to a simple life growing up. Yet she loved your father. And she loved you and Sarah. More than anything.'

Zuma stood at the window and looked out towards the sea – her second beach. She thought of her first: it was the one nearest her village of Kulapalayam where she rode with her sister Reina, sitting on the cross bar of the bicycle. Green rice fields bordered the road and they caught glimpses of the ocean from the rise. They had pedaled passed bullock carts and the occasional

wind mill until they reached a lane that led them to the soft and golden sands where they took their dusty selves and threw their hot bodies into the sea.

‘Why don’t we walk along the beach?’ asked Jane. ‘It’s lovely outside.’

‘Yes let’s.’

When they reached the sand, Anton took his shoes off and they walked down to the water.

‘I remember this.’ Anton looked up and pointed to the island. ‘What’s it called again?’

‘The island? It’s Rangitoto,’ she said.

‘Sounds familiar’

They turned to walk the length of the beach. ‘Do you remember the beach?’

‘I think so - it’s weird. But I think so.’

Zuma let the waves splash at her ankles and she breathed in the salt air.

Jane pulled her jersey across her chest and looked along the beach towards the rocks at the point. Anton had been about seven, and Sarah three. They were walking along the water line. The children were running in and out with the waves splashing up their bare legs, and their parents strolled behind, hand in hand. Zuma’s hair, long down her back, moved gently in the breeze. Neil walked solid, his heavy feet indenting the sand. They’d looked happy though. Jane was launching the boat with James, her husband, and Joe, her son, about six years old. Jonny, just two, was playing in the sand with his spade. Joe and James were heading off fishing. They’d stopped when they’d seen Zuma and Neil. The two families had chatted for a while by the water’s edge and next thing, Anton had hopped into the boat to join Joe and James on the fishing venture. Neil fixed the spare life jacket onto Anton and cautioned him to behave.

Jane watched Anton sloshing his feet in the water as they walked towards the rocks.

'I guess we came here often,' Anton spoke without intonation, not requiring a response, but he got one.

'You walked this way to school each day, and I saw your family here a lot over the summer.' She felt an urge to tell him how happy they'd seemed that day - as a family, but not now, not today.

Every day we came. You must remember. This is our place. There you sat, on my knee and ate your ice-cream. And there, at the playground, I pushed you and your sister on the swings till my arms ached and you could finally be convinced to leave. And there, you fell on the boat ramp and I hugged you for the ten minutes it took for you to be brave or distracted and go back to your game: running up and down the ramp. And you got that scar on your foot from broken glass up there on the pavement. Remember?

They walked around a sand castle: an ephemeral sculpture, washing away with the incoming tide.

'So where are you staying?' Jane asked.

'In a back-packers in town, with a friend. We spent a month in Australia and now we'll spend a month here.'

'You are welcome to stay here with your friend while you're in Auckland. And if you want to go up north you could stay with your mother's cousin, Sheena.' Oops too pushy.

'Err thanks. I'll talk with Harvey, see what he wants to do,' said Anton.

'I hope you like Indian.' Jane stood at the door to the spare room with flour on her hands as Anton dug into his pack for some clean clothes. Harvey appeared from the bathroom rubbing his wet hair with the towel.

'Sure. Yeah...thanks,' said Anton.

'Are you kidding? It's ar national dish.' Harvey exaggerated his cockney twang. Wide blue, hobbit eyes. Light sunburn covered his freckled face.

Jane continued rolling out the chapattis just like she was taught by Zuma. Turn it to get them round. Roll gently, evenly.

Turn it a little ... not too much flour.

And she took the cumin seeds, fried them in the pan with garlic, turmeric and onion. Then she added the cooked pumpkin and finally salt – plenty. Zuma’s mother had taught Zuma when she was a little girl in the village.

‘This recipe is one your mother taught me. I couldn’t make good chapattis until she told me to add hot water when I mix the dough. She was a great cook, your mother.’ Jane passed the curried pumpkin to Anton. ‘And this one.’ She pointed to a plate of chicken curry. ‘Sorry I cheated – butter chicken from the frozen section.’ She passed the butter chicken along to Harvey and he dug in.

In the morning, before the day heated up, Jane got in to the garden and started on the flower bed, pulling oxalis. Anton made his way through the kitchen and stood at the door looking out into the yard. They ate breakfast on the deck over looking the yard, while Harvey slept. Jane had picked a pink and scented rose from the garden and set it in a vase on the outside table.

‘This rose is from that plant.’ She pointed to the climbing rose covering half of one wall of the shed in the middle of the garden. ‘Zuma gave it to me, just before you all left for your holiday. It was a birthday present. It is amazing it has survived this long.’

Anton’s eyes fixed on the rose. ‘I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything about her. We didn’t even have photos.’

He burned every single photo of me. All the wedding pictures. Baby photos. He burned my dresses, my needle work, and my journals. He burned my Shiva idol. My mother’s letters.

‘There are people here who knew your mother - her friends. People with stories, photos. And her cousin and her uncle. They all remember her. And your grandmother, who is in South India. She will tell you stories.’

Zuma stood behind Anton and wrapped her arms around his shoulders and she kissed him on the cheek and ruffled his hair. Remember this?

Jane carried the plates into the kitchen. 'I'll make some tea.'

When she left, Anton moved his face closer to the rose in the vase and breathed in its gentle fragrance and still he wondered how she could leave them, when they were so little. He walked to the shed and pinched off a newly forming bud from the climbing rose and put it in his shirt pocket.

Festival – Day Two

Harvey woke to the sun shining on his face through the windscreen. He'd parked the Escort under a puriri tree at the edge of the farm. It was nine-thirty. He squinted out through the leaves. With a groan and a stiff neck he attempted to stretch his six foot frame out across the front seats, but the hand brake pushed up into the small of his back. Curling his toes around the handle he managed to open the driver's door, and with his foot he pushed, kicking both his feet out straight. He looked along at his toes in the daylight, each nail a different colour.

The previous night was a bit of a blur, but he had a remnant - an image of some girl with bovine eyes and dark hair painting his toenails – possibly in exchange for a foot massage.

Everything was traded here. You brought in what you needed, and shared or traded the rest. Skills and kindness the currency. Anton was already up and over at the ablutions block which consisted of a tap and a shed with a trench and saw dust - his empty sleeping bag folded on the back seat.

The festival had attracted people from all over the country and beyond. They came with their various gifts and skills. Because Harvey had once had a girlfriend who was a massage therapist and had passed on to him some rudimentary knowledge in effleurage, he offered foot massage as his skill. Anton had set himself up to teach guitar in exchange for sitar lessons. Since staying with Anton's newly discovered Aunt in Dargaville he was keen to explore anything vaguely Indian.

Harvey folded himself in half and set his feet down on the grass. He stood. Unsteady. He shook out his legs one at a time, stretched his back, and twisted his trunk a few times like an old agitator washing machine. He walked around to the back of the car and grabbed a couple of muesli bars from the boot. Strolled off, looking for the girl he vaguely remembered. A few people clustered around the juice stand. He wove his way between small pop-up tents to where a big red house truck stood. Dappled light through the Moreton Bay

Fig patterned the truck. A girl with hair the colour of autumn stood at the door of the truck and swung a poi.

'Hi,' he said.

She waved with her free hand.

From the tree he heard the deep swooning of a saxophone and he could just see two legs hanging down like aerial roots with trainers at the end of them - swinging. Notes slid up and down to resting points and through the branches into the air - creating longing, a hint of something just out of reach.

A tall young woman with an artificial leg carried two glasses of green juice towards a table. A child walked beside her with a glass of orange juice and she sat down on a blanket spread on the grass outside a tepee.

'Kia Ora,' said the young woman.

'Hiya. Err ... Kia Ora.' Harvey waved.

Tents and trucks were placed close around a wide central area keeping the space clear for the gathering. A few children were playing with a ball in the open space. More campers on the way down to the orchard and gardens.

Beyond the campers on the north side, Harvey looked at the sheep dotted around the adjacent paddock. The land curved down a grassy slope, to an open gate which led into the orchard. Rows of apple and peach trees stood on the left. Fejoa and figs on the right. Further down there were the nuts - macadamia and walnuts.

Harvey stopped at the end of a stand of apple trees. On a step-ladder between one of the rows, stood a woman with blonde wavy hair. She wore a wide gathered skirt the colour of turmeric and she was reaching up to the high branches, passing large green apples to a girl who stood on the grass holding a basket. Harvey walked down the row between the trees.

'Do you want any help?' he called.

She looked down at him from between the branches.

'Oh hi. Thanks, but I think we're done. What do you think T.J?' She turned to the child, 'enough for a strudel?' The woman's voice was soft and her face formed dimples beside her smile as she spoke.

'Yes I think so.' The girl counted them. 'Forty four. That should be enough.'

'That sounds like a mighty big strudel. You feeding the army?' asked Harvey.

'We could be, we'll just see who shows up,' said T.J.

'Come and join us if you like, and there'll be some lentils and veges in the pot before dessert tonight.'

'Yeah... sure. Thanks. I'm Harvey by the way.'

The woman climbed down the ladder and stood on the grass, her leather boots had yellow laces, and she wore a waist coat with patches of various fabrics and a circle of lace, like a doily stitched on the back with a large embroidered flower on the side. Her nose was pierced and her left arm was entwined by leafy branches tattooed on her skin.

'I'm Deb, and this is T.J and we're parked up under the big tree, in the red truck.'

Harvey watched the mother and daughter carry the basket between them, a handle each, back towards camp.

Beyond the orchard were the gardens. A trough filled with water from a nearby dam provided irrigation. Rows of green leaves pushed up out of the ground, brown and rich soil between the plants. Two men were laying down a new bed, building a wooden frame, and a young woman was by the tap drawing in the hose. She was wearing khaki shorts and a black singlet.

Harvey waited for her to look up. Her long tanned arms moved the hose around two stakes in the ground, like a snake. She wore gumboots. She saw him, but kept her eyes down.

Harvey moved closer and shaded her from the sun. 'Hiya. Great day!'

'Yep,' she said, picking up a spade and walking away.

Harvey followed her. It was a narrow track with room only for one so he walked behind. 'I think you painted my toes last night?'

'Do you?'

'Yes... In exchange for a foot massage?'

'No.'

'No what?'

'No you didn't.' She stopped to pick up a trowel.

'Well who painted my toes?'

'I did. But you didn't massage my feet.'

'Really. I ... err can't remember. Sorry. I owe you.'

'No you don't. I didn't want one.'

'Why not ? I'm pretty good at it .. they say.'

She stopped beside some lettuces and turned to pass the spade to Harvey.

'You were out of it last night. You know this is a drug free zone? They will kick you out for drugs, alcohol ... cigarettes too. Here, make yourself useful. These need digging up, and these need planting.' She pointed to the row of gone to seed lettuces and a tray of seedlings.

'Will I get my feet dirty?' he said, flicking his jandal with his foot. She looked at his coloured toenails and smiled. 'They do look pretty.' Then she left him and weeded in between some rows of spinach. When he'd finished they washed their hands in a bucket from the trough.

'So are we on a first names basis now, now we've shared the same dirty bucket of water?'

She smiled and passed him her wet hand to shake. 'I'm Angeline. Or Angel... And you?'

'And my name's Harvey.' Their wet hands moved together, strangely intimate and awkward.

'Breakfast?' Angel grabbed a couple of apples from a basket as they walked past the shed.

'Yeah. I like to have breakfast before lunch. I don't suppose I'd find a bacon burger and hash browns around here?'

'No but I've got lettuce!'

'Wait... yeah I've got muesli bars!'

He pulled the two squashed muesli bars out of his back pocket and two joints fell on to the ground. Harvey picked them up and put them back in his pocket and they walked on over a small rise and down a track which led to the beach.

Feeling the day warming up he took his T-shirt off and tucked it so it hung out of his back pocket. Sun on his back, yet he thought of winter - back home - and Scotland. *Record snowfall in Scotland this year. Scotland. Little cold hands. Drawing on steamed up windows. Stuck inside.*

The tide was high and they sat partly shaded by a pohutukawa tree. Angel kicked off her gumboots and dug her feet into the sand. She took a flattened stick and smoothed an area beside her.

‘So what else do you offer here? ... Apart from foot massages.’

‘Unicycle lessons. You interested?’

‘Maybe ... sometime.’ On the flat surface she placed pipi shells in a koru shape.

‘And you’re a gardener?’ Harvey asked.

‘I prefer *horticulturalist*. I just finished a course in sustainability.’

‘Err ...that doesn’t help me. Elucidate ye.’

‘It’s about living lightly really ... working with nature - not against it.’

‘It’s good nature gave us marijuana then, certainly helps with living lightly. Do you want some?’ He held out a joint from his pocket.

‘No thanks. Not for me ... I don’t smoke anything.’

‘Obey the rules?’

‘Not really – just the ones I choose.’ Angel moved her hand to her stomach. ‘I’m pregnant ... four months.’ She let her hand rest there. ‘So no to the unicycling for now. Oh and sex! I’ve gone off it. This is what happened last time.’ She patted her stomach. ‘So why are you still here?’

‘Not sure. I may have to go. I think I can hear my mother calling?’ He put his hand over his ear to listen. ‘So, you got a fella? ... I mean who is the lucky man?’ he asked.

‘I’m still deciding.’

‘That many possibilities aye?’

‘No - just one. But. No matter.’

Angel looked away to a distant gull diving into the sea. She stood and walked to the water, white sand squeaking under her feet, she made her way negotiating around the unbroken scallop shells scattered along the high tide mark. She stood waist deep in the cool water, the water was clear. So clear, she could see the shells and grains of sand on the sea floor.

Harvey looked at Angel, and then beyond her to the sea. Sea the blue of the eyes of a girl. They were bluer than ever on a spring day when he’d arranged for the picnic in Roundhay Park after graduation. The day she told him.

Tessa had been quiet as they'd driven to the park. Still quiet as they'd walked down from the car park and sat on the bench watching the mower working its way along the slopes bordering the sport's field. Harvey was sure the mood swing was over the drunken episode the night before after graduation - hence the picnic to smooth things over.

It was the top she wore that really brought out the colour. Blueish maybe turquoise. She turned and looked at Harvey.

'Sorry but I have to tell you something. I've been thinking about our relationship – I want to move on.' She took a breath. 'I don't want to go out with you anymore.'

Harvey had wanted to stop her at 'sorry.' He knew that when you've behaved badly and the girl starts her sentence with 'sorry' - you are in deep trouble.

'Shit. I blew it didn't I?' said Harvey.

'No. Err yes. But its ... I'm going back to Glasgow and I just want a fresh start.'

'Sorry about last night.'

'It isn't about last night – though it wasn't exactly a one off - now was it?'

'So ... I'll tone it down. Can't we? Maybe try again?'

Tessa was quiet. They waited for the mower to pass.

'And there is something else. A separate thing.' She looked across at the trees on the other side of the field and back to Harvey, as if she'd returned from a short trip. 'I am pregnant.'

'What?' Harvey said. 'How long?'

'Nine weeks.' Tessa began to cry.

Harvey put his arm around her. They were both silent walking to the car, and on the drive home.

They sat in Harvey's car outside her flat

'So what will we do?' he asked.

'We? – Its not we! OK?'

'Well err what will you do?'

'I don't know. I ... I need to go home for a bit.'

The following week Harvey helped her clear out of her flat and then he stood with her two flat mates and watched her drive off in her fully loaded old Humber, coughing and spitting exhaust fumes in its path.

Harvey could feel his shoulders burning. He put his shirt back on. He was standing beside Angel on the water's edge. He looked back at Angel, the light reflected in her dark eyes, and her skin seemed light and soft, young. He kept his voice in an even tone:

'I have a child in Scotland ... apparently. He's three now,' he said.

Angel looked back at Harvey, her hand resting on her stomach. 'So who's the lucky woman ... who gets to bring your child up?'

Ouch. 'Her name's Tessa – Tessa Stevenson. We met at university and went out for a few months and then she dumped me, sort of.'

'Sort of?'

'Well, it was mutual really. We didn't have a lot in common. She was nice and I was a bit of a tosser. Then she told me she was pregnant. A month later she emailed me and said she wasn't going to keep it. She'd made up her mind.' Harvey raked the sand with his fingers. 'I sent her some money and didn't hear anything - for a year or so.' Harvey had moved the soft dry surface of sand and was down to the firm damp layer. 'I bumped into her old flat mate just before we left the UK. She told me. About the baby. She'd had it after all. A boy.' Harvey scraped the hard sand with a sharp edge of a broken scallop shell.

'So what's his name?'

'She said his name was – his name is, Alex.'

With his other hand Harvey picked up a small rock and with a flick of his wrist he tossed it into the sea, heard it plop, and watched its vertical splash, the next wave crashing over the ripples.

'Alex.' Angel said and they watched the new wave crawl towards them, up the shore, with the rising tide.

It took two hands to move the wooden spoon around the pot. Thick with spices, lentils, and vegetables, the kitcheri fell to the sides as the spoon made its path through - the scents of garlic and masala permeating the air. An equally large pot sat on the other element, filled with hot rice. Forty people lined up with

their plates and Harvey had got himself a job serving a spoonful of the rice on to each passing plate. A young girl served the kitcheri. She wore a beret and had a purple streak in her hair and she smiled as she served.

'I hope you like lentils.' The girl plopped a pile on to the plate of a beefy guy with multiple piercings in each ear lobe and a snake tattoo on his neck.

'Smells good,' he said.

'People have given up their birth rights for this,' she said to the next taker, a young woman with a baby in a front sling.

'I can understand why they would ... not sure what my birth rights are though!' she replied.

Angel leaned against the trunk of the tree and watched Harvey serving. Sweat on his forehead, and his cheeks rosy. His hair was in the carpet phase; it was uncertain whether or not it would become dreadlocks. She resisted the urge to stand behind him while he served rice, and twirl his hair with her fingers so she could separate the clumps and start the back combing. She saw the woman with the curly blonde hair and bright skirt talking with Harvey and then Harvey pointing over to where Angel was sitting. Next, the woman brought a plate of food over to her.

'Hi there, would you like some dinner?' she asked and handed Angel the plate.

'Thanks. I am hungry.' Angel inhaled over the food. 'Smells great.'

'You need to keep up your strength. Bless you,' she said.

'Err ... yeah thanks.'

After serving up, Harvey joined Angel.

'So what's with telling that woman I was pregnant. I don't even know her.'

'What woman?'

'That one,' she said and pointed. She watched the woman taking pastry slugs out of an outdoor oven.

'I didn't,' he said.

'How did she know then? ... She seemed to know.'

'Sorry. I have no idea. Must be a woman thing.'

The woman with the baby stood beside Angel. 'Hi can I join you?'

'Sure. Can I take your plate while you get seated?'

She lowered herself slowly with the baby in her arms and then prepared a blanket bed for the baby to lie on while she ate. 'I'm Helen,' she said. 'And this

is Eloise.' The baby's limbs were moving constantly, she looked up at the branches, and created a sound of water bubbling through a narrow stream. Angel and Harvey watched the infant watching the trees, and without looking back to the woman Angel spoke.

'I'm Angel and this is Harvey.' She reached out to touch the toes. 'How old?'

'About four months. Actually one hundred and twenty five days.'

'You count the days?'

'Yeah. Sometimes.' Helen looked back at the child on the blanket, caught her eye and smiled. 'She's my world.'

Harvey stood and fetched three bowls of strudel and passed one to Helen and one to Angel. They stopped talking then, as they ate and breathed in the sweet smell of warm apple and cinnamon in the cool evening air. The darkness was closing in on them like a soft blanket.

After dinner the girl TJ pushed a wheel barrow around and collected the dishes. A few guys organized the fire and they drew in close to the heat. The girl with the dangling legs played the saxophone with the boy with a Mohawk who played the fiddle, and the girl with the autumn hair, who played a drum.

They sat around the fire, tapping feet with the rhythm, light and shadows alternately flashed onto their faces.

The cool night air closed in behind them and the family in the red truck had some spare pop-up tents and blankets. Anton fetched a tent to share with Harvey.

Harvey and Angel walked back to her tent by the orchard. They followed the light of Angel's torch and stood by the door to the tent.

Harvey asked, 'Shall we go in, it's cold out here?'

'S'all right,' Angel said. 'I'll bring you a blanket.'

They sat together outside the tent and talked about stars and searched for satellites moving across the sky. The thick woolen blanket was large and they pulled it across their shoulders and backs. The ends met at the front and enclosed them. They held the blanket tight and a warm space grew between them.

'There's one.' Harvey shot his hand out from the blanket and pointed up as a satellite traversed the night. The moon, almost full, shone on their faces.

'Ah yes. I wonder how many there are out there, orbiting earth.'

'Funny you should ask. Six and a half thousand approx – I did an assignment at school on man-made satellites in year eleven. I hope you're impressed.'

'Yeah ... I guess. But doesn't it freak you out thinking about all that junk up there. Polluting space. It doesn't exactly get recycled when it stops working – just orbits forever or smashes in to something causing more debris?'

'I'm getting to like that angry part of you. You really care about planet earth don't you? Its nice.'

'S'nice is it ... yeah?' She nudged him.

'Yeah s'nice.' And Harvey turned and kissed Angel on her moonshine forehead.

She rested her hand on his chest. 'So what do you get angry about?'

'I try to mellow out most of the time. Last time I was crazy mad was when my Dad left.'

'Did he stay in touch?'

'Once a fortnight, weekends, you know. He was busy with work so I ended up spending most of the time with his wife. Oh the irony. The witch that broke up our family - I got to have one to one time with her every two weeks. Now he lives in Gibraltar with his next new family.'

'I never knew my father. He died when I was two. A junkie like the old lady,' said Angel.

'What will you do after this? Will you go and be with the daddy of your baby?' Harvey asked.

'Not sure. I haven't told him yet.'

'He doesn't know?'

'No, you are the only one I have told.'

'So someone's in for a big surprise.'

'What about you? When are you going to meet your son?'

'I don't know either. I'm sure she's a good mother. She's got family there.'

'What about him? Shouldn't he get a chance to meet you and decide if he likes you or not?'

'I hadn't thought about it like that. What about you? Are you going to tell the father of your baby?'

'Yeah, next week. I'm going to visit his family.' Angel drew her arms across her chest. 'It was already over with us before I discovered I was pregnant. I think I'd just been looking for a way to become part of their family ... Really I'm more worried about telling his mother. She's my friend, Gloria. She let me stay with her when I needed space from my mother. I didn't want to hurt her and now it could all go very badly. So I guess I've been putting it off.'

'I can come with you. You know. For support. If you want.'

'Thanks. Not sure. But thanks. S' nice of you though!' Angel pulled the blanket off Harvey and stood up.

'And you? Again. When are you going to meet your son?'

'I think. Maybe. Maybe soon.'

Angel put her hands on her stomach. 'We are exhausted and now we have to get some sleep so off you go. See you tomorrow,' she said. She shoved him gently, turned, crouched down and unzipped her tent.

Harvey lays still for a moment beside Anton in the borrowed one and a half person tent.

It would be day time in Scotland. Does Alex have a yard to play in? ... A ball to kick? The bitch. I don't even have a photo.

Harvey becomes restless. Switching between head north and head south, his sleeping bag rustling and twisting with each change, finally he settles on head north. He apologises for kicking Anton in the face.

'Are you finished?' asks Anton.

'Yeah I'm good – so good to sleep straight after last night.'

'Yeah I thought there was something going on between you and the handbrake.'

'Yeah, right. And don't think you're my first choice of bed pal either - its not quite how I'd planned the end of my day, snuggled up with you,' says Harvey.

'Me too, you're not either. My first choice.'

'So how's the sitar going?'

'Not bad. I guess.'

'You are becoming a proper Indian now. Playing sitar, your ancestors will be proud. Next you'll be opening up your own fruit shop!' Harvey attempts an Indian accent.

'If I do I won't be selling fruit to any pasty faced racists with bad accents.'

Anton flicks a sweater over onto Harvey's face and he rolls over.

Harvey stops rustling. They lay still with their heads resting on their make-shift pillows of rolled up sweaters, and listen to the light hush of the sea on the sand. Slowly Harvey's thoughts turn as he thinks about the day; about the girl; about a boy; a baby.

And he begins to wish that he had asked her, just to know. Maybe to feel it move. And he is asleep.

Mum's the Word

At dawn, Carl waits for Shelley at the café by the lights. The weak sun falls on his face and he closes his eyes for a moment, feeling a mask of warmth. The early wave of nausea settles and he feels an internal shiver. He pulls his coat across his chest. The air is sharp, moist, yet the old muted scents of the inner city effuse from the road, the pavement, and the walls, and seek to infiltrate the new day: the rubber of tyres on the road, diesel fumes and the stale scent of vodka make their claim on the morning. The glass of a broken bottle is scattered on the ground near Carl's feet. He opens his eyes to see a white plastic bag scud across the intersection, carried by the breeze, lifting and landing, it limps along.

He hears Shelley coming, her heels rapping on the pavement. They kiss on the cheek, hug and go inside to order breakfast. She is looking good he thinks, her hair newly highlighted as if the sun has bleached it.

'Nice necklace,' he says, and reaches to turn the stone. 'A garnet?'

'Yes. Apparently it's my birth stone. He bought it for me last night at Newmarket. It's my birthday!'

'Oh yeah?... Happy birthday. Another one already?' He laughed. *That'd cost a thousand bucks at least.* 'Good score!'

Shelley takes a sip of her coffee and smiles at him with her eyes, peering over the rim.

'So what's he like?' asks Carl. 'Who is he?'

'His name is Spencer Marsden, and he's an MP.'

'Which party?'

'Labour I think ... we don't talk politics.'

'And how did you get away so early?'

'I told him my sister Stella was driving us down to see our family in Hamilton for my birthday.'

'Nice! ... Elaborate!'

'Married?' Carl asks.

'Of course. And he's got three sons at King's.' Shelley spreads her fingers to grasp either side of the bagel, and takes a bite.

Barker Samuels. He'd been a King's boy. Full of promise. Good looking. Tall.

They eat in a hurry and leave together, heading off towards the van parked a block down the road. Shelley removes her stilettos and stuffs them into her overnight shoulder bag. She walks barefoot along side Carl. Carl is quiet. He is still thinking about Barker. *What is he doing now?*

Carl's mother had been proud to have him come over.

'He's a well brought up boy, stick with him and some of it might rub off,' she said after he'd left their house that first time - he'd made a good impression with his posh accent and short hair – and the smell of old money.

On the night of the party, Barker and Carl had walked along the beach as it got dark, drinking beer and tossing the empties at the waves. Barker, boasting about his plans to score that night. His white soft linen shirt fell from his broad shoulders, and as the breeze blew, it opened where the buttons remained unfastened, and his firm and tanned torso were exposed.

'So mate you gonna score tonight? Who's your hot lady?'

'I guess ... yeah why not?'

'Not the attitude man. Need a little more determination. And work out, yeah you should work out more. ' Barker lifted his shirt and rubbed his hand across his rippled stomach, 'chicks like buff.'

'Yeah?' Carl filled an empty with sea water and jumped Barker from behind, pouring the water on his head. 'And hair - will they go for wet hair?' He mussed it up before Barker, humourless, shoved him on to the sand.

'Fuck off!' said Barker.

Carl lay on the hard sand and watched Barker shake his head and smooth his hair, walking off towards the club.

Shelley and Carl drive out to the coast in Carl's van. The dense bush crowds in at them on the edge of the narrow winding road. A ponga fern hangs

precariously above them on a tight bend. Carl drives smoothly hugging the corner. Nearer the coast the dark green shades disappear and flax and toetoe emerge in an open river valley. Cliffs drop down on either side of them as they enter the bay. They pull up in the car park and walk through tussock grass over sand dunes and out to the open beach. Shelley faces the breeze and lets the fresh west coast wind blow her hair back and off her face. Just a few surfers out on a Monday morning bobbing about like black seals. The waves dumping.

