

AUT Master of Creative Writing Thesis

Michael Botur

Shorty

***Shorty* is a manuscript collection of short stories by Michael Botur, accompanied by the exegesis *Community Watch*.**

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Dedication

**Much dedication went into *Shorty*, but only a few
dedications came out –**

***Shorty* is especially dedicated to Sarsy
Benikowsky, who believes in me.**

**Shorty is secondly dedicated to the inaugural 2008 Master of
Creative Writing class.**

I would also like to give a shout out to Scruffy



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'Community Watch'

Extruding the Cultural Characters in *Shorty*

'We'd forgive most things if we knew the facts.'

- Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter*

1. Introduction

The eight short stories in *Shorty* examine themes including racism, oppression, conflict, social perception, miscommunication, struggles over meaning, truth and ethnic identity. New Zealand is a country reinventing itself from its colonial past (Wyn 2004 p. 277); identity-making in this country is a 'dynamic process' (Liu et al. 2005 p.11) which generates new cultural forms and practices. The concept of culture and subculture links the aforementioned themes in *Shorty*.

These short stories are the 'shorty' (see definition page 6) of novel-length stories. As the author, I have used the short story form to construct characters that explore themes of identity and culture. Through imaginative fiction based on everyday experiences I have endeavoured to own the characters and manipulate them to explore dilemmas of being a New Zealander. The success or failure of the characters to embody their cultures and find meaning in a fluid social context generates tension, and tension provides storyline.

2. *Shorty*: Function and Form

Shorty is a collection of urban tales, set in buildings. It is not a collection that describes green natural landscapes; instead, the environments are landscapes of concrete, glass and plastic – artificial, much like certain *Shorty* characters who construct themselves artificially.

Shorty is a multiple entendre which references NZ speech, US speech and NZ pop culture. In NZ parlance, 'Shorty' refers to *Shortland Street* but my intention is that the term should reference a different piece of 30-minute entertainment: the short story. Slang derived from US media (rap music, TV and movies) influences the dialogue in most of *Shorty's* stories, in particular the speech of the younger characters. These are the reasons the title *Shorty* was chosen for the collection.

The following is a definition of the noun *Shorty* from the publicly-authored forum Urban Dictionary

(Shorty www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=shorty Oct 10 2008)

1. 'Shorty' originally used to mean a young man, new to the game, a person much younger than you. Now, commercial rappers have turned the meaning upside down to mean a 'fine female' or hanger-on.

Young hangers-on trying to express themselves are found in the stories *Axe of God*, *Model Railway*, *Iesu Ah Scab*, *Eating Is Cheating* and others.

‘Shorty’ also refers to characters aping the subcultures that they advocate, acting as shorties (hangers-on) to a lifestyle identifiable through its fashion, speech and values. According to Dick Hebdige (pp.106-12 in Subculture: The Meaning of Style 1979):

Members of a subculture often signal their membership by making *tangible* choices in clothing styles, hairstyles and footwear. However, intangible elements, such as common interests, dialects and slang, music genres and gathering places can also be an important factor. Youth subcultures offer participants an identity outside of that ascribed by social institutions such as family, work, home and school.

The tangible elements which Hebdige refers to are props visible to an interlocutor who reacts to and defines a subculture. This reactionary interlocutor is usually the ‘general community’, ie. a united cultural majority or ‘norm.’

The formative relationship between style and subculture has been defined by Michael Brake In *Comparative Youth Culture*:

Youth subcultures (are) modes of expression or lifestyles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant systems — and which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions rising from the wider societal context.

Props are an important part of power relations, contributing to the fetishising of subcultures. When this happens a style becomes recognisable to those outside the subculture. Style is ‘Visible affectations by members of the subculture (...) interpreted by members of the dominant culture (Youth Subculture October 2008 from www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth_culture_2008 .) Visibility and recognition

are vital to certain subcultures such as skinheads and punks (Michael Brake 1985.) Subcultural stylistic props found in *Shorty* include Doc Marten boots, Converse sneakers, hooded sweaters, cigarettes, marijuana, RTD liquor, Che Guevara t-shirts, handbags and purses, trophies and rugby balls.

3. Subculture Considered

Language and communication – and lack thereof – give form to the stories told in *Shorty*. Manners of speaking and vocabulary in NZ appear tied to subcultures, and every youth arguably identifies with at least one subculture (Martin 2002 p.51.) Meanwhile, the emergence of a recognisable period of youthfulness, in conjunction with a person's age, has coincided with or caused the ousting of elderly people in a reserved social position. American media has exacerbated this divide; NZ subcultures which reference US subcultures seem to become the shorty of US attitudes and lingo. As Lloyd Martin reports on youth subcultural confliction, a subcultural youth may 'Speak about connections with a global, black American subculture, even though it is white America that is selling them to her... It is a game of mutual exploitation' (Martin, *ibid.*)

Anonymity and inarticulation must be discussed here. Several lead characters in *Shorty* are rendered as anonymous narrators. This is because I can be expressing the voice of a whole archetype, and not a

specific individual. Many characters are the shorty in a difficult relationship with loved ones, colleagues or neighbours. These characters are people who are not well educated, confident or articulate, because they do not value these qualities. Some of these characters are stifled by the roles they have grown into, although 'It is a game that (the subcultural person) can succeed in, unlike (that person)'s involvement in the world that you represent' (Martin, *ibid.*) However, in their stories, my characters are sometimes redeemed by some nobility inherent in their humanity, a nobility which is recognised across all cultures. Humanity – a quality common in everyday life – satisfies the reader.