The day is hung over with low clouds and they walk on the edge of the tide, to the end of the beach, where Carl and Barker had walked, the waves washing their feet. Seagulls fly low overhead. Screeching, they circle and dive. The surf club stands just beyond the dunes, perched amongst the sea grasses in an inlet. It overlooks the bay. Shabbier than they remembered. Its painted weather boards are peeling like a teenage tan, and a piece of roofing iron hangs down, half covering a window in need of repair. The posts still stand supporting the veranda. It was Shelley's idea to come back.

He follows her up the steps. At the top, Carl and Shelley separate and Carl walks around to the back of the building. He stops where the picnic table had once stood. Guys had laid their boards there and waxed them down before getting out on the waves. Some days they just stood around there waiting for some decent swell - waxing and waiting. He walks on round to the front and finds Shelley slumped on the sand in front of the veranda.

'The table has gone,' he says.

She looks up. A question on her face. 'The table? ... I don't want to go round there.'

'Are you sure you want to be here?'

'Yes I am ... And something good happened here.' She points to the veranda.

'My memory must be too good,' says Carl.

'YOU were the good thing.'

There'd been some hard stuff going down that night. Lester had something he was sharing round. Drumming up business. Some of the guys with girlfriends, and most of the single girls had taken off just after Shelley started dancing. She was as drunk and stoned as any of them – probably more, with Barker plying her. She was moving wildly, her hips and her shoulders

driven by the music. And then one of the guys started it. Neil Flemming yelled out.

‘Strip.’

Maybe just for a joke. More voices called out. Carl yelled too. Not that he was interested, but they didn’t know that. He’d seen her at the club before but they’d never talked, he just knew her name.

‘Take it off. Strip!’

No one was really expecting it, but she slid off her jeans and her sweater and underneath she was wearing a red bikini. She carried on moving crazy around the place. She grabbed hold of the post, she wound her leg around and slid her body up and down, laughing. And it was still quite funny and Carl thought it would stop there. But the frenzy continued. The guys were chanting, laughing. Shelley made the sounds of laughter and removed her bikini letting it fall to the ground where she stood and she spun around the post twice more and then as if she had forgotten what came next she just stood, still. Her eyes dark and vacant. Strands of her dark hair fell forward over her face. At that moment Barker went over to her and whispered something in her ear, and then he swept her into his arms and carried her round to the other side of the building. Carl, relieved the show had finished, sat on the sand looking out at the black water and hearing the waves dump and slap against the sand on what was a moonless and starless night. And then one of the guys called it out, from the side of the building. He called to the rest of them just sitting round, thinkless drunk.

‘Come on she’s good for it.’

Then a few stood and peeled off, taking themselves home. Murmurings of ‘slag’ and ‘firkin whore’. There were about ten left. Guys looked at each other, nudged, shrugged. Egged on they filed through to the back of the building. Carl stood at the back, and beyond the heads he could see Shelley on the table. Her face looked up at the dark sky. Carl’s head was spinning. He withdrew to the trees and vomited on the ground.

When he returned they were done. No one had missed him, and guys were starting to leave. Barker took off for a swim in the surf with Lester and Nigel. After a few minutes Shelley stumbled back to the veranda. The audience had gone, yet it was as if she had remembered what came next. She continued to dance, naked and listless, and then suddenly, her face changed. Sober.

Bewildered. She froze. Slowly she slid down the post, her hands gripping lightly, slipping, she fell, like a cloth, to the ground.

Everyone had gone. Carl walked towards her and covered her with his jacket while he collected her scattered clothes. He shook them free of sand and he dressed her. He helped her up and tried to carry her, but in the end they just walked, silently, past the guys in the surf, along the soft sand which slipped under their feet, and back to his house. He tucked her into his bed at home. Carl's mother had let her stay, believing and hoping she was Carl's girlfriend. That was the beginning for them, not like Carl's mother had hoped, but still the beginning. She had spent days sleeping, and when she did wake she just sat in silence on the bed taking only small amounts of food and water which Carl brought in.

Carl, he wrote it. All of it. While she slept. While it was fresh. The names of the guys, the date, time, the drugs, the drink. Even the music he accused. Fives pages of hand scrawl. He folded the papers and hid them in a dusty old Bible that sat on the bookshelf in the lounge.

When Shelley next dreamt, it wasn't of the nightmare party at the club house, but it was about one Christmas. She was with her family at the old house. She was stood in the centre of the lawn which was red from the pohutakawa flowers, and there her parents and cousins, her sisters and her uncle gathered around her. She had been paid by her uncle to keep their secret. In the dream they were all closing in on her pointing and shouting 'Liar. Liar.' And her uncle with his wide-toothed grin, stood at the back and winked at her. She woke suddenly in Carl's bed in the middle of the night, sweating and shaking and Carl made her sweet tea. Soon afterwards she left with Carl. They left the beach for the city and found a flat in Grafton. Shelley took up a waitressing job to help pay the rent and Carl worked as an orderly at the hospital for a bit.

Carl gives Shelley a hand up to standing and together they walk away from the surf club, down the steps and on to the sand. They don't look back. They follow their foot steps back to the van.

Friday morning Carl orders the coffees and takes a table near the door and waits for Shelley. When she arrives her cheeks are pink and her eyes bright and wide and she floats in and sits down. She picks up the bowl and takes a long sip of her latte.

'So... how was it?' he asks.

Shelley bends down, suppressing a smile, and takes from her bag an envelope. She opens it to show the side view of a thick wad of fifty dollar notes. 'Five thousand bucks!' she says.

'Good work! ... Did you show him the film?' Carl's eyes scan to check that the waitress has not been looking their way.

'No.... I'm saving it.'

'What?'

'This is for the baby. I'm pregnant!' She rubs her tummy and laughs. 'I just told him the good news, that he and I are going to be a mummy and daddy and I was going to tell his wife!'

'You're not pregnant?'

'No of course not,' she said. 'He was wild though, called me a whore! Now I thought that was pretty rude. I told him I don't get paid for sex. I get paid for keeping secrets.'

Carl was leaning forward with his arms on the table. 'So ... we lay low for a bit and then send him the film in a few months, just when he's thinking he got away. There's an election coming up...timing is everything.'

'So what's next? When do we go to the Gold Coast? Get out of this hole?' asks Shelley.

'Soon. There's something for you to see here.' Carl pulls out a folded newspaper, the second page of the Herald shows a photo of a young man standing in front of a church building and behind him, a gathering of protesters, clustered around him for the photo. They carry signs.

Pastor Barker Samuels takes a stand against homosexual law reform in his attempt to lead a Christian party in the next election.

'That's him?' asks Shelley

'Sure is. He is one of the pastors. And that's the church. '*The Church of New Hope.*' He rips off page two and gives it to Shelley to put in her bag and they leave the café.

Festival - Day Four

Anton had practiced with the sitar for an hour: his fingers running like insects up the neck and across the strings stop at the end of a run to bend a note. Satya, worked on the guitar chords Anton had taught him while Satya's friend, Lalite, played the tabla. Lalite kept up a rhythmic pulse, tapping lightly with his fingers on the stretched skin of the drum. Satya's sister, Rayna was preparing some food outside the caravan. It was morning, day four. Anton tried to reconcile his mind to this girl sat here being the same one they'd watched dancing that first night. The one he couldn't keep his eyes off.

The girl stood still in the centre of the grassed space, her head down. Her hair loose over her shoulders. She wore a colourful Indian costume – red skirt and saffron yellow embroidered top. A red sequined veil was held by her side. The music of the tabla began – a slow drum. Her hands reached up, palms upwards. One at a time. She twirled. Her red bejeweled skirt and veil followed her movements in slow and graceful curves while all the time the rhythm progressed and her bare feet tapped the earth. Silver bells wrapped around her ankles shook so fast making one continuous sound. The twirl became a spin. The dance propelled the music and she moved faster and faster with urgency until suddenly, as if a conductor had stood amidst the crowd, they stopped. In mid-sentence. The music and the dancer. And she held her pose for just a few seconds before the little gathering began to clap. When the dance was over and the sitar had stopped Anton and Harvey remained seated on the grass, drinking juice made from wheat grass and carrots.

The girl passed a bowl of fruit around and Anton touched her hand as he reached for the orange. The light of the fire flickered on her skin and her long black hair glowed. He brushed her fingers with the back of his hand and asked her name before taking an orange.

'Rayna. My name is Rayna.' She'd flicked a smile at Anton and moved on around the group offering the fruit.

As a child Zuma had carried the fruit to the market. Her basket on her head. Her feet hot on the dirt road that led to the village.

She walked around the fire and crouched beside Anton on the grass.

He held the orange over the grass as he peeled it and juice fell through his hands to the ground.

Rayna now wore jeans and a pale green T-shirt. Her hair was tied in a pony tail and she spoke with an accent like any kiwi girl. She looked up from stirring a wok of oats and nuts over the fire.

'Do you want some breakfast?' she asked.

'Sure ... yes. Thanks,' Anton replied.

'The milk is soy – we're vegans,' Satya added, like a warning.

They moved over to the mat by the fire.

'So where are you from?' he asked.

'Avondale, in Auckland. But my parents were born in Varanasi in India,' she said. 'And you, you sound like a pom.'

Anton smiled.

'Yep I do. But I was born in New Zealand. I moved to England when I was nine. Went to university in Yorkshire with my mate Harvey.'

'So where do your parents come from?' asked Rayna.

'My Father is English, and my mother ... Indian. She was born in a small village near Chennai.'

After breakfast Satya drew Anton back to the music and they worked on their improvising, now on their own instruments.

Zuma waited by the musicians at the market. The sitar and the drum. Someone chanting. She would give three of her oranges, one for each player.

While the music played Rayna washed her red skirt in a bucket of water. The red dye from the fabric of the skirt suffused the water in the bowl and when she had finished she poured it out into the cracks in the dry ground. Anton

watched as she refilled the bowl from the clean water in the bucket that she had carried over from the tap.

He stood when the music had finished. 'I am going for a walk,' he said and stretched his legs out. 'Who wants to come?'

'I can't I am giving a lesson soon,' said Satya. 'What about you Lalite, Rayna?'

'I'm helping at the garden,' said Lalite.

Anton looked at Rayna.

'Sure,' Rayna answered. 'I'll come.'

Anton and Rayna walked up over the hills at the back of the camping area. Skirting around some native bush at the top of the valley they climbed up the ridge. At the top they stood panting; breathing in the freshness of the ocean they over looked the bay. Further out, tiny white caps looked like static brush marks on a painted sea. They looked down at the pohutakawas framing the beach. Rayna felt dizzy and so she stepped back and lay down on the grass. She looked up at the sky.

'To me the sky is the reason we should all live in peace. We can't reach it, yet we all need it and share it. It's the air we breathe,' she inhaled deeply, 'and it is recycled. We are breathing the air of anyone that's ever lived.' She sat up and looked at Anton. Sitting, one leg bent, the other folded under him, he faced the sea.

Anton looked across at Rayna. 'I am breathing air that Mozart has breathed, or Gandhi?' he said.

'And the water, what about that? We are drinking the same water too. Their urine even!' She laughed and it was light and almost musical. Anton thought how he should like to bottle it – or better, to record her laugh and listen to it whenever he wished.

Rayna was quiet for a moment and then, as if she had been thinking it all the time, she said, 'we breathe our mother's air.'

'Tell me about your mother,' he said.

'I haven't talked too much about her, except to my brother.'

'It's OK. Don't then,' he said.

'I will talk with you though. I am guessing you know it too. People who have lost their mothers somehow find each other.' Rayna drew her legs in and sat cross-legged and looked at Anton. 'My father died when we were very small:

I was two and Lalite was seven. He died from lung cancer. My brother remembers him, but the only parent I have ever known is my mother.'

'When did she ...?' Anton searched for a gentler word.

'She died last year. A week before my eighteenth birthday we got a call from the hospital to tell us she had been hit by a drunken driver. She was on her way home from her shift at the hospital. She died just two days later.'

Anton put his hand on her shoulder. 'I'm sorry.'

'I miss her. Miss having her to talk to ... she would always listen to anything I had to say, even the most trivial part of my day. She wanted to hear about everything.'

Anton's voice was quiet, 'I was nine when she ... when my mother went missing. They never found her body.'

'So where ... what happened?' asked Rayna.

'I don't know. We were on holiday in the South Island in a camper van. They - my parents, had a fight or something. She went out and never came back.

Then we moved to England.'

'How awful! Do you remember her?'

'No .. I am trying to. The thing is, growing up we had no photos, and no contact with her family either. But I do remember some things.' And he reached out and stroked Rayna's shoulder, moved his hand down over the skin of her upper arm.

'She had skin like this, smooth and warm,' he said, and they moved closer and Anton put his arm around her shoulder. The sky grew darker and the air became still. The birds had taken to their nests and the sea was calm. In the silence they held each other.

Anton stroked Rayna's hair at the back of her neck and breathed in the musk scent of her hair and skin.

Rayna broke the silence. 'I am going to India. There is a dance school in Varanasi. I want to go to it. I have always wanted to dance. Right from when I was a little girl and my mother would take my brother and I to the Indian Festivals. Also my grand parents live there, I want to see them.'

'When will you go?'

'Maybe in a few months.'

It was dark when they walked down. They could see the fires burning. They could hear the guitars. And singing – the voices carried up the valley towards them. The air was still, cool as the night closed in and they said goodnight outside Rayna's caravan.

Anton and Harvey sat on top of their sleeping bags. Anton held the torch while Harvey was searching for mosquitoes, occasionally clapping one between his hands.

'Gotcha!' He smashed another, throwing himself over Anton in the process.

'Get off!' said Anton shoving Harvey back to his own side.

'Its all right for you - they only eat me!'

'That is why I travel with you. You are my decoy!' said Anton.

'Is that your chick plan too?'

'No I think the girls have more sophisticated tastes than mosquitoes.'

'Like Rayna?' asked Harvey.

'Yes. The lovely Rayna.'

'So where does she go after the festival ... back to Avondale?'

'She wants to go to India.'

'Don't you have relatives there?' asked Harvey.

'Yeah. Near Chennai ... my Grandmother, and an uncle ... cousins too I guess.'

'So aren't you feeling the call to paddle in the Ganges?'

'The Ganges is further north.' Anton unzipped his sleeping bag, pushed his feet to the end. 'I guess I do want to go to India. Maybe visit the mother of my mother. If I can't know how her life ended at least I can find out how she lived.'

'So ... what do you think did happen to your mother?' Harvey asked. Flippant as it came out. As if he'd been inquiring as to what the likely outcome of the FA cup final might be: *Hey who's gonna win - Stoke or Manchester City?*

Anton was quiet for a moment.

'There's no proof. No body. No witnesses. Just my Dad ... and me.' He spoke in a whisper, as if breaking a promise.

'I kissed you on the cheek that night. You were lying in the camper with the light on, reading. And I leaned towards you, your eyes blinked at the darkness beyond the torchlight. Your soft cheek against mine. I had no idea.'

'She came in and said goodnight to us. I thought how sad her eyes looked. Deep and dark and sad. My little sister was sleeping and my mother stroked her forehead and kissed her before she left. She went out to join my father and she shut the door. I thought they were just going for a walk. That she'd be back.

After that I used to imagine she would return. Just breeze in one day and say, 'I'm back. Sorry I left you my loves, but I'm back now.'

'Mate. I ... I'm sorry.'

'Yeah. But you got me here. I wouldn't have come on my own. This land of my mother. She lived half her life in *this* country; we were a whole family here. Once.'

They sit still for a bit in the quiet, eventually putting their heads down they stretch their long bodies out.

Anton closes his eyes. Her hair, was a long black curtain down her back. Long legs like him. Hands smooth and soft with long artistic fingers. And her skin - dark brown velvet. And he falls asleep.

Hello Girl

At number six, the girl waited on the pavement beside the letter box with the mosaic number made from blue broken tiles and mirror glass. She looked towards the hill. With a deep breath she braced herself, before passing the yard of the green house on the corner. Emily was on her way up to fetch the boys.

'Hello girl. Hello girl. Hello girl.'

The magpie, at the sight of Emily, hopped out from the shade of a bottle-brush tree and ran across the lawn towards the path, stopping short of a low picket fence. Emily put her head down and hurried her pace. She flew into the gate just two doors up. It was the fact of there being such a thing as a talking bird that spooked her, rather than its menacing approach. She had never followed through on the conversation with the bird, so had no way of knowing, that it had reached the limit of its verbal skills. Also unknown to Emily, its wings had been clipped. She imagined it flying at her and 'pecking out her eyes' as her brother had taunted: 'It'll take out the both of them, one at a time.'

Matt, fourteen years old, and long and lean, with a wild mop of brown hair, had danced about in front of Emily as they walked down the hill, miming the extraction of each eye with his long fingers,

'...and it will put them in its nest, and they will look up at him and twinkle and shine - they love shiny things, magpies.'

'Shut up Matt!'

Oscar scowled at his younger brother and turned to Emily

'He's stirring, they don't peck out eyes.' Oscar was seventeen.

Emily thought the trip down was never so bad as the trip up - with the boys alongside her at least.

Oscar and Matt had been up at the Clement's all afternoon out the back. The Clement's yard backed onto a wild scrubby patch of wetland on the edge of a sheep farm. There was an old shed where the boys would hang out. They had been shooting at targets of baked-bean and coke cans in the late afternoon. The slug guns belonged to the oldest Clement boy, Nigel, the deranged one.

Only if he was there would he let his twin brothers, Byron and Dylan shoot. Shooting his cousin Millie Rogers in the leg had contributed largely to his 'psycho' reputation. In his defense, he'd claimed she had run in front of the targets. There was apparently no permanent damage.

Emily made a wide circle avoiding the targets, as she approached the back of the shed.

The three made their way home, down the hill in the evening light, along a dappled path. The sunlight shot between the lightly clad branches of the maples lining the street with their late spring, tender leaves. Emily jumped from light to light avoiding the shadow puddles. Occasionally she over-stepped and the toe of her shoe caught the shade. Or she would have to tap one foot lightly on a shadow to get across a dark patch and reach the next sunshine stepping stone.

Now their father would be home and hungry and their mother would be dolloping out the mashed spuds on to the dinner plates.

It was an early dinner on Tuesdays so that Stephan and Julie Winters could get off to their Latin dance class leaving Oscar in charge.

'So you know that Emily needs to get to bed by eight and brush her teeth properly before bed. Matt don't forget to do your homework! And don't eat all the ice-cream - we are having the Clements over on Saturday and I don't want to have to buy more.'

Julie stood at the door to the lounge issuing instructions to the back of the boys heads as they sprawled themselves out on the floor in front of tele, watching an episode of 'The Simpsons.'

Emily had the cat wrapped in her old cot blanket. She was cradling it on her knee as she curled herself in a corner of the couch.

'Are you listening to me?' asked Julie.

Oscar turned to see his mother framed in the doorway, in her fire-red satin dress, the splaying hem impatient, swaying, at the slightest provocation.

'Yep, yep, OK,' he offered. A kiss on the top of Emily's head and they were out the door.

The children waited till they could hear the car shoot off down the drive way and Oscar snatched the television remote from Matt and set it to watch the recording of their favourite crime episode: 'Killer Crimes.' Once again they exposed themselves to another week of a Hollywood version of serial killers and their victims. And their grizzly, merciless deaths at the hands of psychopathic murderers, or triumphant rescues by high level crime investigators. Emily missed some of the subtle stuff, like the function of the meat grinder in the garage, and the significance that the pigs and their food had in the plot. Even the pile of shoes stashed in the skip seemed only incidental to her.

Women were tied up in dark places, and in remote rural settings: forests and farms. Or placed unconscious in coffins or cupboards, cellars or boots of cars. And killed in all kinds of grizzly ways: with ropes, knives, scarves, axes, plastic bags. Occasionally a brother would call out, 'Emily hide your eyes.' They'd be too late and those images would creep into bed with her and they would find their way into her dreams: images of limbs and blood and screams and death - of powerlessness.

Oscar knew he would be in deep trouble if their parents had any idea that Emily had been allowed to watch anything 'inappropriate.' But they had a pact, Emily and her brothers: They took turns at reading her a story before bed on Tuesday nights to put 'happy' thoughts back into her head before sleep, and she kept secret about the program. They would read a whimsical Doctor Seuss or light hearted adventure from 'The Famous Five' or a chapter from 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.'

A few of the girls in 'Killer Crimes' found a way out. The captives - always girls for some reason - Emily had not figured why. Some escaped through a window left ajar. Or cell phone call from the boot of the car brought a rescue team. Or once, Emily had been impressed by the stab in the eye of the perpetrator with a screw driver that happened to be lying on the ground.

Emily was eight years old and had three best friends who could keep secrets: Sarah Kingsley, who played netball with her, and Sam James from her soccer team and Blue Ted. Two were in her class and one sat on her bed. All

were wide-eyed when she recounted the horror stories of the Tuesday evening viewings.

Oscar had been in enough trouble this year. He was on 'probation' according to their father who had noticed that money had been disappearing from his wallet over a period of about eight weeks.

As a means of tracking it he'd taken to writing down the serial numbers of the notes in his wallet. Something he'd learned from an unpleasant experience with a taxi driver in Buenos Aires in his travelling days, over a possible forged note. So when Oscar was confronted by Stephan there was no place to go; there was no point in denying it.

He'd been working on drawing a sphere for a graphic's assignment, at his desk, in his room, when his father approached him.

'Oscar, I have kept a record of the numbers on the notes in my wallet and I know that you have been stealing money from my wallet!' Stephan was no longer angry but deeply disappointed, compounded by the fact of him needing to be deceptive himself -sneaking around while Oscar was in the shower that morning. He picked up Oscar's wallet from his bed-side table. He opened it and found three twenties that matched the numbers of his missing notes.

Stephan held out the three twenties to show Oscar. His face had incrementally altered during the revelation. His jaw had dropped slightly and his moist eyes were blinking with increasing frequency, unable to stay focused on Stephan's face for more than a couple of seconds. Strangely, Stephan imagined that Oscar's face, even with his avoidance, showed some relief.

Some weeks later, one Saturday night, the police turned up at the front door with Oscar. He had been drinking with some of his mates at the beach and the police had arrested two boys in their group for possession of marijuana. The others, including Oscar, had been given a sharp warning.

And the fact of Oscar's grades plummeting over the past year caused Julie and Stephan to despair over their 'delinquent' son. That is what Julie had been calling him in her conversations with Stephan, when she thought Oscar was out of hearing zone.

After the police incident he was grounded for a month. And they enrolled him in after-school maths and science coaching.

'You were such a bright boy Oscar. Your father and I don't know what's come over you these days. You have really let us down...' Julie stood tall and slim in her cream linen suit with her hands on her hips, hair short and blonde in a neat bob. 'It'll be a hard road back for you to gain our trust again I'm afraid.'

She had spent the day in court defending dubious clients and her feet were killing her.

It hadn't been an easy decision to pull the boys out of Newton Grammar. Julie had attended the same school as a girl and had managed to take home several academic prizes in consecutive senior years, as well as becoming deputy head girl in her final year.

And Stephan had been a top academic student at a private school in London. He'd studied economics at Oxford and then he had begun a career in finance.

Julie was convinced that Newton Grammar had steadily deteriorated in its standards of education, and behavior of students, over recent years. The numbers had dwindled and so they had widened the catchment zone for enrollments. Certainly the flavor had changed from Julie's day she thought. The school had reduced its art's budget, and increased the budget for sports and business courses.

In that last year while the boys were still enrolled, a student in year thirteen, Joel Anderson had died from asphyxiation, following an after-ball function. He had collapsed in the early hours of the Sunday morning after arriving at his home, having inhaled his own vomit - lying on his back. He was found in the garden by his parents, already dead.

And then Lisa Higgins, a promising young artist in Oscar's class, and someone he'd known since preschool had left school to raise a baby - at only fifteen years old.

A few weeks later Oscar's best friend and guitarist in his band, Bradley James, who had apparently suffered with depression following his parent's separation, had taken his life at Gannet Point. He had chosen for himself, a violent and messy escape, as he threw himself over the edge of the cliff, down one hundred and eighty metres to the rocks, where he was found by two fishermen, later that same day. That last was the final straw for Julie, she felt Oscar needed a complete break from the school.

Avoiding eye contact with his mother Oscar had sat slumped at the kitchen table while his mother talked. He sat still for the time it took for Julie to get to the end of her victim impact statement. Emily sat on the steps and smelt the smoked burning smell of the broccoli on the bottom of the pan and watched her mother fly to the stove too late. Oscar had taken the chance to exit, isolating himself in his room.

On Saturday Mac Clements brought the wine. Neither his wife, Clara, nor Julie fully appreciated good wine - they were resilient water drinkers. Julie had a taste to be polite and so she could join in with the men's knowledgeable chat about the attributes of the cabernet sauvignon. Stephan was always on the look out for a good wine.

Mac Clements placed his glass on the linen lace cloth beside his plate, fingers resting on the stem. 'So Stephan, when are you coming hunting? There are a few hunters round here. Some of the guys in the street head off together to the bush every now and again - you should join us.' Mac took another sip of his wine. 'Does Julie let you get away?... By the way...' As if to make amends, 'Julie, this is a superb Beef Wellington.'

He pointed with his fork to the plate, and took a slice through the tender meat - a slightly bigger than mouth-sized portion.

'Thanks, but Stephan cooked the meat.' Julie made the effort to smile and present a warm demeanor.

Stephan was pouring into Mac's glass. 'Yep thanks... I googled the recipe.' He rested the wine bottle on the table. 'And hunting? Sure I'd love to. Sometime. Err...sure. But I haven't been hunting for years. So who goes?' Even in that short sentence Stephan could feel his initial enthusiasm dissipating.

'Usually my neighbour comes. Two doors up - Terry Gardner - works with me up at the saw mill. And there's Garth Beetham, who lives opposite us. And my brother, Josh, who you know.'

'Yes I know Terry through squash. And Garth, does he drive the white Hiace van and own an Alsatian?' asked Stephan.

'Yep. And he's a plumber. Did some work for us last year, and I found out he is a bit of a bush boy too. He's done possum trapping for years when he's had his breaks from plumbing. But the dog - he died last week. He was pretty old.'

‘And Josh. He’s the tax inspector?’ asked Stephan.

‘Fraid so. But he leaves it at work mostly.’

Stephan forced himself to be neighbourly; he was not a keen hunter. After eighteen months they hadn’t really made inroads into the community. Stephan had made some attempt through managing Matt’s rugby team which Mac had coached for two seasons, and with the boys being mates and up the road, they had the beginnings of a friendship.

Julie had pushed him: ‘Go on, it will be good to get to know some of the guys round here. You’ll have a great time.’

He was spending too much time at home these days and needed to get out more, she’d thought. The move to the smaller town had been hard on Julie, with the extra travelling to get in to work, and with the long hours since she’d become a partner in the firm, she had little reserve left at the end of the day for making new friends. Having lived in cities for most of her life she accepted she was a bit of a townist. This was a chance for them to reduce their mortgage, breathe some cleaner air, maybe even plant the orchard she and Stephan had talked about. And the boys – it was for them, she’d hoped.

Stephan had given up the big corporate thing years ago and now worked from home selling bar codes online. Emily was the most adaptable, everything for her was an adventure and so she had settled in quickly, making new friends at school, joining the football and cricket clubs.

Two weeks after the Clements had come for dinner, Stephan found himself in a cabin situated in the middle of dense native bush, in the Ureweras, with four smelly blokes, playing poker by gas light: Mac, Terry, Garth and Josh. Garth had taken him out, coming up with an Ace on the river to make a pair against his Queen pair. They played for the stones they’d gathered from the track outside the cabin, to be cashed in when they returned to civilization – fifty cents per stone.

Garth dealt the next round. ‘So mate it’s your first time hunting out here?’ He looked over his hand at Stephan studying his cards. Stephan’s two hands overlapping, fingers curved around his cards, implied to Garth protection – something worth protecting in that hand.

'Not for years. I used to go out with Dad, somewhere round here. About twenty years ago now, and then I shot myself in the foot,' said Stephan.

'Literally or figuratively?' asked Josh.

'Both.' Stephan slipped off his left sock, and revealed his four-toed foot. The pinky conspicuously absent. 'There she is - or was. I had forgotten the safety catch. Made a big mess too, for such a little digit – blood everywhere.' Stephan remembered blood seeping from the hole in his shoe, and pooling over the ground, and into the cracks of the hardened clay, where he'd stood, on a rise, in a clearing, feeling the sharp pain and the slow realization of the cause. Then his father, pale faced, attempting to sound calm, sat him down, and removed his boot in order to stem the flow. He'd wrapped it with his own shirt. Stephan cringed when he remembered the pain of the boot sliding off his foot. His Dad had looked everywhere, without success, for the little toe, once he'd got Stephan in the hut with his foot bound and elevated. Stephan looked up at the guys, wide-eyed, and laughed. 'Ruined a perfectly good pair of boots too,' he said.

The guys had put their cards face down on the table, and were staring with admiration at Stephan's foot. Stephan looked back at their faces, and felt he'd passed some primitive hunting initiation challenge. If they had known – he toyed with the thought of telling them, how loud he'd screamed and cried as that boot came off. Josh held the gas lamp close to the foot, so they could get a better look.

Macs eyes flickered with the gas light. 'So how did you figuratively shoot yourself in the foot?'

Stephan put his sock back on. 'Venison was off the menu, when I started dating Veronica the vegan. She was anti killing of any sort. – Apart from plants that is. I was a vegetarian for ten years.'

'Ten years? Without meat? Man that is a sad story. Worse than losing a toe I reckon.' Garth slapped Stephan on the back and they returned to their cards.

A few hours of climbing over under growth and grabbing at badly placed branches, wading through cold streams and scrambling up banks only to skid on his back side on the moving vegetation down the next slope, and Stephan was over it. He had cuts on his legs from flax and bruises on his back side from

skidding and he had no intention of shooting a deer himself, just on lasting the day. He stuck with Mac and hoped that if it had to happen one of the others would be the lucky one to get to boast a new head on the wall.

‘Shh - you are too noisy man. You’ll spook them.’ Mac had thought he’d seen some movement on the ridge so they moved quietly up the slope.

From the ridge Mac and Stephan could see down into the gully, and at only 20 metres from where they crouched, a young doe stood eating grass on the edge of a clearing. So close, too easy. For only a part of a second, she turned her head towards the men, and Stephan looked directly into her large soft eyes. Stephan could never marry the idea of these gentle, beautiful animals being pests, destroying precious native bush like colonists. And he was pretty sure, that the motivation for the hunt, was not environmentally motivated. When the guys set their eyes on a deer, they saw a trophy. Mac raised his rifle, and with only one bullet in the chest, he took her out. She fell in the time it took for the crack of the bullet to end its echo, and for Mac to lift his head and rifle, and give a shout. ‘Yes! Gotcha!’

Oscar was in trouble again. The Tuesday before Guy Fawkes had been a disturbing evening for Emily.

The girl on ‘Killer Crimes’ was eight years old, same as Emily. And sporty, same as Emily. That night, on her bed, Emily slipped into a sleep of nightmares. She woke screaming, as Julie and Stephan arrived back from their dance class. Emily was crying and fussing and took some time to realise, it was just a bad dream. Julie followed the noise to the bedroom, and found Oscar failing in his attempt to humour Emily with a story. And so it came out, that she had watched the inappropriate ‘Killer Crimes.’

‘I have a good mind to get rid of that TV.’ Julie stroked Emily’s forehead. ‘You watch such rubbish!’ She said looking at Carl. ‘What ever happened to ‘Little House on the Prairie’ or ‘Lassie’?’

‘Normally she’s fine with it.’

‘What do you mean? *Normally*?’ Just how many times has she watched it?’

‘Well ... err ... about ten.’ Oscar hadn’t planned a full confession - it just came out. Emily was still crying, losing her breath. Face red and blotchy. And then she stopped, suddenly. She was fully awake.

'Its OK mum, I'm OK. Can I just listen to music... for a bit?'

Oscar gave Emily his iPod, and Julie stayed with her as she went to sleep, to the sound of Oscar's Indie rock.

Sunday was Guy Fawkes. Oscar was out at his drum lesson, and Matt was up at the Clements, getting ready. Emily had spent the last hour in the garden with Sam and Sarah, playing some version of their own making of 'Hide and Seek.' And at the end of the day the mum's had come and taken the children home. Emily had tired of the game towards the end, having used her strong arms to pull her light frame up to the first branch of the titoki tree at the front of the house. She had managed to hide in the foliage, for a good twenty minutes, until finally, she gave herself up, through boredom.

Stephan had got back from the hunting trip after lunch, and had sprawled himself out on the couch. The newspaper separated and covered his torso. A few pages fell to the floor.

'Emily will you fetch Matt for dinner?' Julie asked, draining the potatoes into the kitchen sink.

'Can't we phone them?'

'Well no, the boys are probably at the back of the section, near the shed, showing off their arsenal, and Matt left his phone here on the bench. Just walk up and fetch Matt will you love?'

'Put your hoodie on, its cold out there.' Stephan offered from the couch, barely lifting his head. More pages to the floor.

After dinner there was to be a huge bonfire and fire works at the Clement's.

At 6 O'clock, Emily left the house to fetch Matt. Oscar arrived home soon afterwards, looking hungry - searching the fridge. At 6.30 Oscar asked if he could get a tattoo if he paid for it. Stephan got off the couch, and poured himself a beer, and Julie looked at the clock again.

'Oscar we'll talk about it later.' She noticed a surprised expression on Oscar's face. Clearly he was expecting a 'no' again, 'Don't get excited, it will probably still be a 'no'. But right now, could you go up and see what's keeping

the kids? I sent Emily up, to fetch Matt, about half an hour ago and dinner's ready.'

Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang. It was Oscar.

'Mum has Emily turned up? She's not here.'

A full three seconds passed before Julie dropped the tea towel on the bench, and shot to the door. She ran up the street. She searched the windows of houses, and in cars going by. She ran to the Clement's house. No sign of Emily. Julie rang Stephan and he called the police. She was randomly knocking on the doors of houses, alerting the street. People whom she had walked past in the street. People she had greeted and exchanged polite stranger smiles. Now - she was begging them for help. Her face ragged and her voice one she had never heard before.

Stephan took her inside when the police arrived, his hands shaking he ushered her towards the couch.

Everything became a blur of urgency. Some kind of neighbourhood search party was formed, and the police organized a special investigation team within the hour.

'Six o'clock. Yes I remember, looking at the clock, because it was dinner time.' Julie tried to settle her mind to think. 'Matt was up at the Clement's. Err ... number ten. And Oscar, he came in just after Emily left.'

'We need to know what she was wearing. And a recent photo. Have you got a clear photo?' The police woman had said to call her Jane. Her colleague, Cliff.

Julie took the school photo from the wall in the dining area and slipped it out of the frame.

'She had her hair in a French plait today - with two pink clips...'

Emily had fetched the clips and hair band from the bathroom, where she had left them, so that Julie could do her hair that morning. Julie thought for a moment, '...and her purple t-shirt, and purple skirt with grey leggings.'

Cliff wrote as she spoke.

'She was wearing her jacket. Grey, with big pink flowers on it.' Stephan said. He could see her standing beside the door before she left, showing him, she had put her jacket on as he'd asked. She never seemed to feel the cold – Emily. For a moment he had a thought, he was glad she hadn't gone out with

just her flimsy t-shirt and no jacket, she would have frozen out there. He chided himself, for finding any comfort, when he knew, she could already be dead.

Emily stirred. Unable to move her arms, she discovered that her hands had been tied together. There was something tight sealing her mouth. It was dark and Emily could hear the sound of an engine. She could feel vibration, and she could smell gas and dust. Her heart raced and she tried painfully to wriggle her hands and free herself from the rope around her wrists. Then a blanket was drawn down off her face. She was in a car. There was pale light left in the day. The dusty windows allowed some evening sun to seep into the car. Emily looked to the driver's seat. The silhouette of a man hunched over the wheel.

'Ah so we're awake now? - Don't bother trying to scream, no-one will hear you out here,' he said.

The smooth voice was familiar to her, and she immediately recognized it as being that of the man she had met briefly at the mosaic letterbox. The man who had seen her pausing.

'Can I help you?' he asked.

'I'm OK thanks – just getting ready to walk past the magpie.'

'You are afraid of it aren't you?' He moved nearer to Emily. 'I have seen you walk up the road and you always wait here, hesitating, before walking past the bird. Let me drive you to your friend's house.'

'No ... thanks. I'll be OK, thanks.' Emily had turned to walk away as a car had come down the street. The man had also turned, to walk away, and then, when the street was empty, he'd come in a rush behind her and covered her mouth and the last thing she remembered was hearing the magpie:

'hello girl, hello girl...'

And now she was - the girl. And in the front of the car, there was - the man, driving. Emily was on the floor behind the front passenger's seat. She had seen something like this before, but it was the boot. She wondered what was on her mouth and remembered it was tape. It was always tape.

Emily closed her eyes and tried to remember the ones that survived.

'The best chance they have of escape is in the initial capture.' The chief investigator in 'Killer Crimes' had told his team.

Emily looked at the car door and wondered if her feet could reach the handle. But it was locked.

'I've had my eye on you miss Emily Winters.' He turned his head to see her frightened face above the blanket.

Her feet could not stretch that far anyhow. Her head was up against the other door and she couldn't see but guessed it was locked. She could get her tied hands up to the lock and lift it. She could pull the car handle down with her tied hands and then maybe she could do a backward roll and fall out the door and on to the road. And what good would that do? - In this deserted area. He would stop the car. And then he'd pick her up and be mad - and you are not supposed to make them mad, she knew that.

She would wait, until headlights shone in the back window, or till she could hear a car coming. But there were no cars to be heard and no headlights shining in the window. The car stopped. And something came over her mouth again.

'We've got to do something. I can't just sit here.' Julie was leaning forward as if she had stomach cramps. She had been holding Blue Ted, and Emily's old cot blanket.

'Everyone is looking Julie. The police are making enquiries. You need to stay and help them with their investigations.' Stephan held her hand. 'But I could go. Get Mac and some guys... and drive around. You ring me on my cell phone if any thing comes up,' said Stephan

Jane leaned forward on the couch. 'You should know, we are investigating a man in this street, who is a suspected pedophile.'

'Who is it?' Stephan stood abruptly. 'How come we weren't told?'

'Well, we don't know if he has anything to do with the disappearance of your daughter Mr Winters.'

Stephan was storming. 'So where does he live?'

'Number four.'

'Just two doors up?' Julie stood to get her coat.

'He's not home,' said Jane, ' the police have searched the home already.'

'I can't stay here. I have got a phone and you've got my number. At least we can drive around and look.' Julie took her coat and phone and walked towards the door.

'Mrs Winters we need you to help us here with the investigation.' Jane stood and followed Julie, who, before reaching the door, had turned suddenly, and returned to the couch where she had been sitting. Julie took blue ted, and the cot blanket, and she saw Emily's drink bottle on the table which she took and filled from the kitchen tap on the way out.

'Ring us if anything comes up... or you've got questions. Come on Stephan.' And they left.

Stephan had sent a message to Mac, who had gathered some men in the neighbourhood. They piled in their cars, and Stephan and Julie rode with Mac and Clara in their four-wheel drive. Garth and Terry drove behind them in Garth's Hiace.

Mac was driving his FWD, 'Now I was talking to the guys, and they reckon if you want to hide somewhere, it would be in the bush. It's our best bet. So we are looking for anything suspicious yeah? And cars parked by bush I guess ... Garth knows this whole area, so I'm listening to him,' said Mac. He was trying to think for Stephan.

They drove for twenty minutes before heading into the Ureweras. After what seemed to Julie as endless bends, they came across a Toyota Subaru, parked at the edge of the road. Garth and Stephan approached the car, and found four guilty-looking young guys with the windows up looking stoned, and listening to their rap music - harmless enough. Garth tapped on the driver's window, and the driver opened it. Stephan felt a rise of nausea in his throat, as the sweet pungent scent of the smoke drifted out from the car, into their night. The boys had seen nothing.

Driving on. Garth took a side road, looking for any parked cars. Eventually he looped back after ten minutes and re-joined Mac.

'Nothing,' he pulled alongside them and called through the window past Terry. Garth indicated to stop ahead at a clearing where a few cars were parked.

Some guys, and a couple of girls were mucking around with fireworks, standing around a fire, blowing up logs. About eight of them, drinking a few beers. Mac approached a couple of the young men standing by the fire. They'd introduced themselves as Stan and Darren. The two had left the bunch and had come aside to talk with Mac and Garth. When Mac explained to them what had happened they exchanged phone numbers and said they'd ring if they saw anything. Wished them all the best. Got back to their mates and pranks.

The hut was on a ridge surrounded by thick bush and the man had driven up a narrow track well hidden from the road by foliage.

Emily woke in the dark, and tried to piece it together. She had nothing to go on. She lay on a bed of sorts. Her head supported by a pillow. Light flickered through the gap under the door. The tape was hard on her face and the rope dug in to her skin. She could hear the glass clink with the bottle and she heard the sound of drink pouring into a glass. She lay there for an hour wondering - how she would die? Listening to the clinks and glugs of the man in the next room. Emily thought about her mother and how worried she would be. She thought about her father, telling her to get her jacket. She thought about the girl in 'Killer Crimes', who had hidden holding onto the frame of a bed, but her hair had hung down and so she was found by 'the man'.

The door rattled, and she heard a lock turn, and the light was switched on.

The man. He is bald and he has blue, blue eyes. And he is shorter than her dad. She has seen him at the letter box before today, fetching his mail. He had smiled at her. He'd moved into the house beside the magpie a few weeks ago, she thinks. And now, he is towering above her and swaying with the drink. He brings his whisky breath closer.

'Let me untie you now, and see if you are a good girl.' He rips off the tape. Emily takes a breath.

'Now, are you going to scream? Shall I put it back on?'

Emily shakes her head. She knows she is far from help. Screaming will only make him angry. He unties the rope from her hands. Emily wants to cry but there is no one to care. She rubs her wrists and says thank you. He smiles, at his power, and her manners.

'Now, look how pretty you are.' He strokes his hand on Emily's cheek. Emily flinches. The skin of his hands is soft and moist and smells of whiskey.

'Now don't be frightened, I won't hurt you, if you are a good girl.' He lifts the whiskey bottle up. 'Here Emily. This medicine will make you nice and relaxed. Drink some.' He puts it up to her mouth. Emily takes a sip and chokes. Coughing and spluttering - she leans forward. The man laughs and swills back a mouthful. He wipes his mouth with his sleeve and leans in to her.

Oscar and Matt ride with deranged Nigel and the twins, around the back streets of the town, and see nothing unusual. They head out to the mountains. For the moment, Nigel looks calm and sane at the wheel.

Oscar is trying not to think all the time of what could be happening to his sister. He has never known such a cocktail of rage and fear churning up. He doesn't recognize his responses. He wants to kill somebody. He wants to save somebody. He wants to die for somebody - if that is what it takes.

What are we thinking? That we will find Emily wandering on the road having escaped, unharmed. Or will we stop the car and hear her crying in the bush, only a short distance away.

Oscar clenches his fists, leans forward and puts his head down. The last time he prayed he was in Sunday school.

Matt is in the middle at the back with the twins looking out both side windows in turn.

Stan and Darren and their mates in the car park are stuffing gunpowder into a log, and standing around a bonfire they've made with tree branches and a bunch of dry leaves.

Julie's phone rings. 'Julie, Jane here. We are pretty sure it is Riley Keeton, the man at number four. Marjory Parker at number 29 drove past and saw him talking to a girl by the letter box this evening. She thinks it was around

six. She didn't think anything of it at the time because she saw him walking away to his car as she drove past. We are looking for a blue Holden Ute.'

Julie rang Oscar and Matt. Oscar remembered seeing the guy - the sick bastard. He'd been washing his car, just down from the magpie house.

Riley Keeton pushes Emily down on to the bed. And suddenly there is a loud blast outside and he is shot up into standing. 'What the fuck?'

He leaves the room, and as an after thought he returns to lock the door. He switches the whiskey bottle for the rifle and makes his way out the front door. Riley Keeton is the only person in the county who doesn't know it is Guy Fawkes.

'Awesome!' It was their best ever. The guys in the car park were elated. 'Did you hear that boom shake the ground?' a tall one with a stick said. He'd used the stick to push the powder right to the end of a hollow log. They had made a fuse and stood back ten metres to watch the blast. Still bits of bark and wood and stuff had flown out at them hitting their legs.

Julie is frozen in the back seat with Clara holding her hand and reassuring her with soothing words she doesn't believe.

'We'll find her. There are so many helpers - we have to find her,' says Clara.

Julie imagines her Emily asleep somewhere. She should be. It's late now. She finds herself worrying that Emily doesn't have blue Ted with her and knows it is ridiculous. She is sick that she didn't know they were living in the neighbourhood of a pedophile suspect. *What good is it? – Me being a lawyer, if it doesn't give me some advantage in this sick world?*

Emily doesn't have to think. She walks to the side of the room where there is a tiny high window and a small table. Standing up on tip toes, Emily can just reach the window and she pushes it open. It is too high and too narrow for her to climb through. She knew it would be. Emily climbs down and scrambles

under the bed. She threads her feet and hands through the wire supporting the mattress and bends her elbows to lift her body up. She tucks her skirt in front of her and holds on. She remembers the hair, and frees her hand to tuck her plait up and into the wire.

Emily hears the lock turn in the door. 'Where are you?' She can hear him open a cupboard, and then he checks the floor under the bed. 'Where the fuck are you?' Then Riley Keeton notices the open window. 'What the... I'll get you bitch.'

He picks up the rifle and torch from the next room and heads out the front door. Emily lowers herself gently to the floor and makes her way out through the open doors and outside into the dark. She can hear him, and she can see his torch flicking through the bushes. Emily moves slowly in the other direction, hiding in the darkness.

The boys in the car park had the idea to wire five sky rockets together and light them. They cheer as they shoot up and into the black starless sky as one long fire ball explodes at intervals into a waterfall of cascading lights.

She has no clue how to find her way out to the road. Which direction. For all she knows, she may be heading further in to thick bush to be lost and die without anyone knowing where her body lay. Then Emily hears a loud fizz ahead, coming from her left. She looks up and sees the rockets shoot in to the air. She thinks of her brothers and remembers it is Guyfawke's day and for the moment she thinks she is heading towards the Clements house where the boys will be letting off their fireworks. Emily adjusts her direction and speed, weaving between shrubs and occasionally stopping to listen for the man. She can hear him in the distance. Soon he would turn and figure that she is heading towards the fire works. She moves faster, stumbling over tree stumps. Another rocket lights her way and she can take a faster route as she sees some light on a track. Emily thinks about her brothers and she imagines she is close to them, with their friends, and their fireworks, and soon she would stumble into the clearing, and there would be Oscar, and Matt, and she would even be pleased to see deranged Nigel. Then the light is flashing behind her. 'I'm gonna get you - you little brat!'

Emily finds the track as the light from the fire shines on her path. She stumbles out of the bush and falls on to the ground in the clearing, and Darren nudges Stan and he runs to her, and helps her up.

'Hey. What you doing out so late little girl?' And Emily lifts her face to look up at Darren, who is not Oscar.

'Help me. Ring. My dad,' she says breathless.

Riley Keeton stands in the cover of the trees for a moment, and then retreats back into the bushes.

Julie and Stephan had been driven nowhere for hours and everything was useless and they were deciding to return home - and then Stephan's phone rings.

'We have a little girl here. Came out of the bushes just now.'

Next, Oscar's phone rings. They are closest, ten minutes away. They know the clearing.

It is Oscar, who first sees his sister wrapped in a blanket, sitting by the fire, beside Stan, and a young woman. Emily is drinking from a can. Oscar takes Emily in his arms. He lifts her little frame off the ground and breathes in the scent of her. 'Thank God you're here... it is good to see you my little sister.' Emily just nods and clings tightly to Oscar's neck.

They sit by the fire and they wait for the others.

Nigel heads off into the bush with Garth, Mac and Terry. They carry the firearms and torches that Garth still had in his van from the hunting trip. Garth carries his trapping bag.

Three police cars arrive twenty minutes later and set up a road block on the other side and send five men into the bush.

Julie and Stephan with Emily, Matt and Oscar are seated in the car. Emily buries her head into her mother's neck as she sits, curled up on her knee. She lifts her head and drinks water from the water bottle Julie has with her, and

in between gulps she is crying, and pulling the blanket tight around her and squeezing Blue Ted.

'My darling... my Emily, its ok now. Mummy's here.' Julie is smoothing Emily's hair, wiping her face with the sleeve of her sweater, as they wait for the ambulance.

The boys in the car park take their matches and Guy Fawkes ammunition and head into the bush from their side. And then they hear the shooting.

Keeton has locked himself in the shed and he is shooting through the window.

The police arrive at the hut shortly after Garth, Mac and Terry and fire some shots towards the hut. The shooting stops and Keeton heads out the back door, and towards the side of the house. As he leaves the hut, three policemen approach the front door. Too late. Keeton runs around to the car, hidden amongst the trees. Just as Keeton reaches for the door handle, he places his foot on Garth's trap. Holding his leg with two hands and with a loud scream he falls to the ground; he drops his rifle.

Garth shines the torch light on to the ground beside him and approaches. Garth picks up the rifle and points it at Keeton who is holding his leg and squealing like a Kunekune. Garth pushes the tip of the rifle into Keeton's neck.

'You sick bastard. You'll wish I'd pulled the trigger soon enough.'

He holds him there and waits for the police.

The Clements have their early evening barbeque, followed by the bonfire and fireworks display. A bunch of neighbours come over – The celebration a week late. And they ignite their effigy, in his big baggy pants and old shirt, and straw hat on a newspaper head. And nobody thinks about Guy Fawkes when they burn the effigy. The raging flames, spitting and crackling consume him.

Emily and her family had walked up the hill together, with their food contributions, and ammunition..... All silent at number four. Emily didn't slow her pace. No bird at number six. Emily and Oscar looked into the garden.

'Where's the magpie?' Julie asked.

'It's gone!' said Oscar, and he smiled.

The physician's report claims Emily is essentially unharmed, physically – just a few bruises around her wrists and scratches on her legs from the undergrowth. Emily needs a sedative at night to sleep. And she continues with anxiety attacks for some months after her abduction. The chief detective says she is a brave and clever girl to escape unharmed, and in doing so she has helped them to find the man. She doesn't know what her parents had been told about Riley Keeton. That he had been a suspect in the disappearance and murder of a little girl, Melanie Brown, only six years old, in Hamilton two years earlier. Her body found in a shallow stream.

And another, near Mangawhai, two years before that - An eight year old, Sarah Findlay. Her body had been found by a farmer, hidden in dense bush on his farm. Riley Keeton had carried the photos of the girls in his wallet. Photos he had copied from their school web sites.

And the police had found a photo in Keeton's bed-side drawer, of Emily skipping, on her own front path.

Julie doesn't know why, but she buys a turkey – she had never cared for it. And then she researches the tradition of Thanksgiving. And that is what they do. At the table, they take turns: Matt, gives thanks for family and new friends; Stephan, for life and love; Oscar, for his sister being safe; and Emily for her two brothers who love her and the disappearance of the magpie, and Guy Fawkes and the cat, and the world.

She lays out the good white cloth with lace corners. The silver anniversary candle stick holder she places in the centre of the table. Emily arranges yellow flowers from the garden around the place mats.

The turkey is dry, but the wine is good. And it feels like 'The Walton's' and 'The Little House on the Prairie.'

The boys go along with cheesy for a bit and Matt catches Oscar's eye stopping Matt short of feigning the inducing vomiting gesture he is so fond of.

And Julie, she laughs and cries, as she holds Stephan's hand, and after three glasses of wine she makes her speech. About love. About gratitude.

About her beautiful, good, and kind children. And just for that moment, they feel it couldn't get much better.

New Hope

Charlene Marsh was rostered on the welcoming team so she'd left home all in a rush and was unable to finish drawing the design for the window she was working on. The embryo had come to her in the early hours of the morning while she was still in that blissful state between sleep and wakefulness where many of her best ideas formed themselves. Her client had requested a window behind the altar of a private chapel he was having built on his rural estate in Mangawhai. Charlene had the picture in her mind of an orange tree - symbolic of the tree of life – tying in with the citrus orchard in the landscape. Charlene was in her sixties, self employed following her resignation at the local high school. She was a three year member of the congregation of 'New Hope Community Church.'

After she had taken the contract for the stained-glass window in the foyer of the church her elderly mother had passed away and had requested to have the funeral there. Charlene was surprised how comforted she'd been by the sensitive words of the minister taking the service and with the ladies from the Guild popping around with cakes and kind words following the funeral. They visited off and on over the weeks - after the flowers had died. Charlene felt to attend church a few times as a way of saying thank you for the kindness around that time and in a strange way to hold on to her mother's memory by mingling with her church family. She hadn't intended to get so involved yet here she was shaking people's hands, smiling and welcoming them and trying to keep the design in her mind – how she might create the fruit, the leaves, the twisted branches.

'Morning, welcome.' *What's her name - lady with the strange husband? - Mary!* 'How are you Mary?' they shook hands. Charlene passed her the order of service. Behind her the husband slunk, barely a hello.

'Morning,' she said and reached out her hand to him and his hand was warm and smooth and flaccid.

Barker, the youth pastor arrived with Jess, his fiancé, who is also the senior minister's daughter. A kiss on the cheek. A hug from Jess. *So young so pretty ... so trusting.*

'So have you fixed the wedding date?' Charlene asked Jess.

'Probably next February – we need to book a venue.'

Barker appeared tense. Ushering Jess through the foyer. Charlene put it down to his being on preaching today. *He'd been elevated quickly, second time this month he was on.*

He was a draw card for the youth ... to boost the numbers of young people in the service. Full of promise, charismatic, handsome.

Charlene couldn't get beyond the memory she still had of him when she taught him for year ten art. An arrogant young man back then disrupting her class, mocking students work. He was a bully back then.

She took the pen from the visitor's book and turned over an order of service and sketched the window design of the tree. The roots would be as deep as the trunk was long and the gnarled branches and roots would imply an ancient tree.

And a bird – one small bird on a branch.

Charlene put the sketch in her pocket and returned to greeting people.

She recognised Shelley at once. Carl looked vaguely familiar but he'd never been in her class.

'Shelley Watkins.'

Shelley was startled hearing her name. And placing Charlene Marsh in this setting took some reconciling.

'Miss Marsh?'

'Ooh now that makes me feel old and I'm only sixty three! Call me Charlene.'

Shelley remembers the extravagant art classes with Miss Marsh. The way she would wildly abandon the school curriculum and do some outing to a local sculpture exhibition or they would do printing or murals, even graffiti art - returning after school to finish their work.

'Are you still teaching?'

'No I err was too much of a deviant ...always straying. So no more teaching in school for me. I am making stained glass windows now and doing a

little art class at home in my studio. What about you? You showed some real talent with your paintings at school. Have you continued with art?’

‘No I err. I don’t.’

‘You must come to my art class if you can.’ Charlene wrote her phone number on the back of an order of service and handed it to Shelley. ‘Ring me,’ she said.

‘Thanks,’ said Shelley. *I might do that.*

‘Shelley are you all right?’

‘I will be soon,’ she said.

Seeing Miss Marsh distracts her and dilutes some of her resolve as she makes her way with Carl down the aisle, to find a seat. She is planning a means of escape, while the band leads worship. But for the moment Shelley is elevated and rising above all that is pulling her down. She watches a woman singing with her eyes closed who seems to have left the planet, her face glows and Shelley means to whisper something to Carl, something witty, but she doesn’t and the worship finishes. Then she sees him. He rises from his seat on the front row and makes his way confidently up the stairs to the pulpit. Shelley swallows hard. Carl reaches to squeeze her hand. Barker opens the bible laid out before him and peers beyond the lectern, pausing for effect.

‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ Barker looks up from the Bible. Handsome in his three piece suit, same bold shoulders. His hands grasp the side of the pulpit and he scans the congregation. ‘We have all done wrong but we can move on. We are forgiven because of Jesus. We are washed in the blood of Jesus. We are free from our past.’ He focuses on individual faces. His eyes as if beseeching, as if sincere. He looks along the row where Shelley and Carl sit and his gaze stops at Shelley. He falters as a recognition comes over his face. Looks at his notes. Fumbles the pages. Looks up.

‘Um ... Jesus said ...’

Shelley rises from her seat. ‘I have something to say... Barker Samuels, to you. You have to face YOUR past ... You have to face ME,’ Shelley says.

She is shaking but her voice is strong, clear. Barker freezes, his face stony pale. The congregation begins to stir. Necks strain to see Shelley. An usher comes to the end of the pew and indicates for her to sit down.

Shelley goes on. 'Barker Samuels you raped me on the 17th February 1975. I was fifteen years old. You and your friends.'

Shelley shaking, slumps back on to the pew. Carl puts his arm around her. A mixed disturbance in the crowd, a discordant hum.

Barker, silent, lets his hands fall to his sides. He stands frozen. His eyes unfocussed he looks around above the faces towards the door. Jess goes to him. Several men lead him out the side exit. The senior pastor moves to the pulpit and clears his voice. He speaks into the microphone but already people are talking amongst themselves.

'Can I have your attention please. Sorry, just a moment.'

Carl guides Shelley down the aisle of the church where Charlene moves towards her. Her face all softness and concern, she takes her arm and walks with her, and on the other side Carl steadies Shelley. They walk to the exit and out into the fresh air. 'I'm so sorry.' Charlene says turning to face Shelley, and she wraps her arms around Shelley and holds her.

'Will you come with me?' Shelley asks. Charlene then slips into the back of the car behind Shelley and rests her hand on Shelley's shoulder. She looks back at the old church building before they drive off - moss on the stone on this South side of the building – awaiting the next working bee – the youth with a water blaster. *Mind the side window!*

On the east wall Jesus carries a lamb in his arms, surrounded by rays of light. His face forlorn – Jesus, and the lamb.

The new window shall have fallen fruit on the ground - under the tree.

Carl starts the engine and they drive the short distance between the church and the police station, windows down, wind blasting through their hair.

Eyeballing Snowflake

‘So what’s your ten twenty Snowflake?’

‘I’m down in Meadowvale Drive, last house on the left.’ The girl’s voice was weak behind the radio crackle.

‘You sure you want to come for a ride then?’

‘Yes. Yeah I’m sure.’ She raised her voice.

Fandango checked the rear vision again. Smart arse in his red lotus sitting on his bumper. Fandango pulled over, resisting the pull of his up-turned hand out the window. He didn’t need another warning from the boss. Lotus passed.

Eyes heavy. After driving four hours solid, it was time for a break.

‘I’m coming down that way on the flip flop tomorrow Snowflake. I’m just stopping off now for a feed. See you then.’

He drove on till he reached the hill-top diner and pulled the truck in alongside Elvis, standing by his truck. They walked on over to the diner leaving the two Kenworths lined up in the truck park, shining their chrome in the sepia light.

Snowflake’s breathing was shallow, but she knew it was time. She looked at the top shelf of her father’s bookcase, his collection: a tarnished silver sporting cup from his boy hood, a model of a red Ferrari, and the stuffed pheasant - its shriveled redundant wings clinging tightly to its stiff body, glass eyes glaring at the faded family portrait.

It wasn’t hard coming up with ‘Snowflake.’ She knew it would have to be ‘snow’ something, with her crop of white-blond hair, she was a target on school photo day. The ubiquitous photographer, breaking playground rules, bullied kids into their places.

‘Carrot-top at the back. Snowball you come in here at the front beside Pigtales.’ Every year brought Claire a variation on the theme – ‘Snowy’, ‘Snow top’, ‘Snowflake.’

For months she'd been creeping into her father's study at nights after he'd gone to bed, talking on his CB radio late into the night. This night was no exception. They'd been talking for weeks now, she and Fandango. He was the first she'd given her address.

Friday she'd turn fourteen and she'd been asked how she wanted to celebrate.

'So Claire, what about having a few friends over like last year?'

Her mother was watching the road through the kitchen window as she spoke. She sloshed a languid dish cloth in the water above the dinner plates soaking in the sink.

Nothing would be like last year. She'd had an all girls sleepover and they'd watched 'Legally Blonde' and 'Mama Mia'. Sang along with all the songs. Six girls. *It was a kid's party.*

'Can I sleep over at Sandra's?'

'Are you sure love? We could go out for dinner or something.'

'No Mum, I do really want to go to Sandra's. I can go home with her on the bus after school on Friday.'

Already Claire was looking down on her mother - in just six months she had shot up to five foot eight. One of the tallest in her class, she was still adjusting to the changing perception she had of herself, and of others towards her. Outside of school she was taken for sixteen or seventeen. She oscillated between two states: one, of awkward self consciousness, and the other, of a sense of power, being in, moving in, her new body. She had noticed being noticed, and she liked it - mostly.

'All right then, we'll have a special meal on Saturday night, and Nana and Granddad can join us. I'll see if Nick and the boys can come too. Maybe a barbeque?'

Claire cringed at his name. Nick was her mother's brother and he seemed to be at every family birthday and Christmas. And the boys, she tolerated: Gerald and Stuart, were aged ten and twelve - the cousins.

'Poor Nick, he's so lost. Now that Sharon's left him. It'll do him good to come over with the boys.' Her mother went on. Claire let it go. Whatever. She was focused on doing what she wanted this year. On Friday at least. But Claire had no idea he would come to the door so late in the day. She had waited at home all day with the excuse of a stomach ache, and had finally decided he

wasn't coming so she shut herself in her room with her head phones, losing herself in Ziggy Stardust.

At five-thirty he came, just after the long shadows were cast through the trees and onto the front paddocks and just after Claire's mother had arrived home from the office. She was at the sink, preparing dinner, when she saw the truck park on the road at the end of the driveway. She dropped the potato into the water and froze - her eyes fixed towards the truck. The driver's cab door opened and she watched as the man climbed out and swaggered towards the house. Claire's mother opened the front door to see a young man stood on the porch: dark, burly, wild hair, black leather jacket – he reached out his hand.

'I'm Fandango. I've come to eyeball Snowflake.'

'You've what?' Her eyes wide.

'Is Snowflake here?'

'You've got the wrong place, there's no *Snowflake* here.'

He shrugged and made his way back to the truck, climbed up into the cab. Stones and dust shot up behind the wheels as the truck sped along the gravel road away from the house.

'Snowflake where were you?'

'What do you mean? I waited all day. Copy'

'I came before dark. Just where you said and some woman said you didn't live there.'

'My mother gets home around five. You can't come that late.'

'Snowflake, how old are you?'

'Sixteen - err - seventeen this week. On Friday. Can I meet you somewhere instead?'

The school day had been long and tedious and when the girls finally met after school they could hardly contain their excitement. They cringed as they entered the public toilets. The smell. The damp, stale, human waste. There they dressed into their night-out clothes: black, tight, short skirts and same black tank tops. The tops they had chosen on their trip to the mall on the previous weekend - a size eight and size twelve. Claire wore her short black denim jacket that she'd bought with birthday money from last year. Sandra wore her sister's

imitation black leather jacket. And she had nicked her sister's lipstick, eyeliner and mascara. Claire had a small hand mirror that she pulled out of her bag. The girls stepped outside to daylight and fixed their makeup. Lips last. Red.

'Do I look hot or what?' Sandra presented herself to her mirror friend. Hands on tilted hips. Lips pouty.

'Hot as!'

'And so do you. Those legs!' Claire knew she looked great in a short skirt. Legs her best feature. Sandra's was her bust. The top clung to her outline and accentuated her shape, dipping enough at the front. Enough to keep the fine balance between embarrassment and power that a girl has to manage.

'How old do you think I look, honestly?' Claire asked.

'You look at least fifteen.'

'Not more?'

'Well yeah more like sixteen or seventeen? Err well probably eighteen in the right light. You could get into a pub.'

'What about me?'

'Yeah you too'

'What?'

'You look eighteen. Or even twenty in the right light! If you like, turn the light off!' They laughed.

'Does this skirt make me look fat?' Sandra turned around.

'No way.' Only a bit she thought. 'Now hurry he's coming at six.' The girls headed to the over bridge. At five past six the truck pulled up and the girls ran to the cab.

'Snowflake?' He leaned towards the open door.

'Sure is.'

'Hop in!'

The girls pulled themselves up into the cab. 'This is Sandy. Sandy, Fandango.'

'You two twins?' Fandango sniggered. He took time to check them out before he moved the truck.

They couldn't have been more different. Claire - tall, slim, blonde. Sandra - dark, short, voluptuous.

'We are like sisters. We go way back.' Claire tried to look at Fandango but they were too close. She could smell him - or something. She wanted to move closer to determine if it was cab or man. Mossy, warm, diesel. And leather. Seats or boots? She had noticed his hair in a pony-tail and a tattoo on his left upper arm as she had climbed in - to be studied later. Relieved he wasn't old. Relieved too, there was no hint of after shave. The only other man she had been this close to, other than her father, wore some suffocating brand of after shave. She could gag just thinking of it.

She thought he could only be twenty. Claire wished she had asked before now. And he was a bit dark. Coffee coloured - to be studied later.

'Once I've made this drop I'll be off for the night. You girls up for a drive?'

'Yep. Sure.'

'My mates birthday today. He's having a party. Wanna check it out?'

'Sure. I guess.' Claire flicked a glance at Sandra who shrugged back what looked like an agreement.

The girls sat silently in the cab, the music merging with their thoughts. Fandango tapped a hand, nodding in time to something she had never heard before, and she struggled to determine if it was too country to be cool. But the music seemed to power the truck along. Claire looked down on the small, intimidated cars, as they pushed past the dusted shrubs which flanked the highway. She looked beyond the shrubs and over farmland and saw that the light was changing. The gold on the land was fading and the evening slowly morphed to darkness as they drove on.

Fandango pulled into a wide car park for the drop. He turned the engine off and stepped out. The girls watched, as he walked across the tarmac to a warehouse. He moved with rhythm - the music in his head. He sauntered towards a man in overalls.

Eager at their first chance to swap impressions Claire turned to Sandra.

'So what do you think?'

'He's cute, how old do you think?'

'Looks at least twenty.'

A few guys came over and unloaded pellets off the back of the truck while the girls flicked through the music cassettes in a box at their feet. The driver's door startled them.

'So what do you want to listen to?' Fandango climbed in. Sandra held up *The Best of Bread*. 'Sure, that's my Dad's. It's old but cool.' He placed the tape in the player. '*Baby I'm a want you, baby I'm a need you...*' The words and music filled the cab. This song.

Her mother was in the lounge and this song was playing. Claire had just gone into to check the TV guide. As she entered her mother jumped up, wiped her face and slipped a small photo she'd been holding into her pocket. She'd thought Claire hadn't noticed.

'Silly sad songs – I used to love that song,' she said and slipped past Claire and into the kitchen.

The tears came often at that time until Claire's mother discovered she was depressed. Claire's father had insisted on her going to the Doctor. It explained everything, they'd thought - Why she wouldn't get out of bed in the morning some days - or clean the house. Things had slowly returned to normal. And then her father left.

Claire had known something was going on when she had come home early from school the day of the teacher strike, and she had seen her Dad's car parked in the carport. Claire had walked inside the house and into the lounge where Gina Newcraft was sitting on the couch. Her father in the kitchen. That was normal. They were colleagues at work. Two real - estate agents comparing notes. But it was a cool day and yet Gina was flushed. Her cheeks were red and her normally perfect hair ruffled.

'Oh Claire honey you know Gina don't you? We were catching up on business. Do you want some lunch?' *What's with honey? You never call me that.* Claire said nothing. She had pretended everything was normal as she walked to her room. Looking in at her parent's room she had seen that the bed was messed up and the white bear was on the floor.

Claire was never sure why she didn't spill the beans when her mother came home. It certainly was not to protect him. Maybe it was to give him the chance of fessing up. But he didn't confess. He just left – after a few weeks - after a big fight. Into the arms of Gina he went. He was away for six months and they were in *love*. Then one day they were no longer in love and he returned. Moved his CB radio back into his study. Clothes back into his draws and everything was normal again. Only he had started calling her honey.

'Don't you get tired driving all day?' Sandra asked.

'Na, I just pull over and get some shut eye. Some of the guys take stuff. Keeps 'em going. I just do caffeine and soft drinks.'

They were heading back to Winstone via the gorge. 'Some of the guys will be there by now. We should be at Mike's in an hour.'

'So is Mike a good friend?' Claire couldn't remember if he'd told her. Conversation flowed more easily on CB.

'Fraid so. My best mate for years. Not sure why. He's way uglier and stupider.' He laughed.

An hour later they turned off the main road and hit the gravel. The truck slowed to a crawl on the corners. There was no way another car would have got passed as the road continued to narrow.

Eventually the road stopped at a turn around and Fandango parked the truck. They made their way down a long dark driveway that led to the house. Black branches hung over the driveway and brushed them as they walked in moonlight, scuffing their feet on the gravel. 'This is creepy.' Sandra clung to Claire's arm. Both girls picked up on the other's fears. They could see the house was dimly lit and two dozen cars were parked on the driveway and lawn.

The house was full. Guys sat on beer crates in the yard and leaned on every wall of the house. Before they entered the lounge Claire gave a futile tug at her skirt as if to lengthen it. The girls scanned the room and fell in behind Fandango. Just guys, no girls.

Claire leaned towards Fandango and whispered to him. 'Where are all the girls?'

'Mike should have Jess and a couple of her friends over. Now where are they?' he said and scanned the room as they walked through.

It was ten o'clock and everyone seemed pretty drunk to Claire. For a moment she thought she and Sandra were in over their heads. Sandra was shooting her *what the hell are we doing* looks. While Fandango was getting drinks the girls found a corner to stand in. Sandra leaned over and whispered to

Claire. 'We must be OK. He listens to Bread doesn't he?' The girls half laughed and took the rum and cokes from Fandango.

'Mostly truckies here. That's Bear, leader of the clan.' Fandango looked across the room, gave him a chin up. Bear nodded, smiled. 'He's been driving for twenty-five years.'

Bear stood tall, broad shouldered. Scandinavian looking. Fortyish. He walked over, coat over his shoulder.

'You not heading off already?' asked Fandango.

'Early start. Gotta get some sleep.'

'Meet Snowflake and Sandra, this is Bear.'

'Hey, good to meet you. What neck of the woods are you girls from?'

'Just north of Winston, not too far from here. I guess.' Claire had no clue where they were.

'Make sure you get home early. These guys aren't pretty after eleven. Night all.'

'See you later.' Fandango patted Bear's back as he walked towards the door.

'That's Elvis, with the guitar. And he didn't get the name from his voice.' Fandango pointed across the room. Elvis caught sight of the girls and moved towards them. 'Ladies have we met?' He swayed. Bulge hanging over his belt. Large cowboy buckle. 'Elvis this is Snowflake and Sandra.'

'I'm Elvis.' He bowed and tottered. 'Elvis with the pelvis at your service.' Sandra coughed, choking on her drink. Both girls bent forward laughing.

'No thanks,' said Claire and they left him playing his guitar. Fandango guided them through the room looking for Mike.

Mike stood to greet them, 'Hey, thanks for coming. You must be Snowflake.'

'How did you guess?'

'I'm a genius, didn't Shane tell you?'

'Shane, err yes, I guess.' Claire had never thought to ask Fandango his real name.

'Where's Jess?' asked Fandango/Shane.

'Dumped me again!' Mike put on a smile. 'Guess she didn't know what to get me for my birthday.'

A man, thirtyish, pale and lanky, with thin wispy hair came out of the bedroom. Shane stiffened, looked back at Mike. 'What the fuck is he doing here?'

'Chill out. He's all right.' Mike called across to Lester, 'Lester hey come and meet some new friends.'

Lester moved in and shook hands with the girls. 'Any body want to join us? I've got some good stuff. You girls want to come and have a seat in the other lounge?'

'No they don't. Climb back into your hole Lester,' said Shane.

'What's with you? They can speak for themselves can't they? Lester moved towards Shane, lifting up his fists.

Mike, in the middle, put his hands up to part them. 'Back off ladies, keep it friendly.'

Shane took the girls by the arm, and moved them through the lounge and to the deck where rum and cokes appeared again. It was a balmy February night, and they were thirsty from the long drive, they drank them like soft drinks.

'So why 'Fandango'?' Claire could hear her words slurring. It amused her.

'You should see me dance!' That laugh again. More of a snigger.

'And what about this?' Claire stroked the tattoo on his right arm. A snake and a rose.

'Well, the rose stands for beauty and truth. The snake, for evil and lies.'

'Really?' Claire's hand resting on his arm.

'No, actually I just made that up. I just thought it looked good that's all.' He grinned.

'So where do you live when you aren't driving?'

'I stay up at Clifton, by the beach - just me and Dad'

'Your folks separated?'

'No, my mum died when I was two.'

'Hey,' Lester stepped on to the deck carrying three drinks. 'No hard feelings?' Lester past them each a glass of Cold Duck. One last drink.

Time slipped away and they felt warm, relaxed. Claire's head began to swim and she felt herself fading. She could see Shane blurry beside her.

'I feel strange,' she said.

'Me too,' Shane answered.

Shane lay down on the deck beside her. Claire couldn't see Sandra anywhere, and then she had to close her eyes.

' Sandra,,' her voice inaudible. *Where are you?*

She was sinking down. Surrounded by chattering and music. Her friends all gathered round all talking at once and she was blowing out the candles on her chocolate mud cake which her mother had made. Everyone was laughing. Sandra's dark, smiling eyes looked back at her.

Oh God.... Claire felt her body weighing down, pushing on to the deck. Most of the crowd had left - just a few guys inside. Claire could hear cars in the driveway heading off. If she could just get up and find Sandra they could run down the drive, get in a car, and head off. She tried to talk, to reach out for Shane but she couldn't move. Just before her eyes closed again she caught sight of Sandra's legs hanging, one shoe had fallen to the ground, as she was being carried into the lounge. *Sandra.*

Elvis stood over Claire, bent down, and lifted her up off the deck. He carried her through to a bedroom at the end of the corridor and laid her on the bed. Claire stirred. She opened her eyes.

'Oh God no. Not Elvis.' She tried to move, but kept falling back, fading.

'Easy now, don't struggle, it's OK.'

Lester had Sandra.

Shane rolled over, the sun bright on his face. He tried to lift his head. *What happened?* Slowly he pieced some of it together. *Lester. Lester you bastard.* There was a pillow under his head and a blanket on his legs. He groaned.

'So you're awake now. Can't handle your drink aye?' Elvis stood blocking the sunlight, casting a shadow on Shane's face.

'Where's Snow....?'

'She's all right. She's sleeping.'

'You - you didn't?'

'Are you mad - she's a kid don't you know?'

All morning Claire's mother Emma had been in the kitchen preparing the meal. She scraped the last of the cream from the bowl and spread it on the jelly of the trifle. A sprinkle of hundreds and thousands on the cream. Nick would help Gerald with the barbeque and Claire should be home soon in time to help with entertaining the boys. Just to be sure though she thought she'd ring the Marshall's.

'Hi Alison, its Emma, I just want to check what time Claire's coming h – .

'Wait. They're not here'

'What?'

'They're not here. Sandra said she was staying at Claire's!'

'No! Claire said she was over at yours.'

'So where are they?'

'Oh God. Think. Think.'

Emma stood paralysed. Her mind began to race. She was listing Claire's friend's names in her head, mentally drawing a line through them each in turn.

'I don't know where they would go. Why they wouldn't tell us?' said Alison.

'I don't know. We'd better ring the police. Wait.'

'What?'

'It might be. There was a guy at the door. The other night. It was weird. He asked for *Snowflake*. And then Claire went all sheepish when I told her about him. Some truckie guy.'

'So do you think they've gone with him?'

'Maybe. I thought he'd got the wrong house. But Claire could have been up to something. Oh Alison I'm sorry I didn't figure it out.'

'Name Emma. What was his name? What was he like?'

'He had a Spanish name. Some crazy truckie name. Like 'Ferdinando', 'Alfredo'.

'We should ring the police.'

'Yes - you do that. I will try ringing someone. Someone I know from way back. A truckie. He might know something. They all know each other.'

She had intended to find Lars one day. But not like this. This was far from how she'd imagined their first contact - after all these years. But she knew he would do what he could to help. Emma flicked through the white pages of the

local directory. She hadn't heard if he had moved away. Though no-one would have known to tell her. It had been sixteen years since they'd first met in person. Before that Emma had talked to Lars on the CB radio on and off for a year or so, on long nights when her husband Gerald, was away at conferences, or signing up with clients, or socializing with colleagues.

She ran her finger down the 'H's. There it was. Still only one 'Hamsun'.

'Hello, is that Lars? It's Emma Lewis.'

'Emma. Yes – Emma. It's been...'

'Sorry Lars to make contact like this after all these years, but its kind of. Its an emergency. I need your help. I think my daughter might have gone off with some truckie. We can't find her or her friend. She's only fourteen.'

'Kids aye? Who'd have 'em? I saw two girls last night with Shane up at Mill Road but they were more like seventeen. One was called 'Snowflake.'

'That's them. What's the address?'

'I'll take you. I'll pick you up in five minutes on the way. Are you still in the same place?'

'Yes. Yes I am. Thanks Lars. I appreciate this.' Emma caught her breath briefly then rang Alison, who rang the police.

Lars and Emma drove up the long driveway and parked behind the police cars. Emma ran up the steps.

'Where's my daughter? Where's Claire?'

The police woman standing on the steps pointed inside the house.

'She's in the bedroom lying down. Down the corridor on the left.'

Emma stepped over cans, bottles and plates scattered everywhere. Beer puddles on the floor. Claire and Sandra lay on the same bed in a dark room, eyes open, faces pale, holding hands.

'Mummy.' Claire lifted one arm and cried for the first time in a year. They held each other tight.

Alison came in just after Emma and sat with Sandra on the bed.

'Are you all right?' she said reaching out to her.

'I'm OK, thanks to Elvis. Mum I'm sorry.'

Alison kissed Sandra, and smoothed the hair on her forehead. 'I'm just glad you're all right my love.' She squeezed her hand and they waited for the ambulance.

Lars found Shane sitting on the couch in the lounge with his head in his hands. 'Hey son,' he gave him a hug.

'Hey Dad. Wish we'd left with you.' Shane lifted his head and looked into Lars' concerned eyes.

'I can't believe I brought the girls here - to this hole. And that I'd owe Elvis - big time. I was still coming round when the police arrived. Elvis had met them and showed them where he'd locked Lester. Elvis had managed to overpower him before he could push Sandra into the back seat of his car. He dragged Lester to the shed out the back where Lester had his stash. I couldn't move, but I could hear Lester bashing on the door and screaming abuse at Elvis from inside the shed.'

Shane smiled. Tired. Relieved. And he looked over at Elvis who stood, leaning at the kitchen bench. His shirt ripped, his white pants muddy, he held an icepack to his cheek.

At the hospital, Claire and Sandra were examined. Blood and urine tests for Claire, Sandra and Shane. The girls were to be 'observed' overnight.

'Rohypnol,' the sergeant said to Emma. 'The lab results show rohypnol. Lester Chambers put it in their drinks. It showed up in the urine tests.'

'Will he go to jail?'

'Of course. We've got plenty on him too.'

Emma led Lars into the room.

'Claire there is someone I want you to meet,' Lars stepped into the room. 'This is Lars, Lars meet Claire.'

Claire looked up, 'Bear?'

'Hey Snowflake.'

Lars drove Shane home to Clifton and gave him a hot drink, got him into bed. Then he returned to the hospital to fetch Emma, so he could drive her home for her car.

'That Lester is a bad egg,' he said pulling away from the hospital grounds. 'The best thing that came out of tonight – was him getting busted. They'll get him for attempted rape. As well as his stash in the shed, they found the hard stuff in his car too - he's going down.' Lars shook his head. 'Mike chooses some loser friends at times. I don't know why Shane has so much time for him.'

'And seeing you again.'

'What?'

'Another good thing is *seeing you* again.' Emma paused to find the words she needed to say. 'I can't count the times I've wanted to pick up the phone and call you.'

'It has been a long time,' he said.

'We were young.'

'Aren't we still?' Lars smiled.

Emma took a breath. 'Gerald is leaving - for good this time. I haven't told Claire yet. We were waiting till her birthday was over. We both want this - this time.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Thanks. But I'm relieved. He has never had time for us.' Emma paused as they left the city. Farmland replaced suburbs. They passed lifestyle blocks with 'For Sale' signs on their fences.

Lars was silent.

'What about Claire?' he said.

'I think she'll be all right - I hope she will.'

Emma paused, took a deep breath and continued, 'I have never told her about us. About you. I wasn't sure at the time you know. Not until I found out that we, Gerald and I couldn't have any more. We couldn't have *any* children together.'

Lars pulled the car over to the side of the road, and parked. He turned and looked at Emma. Her eyes were filled with tears but remained fixed on him. Lars turned away.

'I need some air.' He got out and walked around the car - along the grass verge at the road side. He rubbed his face with two hands and looked at the hills. He inhaled the cool air. Light rain on his face. Lars turned and walked back to the car.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I made a mistake so long ago, thinking it could ... or *should* work with Gerald.'

'It is what it is.' Lars reached across to her and squeezed her hand. 'Tell me. What's she like – Claire?'

Claire stood watching Gerald pack the last load into the boot of his car. Golf clubs. Radio. His Bee Gees albums. Finally the stuffed pheasant wedged and squashed between boxes. He had two goes at slamming the boot shut. A weak hug and a promise and he was gone. Claire had thought she would be upset to see the CB radio leave, but she had decided she could in fact live without it.

She set up the space in the office as her bed room. More sun, and good desk space for her art work. A view of the road.

The truck parks on the road at the end of the driveway and Lars and Shane make their way to the house. Claire opens the front door and welcomes in the two men stood on the porch.

Shane mock punches her on her arm as they go on through to the lounge.

'Hey sis.'

Getting off Lightly

At the end of term one I had Millie Hart clean out the fish tank and Stan Black wipe all the shelves down. While the rest of the class were washing down the desks and chairs outside with Lucy the teacher aid, I cleared out my desk. I left the freesias in the vase till later – I would wrap their stems in paper and take them home at the end of the day.

I'd miss the children. I'd miss Millie. She was eight years old and always direct.

'Smell them Mrs Reilly' She had pushed them up to my nose. 'They have scent to attract pollinators.' She's one that reminds me of Tommy. There were no greys for her – only black and white.

'Millie has little understanding of euphemisms and inference. Her inability to read social signals confuses her and hinders her friendships.' I took the psych report and filed it in the desk drawer.

Only Darren Marsden the principal knew it was my last day. I was getting off lightly. I really couldn't bear farewells.

Compared with the boys May and I had always gotten off lightly; we'd scraped through our childhood relatively unscathed. Maybe because we knew just when to keep our mouth's shut and where to hide - under our beds upstairs.

Not so the boys. They didn't have the same sense of caution - hooning around, fighting with the cushions, turning the TV up loud, bashing a ball against the side of the house - till the dragon was woken.

'You selfish brats. What you think you're doing waking up the house?'

Through the upstairs banister we look down on the lounge. He still wears his jeans and T shirt from the previous night, his hair a wild bush. Cursing he swings his belt at the boys who cower behind the couch. The slap of the strap against Tommy's bare flesh. The boys squeal. And Mum suddenly appears in her dressing gown standing by the kitchen door to the lounge.

'Leave them alone! Boys get outside!' She tries to block his way as the boys slip past her. Then he starts on her. First the shove against the wall, and then the threats. Next a fist and she is on the floor, holding her face. Tommy's arms and his back immediately show the red marks and later the dark bruises, fading in a week to yellow.

Tommy, he was five years older than us and with his 'back talk' he drove our father crazy. Once or twice he even tried to hit him back.

Dave, just three years older than us followed Tommy everywhere until Tommy ran away. A few times the police brought him back, smelling of glue, but he wouldn't stay. We watched him drift away - even when he was home he wasn't really there. And I was sick for all the beatings I'd missed, as if I could have lightened his pain.

A year later he was hit by a car. In the middle of the day in one of his states he was making his way across the state highway - didn't see it coming. He died that same day in hospital from head injuries and the police said it wasn't the driver's fault - Tommy just came out of nowhere.

Dave lay on his bed crying for days at a time and when finally he stopped - he did just that. He stopped. We never saw him cry again. Not even at Mum's funeral.

Mum's eyes have deep dark hollows yet she smiles weakly and proceeds to help us create the scrap book. May and I carry photos and some of Tommy's drawings into the kitchen and spread them out on the table. On the front page I glue the photo of Tommy in the garden. A monarch butterfly rests on his shoulder. He is ten. He'd asked for a swan plant for his birthday. This book will become our 'sacred art' and we will write our messages to Tommy. Our first poems. As if he will come at night while we sleep and slip the book off the shelf in our room, turning the pages of our thoughts.

I need to rest. I can hear Rangi clattering about in the kitchen, raiding the cupboards. His ravenous time. I close my heavy lids and sleep on the couch for a few hours and wake to May, hand resting on my shoulder. She whispers - her face up close, her reassuring smile. She brings the sunshine.

'Hi sweetie you awake? Big Bro is here.'

I smile and nod. And Dave is there - all light and blustery. He sits himself at the end of the couch and smacks his hands on his knees.

'So sis what's all this I hear? Sitting here with your feet up being waited on.'

I prop myself up on my elbow. 'Anything to get out of work aye Dave?'

His hand gently pats my leg. 'So Hine how are you doing?'

'I'm good Dave. The body feels like crap though.'

May brings in some tea and carrot cake and goes back to the kitchen.

'So you reckon there's a cure for this?'

'Maybe. But they say the cancer has grown and spread into my liver and lymph glands. They are not giving me any reason to be hopeful, this time.'

Dave stands and walks over to the photo of Mum on the wall.

'How old was she when she passed on? Sixty?'

'Yeah - she was just sixty, she died three weeks after her birthday.'

I sit up and lean towards the coffee table, pour our tea. Two sugars for Dave.

'And Tommy. He would be fifty three.'

I try to imagine Tommy at fifty three – *would he have been solid like Dave? Running his kids to rugby every Saturday? Dave never speaks about him. I wonder if he still has the box of Tommy's toys tucked away in his basement somewhere with the red metal truck that Nana Rose bought him. His rugby ball. Army set.*

'Hey Dave what did you ever do with Tommy's toys – his truck?'

'Dunno. There somewhere. Haven't touched them. Buried in the basement somewhere I guess.'

He is quiet for a bit, then, as if he's just remembered something he jumps up. 'Got to go sis.' He kisses me on the cheek. 'I'm driving Todd to Auckland for the rugby. They're playing Auckland Grammar. Should hammer 'em.' May opens the front door and the cool air moves in to the lounge as Dave leaves.

Yesterday the doctor came with the nurse from hospice and they say there is a plan. And even though my eyes were closed I was listening to them. There was Danny and Rangī with May, the doctor and nurse and they said it

was a family meeting. I nodded and smiled but mostly I just listened to their plan for me. I am being managed.

May's eyes are shining, she's sitting on the bed watching me and I'm trying my best here to give her some reassurance. I force a smile through this wall of pain.

'Its bad?'

'Yeah. Yeah.'

And we both know that the morphine will move me away from her, further into the haze.

But I take it and she waits while it passes again and I'm drifting.

The cornfields at May's stretch out for fifteen acres in the valley surrounded by the mountains on the west and the sea on the east.

Every evening on the week of my boy's birth the sky is red. May and I sit on the deck, babes in our arms and look out at the display. We are bathed in the evening's light until the colours fade and the sun lowers itself behind the blackened, shadow-board hills.

May nurses her baby, Awhero, beside me. Her girl, my boy. He lights my world with all the colours he brings. He is Rangi - after his birth sky. I can't take my eyes off baby Rangi, these days when he is so new - I am floating. Somehow hope has risen up in us like a spring tide and we think, May and I, that we could make a difference. We talk about what it might look like - children with a safe future, with dreams, choices.

May leans forward and slides my head onto the pillow.

'Danny's coming soon, he rang.'

I think I smile.

Danny, the first time he comes back home with Dave and his mates, after rugby, they drink a few beers in the garage. He is funny - always has a joke to tell but they never sound funny when anyone else tells them. Danny can make anything sound funny. He can just read an obituary and fold a crowd with laughter. It may have something to do with his Irish accent. Danny from Dublin on a working holiday - the blue eyed boy off to seek his fortune. I am drawn to

Danny when I hear him sing – he sings an Irish ballad with his guitar – A heart wrenching love story of an Irish Farmer who falls for a British Landlord’s daughter. Well it works for me. His voice is sweet and sad and makes me love him.

I sleep again until it comes back. The *pain*.

Danny is out of work and I’m wanting to borrow the rent money from May.

‘Tell her to keep her money, we can look after ourselves.’ Danny is leaning on the bench in the kitchen while I am peeling spuds.

‘Well maybe we have done so far, but we are sinking fast, we don’t really have a choice.’ Its not the first time I am straining to keep the blame out of my voice.

‘Who could guess the bottom would fall out of the housing market and developers would be scared off? Building was always a sure trade. You never hear of teachers losing their job in a recession do you?’

He is right I guess - so I can finance him while he waits at the pub with his mates, too proud to go on the benefit.

‘You could go on the dole.’ Worth a punt to prove my theory.

‘I’ve got this far without any hand-outs there’s no way I’ll go on any benefit. I’d run away to sea and join a dredger before getting the dole.’

Too proud to borrow money, still he lets us have the party at Mays.

Danny sits on the edge of the bed holding my hand. His hands are soft, warm now.

‘Can I get you something?’ His voice so far away.

Water. Water. I try to speak it. He brings juice and a straw and holds it for me.

May and I buy ten two litre bottles of orange juice for the party. We work most of the day getting the food prepared - Rangji’s favorite foods on his birthday. Sushi is on the list. Fiddly stuff but worth it. We weren’t to know what devastation sushi would cause - It isn’t deep-fried and covered in cheese. Since that memorable visit to the oncologist, or what May and I called ‘C’ day, I think

more about what goes in my mouth. I feel its my duty to convince the unenlightened on alternatives to sugar and lard but it doesn't always go down well. What do I care really, if Dad does or doesn't like our food? Though I will wish I had given him pizza just to keep him happy.

I think about Mum. I miss her - more at birthdays or Christmas than at any other time. She loved being with her children and grandchildren whenever she could. She would have loved to be with us and see Rangī turn seventeen.

I feel a wave of nausea and a weight of fatigue pushing down on me and I long to slip in between my sheets and shut out the world. And Rangī – not sure he even wants it - the party. If we went out for pizza instead and had an early night everyone would be happy and safe.

Danny is holding my shoulders and moving me to the side. I can feel I'm on a horizontal lean. He straightens me up and pulls the blanket up to my chin, kisses my cheek and then moves to the chair and proceeds to tell me something about the band and Rangī. And his voice is a long warm hum, lifting and falling gently. He mentions the game score, the fight on the field ...

And May and I are stuck on the steps – drawn out by the sound of raised voices. It is all over pretty fast with the guys pulling Rangī away but I'd wonder how far he would have gone. I've never seen him like that. The old man fallen backwards on to the couch. I think of Tommy standing up to him all those years ago and now there's Rangī confronting him. Its something about the kids going off.

I can't look at the old man sat on the couch, I need to focus. We have to find them – Awhero and Wiremu. We head off in May's car, me driving, the gears crunching. Rangī is nursing his jaw and rage. I am breathing fast as if each breath will dilute the toxic dread in the air. Five minutes drive and there it is - the car on the side of the road. Lights off. We walk in darkness with just a weak torch light beam leading us. Awhero and Wiremu, they are smashed up. The car in the ditch, just three kilometres from the house, on their way to get pizza.

Danny has a pill for me and I can still lean forward and swallow. He holds his hand over mine as I take the cup, take a sip, pop the pill. Swallow.

My mouth is dry and the day is dark - the church just half full. The RSA have turned out. Slowly they make their way forward. They sit in two rows on the left. Some of his drinking mates behind them. On the other side May and I hold hands, our cheeks dry.

The old man, Dave was with him in the end, he had rung Dave from his phone in the garage. Said he couldn't breathe properly. He'd been climbing in his garage trying to reach some box that had his dad's medals. It was tipped up on the garage floor. The doctor said it was his sick heart and he'd died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Dave said Dad was trying to say something just before he died. He thought it was 'sorry' – just 'sorry' the unfinished sentence. We had no trouble finishing it for him - each in our own way. The bastard.

Awhero, bless her, she is still learning to walk with the prosthesis and she makes her way up the aisle, takes her place at the pulpit. She is the only one to speak kindly about him at the funeral. No malice that girl. No harm done I guess.

I heard someone say 'It's better to die living than to live dying' - It sounded so wise at the time - when I was well. But if I'm going to die I want to do it well – what choice is there? I have to be strong. For Danny. For Dave. Awhero and May. For Rangī. And what would weak look like anyway? Cursing everyone that comes into the room? Cursing God? I am past that anyway. I am being carried. Beyond the scent of fresh linen we can all smell the death on the sheets.

Mostly I want to sleep. I am in the room where Rangī was born and the room is filled with cards from the children in my class. *Get well Mrs Reilly. Come back soon Mrs Reilly. Don't Die Mrs Reilly* – I had smiled when I'd opened that one. And I'd guessed right. The card was from Millie Hart – her Grandmother had passed away only a few weeks before I'd had to quit work. The freesias she

had brought in on my last day at school were from her Grandmother's garden. I breathe in the scent of the memory of spring.

I can lie on my side now and see that sun is setting over the western hills. I close my eyes to the light. Too much light. Yet I'll keep the curtains open as long as I can and squint at the magenta and persimmon stripes in the sky – before they fade.

I hear May come in and feel the weight lift off the bed. I know she sees me smile as she takes the tray away.

Before he heads off for band practice Rangji comes into the room. His hair a wild mop. The clean white T shirt he wears smells of May's laundry detergent. His skin warm and smooth but for the new stubble on his chin. He kisses me, and for a moment we exchange the air we breathe. His face seems to shine, reflecting the evening light, and I am being carried so lightly now.

'Look at the sky,' I say it too quietly, but he hears.

'I see it,' he says looking out. 'It's beautiful.' He walks across the room and opens wide the French doors and he pulls it in so close that I can almost touch the colours.

Silk

Mrs Lancer placed her hand bag on the floor against the wall. She smoothed out her floral patterned skirt as she settled herself into the chair.

From the moment she'd entered the room, it had been filled with the fragrance of her scent which quickly over-rode the familiar clinical smells which owned the space: A scent of my childhood.

'So Mrs Lancer, just the one filling today?' I asked in a telling way.

'Yes I hope so,' she said, hands gripping the arms of the chair. Shoulders tense.

I inhaled a little, not so she would notice, but enough to be sure. *Yes Lavender. It must be lavender.*

We'd lived in Mangawhai, near the beach, in a converted bach that overlooked the sand dune. Out the back and into the bank my mother had planted lavender bushes.

'Just a wee jab.' I anaesthetized the area. 'Lower right molar.' Lucia filled the mouth-wash cup. Needle in the gum and the patient winced, gripping the chair more tightly.

'Sorry.' I said. And I was. I was always sorry. 'You might want to rinse your mouth now.'

I'd taken a scrap of gingham fabric from the sewing basket, and I had spent the afternoon hand-stitching a small bag, which I filled with sprigs of lavender from the back yard. I tied it together with a ribbon and presented it to my mother. She had taken it in both hands and held it to her nose, breathed in the fragrance. She'd smiled. And I had anticipated her showing my father when he'd come home:

Look at the lavender bag Lawrence made, isn't it lovely?

Maybe she had, when I was out of the room, or maybe they'd been distracted by an argument. I was ten years old. The following year at school I

was thrown with the boys into woodwork and metal work. The girls did the sewing and cooking. It was like that.

When my mother died suddenly from a cerebral aneurism, soon after my twelfth birthday, my sister Charlotte cried for a week until my father told her she'd go blind if she didn't stop. My father took a firm hold of the domestic reins.

As a young man I had never considered doing anything other than join my father in the dental practice. It was never spoken of. I *would* take up a career in dentistry.

Something changed after I turned fifty. I had always expected at this stage in my life to be settled and content as everything was perfect. The practice had grown, I'd taken in a business partner, and additional support staff were taken on. I had a little more time for hobbies - photography, travel with Gloria and the boys. Then my father contracted motor neuron disease and took two years to die, during which time he, and we, suffered the effects of the long and debilitating illness.

His face was pale and stripped of life for the months before he died. His limbs became powerless alabaster stalks, threatening to snap, as we lifted him on to the bed at the end of the day. Every day I visited for a few hours, co-ordinating with the carers and doctor visits. He was nursed at home until the end.

Before Ruby, the new carer rang me, she had parked him out side on the deck and had been feeding him his dinner, and after taking a mouth full of minced beef he'd suddenly accused her of trying to poison him. She announced her resignation to me over the phone, so I'd had to cancel my last two patients and head on over.

'I can't work for someone who abuses me the whole time - I don't need that,' she said as we passed each other on the front porch. 'He's impossible.'

'What's new?' I said.

I watched her march to the gate slamming it shut, and out to her car. She shot off down the road leaving a cloud of exhaust fumes in the still autumn air. Out the back I found the old man slumped in his chair on the deck. I heaved him up, clasping my hands around his waist from the back - careful not to pull on his tender shoulders.

'Perhaps we should think about you moving in to care at the hospice now?' There was no acceptable way to say it.

'Fuck you. You are all useless. Why can't a man die where he wants?' he said.

He pushed his dinner plate on to the ground with the prong he wore attached to his forehead. His head and mouth were the only members remaining over which he had some control.

The old man was dribbling and shaking his head. I was rattled: we'd lost the third carer in a month.

'There are only a finite number of people out there to employ. You can't keep abusing them. We are all trying our best here.' I was picking up the pieces of broken crockery off the ground.

'You don't know what trying is. You've always been lazy. Your mother spoilt you and your sister. I did the hard work for the practice and you just walked into it.'

He was one of the rare ones who didn't lose his speech at the end, and so he'd managed to spit out the old venom till the last. I was glad at least that my mother and sister had been spared of it. My sweet baby sister who had died at only eleven. Leukaemia. In just a week following her diagnosis, and a year after my mother had died. Until I went to dental school it had been just the old man and me at home.

I'd thought I would at last feel some freedom when he'd gone: financially, from the inheritance and now in the practice: I had full autonomy.

The staff were supportive, loyal, no-one spoke against my father, yet they knew him well.

Lucia had been with me in the practice for five years - At the desk, and then for the last year as a dental assistant. And we had spent most of every day in the same room. She was thorough in her work and with her help I was able to keep doing what I knew, delivering top level dental care in a warm and supportive environment while everything else was crashing down around me.

She was young and I guess I had noticed she was pretty but really, and this didn't go down too well with Gloria, the thing was, in the end, she understood me, or at least, she accepted me. Somewhere between the funeral and moving out my life began to unravel, a thread at a time.

It was Gloria's birthday and I'd stopped by at the mall on the way home to buy her a gift. Martin was getting her a jazz CD and Jack had bought her gardening gloves. I was thinking to buy her a book on gardening, along with her 'House and Garden' subscription. But just beside the book store I saw there was a lingerie boutique. I stopped outside and I noticed, hanging from the outside rack, a champagne coloured silk night gown. I ran my hand down the length of it, trying to imagine Gloria's body inside, her smooth curves. I was trying to think, would she like it? I knew she normally chose to wear cotton over synthetic, but this was silk, and every woman, I thought, loved silk. And she was in fact delighted with it when she opened the parcel and I remember thinking, I'd got it right this time.

That night she showered and came to bed wearing it. And though it was a little too large for her she never mentioned it. And she smelled fresh, lightly perfumed, redolent. And the silk fell smoothly over her hips. We hadn't been close for months with the long hours at work for both of us, boys keeping us up late, Dad being sick. Sleep just looked so good at the end of the day. Not that I was sleeping well at all, at best, four hours a night. It was around that time that the doctor thought I might be depressed. But that night I was still hopeful, and we hugged and talked a little about the evening, the boys, and I ran my hands over the contours of her and everything seemed to go well and a part of me felt the old excitement. But then, I just felt overwhelmingly tired. We laughed and shrugged and just fell asleep again. Gloria didn't seem to mind, and after a week or so, I noticed she was back to wearing her cotton pyjamas.

'I prefer cotton to silk. I'll save the nighty for special occasions, holidays...' she said, and she folded the night gown and placed it in the back of her top drawer.

By then I was having days when I would struggle to get out of bed, to get to work. And weekends, I just wanted to lay low, make the most of sleeping in. Gloria did the football trips and the rest of the time the boys were independent – off with their mates. Gloria pushed me to visit the GP and he changed my antidepressants and sent me off to see an endocrinologist who talked about hormones.

On a weekend when Gloria took the boys down to Christchurch for her niece's wedding, I stayed back to catch up on the back log of business accounts. After a few hours I took a break and popped out for lunch at some kebab place up in Ponsonby. As I walked back to the car I saw an accessories stand in a chemist shop. I was thinking to buy something for Gloria – something delicate. A scarf. I thought she would possibly be happy with a new scarf. The assistant approached me at the display stand:

'Hello, can I help you?'

'Ah yes, I am looking for a scarf for my wife.'

'Yes, we have plenty. What colours? Fabrics? Does she like chiffon, cotton, silk?'

The girl wore a frumpish sort of pink blouse and wide black pants and she peered through narrow, wire-rimmed glasses. She held up various scarves.

'Blues. She wears blue a lot.'

There were several blue and green patterned scarves and I was at last able to choose one, chiffon and long. I held it high and studied the pattern, abstract paua, colours of the sea. 'Yes I'll have that one, but I may keep looking... err...she may like to try another colour for a change.'

The girl left me to browse and some young guys in hoodies swaggered in and whispered at the counter. They stood staunch across from her and said something to her. And she, pink faced, turned and reached for condoms off the shelf behind her. I turned back to the stand and examined the autumn golds and deep crimsons I'd found. *A broad black belt would be good for her too, very useful.* I studied the quality of the leather belts hanging beside the glucosamine special near the counter.

At home I left the bags on Gloria's side of the bed - a surprise for when she returned, and I got back to the accounts. That evening, on my third glass of red I thought I should check how I'd done with matching the scarves to the outfits hanging in Gloria's wardrobe. She had a dress that she had worn to her sister's third wedding. It was a deep turquoise, perfect with the paua scarf, and the belt would work too with her black shoes. She would look stunning. I felt the

weight of the fabric resting in my hands – surprisingly heavy for a summer dress. I caught a glimpse of myself standing there in front of the mirror holding the dress and the scarf, and I saw something I hadn't seen for a long time. Something in my face. But then the colour was all wrong – my skin looked ill. I pulled out the rusty crimson silk scarf from the shopping bag and lifted it to my face. I could feel the smooth silk catching on my chin's evening stubble, so I raised it to my cheek where it felt soft, and caressed my skin. I draped the scarf around my head, leaving my face uncovered and saw how my skin glowed with the new colour. Gloria had a dress that she never wore these days, a size sixteen, dark, lined geometric shapes filled with autumn colours: reds and muted tones of green, orange.

For some time I held it and looked at it hanging from the hanger. Of two minds. And then, as if I had flipped a mental coin that was always going to be heads, I stripped down to my boxers. I took another glass of wine and took the dress from the hanger. Carefully I managed to squeeze into the dress, with the zip undone. I'd imagined it would be funny seeing myself dressed in a woman's clothes – I could do with a laugh – it had been a while since I'd had a good belly laugh. It felt good until I thought about my dead father and what he would have to say. I sat down on the edge of the bed and felt the wine spinning my head. Nauseas. I tried to imagine how Gloria would react if she walked in – or one of the boys. I took three deep breaths and walked over to the bedroom door and locked it. With the belt pulling hard in at my waist, and the scarf loosely draped over my neck and shoulders, I rifled through an old make up box of Gloria's and found some lipstick: 'Autumn glow'. I twisted the stick in and out, watching the colour come and go, just as I had seen my own mother and Gloria do, so many times. As a boy, I had watched my mother make a taut circle with her lips. I had closed in to view her in the mirror and felt the softness of the fabric of her skirt on my cheek, and she had not offered, and I had not asked, to try the lipstick. And then Charlotte, who was just three had come into the room and asked for her kiss on the lips. Her kiss, which transferred the red lips and made Charlotte laugh at her own face in the mirror, red and smudged around her mouth: like a clown.

I moved my face closer to my reflection and formed the taut circle with my mouth. And slowly I moved the colour across my lips and smacked them together, rolling them. I twisted the lipstick back down and replaced the cap

placing the lipstick back in the box. My heart was racing. I stood back from the mirror. Wide eyed. And then I began to laugh. And sure, it was a full blown and from my belly laugh, but not because I looked funny at all - not to me at least. I saw elegant colour, and life - joy even, laughing back at me, breaking the long silence.

I spent the evening drinking more wine, listening to jazz, and moving through the lounge in various forms of feminine attire which I selected from Gloria's wardrobe.

When Gloria returned home on Sunday with the boys, everything had been returned to order, I'd thought. And she was surprised to see I had bought her the scarves and belt, puzzled too that her clothes in the wardrobe had been rearranged.

'The rod broke – they all fell down, so I had to fix it ... sorry they got a bit jumbled.' I lied. Sick. Gloria rearranged her clothes in a particular order and I took care to note it. From the couch I watched her follow-up with the boys about their rooms. Then on to clean the kitchen and lounge - she perfected the home.

So the foraging into the world of women's fashion continued: I felt a surge of something I thought had gone forever, still, I managed to keep secret the reason for my elevated mood. However Gloria became suspicious. Nothing had changed between us, still she could see I was different. She asked me if there was someone else and seemed to expect me to deny it. I adamantly denied it.

One Saturday night, Gloria had a work do, and the boys were out with their friends, so I planned a night at home in front of tele watching the football I'd taped. After an hour or so I went into the bedroom and took the silk night gown from the drawer. Still wrapped in tissue paper, I gently lifted the gown and spread it on the bed. I pulled it over my head and felt the smooth fabric slip over my shoulders and body like liquid, and I turned to face myself in the mirror. Around the chest it was a little too tight, but the fabric splayed out at mid-thigh level and it felt soft the way it fell around my legs, as I moved in front of the mirror. The hem swayed. I closed my eyes and moved my hands up and down over the fabric, feeling its softness. And then, when I opened my eyes, I saw

Gloria's reflection in the mirror. She was standing behind me. I turned, and we stood in a silence looking at each other for what seemed like minutes but were barely seconds, and in that time I could see how her world, our world, had tumbled down. Her jaw had dropped open and her eyes were wide, as if she was confronting an intruder in a home invasion.

'What the... what... are you doing?' she asked. Her hands were shaking as she spoke.

'I ... err...was just...' Silly, but I was relieved I had not yet got to the lipstick. I tried to remove the night gown.

'What is going on?' Her voice cracked.

'I .. err. I am stuck,' I said from under the silk.

I was struggling to pull the night gown back over my head. Gloria pulled upwards from the hem, though not too gently, and we heard the stretching of side seams and the tearing of stitches.

'I do it because it makes me feel happy?' My words muffled into the fabric as the night gown stretched across my mouth.

We tried to talk later, but when she thought about the boys a volcano erupted.

'Imagine if one of the boys had come in. Imagine if their friends had been here? What would they say?'

'I know, I know. I'll stop.' I was a freak to her. And to myself. I tried to stop.

For a few months I didn't go near the wardrobe or the shops, but it really wasn't going to last. When I talked again with Gloria it was clear she would not have me dress in women's clothes again. Rejection combined with dark fury on her flushed face as she stood with her hands on hips. As if I had been unfaithful.

'Are you gay? Is that it?' she asked.

'No. I don't think so. Any I don't want to be with a guy - not like that.'

'But you don't want to be with me either do you?'

'I do .. I think so. I don't know. It's not simple. It's complicated.'

She was not reassured and she had me promise not to tell the boys what I did in private.

'This would really screw them up!' she insisted.

'Are you sure? It might help them understand me.'

'You don't understand it so I'm sure as hell they won't!'

It was only a matter of weeks before we decided to have a trial separation and I moved out. At work I tried to keep quiet and busy. In our family we had always kept our troubles to ourselves. But with Lucia the pathologically empathic in my work space, there would have been *less* chance of her commenting had I been wearing a tutu, and with my hair in an orange Mohawk. Lucia had always been open about her own struggles. Between patients she had shared some of her pain: much of it as an adult had been self inflicted she'd confessed. Craving for any joy she could find, she had, by her own confession: 'made self-sabotaging choices around alcohol and relationships.'

Sam was the most recent of the mutually destructive liaisons. They had been together for two years and the first six months was a blast. They had joined up with other yachties and sailed all summer around the islands, largely drinking their way round. When they settled back on land the drinking continued, but the fun and free spirits had ended. Lucia left Sam one day and moved in with her mother while she got help, and some level of control back in her life.

So I had heard it from her and naturally she had managed to draw it out of me, some of it at least - our separation. But I had kept from her the new side of myself that I was discovering.

We'd had a patient cancellation and I was catching up on notes. Lucia was cleaning and organizing equipment and I stopped and watched her working. Her neat and trim figure. She was always eager to please at work. Never complaining.

'What...what's the matter?' She stopped cleaning, having seen me staring at her.

'The thing that's hard for Gloria...' I paused and took a breath. ' ..The thing that's hard for me too I guess. I like to dress. I don't know why, but I get a buzz, wearing women's clothes ... sometimes.' It was said. As strange as it sounded, it was out and I didn't have to wait for a response.

'What, dressing up?' Her face was bright. 'That's OK. Some people do. I read about it. You'll have to show me sometime.' She put down her cleaning cloth and walked over to me and kissed me on the cheek.

The first date with Lucia was conventional: dinner out. Lucia started to talk about her litany of failed relationships following her first love, Daniel, who had died from a tragic fall at work, from a ten story construction site. And then quite suddenly she tired of the stories and she began on fashion. Her eyes lit up.

'Truth is,' she said, 'not that I don't love my job, but I really wanted to be a fashion designer.'

Our second date was at my place and by then I'd collected my own silk range and Lucia absolutely loves silk. We went through the scarves and several new ties and belts I had bought and Lucia commented on colour, on the texture. It felt strange to talk with anyone about such intimate textures and colours.

And that evening, after a bottle of wine, we both dressed in sari's, laughing at first at the difficulty we had in securing the folds into the waist. We wrapped layers around our bodies.

For dinner, we ate curry on the deck over-looking the harbour and we lit candles and incense. After dinner we sat in gentle light, on the floor in front of the fire and listened to music from the sitar. Later we held each other and swam together on the floor, lost in a silk sea in front of the hearth.

Lucia moved in the following week. It was already over for her and Sam, just a bit of logistical sorting to do. In the end hers was an amicable, civilized and child-free separation.

Lucia has come with me to Wellington this weekend. It's the convention for cross-dressers and half of the guys here are supposed to be off on 'fishing or hunting weekends.' Some of them have support though - brought their partners, wives. There's a lot of colour and fabulous fabrics and plenty of showing off. And we laugh. We really laugh.

Jack and Martin, my boys, are driving through Wellington on their way home from uni for the holidays and we've arranged to have dinner with them on

Lambton Quay. We're still deciding what to wear. Our hotel wardrobe is full of exquisite garments, mostly Lucia's designs.

Eventually I choose. The tie, the silk tie. The boys had bought it for me for my fiftieth birthday. I splash on a touch of the Yardley's Lavender and we head off to the Quay.

Round and Round the Garden

Lillian Baker sat in the floral upholstered chair by the French doors, positioned for the full view of the oak; she looked out into the garden. The last leaves fallen. From a naked bough hung a swing, its wooden seat tilted so slightly that Lillian imagined her Angie had just stood to leave the swing, and soon it would find its horizontal again, jiggle about for a bit, till it rested. Still, undisturbed.

Lillian holds the smooth acorn in her hand, and watches, as it rolls in her palm. Smooth and shiny. It had been in the bottom of the annual Christmas parcel sent from Lillian's grandparents in England, along with the Smarties, British newspapers, licorice allsorts and kids clothes from Marks and Spencer's. It came from the oak in her grandparent's garden in Yorkshire that she almost remembered. She was just six years old when her parents left for New Zealand on the ship.

Reluctantly, she lets the acorn fall to the ground. Into the hole her mother has scooped out with a trowel. She watches it disappear as her mother covers it with the soil - never to be seen again.

On the left side of the garden, there was a padlocked white gate leading into the neighbour's yard. There were a couple of fejoa shrubs and a lemon tree, but the oak was the largest tree on this north-facing side of the house. And nothing remained of its tree house.

A once-rotating clothesline stood to the right of the tree, and surrounding the yard was a box hedge. Since James, Lillian's husband, had died, Henry Walker, a semi-retired neighbour and friend, had come fortnightly to mow the lawn - and twice a year he shaped the hedge. Henry refused any payment but for the scones, and on a good week lamingtons.

'I'll not charge friends I've known for more than forty years,' he'd laughed when Lillian had attempted to pay him for his work. They had been friends at high school. Henry had gone on to a carpentry apprenticeship, and Lillian had

studied pharmacy - their paths rarely crossed, until she met Henry many years later, as a customer in her pharmacy practice. During the months he'd nursed his wife Rosa, he'd become a regular. After Rosa had passed away they had continued to stay in touch and a warm friendship had developed between them.

Now, seeing the football wedged between the trunk and branch of the tree, Lillian was reminded of yesterday's incident. She had heard the whooping and hollering of the boys next door playing footie in the yard, and she'd heard the ball bashing against her fence in the afternoon, while she was trying to rest. Her stress levels were already high, when the ball came flying over the fence, and lodged itself there in the tree. Seconds afterwards three boys scaled the fence, and two tried unsuccessfully to leg the third one up in order to retrieve the ball. She'd shot out of her chair and stormed to the door.

'You boys get out of that tree immediately!' She'd surprised herself at the shrill tone of her voice. The tallest boy had spoken and she'd recognised him by his lanky limbs and shaggy brown hair, as the youngest of the Adam's boys from next door. Not the first time he'd been over her fence to fetch a ball.

'Mrs Baker we were just trying to get our ball. We need a ladder.'

'Just you go home now and I'll get Henry to bring a ladder.' The boys stood waiting, as if more was coming.

'Go on then ... leave it, off you go! ... Shoo!' Lillian waved them off. Shaking. A deep knot began to form in her stomach after the boys scarpered back over the fence. And she'd gone to her room and curled up on her bed for an hour or so, until her heart had slowed and she was calm again.

Lillian picked up the phone and called Henry.

'Henry, it's Lillian. Would you mind bringing your ladder next time you come? Those boys have got their ball stuck in the tree.'

'Lads aye? Sure Lily, I'll come over tomorrow. I'll write it down so I don't forget.' Henry was the only one she knew who called her that - Lily. Hearing it was like comfort food. Like pavlova with cream and kiwi fruit - she could taste the sweet meringue melting in her mouth – that last time she'd eaten it at Angie's twenty-first. Though it was ten years ago now. Before the diabetes.

With Henry she'd felt she should insist on 'Lillian', but it soothed her, in a way.

She looked out into the back yard at the outline of the oak - its spindly branches, brooding against the grey sky.

Mother is fetching the tartan woolen rug, and spreading it on the grass, in the shade. When Lillian, and her younger sister Alice, are seated, she ritually carries out the food and drink to the waiting children. If a friend is over to play the ceremony is even more impressive. There are little alterations to the usual - serviettes, the three tiered cake stand, linen doilies. Today it is just her and Alice. The passion-fruit icing on the cup-cakes trickles onto the plate. The girls eat the cakes and lick their fingers. They drink their mother's ginger beer, and the cicadas accompany them, with their summer mantra.

Lillian looked at the cloth on the small table beside her, the cloth her mother had often laid out - a white square with hand-embroidery on each corner. Blue lavender flowers with green leafy stalks. Lillian's mother had embroidered the cloth herself. As long as Lillian could remember her mother always had a handiwork project of some sort on the go. It seemed the aptitude had skipped a generation, as neither Lillian nor Alice had the slightest interest in needle work, much to their mother's repeatedly expressed disappointment as they were growing up. Alice was sporty, and Lillian was lost in books most of the time, and that was that.

'One girl can't sit still, and the other's got her head in the clouds.' Lillian over hears her mother, with a neighbour, Mrs Wigglesworth, complaining about their children's various shortfalls. But her mother is one-upped in the crescendo of disclosures when Mrs Wigglesworth reminds her that her youngest, Stanley, has cerebral palsy and struggles even to dress himself. It silences her mother, at least for the rest of the day.

The tea tray sat on the embroidered cloth, presenting the family bone china which Lillian had inherited. Her mother had sat in this very chair, with little Angie on her knee having her first knitting lesson at only seven. The first grand

child. Her mother's large working hands cupped over Angie's guided her to create new stitches while the long, purple scarf cascaded over their knees to the floor.

Lillian leaned forward, and lifted her grandmother's teapot, and poured slowly into her mother's cup. She settled back into her chair with cup and saucer resting on her lap. Her mother had always insisted on how she must have her tea,

'Weak, black, with a squeeze of lemon.'

And woe betide anyone who kept the tea bag in too long or added a spot of milk. One year in hospital and she had surrendered her preference; obliging the staff with her compliance, like a kitten, she'd lapped the milky luke-warm tea. The first domino of her waning will - the departure of her soul had begun. Soon after that she'd stopped asking for anything. Eventually she had become stiff and hunched in her chair, gazing blankly at the floor. Saliva on her chin. As disturbing as it was to see her like that it was at least a kind of peaceful phase.

Lillian had made sure her mother's photo album was always by her bed. Opened to show a different chapter of her 'before' life. Initially for her mother to be reminded, and later, for the nurses. She recalled the way the staff had visibly exuded a new tenderness towards her mother, as they made the connection between the vibrant, attractive woman, mother, wife, sister, daughter, nurse, in the photos and the frail, demented woman on the bed.

Two years after James' death, Mother had had a stroke. Recovery was limited, with her increasing confusion. It became clear to Lillian, her mother needed more care and so she arranged for her to move into the life-style unit at the oxymoronic 'Paradise Residential Health Care'.

Alice was sailing around the Mediterranean at the time with her husband and three children. She couldn't be located for weeks. So it had all been up to Lillian – the arrangements. There were protests of course. Her mother's horrible accusations:

'You bitch you stole my house. You're getting me out of the way.'

It was all explainable, but the effects on Lillian were visceral; she lost her appetite and diminished in size over the following weeks. Then Alice turned up -

six months after their mother had been moved into the residential unit. By then, mother had become a benign and confused little old lady.

Lillian drank from her mother's cup. She peered over its rim at the lawn. Daisy's scattered all over, but none would sprout under the tree. Lillian closed her eyes.

Her father with his hammer, is building the tree hut. She and Alice are excited, eager to help. Passing wood, nails. Her father has made the ladder removable: intended to prevent little kids going up by themselves. Lillian is twelve, Alice nine. Billy, only three. A curious boy, always on the go. He is exuberant, but he is getting in the way.

After only three weeks of completion the tree house would be destroyed.

Lillian placed the cup on the tray, and edged herself forward in her chair. Slowly, she pushed herself into standing. Everything had seized up. Still straightening herself she began her walk to the kitchen, avoiding the packing boxes lining the walls. Her hip was playing up. Rain was coming. Her pain was more reliable than the evening weather forecast these days. She had something for that. In fact, she had something for everything. During her twenty years as a pharmacist, Lillian had managed to accumulate a broad range of prescription medicines, now, all years past their expiry dates. Her younger self would have been horrified that she had kept old meds. But, when it came to it, Lillian couldn't stand the idea of wasting anything. And quietly proud she was, that she had managed to avoid any doctor's visits for the last ten years, by self medicating. She stood tall and reached to the top shelf of the medicine cupboard, and slid out the box labeled 'Pain Relief'. She took a mouth full of water from a glass, and popped two anti inflammatories into her mouth. Lillian put the jug on.

She stood at the sink and wondered what the postie had popped into her letter box. The rates were due. And the water bill. She'd fetch them later.

Lillian shrunk herself down at the kitchen table. Her dry hands, smooth on the Formica surface, slid across the table and picked up the word list. She read the random collection:

'dog, light, ship, cornflakes, soap.'

She read it again. She repeated it to herself, one last time. She turned it over and picked up the newspaper. She read the front page: Floods in Peru, Earthquake in Haiti -with photos of orphaned children - their dark eyes large with loss.

And a domestic violence incident - A man had been sentenced to life for murder: A child had died - from head injuries.

From here she and Alice can see their parents. Her father's face is rabid as he heaves and swings at the tree, with axe and hammer. Like a mad man he proceeds to demolish the tree house. Mother stands by sobbing. Alice and Lillian stay inside the house.

When he has finished ripping and bashing the timber, he stands back and looks at the tree. The fury on his face dissolves and he buries his face into his hands. Crashing on to the ground, on his knees, his body a storm, rises and falls. Mother moves towards him and crouches down to kneel beside him, her knees crushing the daisies on the lawn. Only yesterday Lillian had sat there with Billy picking daisies. Mother gently rubs his back. Her arm is moving in circles.

Just like Billy in the bath with the soap. He liked his back and tummy being rubbed.

'Rub it in circles Lily.'

He'd sat with shampoo bubbles spiking his hair, and held the soap out to Lillian.

'Round and round the garden like a teddy bear.. one step, two steps, tickle you under there.'

Always delivering his surprised shriek, as he giggled on being tickled.

'Again Lily, again.'

Lillian rose to put the jug on. Her eyes focused on the note which had been taped to the bench. 'Words For Today.'

Words for today? Words for ..? Lillian turned away from the bench and sat herself down at the table, trying to remember. She took a pen and paper and wrote: 'dog'. She thought long and hard and wrote, uncertainly:

'letter',.....then nothing. That was all she could remember for today. Slowly, she took the list from the table, and turned it over. She ticked 'dog'. And that was it. With a deep sigh, she folded the list, and placed it in her pocket.

The phone rang. It was Angie, ringing from the hospital.

'Hi mum, I've been held up at work so I won't be there till later today, in the evening, around six. We should easily finish the packing before they come.'

'Don't worry, tomorrow will be fine. I'm all right love.' Lillian sounded a little too bright.

'Mum are you all right? I mean ... about tomorrow, are you ready for this?'

'Ready for what?'

Angie was uncertain whether she was dealing with confusion or belligerence.

'Tomorrow is the move. You are going to 'Paradise' remember? I showed you the lovely sunny unit, and you liked it. It has a sea view.'

'We can pack tomorrow. Give me an evening of peace.' Lillian took charge.

'Well all right. I'll be there early in the morning. The kitchen will need a good clean when we've emptied it.' Angie paused. 'It'll be all right mum,' she finished, as much to convince herself as her mother.

'I love you Angie, I know you've done your best. You always do.' Angie was taken aback at the uncommon expression of affection.

'I love you too mum. Sleep well. See you in the morning.'

Lillian put the phone down on the table. She stood and put the jug on. And then reached again into the medicine cupboard for a bottle of tablets, and popped them into her pocket.

She made herself a cup of tea, and carried it on a tray, with a plate of biscuits. A soft blanket over her shoulders. She walked on through to the living room. Lillian opened the doors and stepped outside into the garden. She inhaled deeply. The autumn air was cool and scented with damp, rotting vegetation.

She made her way towards the oak and spread her blanket on the ground. She placed the tray with biscuits and tea on the blanket. Lillian gently

lowered herself and with some difficulty managed to seat herself with her legs out straight. She closed her eyes for a minute.

Lillian took two white tablets from the bottle in her pocket, and with a mouthful of tea and half a biscuit she swallowed them. She repeated it every few minutes, till the bottle was empty.

She turned her head towards the right where the swing now hung and examined the ground under the tree where once she sat with Alice. Their picnics. The chatting and the giggling.

Her mother is walking across the lawn with the tea tray, smiling. Lillian's mouth is watering at the thought of the passion-fruit icing. Alice is licking all the icing off first. Lillian takes another tea biscuit. Alice takes another cup-cake. Lillian licks the icing with her long tongue when her mother has turned back towards the house.

Lillian re-positioned herself in order to look to her left at the hard ground where Billy had parked his red metal truck.

His little body is spread out on the ground, his little fingers and toes like tiny sausages lying still. She wants to draw his shape. Like she and Alice had drawn around him as he lay with his arms stretched out at the beach last summer and Billy had been so thrilled when he'd stood to see his shape on the sand. He'd taken a stick and drawn in two eyes. He'd fetched seaweed from the high-tide mark and arranged it for hair. And they'd watched as the day grew late and the tide had come up and tickled the sand man's feet. Eventually the waves had washed over him, melted him down; Wave by wave – the sea had washed him away.

Billy's last shape is twisted and broken and they will never get to draw around him. Being the first one to find him laying out, Lillian freezes. She has lost her voice. So she walks like a ghost to tell her mother, who drops the egg

beater on the floor and runs to Billy. Lillian rings the ambulance and her mother weeps while she waits, over his wee body on the grass under the tree.

'It's most unusual for a child to die falling from only twelve feet.' The neurologist explained to the police. 'But it is possible.'

As a matter of policy there was an investigation. Lillian's parents were subjected to endless questioning by over zealous police officers. The 'Father' may have been a violent man, who had beaten up his son. Who had bashed him so hard his brain had got smashed. Who had killed his own boy.

Lillian's father took it all, carrying his own shame and remorse, he showed no sign of relief when the investigation was over.

It was officially declared an accident. Billy had climbed the ladder and had fallen from the tree and hit his head on the metal truck.

They were at last left to grieve in peace.

There is no peace. Alice cries loudly and retells her last words to Billy again and again. She had been playing in her room with her soft toys and Billy had been disrupting her and he'd wanted Pink Ted to be Superman and kill Bat Bear.

'Get out of my room you are so annoying. I don't want to play with you any more.'

Lillian sat hunched on the ground and she felt sick and dizzy. She lay down flat on her back and looked at the sky between the skeleton branches. Dark clouds gathered in above her and she felt the cold air on her skin, so Lillian Baker pulled the blanket up and over her arms.

Her head spun. - The tree rotated around the form of a child swinging on a branch. - *Round and round, round and round and round, little Billy.* Billy's squeals, 'Again Lily, again!'

Henry knocked loudly on the front door.

'Lily it's me, Henry.' He opened the front door.

'Lily it's me. I brought the ladder early.' Henry walked towards the open French doors and a sharp breeze blew past him and into the house. He saw Lillian lying on the ground in the yard and ran to her. Taking her by the shoulders he called.

'Lily. Are you all right? Lily!' He shook her, 'wake up!'

Henry tried to control the panic in his voice. He noticed the chewed tablets, vomited on the ground beside her. Henry cleared her mouth and lay Lillian on her side in order to run inside. He picked up the phone and he called the ambulance. Then he returned to Lillian and wrapped the blanket around her. He wriggled himself out of his jacket, and covered her, positioning himself so as to block the cold wind.

Henry held Lillian and waited.

A drop of rain fell on her cheek and she stirred. Groaned. Murmured something. And sank again.

'I came with the ladder Lily. I came to get the ball down. I said to myself those lads will be wanting that ball. You know what lads are like Lily? They wouldn't keep away from the tree until they had their ball.' Henry held Lily upright and drew her in close.

'You'll be all right love,' he said and he heard the crack in his voice as he spoke.

The wind blew cold while Henry rocked Lillian gently, still waiting. The slanting rain soaked through his cotton shirt which clung to his back.

The swing danced, wild in the wind.

Lillian is twelve. She is engulfed by a dark cloud. Her whole body aches, and she curls herself up on her bed. She plays the scene over and over: After placing the ladder against the tree, ready to climb, she returns inside briefly to fetch her diary. She'd thought to write alone in the tree-house, but then, Fats Domino is singing: 'Ain't that a shame' on the radio - her favourite song. Lillian, for the moment, loses herself in her dance. Absorbed in the music, she hasn't noticed Billy behind her, making his way toward the French doors, pulling his truck behind him.

When the police arrive Lillian imagines herself running out to the gate to meet them.

'It was me. It was me. I left the ladder there. It was my fault.'

But no-one seems to blame her.

Lillian's parents never speak about how it happened, who was to blame. Lillian's mother had been busy in the kitchen with dinner and she had sent Billy to play outside by himself, for a bit, with his new truck.

Billy lifts his truck carefully over the step by the French doors down onto the grass. The paint is new shiny red. It has metal wheels with real rubber tyres on them. It has a string tied through a hook on the front of the truck. He tows it along the grass behind him. Running he makes it go faster, down to the end of the yard. He looks back at the house just once before he struggles up the ladder, the truck held with one hand up against his chest, the other hand taking on the rungs. He goes up.

The really hard part is moving from the ladder to the platform while heaving the truck up.

Rochelle

I ride through the park taking the shady path under the eucalyptus trees. I am out with my daughter Seline. She is sixteen. Splashes of light flash between the smooth gum branches onto our faces. I look up through the branches to the sky and breathe the scent of the leaves and bark. Seline runs beside me where the path is wide, her long strides gliding her slender six foot frame forwards. Her pony tail swings to the side with each step. She runs like that girl. That aboriginal girl, Cathy Freeman.

We come down towards the children's playground where a woman pushes a child on a swing.

'Look mummy! She has one wheel.' The little boy on the swing points at my twenty four inch wheel and I slow. Idle for a bit. Show off with jumps and rotations.

'Look Mummy.'

'It's a unicycle,' the woman says to the boy, catching him to still the swing.

'Sure is,' I smile, wave and catch up with Seline. There are jumps further along at the rear of the park.

Dark clouds have formed above us and I feel the first spot of rain. Seline is standing on the rise, still, looking across to the far corner of the park. There is a skirmish on the grass. Three boys, teenagers, all wearing black hoodies are roughing up a boy who is on the ground. With his knees bent and head covered by his hands he tries to shield himself from the full power of their fists and boots.

'Mookari,' I say to myself.

I stop beside Seline on the path and take in the scene. My heart pace has picked up. My breathing is fast. I take a slow deep breath.

At the Southern edge of the park there is a man with his dog and a Frisbee. In the middle of the grass a family play football. I turn again to the boys

in the far corner. The one on the ground is bending up his legs and lying on his side. I ride on up, Seline behind me. I hear her say 'what's the plan?' but we are here.

One more boot into the boy on the ground and we can hear him. A yelp or choke. The one standing back laughing and swearing leers around at us.

'So what are you going to do about it?'

'Nothing,' I say. 'Just wondered if you wanted to have a go on my unicycle.'

'Oh yeah?' He looks back. 'Guys!' The two have stopped punching and they have straightened up. One wears a black beanie under his hood. He takes two strides towards me and grabs the unicycle by the seat.

'Yeah.' He sniggers. 'Hey gives a hand Jez.'

The two support Beanie on each side as he mounts the seat.

Seline moves behind them to the injured boy and helps him to stand. He stumbles.

'Go. Run!' she whispers to him. He totters and crouches and then straightens a little. Scrambling over the back fence he vanishes.

Hoodies haven't noticed.

'What if we keep it? What about that aye?' one hoodie says.

'You can,' I say. 'But you see that man and his dog? And that guy playing football with his kids?'

All hoodies follow my gaze. 'Yeah? Well they're with me, and if you try it they will come down on you so fast you will –'

Beanie on the unicycle is shot backwards onto the ground; he rubs his backside and swears at his mates for letting him fall.

I lift the unicycle off the grass.

'Got to go now.' I say and I'm riding off after Seline. Fast as we can we leave them. They are running up behind us. We're fast. Past the man holding a Frisbee facing away from us. And when we know we've lost them and we're nearly home Seline and I start laughing.

'Did you see that look on his face - lying on the ground rubbing his backside?' I say wobbling and swerving with laughter.

'Yeah and your big threat! What was going to happen when your help didn't show?'

'I hadn't thought that far,' I say, and then the rain comes down again and I think of the dogs.

It rains heavy in the west. Where we are, at the lowest end of a long driveway, with a stream running across the bottom of the section, with all the contours of the street and driveway tipped towards us, it seems like all the water off the Waitakere ranges comes down to our valley, down our street, and it swoops towards us. Down the driveway it joins the water falls splaying off the gutter less roofs. Down it comes to dump on us. And from here it moves through our yard – a raging torrent in search of a gully. It leaves a pool that seeps into the bog that is our yard for the whole of winter.

Wiki has made her way up to the roof of the hen house and she is soaked and yelping. Her ears wet rags. The others have found some shelter under the stairs.

All the animals, with the exception of the chickens, are brought inside. Already there are two tanks of turtles up against the walls. Seline helps me carry in the two cockatoos in their cages. The rabbit and husky are cold and wet, their shelters sodden, we bring them in.

Seven Papillion dogs – (we are sitting two), are running in an area we have fenced off beside the kitchen, and the two week old puppy is in a box by my feet.

So we're stuck indoors and we've moved the couch and two chairs into the corner by the front door. Seline is out at her friend's house for the afternoon working on an English assignment. Annie, my house mate, has baked savoury scones and Lawrence is with us. He's come to fetch Tilly, his Papillion. Lawrence is my dentist, and when I took a three month puppy in to see him last year he fell in love with all Papillions. Today Lawrence is wearing a pink frock, I think it is taffeta and lace, with a pink and blue silk scarf, and we're starting to get some sunshine coming in through the front door.

With the yapping of the dogs I don't hear the vehicle drive up. A door slams and a man pops his head around the corner as he reaches to knock on the open door.

'I'm Des Brown from the council.' He coughs. 'There's been some complaints. We've come to inspect the place.' He moves into the lounge and is followed by a tall and broad man. 'This is Lester,' says Des.

Wiki is on my lap and as I stand she moves to the crook of my arm and I cup her with my other hand and walk to the door.

'We are a registered animal rescue house. These animals are being well cared for,' I say.

'Sure. But I need to check how many dogs you have here.' Des is moving through towards the dogs.

He looks at Annie and then at Lawrence's dress.

'We are looking after two dogs at the moment,' I say. *We are only allowed five.*

'You are only allowed five dogs on the property. How many have you got?'

'We have five dogs, plus one two week old puppy.'

The dogs are running and yapping. Flustered. Skitty.

'One, two, three, four.... five. One, two, three, four, five ... six.' One hand on his belt, the other pointing at the dogs.

'There are seven.' I say. 'But as I said, two are not ours. One is Lawrence's dog.' I look at Lawrence.

'OK Lawrence so if you take your dog and we don't count the pup, one still has to go,' he says. 'Sorry but I don't make the rules.'

'I'll ring the owner to come and get theirs.' I am hearing the change in my voice and Wiki is starting to shake in my arms. You can't raise your voice around her, she's had a rough time this little one - before she came to us. The man Lester has moved forward. Still silent he stands behind Des.

'Which one do I take? You choose.' Des has keys that hang off his belt which clink with each step.

'What?' I am holding Wiki close to me, tucked inside my jersey. 'You can't take any.' I am walking to the phone. 'What are you trying to do?'

'You know what we have to do. It's the law.'

'I'll only have five here tomorrow. Come back then.'

'I'm not working tomorrow. I'll take the oldest one. Which one's that?'

It's Wiki here, but she's only ten years old. She's got ten more years in her yet. You can't take her!' And now I'm shrieking and he's reaching out for

her. Annie's stood now and she is shouting at him to leave us alone. Lester is moving towards the dogs. Lawrence comes over to Des.

Lawrence sounds calm. Sensible. 'Come on mate can't we work something out?'

I'm thinking he will turn everything around for us.

For a second, Des Brown looks into Lawrence's face as if he might reason with him, and then his eyes drop. They move up and down. He scans the dress and as if that was an answer, he turns back to me.

'Ladies. Don't make it worse. Give me the dog.'

Des Brown's eyes are steely blue, hard set. His assistant is reaching to pat Tilly.

Wiki is shivering, tiny little vibrations in my arms.

I whisper in her ear some words from a world away. All my dogs know Australian Aboriginal. This calms her and then, so we don't hurt her anymore, so we don't pull at her and hurt her weak back, I see myself passing her, trembling, into his arms, into Des Brown's arms.

'Scoop her. Don't lift her you'll hurt her back.' I say.

And he does. Des Brown scoops her gently under her hips, and holds her close.

He carries her back to his van with Lester following behind. Her big butterfly ears seem to flap as he places her in the cage at the back and she barks at them.

I am frozen at the door and before he slips into the van Des calls back to us.

'I'll send you the bill. Sorry. Its eighty bucks.'

'What? What did he say?' I'm asking Annie and Lawrence. 'What the fuck did he say?'

'Bastard!' Annie screams at the van as he reverses away, up the drive.

I am coiled on the floor. 'Wiki. Little Wiki. How could he take her? Wiki.'

Lawrence is crouched beside me and I can't move. Annie has her arm around my shoulder and I can hear her weep quietly. The sun is on my legs and I hear the song again. The song that is always there. Words I don't even understand yet they still me. In time I do breathe in the warm air.

1972

The girl and her mother sit by a stream in the shade of a eucalyptus tree. It is North Queensland. It is hot. The earth is red and parched. The girl is just three. Her mother sings a song about the river and the trees, and the child rakes the dirt with a stick, rutting out pebbles. They look up at the sound of an engine.

A blonde woman moves towards them from the truck and crouches beside them.

'It is best,' she is saying. 'She will have food and education. A good family.' Her face is kind. 'Come.' She beckons. 'Would you like to ride in a truck?' She holds out a hand to little girl.

'We don't need you. Leave us.' The girl's mother looks up. 'Please go.' She waves her off.

'I'm sorry.'

The woman turns and walks away.

Two men who had been standing beside the truck walk past the blonde woman with the kind face. They walk straight to the child and her mother. One holds the mother while the other takes the child. He scoops her into his arms and she is calling back as they walk away.

The mother runs after the truck as it moves off, the dust in her face, she runs as fast as she can. Her cry rises above and then blends and is lost, in the sound of the engine of the truck as it pulls away. Her bare feet are cut on the stones and they bleed and she keeps running. Running until she has no breath.

Today I find out that I am one year younger than I thought. The woman who brought me up, the woman I called mother has sent me a certificate of some kind. If this is true I am thirty- nine. There are lawyers who can help you with this stuff. Find where you are from.

My own girl Seline wants to be a high court judge. She is clever. She can do it if she wants. She might do anything. Or she could run. Seline could run for New-Zealand one day.

I have heard Australia is largely a barren desert. I want the heat and the dust. There is an international unicycle event in Brisbane. I might go. I'm fast.

I am a river, surging. Raging.

And I may just get a tattoo before I go. On my right arm. Like Cathy Freeman. She has the words 'Cos I'm Free' written on her upper arm.

Friday we get a letter from the council. I open out the letter to read it and it is full of words and letters jostling for space. Twenty primary schools and not one could get the letters to still themselves for me.

'Annie you read it.' I pass it to her. We are standing in the kitchen, Seline, Annie and me.

'Its from the council.'

'I know but what does it say?'

Annie is scanning the letter.

'Read it,' I say.

'I don't believe it, listen. It's about the complaint we wrote in. They've enclosed a cheque!'

'How much?'

'It's eighty bucks - for the vet bill!' Annie takes the cheque from the envelope and passes it over to me and she reads.

'Dear Ms Rochelle Baker!' She looks up and smiles at me. 'Ms Rochelle Baker - that's you.' She continues.

'We have enclosed the cheque to cover the vet costs for the dog that was euthanised. We are aware of the good work you have done for animal rescue and although Mr Brown's actions were in keeping with our council action plan we acknowledge a heavy handed approach is not our policy. Our apologies to you for any unnecessary grief to you and your family. Yours faithfully, Sarah Anderson, Dog Control.'

'That's it?' I say.

'Yep that's it. Annie turns over the letter, nothing else.'

'Its an apology I guess.'

'I guess that's it. A 'sorry'.'

I take the sorry letter and walk to the bin.

Returning later in the day I retrieve it from the rubbish, and pin it, with the cheque, to the kitchen wall.

The place is quieter without Wiki. The dogs miss her. She was mother to three of them. Through the kitchen window I can see the other dogs in the back yard. Muddy paws. But they're happy to be outside again now the sun is shining and the yard is drying out. Next, one of the dogs is at my feet. It's Leeza, one of Wiki's big pups, sniffing about. I scoop her up and hold her underneath my chin.

I sing the song she knows and she nestles in, close against my neck.

Shifting light

After dropping Evie at crèche she makes her way from the bus stop and down through the park. Along past the swings, an elderly man is walking his short and hairy dog and he tips his hat as she passes.

Must be foreign....who does that?

She takes the short cut through the car park of private city apartments. Further down the hill moulting maples line the street. A narrow, pokey, neglected alley features the back sides of low town restaurants. Waste flows from over-filled bins. Rotting vegetation. Old empty meat packs and cans are strewn where the dogs have left them. She gags at the stench.

Shelley knocks at the faded blue door of Carl's flat and then remembers she has the key.

'Hiya Carl ... it's me.' She glances in at the lounge. The curtains are mostly closed. A dull shaft of morning light passes through the gap where the curtains stop short of meeting. Through the window opaque with city grime, it divides the room.

'I'm in here.' Carl's voice from the bedroom.

The room is dim, clothes scattered on the floor, some dirty plates – a residue of packet soup and noodles. Shelley breathes lightly and still she smells the stale sweat of Carl blended with the damp and dust of the room. He lays with his back to the door facing the window where grey-leaved branches press up against the building, scratching the glass with the breeze. Carl's pale shoulders and upper back lay above the thin white sheet, the duvet pushed to the floor. She walks around the bed to Carl and kisses him on the cheek.

'How are you?'

She tries to fix her eyes on his hollow face, on his deep set eyes. But she has already seen the thin white strip of an arm folded across his chest, the other folded under his body. His hair is a blonde mass of unruly curls.

'Box of birds. Thanks.' He coughs. 'I haven't seen you for a while.'
'I had my exam yesterday ... been studying.'
'So how was it?'
'OK I think. Not too many surprises.'
'Sorry it's a mess, Bronwyn hasn't come.'
'The home help?'
'Yeah ... the agency says they haven't got a replacement.'
'So tell me what I can do.'
'You can help me get rid of my father ... said he's coming at eleven.'
'Your father?'
'That one ... the ever absent.'
'And what about a shower? You need help with that?'
'Err ... no it can wait.'
'Have you lost your sense of smell!'
'Pretty bad?'
'Fraid so. Don't be shy now ... just let me help you.'

Shelley puts her shoulder under his arm and her arm behind his back and she helps Carl stand from the bed and walk to the shower where there is a white plastic chair ready in the shower box. Carl sits and begins to remove his boxers, easing himself from side to side in the seat. Shelley pulls them down and over his feet and Carl sits naked on the chair. Slumped.

'Now don't be shy will you? I'll just wash your back and stuff and you can wash the other bits ... what you can reach ...' She turns on the shower and lets the water run warm.

'Me shy? YOU are hiding behind euphemisms. *Other bits?* This is what they call an elephant in the room.'

'Here elephant! You can hide behind this if you like.' Shelley passes Carl a hand towel.

Shelley slips her sandals off and tosses them away from the shower so she can step inside.

'Now I don't want to get wet so at the risk of turning you straight I need to take these off while we do this.' She pats her jeans and her shirt.

'Sure don't mind me. I'm only bluffing anyway - it's my long and twisted way of getting you in the shower with me.'

'Good plan. Took you what ... fifteen years? But look you've done it!'

Shelley steps into the shower wearing just black underwear and a singlet.'

With the shower running warm on his back she moves to his head - the rush of water soaking and stretching out his curls. While she massages shampoo into his scalp Carl holds the shower head and closes his eyes while Shelley's fingers move around in circular motions over his scalp. First near his temples and then moving low down at the back of his scalp. Running the warm water again over Carl's head she rinses the shampoo till his hair squeaks. With the conditioner evenly smoothed through his hair she rinses again.

Carl is able to stand for a short while with his hands against the shower wall, while Shelley moves the soap over his back. With her hands she slides over his skin, lightly over the boney places and more deeply where there is still some muscle. With the cloth she rubs the soap down the length of his long legs and to his feet until he is tired and needs to sit. Shelley washes his chest and lifts each thin arm to soap underneath while Carl holds the shower head, directing the water.

Turning the head quickly he splashes Shelley on her face and chest.

'Oops sorry,' he says.

'Sure you are! Here give me that.' And she takes the head and washes the soap off his chest.

She washes his face, combs his hair and shaves the shadow from his chin. Lastly Shelley crouches down while Carl sits with a large towel over his shoulders and she washes his feet. Rubbing with the cloth between each toe and massaging deep along the sole of both feet while he looks down at the top of her head – her hair wet, her hands moving firmly. Slow. Tender.

She looks up and smiles and when she finishes she stands and leans in to him and kisses him on the cheek.

'That wasn't so bad now was it?'

'I love you Shell'

'I know. I couldn't hope for a better man in my life.'

Shelley answers the door to George Garland. Middle-aged, overweight, bald. He wears a suit. She has cleaned the lounge up and Carl is resting on the couch. His father sits in an armchair at the other side of the room and talks. He speaks about his new business, his agency, his new house, the wife. When Carl is failing to respond he goes quiet for a bit.

Shelley places the tea tray on the coffee table next to Carl and passes the cup to George. Carl is sitting upright on the couch and he looks directly at his father.

‘One thing I never got in twenty five years - why did you leave - so completely?’

‘I. It was your mother and me - we had our differences.’ George avoids eye contact.

‘Why did you leave ME? I saw you just twice after you left. You just disappeared.’ Carl’s face is searching. ‘And why now?’

‘I heard you were sick ... um ... your mother rang me. She said you had. You were pretty sick. I’m sorry.’

Do you know what that means – ‘sorry’?

‘I thought. When I was a kid. I always thought you left ‘cos I was gay ...’

‘I suspected it – told your mother even. But err - it’s not why I left.

Although ... I didn’t know how I could be a father to you.’

Carl leans forward slightly. ‘Just being around would have been a good start.’

‘You wouldn’t even catch a ball. You didn’t like sport.’

‘Not because I was gay. I just didn’t want to play rugby. Heaps of kids out there don’t want to play rugby.’ Carl’s voice has raised a semitone.

‘I did. That was all I wanted when I was a kid. Loved it, still do.’

‘When I refused to play you called me a faggot! I was twelve! I had to look it up in the dictionary ... and then I had to look up ‘homosexual’. I had no idea. And then you left two weeks later and I spent the summer in bed, sick with glandular fever and wondering what it meant to be a ‘faggot’.’

George stands and stretches his legs. From the lounge window he can see his car parked in the street, someone has written ‘clean me’ on the passenger door.

Still looking out he speaks, his voice quiet, inaudible.

'What?' asks Carl.

'I didn't know,' he says more loudly. And turns back to Carl. 'I thought you were all right.'

'I wasn't.'

'Your mother, she was the understanding one.'

'No one understands,' Carl says, and falls back resting his back against the end of the couch. He lifts his feet up off the ground and stretches out. 'God I am so tired. Sorry - I have to ...' He moves to get up and make his way to the bedroom.

'Yeah sure. Sorry. I err ... I'll go. I'll see you then son.'

Carl's father touches his shoulder with a light punch and says goodbye.

Carl lays on the bed with the thought of his mother 'the understanding one'. He was eighteen, flatting in Grafton and it was mother's day so he'd gone home for Sunday lunch. After she'd been going on about Shelley and him being together, what a lovely girl Shelley was and so on. He'd told her they were just friends. But she had continued to go on about him getting a nice girlfriend one day so then he told her.

'What ... gay as in homosexual? Are you sure?'

She had slowly dissolved into uncontrolled tears. She had lost a dream of ever being a grandmother she said. Her loss of grandchildren was to become a repeating theme of their ongoing conversations.

Shelley had heard everything from the kitchen and just as she shuts the door to George the phone rings.

'Hi Shelley here, Carl's place. Oh hi. Yes he came. He's just left now.'

She looks up to see that Carl has taken himself back to bed.

'Not too bad, no. But he's exhausted now. Yes he's resting. I'm just doing a bit of cleaning then I'll fetch Evie. Oh would you? Thanks that would be great. I'll ring the crèche so they are expecting you.'

Evie is full of it, she carries her construction all the way up the stairs from Maureen's car – an alligator made of egg cartons, painted green and orange -

she began talking about it even before the door was opened. Maureen puts the groceries away and starts on dinner. Evie sets the alligator on the coffee table.

Carl sits up in bed, refreshed after a sleep, and takes the tray. He looks up from his plate and smiles at his mother and Evie sitting on his bed. Evie on her knee telling another tale.

Shelley stands at the door to the bedroom listening to Evie. She watches Carl. Flickering and soft evening light pass through the leaves of the tree onto his face. She walks around to the curtain.

‘Shall I draw it?’

‘No thanks. You can leave it. I like it ... it’s going soon anyway.’

Small Victories

Wiremu and I had spent the hours at the end of the day skimming stones, diving off the rocks, and sprawling on the sand – our wet bodies covered in tiny white grains. We dried off, and then again, raced down to the surf and washed off, only to return to sinking our bodies in the warm sand - delaying the inevitable. In the sand we carved out the shape of a sea monster, our own taniwha, and filled the shape with sand, Wiremu insisting on smoothing and sculpting the shape. We sang the Taniwha song we were too big to sing.

‘... My mother is waiting for me under the kowhai tree. Haere ra my Taniwha. Tahi, rua, toru, wha. Hee.’ Mum called to us from under her beach umbrella, and we pretended not to hear, on the afternoon of the last day of that summer school holiday. When we were last kids.

Mum had to drag us off the beach before the sun set. We drove Wiremu back to his place and then headed back into town and we were home just before dark. And Granddad was there, waiting with Dad on the deck, drinking.

‘I thought you’d never come home. We’re pretty hungry here,’ Granddad said. We weaved our way up the steps. Side-stepping the empty bottles we went inside. Mum fussed about in the kitchen while I grabbed some bread and cheese, and got to bed early. Tried to sleep.

Mr Kingi, our social-studies teacher, was my first male teacher. He introduced himself to us. Forty something I’d guessed, about the same as my Dad. It was our first week at high school and I was adjusting to the change from civvies to the stiff blue shorts and scratchy blue shirt. From feet to shoes. From groups sat at tables, to individual and separate desks. From being in a class with the kids we’d grown up with, we were thrown in with a bunch of new kids from the other feeder schools.

You couldn’t hear a breath amongst us then, watching him, standing there at the front: tall and straight, like something out of a movie, his long hair in a pony-tail. He had a thin, trimmed beard and moustache. When he spoke, his voice was like liquid honey, smooth and round. I watched Wiremu watching him.

'I am from the Ngati Porou Iwi,' Mr Kingi said. And he turned and wrote it on the whiteboard: his name and Iwi, in large capital letters. The new black marker squeaked across the board. He turned back to face us. 'Your project this term is to research a famous person. Find out about someone who achieved something worthy of note.'

Wiremu, sitting straight, spoke up. 'I'm going to do Edmund Hillary.'

He had been in my class every year since new entrants, and now some random turn of events had put us together again. Stories go it was Wiremu who'd started the paint fight. Our year four teacher Miss Cooper had brought in some old real estate signs and leaned them against the fence, white side out. For art we were shown how to carefully flick paint off the brush for special effect. Splatter art. It began as a controlled exercise and for a while we enjoyed watching the patterns form on the signs. After a few minutes of that Wiremu was bored and started flicking the paint to the side, inevitably getting paint on kid's clothes. And other kids followed suit, aiming at each other. Even the teacher ended up with paint on her shirt. The mums arrived in time to help with the clean up at the end of the day. Mum said Wiremu could be another Pollock, using people as canvases, but Miss Cooper had been unimpressed and made Wiremu stay behind after school.

Wiremu lived with Jock, his uncle who had taken him in when he was three, after his mother had lost custody of Wiremu and his brothers. And with his Dad having shot through when Wiremu was a baby they all had to be sent to various relatives homes. Wiremu's three older brothers went to live down the line somewhere. We were friends, me and Wiremu, but sometimes I wondered why. He was always just there.

Mr Kingi looked at the faces in the class as if he was drawing us all into his net: 'Take a week to think about it, there's no rush - just choose someone by this time next week ...and put your hand up next time.' Eyes on Wiremu. Wiremu speaks before he thinks. Most of the time I reckon he hasn't a clue what he's going to say - until he hears it coming out of his mouth. And his mouth gets us both in trouble. We sat behind a guy with hair too big at the movies one Saturday and Wiremu called out: 'That ladies hair is huge - I can't see!' The guy turned around and grabbed Wiremu's pop-corn and tipped it on his head. We moved pretty fast in case anything more messy was coming our way.

Mr Kingi scanned the class. 'You can use libraries, newspapers, internet, family etc for your sources.'

I had no idea who to study and I didn't want just any random famous person. The boys were doing an All Black or Edmund Hillary. The girls, netballers or rock stars.

My own project got delayed, as the next day Mum came home late from an appointment with a specialist at the hospital. She'd left a note on the bench saying she'd be late but I'd assumed it was her basketball night. She'd waited till she'd got dinner ready and we were seated at the table. There was me and Dad and Aunty May and my cousin Awhero. She walked from the bench to the table and sat down. Holding both her hands together she rested them on the table. Mum took a deep breath and told us.

'The specialist says I've got cancer - breast cancer.'

That's all she said. It was what Nana'd had. She paused. Mum's eyes were deep dark pools, the colours of marmite. I looked away. Everything in my mind muddled, then went blank and then I noticed a rip in the table cloth and remembered the lunches at Nana's. I would go over there in the weekends and we'd eat home-grown tomatoes sliced and sprinkled with salt between big chunks of freshly baked bread. The same cloth had been on her table. She had embroidered the flowers - the flowers on the cloth - yellow. I was only nine when she died and I missed her stories and trips to the movies and the way I never did anything wrong. Somehow the tablecloth had made its way to our table. The tear sliced right through the centre of a bunch of flowers, more like a cut from scissors. For a few seconds no one breathed and then she spoke.

'I'm going to throw everything at it.'

May stretched out her hands across the table and took Mum's.

'You beat it Hine love, you're a fighter.'

Dad leaned forward, eyes narrowed.

'So why didn't you tell me? - How long have you known something was wrong?'

I said nothing - willed myself to go numb. I thought of Nana's tooth when she smiled - one of her front teeth had a gold cap - shiny when she smiled. 'I didn't want to worry you.' Mum's voice was tight. Awhero stood and moved behind Mum, and she wrapped her long arms around her. 'Love you Aunty,' she said and kissed her on the cheek. I took my plate to the bench.

Two weeks later Mum had surgery to remove her left breast and then started on the chemo. She looked sick for weeks and got real skinny. Her long hair fell out in clumps and she cried when she first saw it in the mirror. She'd stood with her back to the mirror in the bathroom and held a hand mirror in front so she could see the bald patches at the back. And then she went to her room. She started wearing a scarf to cover her head and then one day she came to me with the electric clippers and asked me to shave it all off.

'Number two,' she said. We stood in the bathroom in front of the mirror and I took the clippers and drove them down the back of her patchy head. I towered above her at only thirteen and my shoulders were already broad. 'Nice and burley like your Aunty,' May had said to me at Christmas. My own hair hadn't seen scissors for two years and thick black curls hung partly over my face and to my shoulders. Mum's eyes, deep and dark were wide, like mine and each filled with our own fears, unspoken. Long thin strands fell to the floor as the clippers made their tracks. When we were finished she wiped her eyes, and rubbed her hand over her head and smiled. She looked like Sigourney Weaver from Alien. 'You look awesome,' I'd said, and she did. And she stopped wearing the scarf.

Dad cooked once and stopped going to the pub after work for a while but it was mostly Aunty May who cooked and brought meals over. Then one day the treatment stopped, and she slowly gained some weight, and her hair eventually grew back. The doctors said she was clear now, and she could get on with her life. So we did.

Mum had sent a note in to Mr Kingi, and so I managed to get an extension on my assignment. As for who to study, it was Mr Kingi who helped me. One morning at the start of our first lesson for the day, he took a fifty dollar note from his wallet and taped it on to the white-board at the front of the class. We didn't see those very often – fifty bucks! It got us sniggering and gossiping amongst ourselves. Then Wiremu piped up: 'Oh man that's my note! ...Fell out of my pocket...thanks Sir.' Wiremu mimed patting his empty pockets.

'Nice try young man.' The teacher scanned the class, with his imposing gaze. 'So you all recognize the value of the note, but who can tell me the name of the man whose image is on it?'

The whole class squinted to focus on the portrait printed on the note – Hoping for some recognition. No surprise, Natalie Smale put up her hand - always first.

‘Is it Sir Peter Blake?’

‘Good try, but no,’ Mr Kingi looked around, ‘Anyone else?’

Slowly Wiremu raised his hand. Some kids beside us sniggered. I was embarrassed for him – but it was too late to save him. - All eyes were on Wiremu.

‘Yes Wiremu.’

‘It’s Apirana Ngata,’ said Wiremu. Class eyes moved as one from Wiremu to the teacher.

‘Yes Wiremu, well done, you are right.’

I was stunned - I had never heard any combination of those words before. The class sat in shocked silence. Natalie shifted in her seat. And I had an image of myself running around the class cheering and stomping my feet. Wiremu’s eyes were wide and waiting.

‘And who was this man - Apirana Ngata?’ Mr Kingi asked.

Wiremu sat up, a little taller, ‘He was a great leader and the first Maori All-black and my uncle says our family is related to him.’

‘What an honour - to be related to such a man Wiremu. And yes, he was a great leader, but he wasn’t the first Maori All Black I’m afraid.’ Mr Kingi looked around the class.

‘Who can guess which first for Maori he did achieve?’ Now if he wanted serious answers he should never have instructed us to ‘guess’. Only Natalie kept quiet, the rest of us felt it was a free for all. A scrum without a ref. We called out the first things that came into our heads: astronaut, explorer, basketballer, Maori King, league player, rock star, dancer. Wiremu back to his true form: ‘He climbed Everest?’

You couldn’t hear him sigh but it was in his eyes – a tiredness – more of a groan really. Mr Kingi’s eyes scanned the room; he searched the faces of the students for signs of intelligent life.

‘I want you all to do some research: Find out, in which area Apirana Ngata achieved a first for Maori?’ He turned and wrote the question on the board. Then he took the fifty dollar note from the whiteboard and put it in his pocket – a slimmer chance we had now of nicking it, I could read Wiremu’s

mind. Though I wondered if it would have been safe after all - up there on the white board all week with Apirana Ngata looking out with those eyes at any would be thief: '*Shame on you*' if anyone reached for it. At lunch time Mr Kingi took the fifty bucks and went into town and bought a book: *The Life of Apirana Ngata*. He let me take it home for my assignment.

So I had my man - my famous person, and I sank myself into the life story of a man who was dead. - And a politician. I read in Mr Kingi's new book that Apirana Ngata was '... recognised for his work supporting Maori culture and language and that his Iwi was Ngati Porou.' I'd thought - No wonder Mr Kingi admired him — they were probably cousins. Still - I was hungry to find out all I could. - He 'learned about the Pakeha world so he could benefit Maori.' I read on - 'In 1893, he gained a BA in politics - the first Maori to complete a degree at a New Zealand university. He gained an L.L.B at the Auckland University in 1896 – the first Maori law graduate. 'My project missed out on the marks for presentation, without the pretty borders and calligraphy of Natalie Smale's on her Captain Cook assignment. But I got A + for information and a big smiley face. My first and last A+. Not even my science assignment on cow farts and greenhouse gases in year 11 was to prove as successful.

That year Wiremu was hardly absent from school. He would follow Mr Kingi around at lunch times, if he saw him walking to the staff room, or on duty in the grounds, he'd catch up with him and just kind of be there. Sometimes after school Wiremu'd go back to his class and just hang out with some of the Kapa Haka group. Even later, when Wiremu wasn't even in any of his classes, he managed to get Kingi involved when he got in trouble. Truancy mainly. And once, for some pretty stupid graffiti on the gymnasium wall after he failed his English assignment: 'Inglish Sux' - Beautiful stylised calligraphy so Kingi got the attention of the art department and Wiremu changed over to art studies. Wiremu and I signed up for basketball in year ten and Kingi coached our team right through to year thirteen.

The day before my seventeenth birthday started with Awhero and me harvesting the corn at May's before the heat of mid-day. After we'd been working for a few hours we headed down for a swim, and spent the afternoon diving off the bank into the river at the back of the cornfields. May and Mum sat in the shade on the veranda reading and playing guitar and singing. Dad had come and gone over the summer, but mostly we'd been left on our own at Aunty

May's for the whole month of January. We were more like siblings than cousins, Awhero and me. We had seen each other every week since I can remember. You wouldn't know May and Mum were twins, they looked so different, if they were trees Mum would be a poplar and May a bottlebrush. May had big hair that she wore scooped up into a bun, often with a bright coloured scarf wrapped around her head. Stray curls hung loose around her face. And she was built big. Not exactly fat. Mum said she was strong from farm work. Mum was tall and slim and wore her long black slinky hair in a plait most of the time. Being a teacher, Mum had the long break over the summer, so she helped May with the farm. When May wasn't working on the farm or selling corn she was sculpting with terracotta. The clay she'd dug up somewhere down by the river and her shed was filled with body parts - including a giant foot.

'Hey Rangī I need a male torso will you sit for me?'

I'd said I was busy that day but I'd get Wiremu over. He was keen - till he realised he had to get naked.

May sculpted Mum once. She'd had to sit for hours each day for a week. May just did her head and shoulders - and she had managed to sculpt the head on a slight tilt and her eyes were looking downwards and a bit to the left, like she was thinking - and she'd got her hair long and straight down her neck towards her back. The sculpture sits on the shelf above my fireplace now.

I was turning seventeen that summer, and Awhero eighteen - off to do her nursing training after the summer break. We were sitting on the grass above the river bank looking over the water: black and white cattle on the neighbouring farm had their heads down, watching their turf.

'So Rangī, what you going to do next year, when you finish school?' Awhero asked, sprawling herself out on the grass, soaking up the afternoon sun. Her shape was elongated - her arms stretched above her head. Legs smooth and slender. Her long feet had pink painted toes - each with a tiny flower in the centre. I imagined for a moment what it would be like for another guy, like if she wasn't my cousin, lying beside her on the grass. I was lying on my back, resting on my forearms; dappled light fell on my head and shoulders through the leaves of the tree above. I turned my gaze towards the river.

'I thought I might do nursing.' I kept my tone flat.

'Serious?' Awhero sat up suddenly and caught my eye. But she could always read me. I flicked her my 'gotcha' smile and Awhero slapped her wet

towel onto my legs - laughing.

'Your Dad would be furious if you became a nurse - his boy doing a girl's job!'

'Yeah, perhaps he wants me to help him go and prop up the bar at the local, keep up the family tradition.'

'At least you know where he is, we've never even heard from Doug since he took off. Mum says 'good riddance to him.'" I'd never heard Awhero call him Dad, only ever Doug. He left when she was eight. We listened to the duet of the river and the cicadas and then Awhero stood and walked over to the poplar tree. She reached up to a low branch and tore off a twig and walked to the edge of the river. She threw the twig into the water. We watched the current carry it away - down stream.

In the evening we sat on the deck eating corn fritters for supper and we watched the sun ease its way down past the corn fields. Long finger shadows of corn stretched across the front yard and touched the bottom step - reached towards our feet - and then blended with the incoming darkness.

The following morning I woke early at Aunty May's - some fly was trying to bust its way out of the room straight through the window glass. Too lazy to get up and open the window, I lay on the bed trying to ignore it and sink back into sleep. But the pest from the pit of hell was sent to steal my favorite pastime. Finally I ripped my pillow from under my head and smashed it hard against the window. The fly fell to the ground. Dead. I was surprised my first strike had been successful. But the fly had achieved its mission. I was wide awake. Slightly irritated that my day had started with killing, a wave of nausea rolled between my stomach and throat. I willed my legs across and over the edge of the bed and my feet to the floor. I could hear mum doing the crossword and May reading the paper at the kitchen table. Taking turns interrupting each other.

'Here's one for you May, six across, four letters: guests greeted by a headless ghost.'

'Um. Oh... yes. Take the G off.'

'Great. Yes! *Host*. Of course.' I heard the tea pouring into the cups. I

thought I might as well get up and face the conspiracy of morning.

Then it was Mays turn. 'Hey Hine listen to this.' May read slowly:

'Tribal women in a Papua New Guinea are killing their baby boys to break the cycle of violence. Mothers in Papua New Guinea claim they have been forced to resort to infanticide in order to end the tribal wars that have devastated the Eastern Highlands for the last 20 years, it has been claimed. All baby boys born in the last 10 years have been killed at birth, according to two women from rival tribes. In desperation, they agreed to murder their sons to stop the violence. Joana Belas and Koriyama Luke said the women smothered their sons at birth to force an end to the tribal conflicts. They said 'The women have had enough of the misery the men have brought them''

There was a long, still gap before I heard mum speak.

'They must feel so desperate. How could they do that to their sons?'

They don't think they have any choice. Desperate Measures....' May responded.

'Sometimes I wish we could do something. What chance do our kids have when all the men in their lives are fuckin boozers and losers?'

Mum next, 'So are you thinking hemlock this time? Just slip a bit in the stew aye May?'

May giggled. 'Might work better than that deadly night shade we tried after Tommy ran away.'

'He must have cast iron guts. Just ate it all up – never said a thing. And you and me hiding under the bed, shaking. Doing our bit for Tommy. Tommy ...'

Somehow I don't think this conversation was meant for me. I left the bed and put my head through the door opening. Seeing me awake before nine startled and silenced them. I walked towards the fridge. 'Hey Rangi. Happy birthday.' Mum and May stood to give me a hug. Still dazed by the early start, I had forgotten that it was my birthday.

'You are up early son, did our chatting wake you?'

I shrugged, still mad at the dead fly.

After breakfast Wiremu turned up in his uncle's truck. You could hear the rattle of the chassis as loud as the engine itself as he drove in. Red paint from the last restoration peeled off the doors of the Bedford and it coughed to a stop, leaving its cloud to settle in the driveway. Awhero joined us and we headed off

to the coast to catch some waves. Awhero was a pretty good surfer for a girl and Wiremu too keen for her to come along – It was no secret, he went all flakey when she was around. I'd told him he didn't stand a chance as she was too smart for him. Now she was going nursing she was probably going to fall for some rich, smart doctor. I'd felt bad saying it, but he would get these notions. I was his link with reality and he needed it spelt out - he didn't *get* subtle.

Wiremu pulled the truck up to the base of the dunes and we walked our usual route, weaving our way over the sand dunes and through the sea grass. The sand squeaked beneath our feet as we made our way towards the edge of the water. The beach was sparse and white, flanked by grassy banks rising up to rocky cliff tops. The bay was a couple of kilometres long and the only signs of previous visitors were the wheel marks of a tractor engraved along the unofficial road running the length of the beach - disappearing round the point. The sea gleamed, and good sized swells curved gently from the southern edge and gradually rose up to a perfect, concave, moving wall. We chucked our gear on the sand and Wiremu's wallet fell open. As Awhero went to cover up our stuff with a towel she saw the photo. 'Hey Wiremu what's the photo?' She picked the wallet up off the sand and Wiremu came in close behind her pointing over her shoulder.

'Yeah that's me. That's my brothers. And yeah ... that's my mum.'

'You were so cute ... How old?' Asked Awhero.

'Dunno ... maybe two ... three? Soon after that we were sent away.'

In the photo Wiremu stood with his brothers and his mum at an empty beach. There was a log – a giant piece of drift wood. It was a good one of the brothers – they were all smiling and looking directly at the camera. His mother was sat on a lower branch and her face was half hiding behind Wiremu who was holding a spade and focused on digging. She held an arm around him and looked above his head to the sea.

'Man you were skinny back then too!' I said.

'Wiry .. it's wiry ... this is all muscle man, no fat on me.' He rubbed his arms and waist. 'And I'm stronger than you burley boy,' he said and he picked up his board and ran down to the water. Awhero and I running behind him.

Wiremu was first to catch a wave. It was a rare nine out of ten day.

'Why only nine?' Wiremu asked. 'It's wicked.'

'Nah - Save ten for Hawaii'

Hawaii - It was a dream – A dream to go there on a surfing trip one day. We'd talked about it since we were thirteen and saw our first surfing movie at the surf club. Wiremu had gone straight home and found his uncle's surf board in the basement. We'd spent four hours the next day taking turns trying to stand and balance, and ride six inch waves.

We surfed for a couple of hours till we got hungry. Wiremu drove like an idiot all the way home - showing off to Awhero. It's scary being with him driving, even when he's sober.

Mum and May needed some help getting ready for the party I didn't want. Dad would come over soon. Uncle Dave with his partner and her three kids, and Kingi - with Maria and their two girls. And Granddad would be there - sitting on his crate. And there would be enough beer for the whole of the bay and they would get to work drinking hard out like it was some great challenge to rid the world of beer, someone had to do it, and the first hour or two would be fun. That's the part I try and remember - when the music was good and the night young. Dave and Dad played guitars, their own combination of Irish reggae, and everyone sang with increasing volume and less tune as the night progressed, or regressed. But it's strange what the mind does with memories, the bad eclipse the good. Like when Mum's friend Shareen and her husband Jason, used to come over all the time with their three kids for dinner and drinks and her husband Jason was such a cool guy – made everyone laugh. He rode a Harley and one summer we went camping together at Hot Water Beach, and Jason took us kids for rides on his motor bike around the camp site. And we swam all day and the guys went fishing and diving. Then a year or so later Jason cheated on Shareen, with their friend and neighbour, Ellen Swann - and now he's all evil. There is nothing good to say about him anymore. There's no more talking about the good times we all had. What a character he was. No, the past is a dark purple shadow and Shareen wears it on her face.

Dad was in his happy space and he and Dave were into the music that night. Two guitars, Dave with his lead breaks. Hitting the best. And that was the happy bit that I remember. Music does that.

Wiremu's family came over. Jock and his partner Teina, and her two children, Sara and Ruby, who were ten and twelve years old. They drove

Wiremu crazy most of the time, like sisters should I guess. He hardly saw his other family – just at funerals and sometimes when his mum visited - if she wasn't too wasted. He said he didn't miss them but his voice went really quiet if he ever talked about any of them.

Jock, long and skinny leaned on the wall of the shed, under the party lights that trimmed the shed and the back porch of the house. The guys had set up some of the dining chairs and crates around a fire burning in a steel drum. He always looked as if he was just keeping ahead of his past. Teina kept him supplied with orange juice, his new regime she said. And Dave gave him a hard time.

'She's keeping you under the thumb man if you can't have a beer with the boys.'

Jock looked like he was going to say something and then he just smiled.

'Cheers bro.' He raised his glass of juice, kissed Teina on her hands - or thumbs.

Mum and May prepared my favourite foods but we weren't to know what devastation sushi would cause. Food kept coming out of the kitchen but it wasn't Granddad's favorite.

'Don't give me that Sushi stuff I ain't eating that fucking Jap crap. Where's the real food?' Granddad stumbled into the kitchen, beer sloshed from his bottle on to the floor.

'Here have some sausage rolls.' May handed him the plate.

'They've probably got some weird thing in them, what's that green stuff? You and your fucking fancy food! Give me pizza, who's gonna go get me some pizza?' Swaying and waving his arms about, more beer splashed on the floor. It was strange to see May and Mum having their buttons pushed; still trying to keep him happy after all the years - after what happened to Tommy, their brother. He was killed crossing a road - high on glue, when he was fourteen. He'd gone off to live on the streets to get away from home. After Nana, what she put up with. The old guy was beyond it: leaning in the doorway, his belly hung over his belt, and parted his shirt between the buttons. He wore a red sauce stain on his shirt. His hair and beard were wiry and straggly. I looked at the photo of Nana with Granddad that May had on her window sill. He was in his army uniform, his hair short, and he was clean shaven. But he had those same angry and wild eyes. Nana shrank beside him.

I turned my back to him and put my hands into the warm soapy water in the sink and I saw Awhero as she came into the kitchen reflected in the window. 'Hey Granddad - come and sit out by the fire, we've moved the couch outside.'

'Hey my girl - my favourite mokopuna - they're trying to poison me.'

Somehow he was persuaded to go outside. Awhero led him to the couch.

I got stuck into the dishes with Mum.

Kingi had left with his family before the night got rowdy and he'd left an envelope. I'd opened it and found a card, and inside the card was a fifty dollar note, and the message read, 'Rangi Happy birthday. Stand tall. You are an awesome young man. Here's a note for you. I'm sure you'll think of something to do with it.' I'd put the note in my back pocket and planned to frame it.

Mum asked me to go and check on Granddad, see that he wasn't causing any trouble outside. He looked happy and harmless enough on the couch.

'Hey boy, don't you worry about the food, the pizza will be here soon.'

Like a child who's won some small 'told you so' victory.

'So who did you persuade to get some pizza?'

'My lovely Awhero of course, she listens to me. I gave Wiremu my car to take. They should be back soon and you can have some real food for your birthday.'

I had an image of Wiremu, drunk as any of them, making his way to the car, with Awhero, convincing her he was OK to drive. The blood rushed to my head and fists.

'You stupid old man giving your keys to Wiremu. Can't you see anything? He's drunk - He's a lousy driver - even when he's sober.' The music stopped and Mum and May were standing on the deck.

'What the hell were you thinking?' I said.

He prized himself off the couch. Fury on his face. Seeing that he could stand, and that he was still an inch or two taller than me was all I needed.

'Who do you think you're talking to? I'll teach you some respect.'

His voiced raged. I saw his right arm move back, fist clenched, and before I could put my arm up I felt the smash of his fist, hard on my left cheek. Just missed my eye. I staggered back. Adjusted my footing. I was glad, at sixty-two he was not too old to hit. Something twisted in me. The pain in my face triggered my own reaction. I punched him with my left arm across the jaw. He staggered back and fell on to the couch. Disappointed at his soft landing I took

him by his grubby shirt and heaved him to his feet. I wanted to take some more punches so I could get back to venting some rage. I would hit him in the guts for the pain he's been to Mum and May. I would bash him on the head for Nana, what she put up with. For Tommy who should be my uncle. But Mum was there, and May, and Dad, Dave. They held me off.

'Leave him son.' Dad pulled me back. They took me inside, leaving the old man nursing his jaw on the couch.

'What was that all about?' asked Mum. Eyes wide. Face thin and tired.

'Wiremu is driving Awhero to get some pizza for the stupid old man.'

Still fuming. I looked up at May – all the colour had drained from her face.

'How long have they been gone?'

'I think they've just left, maybe ten minutes, I'll try Awhero on her cell phone.'

I dialed her number. 'Only her recorded answer.

'Try Wiremu.'

Same again. No answer.

'They probably can't hear if they're listening to music. I'll just take a drive to see.'

My own voice sounded strange to me: tight and flat.

'I'll come.'

'Me too.'

May and Mum got their coats. They tried to sound calm, as if their voices could alter the inevitable. And we shared an understanding: we didn't want company. In their various states, we left them. Though all were slightly more sober following the drama between me and the old man. It would be a long while before he would be 'Granddad' again. We slipped out.

The road through the gorge was narrow, with barely enough room for two cars to pass. But we knew where we were going. Our own unofficial dead-mans curve, officially known as Nelson's bend. With its sharp bend and uneven camber. There'd been a few locals that had lost their lives when they headed off the road at that point.

Three little white crosses stand on a grassy patch at the edge of the road, over-looking the water. - We all remember Shane Porter. Two years ago, on a Saturday night. He drove off the edge of the road at the only exposed spot, and flipped his car with his two buddies inside: Boysie O'Connor and Tane

Myers. They drowned in the shallow water of the river valley - all three. We drove past the crosses. Relieved. No sign of a car off the road.

It was further on, on the straight - when we were still feeling relieved, that we saw the black outline of a car on an angle, on the opposite side of the road, nose in the ditch.

'Oh God it's them,' May gasped.

May held a torch and pointed it towards the car and we walked towards it, towards the groaning coming from the crumpled car.

Wiremu was calling out. In the passenger seat Awhero was silent. May tapped her cheek and she groaned a little. There was a cut on her head, and blood from the cut ran down the left side of her face, and on to her white blouse. May used her hanky to press against the wound, and reassured Awhero.

'My leg.' Awhero murmured.

May shone the torch on her leg which showed a large and deep gash. And then she put pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding, but it was difficult in the dark to see the extent of the injury.

'We're going to get you to the hospital,' said May.

Mum used my cell phone to call the ambulance and after a very long fifteen minutes they arrived. Awhero had become anxious and restless. May was firm: 'Don't move your head, you need to keep still.'

Wiremu was working it out.

'What.. happened? I can't re... my leg hurts,' he said.

The medics sedated Awhero a little to calm her and bound her crushed leg. May was instructed to hold her head while they transferred her. Awhero and Wiremu were carried by stretchers to the ambulance. May sat beside Awhero in the ambulance and we watched the driver close the doors and drive off, alarming the night with the screaming siren.

I'd wanted to take Wiremu and shake him and shout - 'You loser what do you think you were doing? You stupid idiot.'

Mum and I followed in the car. I felt a strange mix of relief with nausea and dread. Wiremu ended up in the orthopedic ward. When we next saw Awhero, three hours later she was in a hospital bed, in intensive care, in a white nighty. Tubes in her mouth, in her arm. A device around her skull – some sort of traction. Unconscious. The wound on her forehead had been bandaged. And

she was swelling up – bruising around her face was yellow and blue. In a few short hours beautiful Awhero had been transformed. My eyes scanned along her long length. Recognizing her familiar shape under the covers and with her one foot peeking out from underneath the sheet I could see her toes, nails painted - a little flower in the middle of each nail. I choked. The sheets were flat on the other side where her foot should have been. My eyes moved to the walls. I looked for a painting, a plant - anything. Nothing. It was all white and clinical. I counted the cycles of the respirator and tried to breathe in time with it. May's voice brought me back.

'They had to sedate her - she was thrashing about. They are worried about her neck. She's also had a minor head injury. That's what the nurse said....And her... her foot was too... too crushed.' Mays voice was flat and undramatic, like a first run on an unfamiliar script - and on the surface she seemed calm. Maybe she was drawing from her nurse days and pretending it was another woman's daughter. But her face, like I'd never seen it – had changed shape. And lines - grooves I'd never seen.

We waited for the doctor to tell us the results from the X-rays. May held and stroked Awhero's limp hand. It was two o'clock in the morning before we finally saw doctors. The intensive care specialist opened the curtains surrounding the bed and stepped into our new world. He had a young doctor with him holding a chart.

'The xrays show that Awhero has a fracture of her neck, as well as a minor head injury.... And her leg ... I'm sorry ... ' the older doctor said. 'While we assess the extent of the injury we need to keep her sedated - to keep her still.'

It turned out her neck fracture was unstable - and then everything happened in a rush. She was in surgery within the hour. We waited in the corridor, walking up and down, and we waited in the visitor's room, turning the TV off and on and then we tried to rest – for five hours, until she returned to intensive care, asleep.

We left May sleeping in the arm chair beside Awhero and went home for a few hours sleep. The place was a mess – bottles, cans scattered around the yard, dishes on the bench. And Dad and Dave were asleep in the lounge. There was no sign of the old man.

In the afternoon, back at the hospital we found him in the visitor's room, sitting, hunched over, and staring at the cover of a sport's magazine. 'What are you doing?' More of an accusation than a question. Mum's voice was tired.

'I wanted to see how the kids are.'

He had changed his shirt - I noticed that much, but I couldn't look at his face. We left him and walked to Awhero's room. He followed.

Awhero had her eyes open. She was wearing a stiff neck brace. With a tube in her throat. She couldn't talk and May was leaning over trying to understand what she was trying to say. Then I had a go. Looking into Awhero's dark eyes I could only see her pain and a volcano raged in me. At the stupid old man. At Wiremu – what they'd done. I looked up, the old man had left.

'She's asking about Wiremu.' I said to May.

'Honey he's OK.' May leaned over the bed so Awhero could see her again – 'He's broken his leg, so he is in traction in the orthopedic ward – no doubt he'll be giving those nurses their run around.' Some relief in her voice.

I tried to stay away from Wiremu - it wouldn't look good dragging him off his bed with his leg in traction and smashing him in the face – but it would be months before he could stand and take it - so I was left with imagining how I could deal to him.

I followed Mum into the orthopedic ward and into Room B. Wiremu was sharing a room with three guys – all in their twenties. Wiremu's right leg was strung up in traction. Two of the guys in Room B were in the same car when it crashed - and their friend had died. He'd been in the front passenger seat when they swerved too sharply round a bend, and the road was wet, and they hit a power pole. All this was told to us in a whisper by Wiremu in our first five minutes of entering the room. The other guy came a cropper off his motor bike and had smashed his pelvis. Had to have skin grafts on his back and leg so he could only lie on one side.

Wiremu looked sick and had been vomiting. Probably from the anesthetic Mum said. He deserved it – stupid bastard. I told him he was a dick. Then Mum did all the cheerful visitor talk – I left her to it and waited in the visitor room.

Awhero made her slow recovery - Wearing the neck brace for six weeks.

She was still having headaches and was really tired all the time but her speech had picked up. I pushed her in the wheel chair round the corridors and then after some weeks in rehab she was discharged. From home she made me drive her to visit Wiremu, via the library.

‘You’re wasting your time cuz’ he doesn’t read – unless you want to get him some comics.’

Wiremu’s leg looked pretty sore - the pins for the traction went through the bone and I imagined swinging on the weights to see his reaction. Awhero exchanged the books from the library for the ones he had on his side table. ‘I got you a couple of art books – Van Gogh and Matisse - oh and here’s Rodin.’ She held up a book to show the cover: two marble hands just touching. ‘Mum’s favourite - Rodin.’

‘Cool. That will help kill the time - Jock brought me some pencils and paper for drawing - so I’m right into that now.’

About the only thing Wiremu showed any interest in at school was art but I’d never seen him read a book – he must be bored as - I thought. Turned out he was so bored he did read them and even asked for more.

Awhero, she missed out on doing her nursing that year. And I never got to smash Wiremu in the face for being such a loser – but there was some kind of justice in seeing him hobble in pain on his crutches for a year. Every chance I got I told him he was an idiot which most of the time he agreed with – sort of took the punch out of me.

The roads were safer for a year while Wiremu couldn’t bend his knee to fit in the driver’s seat. And it was a happy day for me when I drove him home from court after he was charged with drunken driving causing serious injury. He lost his license for a year and had a fine of \$10,000.

Awhero – she healed and learned to walk on a new prosthetic foot over the next year. And Wiremu and I never forgave him for being an idiot, but somehow Awhero had. Somehow he found his way into May’s heart. He took up sculpting and turns out he’s not bad. He always liked getting his hands dirty. His first success – a woman’s leg, below the knee. A smooth and gently curved calf. Narrowing to a slender ankle. A smooth arch of a foot. Finished with perfect

toes - extended. Heel slightly elevated. As if the foot is stepping on to something.

We drove out to the beach in May's car. Both Wiremu and Awhero struggled on crutches in the soft sand to get from the car to the beach. We sat on the dunes and watched another sun go down, streaks of red with wisps of white clouds scrawled randomly across the sky, as if nothing had changed. And I'd thought what a sad picture we had now. A tight lump formed in my throat, but I looked across at them, Awhero and Wiremu, sitting with the light on their faces, looking out together at the horizon. They were holding hands. 'It's beautiful,' Awhero said. And she was smiling, and Wiremu's eyes were moist.

A year later and Awhero was at Teacher's College, wearing shorts in summer and living with her new foot. Wiremu was doing a sculpture course. I still held hopes Awhero would ditch him some day but then it wasn't going to happen. Now they've got the three girls its unlikely. He still knows she's too good for him, and yet they look so happy together.

Mum lasted till my graduation. We had the funeral two weeks before Christmas. Everyone said she'd put up a good fight for eight years.

Every year I do that speech there in front of my new classes. The year nines with their faces bright. I am standing tall, scanning the class. The hopefuls.

'I am from Ngati Whatua Iwi, AND I am Irish.' I say. And I write it on the white board, my name and my Iwi, in large and capital letters. And some time in that first term there will be a man's face on a fifty dollar note looking back at them from the white board as they sit in their scratchy new blue shirts, looking back at me.

The Gap

'Life is a joke. A fickle invention of a bored and lonely deity,' he'd called across his desk when he'd seen her looking out. He waited for a response, but Miranda wouldn't look at him, her eyes were fixed on the scaffolding at the empty construction site across the road.

As the building had grown she had taken an increasing interest in its construction and when finally it was level with her office window she'd obtained an unobstructed view.

Builder Falls to his Death

On Tuesday, Daniel Maxwell, a young apprentice who had been working on the tenth floor of a construction site in Customs Street, lost his footing and fell ninety metres to his death. According to Industrial Safety Standard's Authority there is to be a full investigation into the safety standards at Lexter Challenge.

Daniel was his name. Now he was dead she knew it. But to her he'd been Tom. Miranda folded the newspaper and placed it on her desk with the article and photo facing down, and she gazed again out of the office window. She'd had enough of Marvin's philosophical insights - His need to share with the world the discoveries he'd made through his double major in Philosophy and Statistics.

She would never forget how alive Daniel Maxwell had looked only minutes before he fell. Agile. Flexible. Strong. Cocky. Laughing at his friend, throwing some tool across to him. She was only glad she hadn't seen him fall. While he was moving through the air Miranda had been putting on some lipstick in the bathroom: 'Autumn Rush'. When she returned to her desk, the site was already being cleared, and the orange tape was being fixed: cordoning the area

where Daniel had been working. She heard the ambulance and had looked down to see his body on the pavement. And she could see it was his still legs in his work shorts framed by the gathering of heads and hats, several crouching beside him. His red, hard hat still on his head. Miranda was frozen at the window and the office staff lined up alongside her; a wall beside the window. Faces breathed at the foggy glass and they watched as the ambulance team removed his hat and placed his body on a stretcher. They covered Daniel Maxwell with a sheet, and carried his body to the ambulance. At that point Miranda had realised she was breathing too fast and she was feeling dizzy. And then she collapsed in a lump on the floor. She revived after a minute and rested on the couch in the lunch room. After an hour her boss, Damien Price, drove her home.

'You must have that bug that's going around. Stay home till you feel better.' Damien had insisted. He'd walked her from his car to the front door of the tiny flat where she lived with her mother and younger sister. Miranda made no attempt to explain herself to Damien and was relieved to be handed an excuse for her behaviour, and she shut herself in her bedroom for the rest of the day.

They, Tom and her, had been embarrassingly close, and sure, she could have turned her desk to avoid him but truth was, it was the only reason she'd had for turning up to work these days; the office was cramped and the air conditioning droned on and it was filled with Marvins - IT clones with only minor variations: Carl was obsessed with Star Trek and Shane studied astrophysics. Jerome painted small fantasy figures and Marvin spouted philosophy and random facts.

One month ago, Daniel began work on the construction site, and after only a few days Miranda had been found by his disarming smile. She'd caught a glimpse of it just before turning away under the pretense of an office errand. He'd looked directly at her and she'd been taken aback, not by his physical appearance - sure, he was tanned and had sun bleached hair and a long, lean, yet muscular build which she *had* noticed, but by his invasive and confident warmth. His smile leapt across the gap between the buildings as if to say, 'I would love to get to know you.'

The next time it happened - the smile, she was more prepared, and had willed herself to meet him, with her eyes, and her own version of a warm friendly grin. Without words to create their usual uncertainty she had surprised herself at her boldness.

'Can I borrow your stapler?' Marvin leaned on the grey wall beside Miranda's desk as if he'd popped over for a chat. Wordlessly she handed it to him and stood, turned her back to him and walked across the bland carpeted floor to the drinking water to fill her bottle. He followed her. Miranda had managed to get time off that afternoon with the excuse of a dental appointment. Only Marvin seemed to doubt her.

'Didn't you go to the dentist three weeks ago for a check up and everything was fine?' At least he'd kept his voice down, leaning into her as she walked back to her desk. Whispering. Close enough that she could smell his own special blend of aftershave and perspiration, and feel his breath on her neck. She had cringed at the proximity.

There was nothing rugged about Marvin. His skin was soft and pale, and his hair, medium brown. His glasses, with an older style frame. He had an annoying habit of pushing them with his finger on the bridge, moving them up his nose at regular intervals.

Miranda slipped into the pew at the back of the church. She studied the photo on the order of service and saw that he was wearing a suit, smiling. The smile was true, but not the suit. Tom... Daniel, looked different somehow – too formal. Though she admitted to herself she had never seen him this close, she found herself becoming irritated by the poor representation. And they, his family, blonde heads from where she sat, were seated in the front row. Brother's and friends stood to take their turns to speak, to the congregation, to the coffin. Miranda thought of his broken body stretched out inside the coffin and without warning she felt a lump rise in her throat. It took her breath away. She gave an audible gasp and her eyes pooled with tears. The various speakers went on to tell of the man who was both funny and brave, who was daring and bright. Who liked to lark about. A young man with broad shoulders who introduced himself as Mark, Daniel's older brother, described their last surf together. His voice

broke up several times as he described the competition on the water, on the sports field, in the pub.

'I'm gonna miss you mate.' Another crack as he faltered towards the end of his speech. Mark the brother spoke towards the coffin. He took a white rose from a basket and rested it on the lid.

Miranda reflected on the way things had developed between her and Daniel. She had wanted to meet him, and just a week before the accident he had mimed that he wanted her phone number. Miranda had written it on a large piece of office paper, as an after thought squeezing her name under the number, too small to read, and she waited till Marvin had left for lunch. She had held the paper up to the window.

'I'll ring.' He'd mouthed it with actions, and he'd written the number on an off cut piece of timber. Then for two days she had looked out for him but he hadn't shown up. When he did return Miranda thought he looked different – something had changed. With him not meeting her gaze she wondered if he was unwell. In fact she had made up her mind she would wait around at the bottom of the building that day and meet him face to face as he left work. Then he fell.

With no black garment in her wardrobe, Miranda had bought a loose and ghastly black dress from the charity shop for the funeral which sucked out every bit of colour from her all ready pale face as she'd stood in front of her gloomy mirrored self. In black, even her colourful auburn hair looked faded. She looked sickly. She'd had to get dressed in a public toilet in the park to avoid leaving work in her funereal garb. She'd felt like a witch coming out from the darkness of her cave and into the judgment of the unforgiving daylight.

After the brother, a young woman stood to speak. Tiny, yet curvaceous in her tight and short black dress, she had café con leche skin and looked as if she had just stepped off the set of a Spanish soap opera. Her hair was dark and silky straight. Black was good on her.

'I am Lucia.' The young woman's voice cracked and she pulled out from her handbag a lace hanky, and dabbed her eyes. 'I have always loved Daniel. Even though we only got back together just last week. We both felt it would be

different this time ... and Danny...' she turned and looked at the coffin, 'Danny, I'm going to miss you my love.' She took her rose and placed it with the others. Lucia sat down.

Miranda felt the pressing in of the pseudo gothic walls of the building, followed by a wave of nausea rising from her stomach. She thought she would choke from the stuffy blend of church aromas; of dust and wood polish, of mixed perfumes and aftershaves. Miranda willed herself to stand and she made her way passed two weeping girls seated at the end of the pew. Holding her breath she managed to walk the few steps necessary to get herself to the church door and into the fresh air. She walked down the church steps and crossed the road. Breathing again as she reached the grass she sat down on a wooden bench overlooking a neglected fountain. The park was empty, but for the sweeper clearing the leaves from beneath the autumn oaks. She breathed deeply and let the tears run down her cheeks. It was Tom she would grieve for. Not Daniel. Her Tom, their Daniel.

A cool breeze lifted some leaves and ruffled her hair and then she looked up at the figure on the path. It was Marvin, walking towards her. He waved. Marvin, with a bounce in his step. She groaned. She wanted him to leave her alone, just walk away. He sat beside her. She braced herself, ready for some cynical philosophical take on life. *Life is an empty bubble floating on a sea.....* But he was quiet. Out of his pocket he took a clean and neatly folded handkerchief and passed it to her and she wiped her eyes.

'Keep it,' he said. It was soft on her skin and had the hint of the scent of fresh laundry detergent. She felt the strange warmth of his arm beside her as they sat under a grey sky, saying nothing, watching the sweeper and the fountain.