The characters describe their environment with difficulty and conflict, in a style similar to Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* characters. This style is anathema to authors such as Ian McEwan whose characters are articulate and culturally refined. *Shorty* aims to balance the expression of inarticulate characters against those empowered by articulation, and investigate this (im)balance.

In *Shorty*, archetypal characters have engaged with an environment, and their character is refined because of this engagement. Rough descriptions of some subcultural archetypes in *Shorty* are as follows:

- Socialist advocate ('hippie')
- confused teenage voyeur
- spunky personal trainer
- bumpkin farmer

- colloquial skinhead
- victimised Samoan schoolboy
- trashy dole mum
- mistrusted homie hoodlum

Most of the characters in *Shorty* lack a concern for art, culture and scholarship; the minds of the characters have not been developed by formal education and training.

It is debatable whether my characters have been *born* white supremacists, misogynists, gangsters and so forth. The interrogation of their (sub)cultures asks whether their behaviour is primal or not – are the characters I'm dealing with posturing, is their subcultural identity authentic/natural, or are they somewhere in-between?

4. Environments

In *Shorty*, many characters are unsure if their lives are 'normal' or not. The characters are described along subcultural and ethnic lines, if *ethnic* is defined as 'Belonging to or deriving from the cultural, racial, religious, or linguistic traditions of a people or country' (Random House Unabridged Dictionary 2006.) However, there is not always synchrony between a character's ethnic group and their subculture. My characters position themselves, and they have been positioned. Another way to

consider this is Sarah Thornton's identification of subcultural communities being envisaged as subterranean compared with the enlightenedness of the 'public.' (Thornton 1997 p.2)

Observational time spent at the gym, at church, working in an office, and riding public transport has provided me with cultural settings in which characters can represent themselves. 'Ordinary' New Zealanders, as Westerners, spend most of their days in the workplace and the home, with transport, education, recreation, religion and sleep filling in the gaps to round out each twenty-four hour day. The environments of public transport, schools, shrines and recreational facilities can be either wholesome communities or can be described as communities of strangers; Most of these environments are both. Robert Park identified as far back as 1915 that

In the city environment the neighbourhood tends to lose much of the significance which it possessed in simpler forms of society. The easy means of communication and transportation (...) tend to destroy the intimacy of the neighbourhood. (Park 1915 p.17)

This psychological dissonance inspired most of the stories in *Shorty*.

5. An Ethnography of Leading Characters in *Shorty*

The leading questions implied by my strategies of character construction and storytelling can be summarised by the following questions:

What do we expect from somebody belonging to this culture? Where is a person of this culture likely to come from in an ethnographic and geographic sense? How has this culture written itself, and how have I represented the culture in my work?

Dirty Hands

'FYI, you can buy working class pants and cut out the middle man. Middle man'll fleece ya.' - Danny

Dirty Hands deals with people categorised as *not fitting in* in the country they have arrived in, and thus being treated as inferior citizens. In this particular case, a descendant of immigrants from India disparages more recent Indian immigrants because he poorly positions himself in a socialist-activist subculture. In this story, the 'settled' immigrant does not accept the later immigrants as unextraordinary.

However, the reader is also asked whether or not the candidates *should* be treated as immigrants or not – are these 'late arrivals' actually exceptional?

The twist at the end of *Dirty Hands* is the revelation that one later immigrant, Prayag, is a 'normal' Kiwi in that he is revealed to be a loudish speaker of fluent NZ English in comparison to Jyoti, his partner, who is a repressed worker of relative dignity. The character of Danny the (conflicted) bureaucrat/socialist, meanwhile, is taken for granted as a Kiwi

simply because he distances himself from the immigrants, who work as cleaners beneath him. Danny performs to affiliate himself with a subculture of (impotent) socialism ('hippiedom') because 'Through performances, a set of perceived norms are referenced' (Falconer & Kingham 2007 p.182.) Danny variously restrains and indulges Prayag and Jyoti to display his power. He is a hippie of hollow affirmation because he realises he will 'never be able to break down the real social relations of capitalism' (Stratton 1997 p.187 from *The Subcultures Reader*.)

It was following WWII that there was 'a shift from trade-based occupations and manufacturing to a service economy' (Stratton p.274) enabling Danny to simultaneously proclaim the virtues of bluecollar occupations while working in the service economy realm, which has been a domain of females.

Danny asserts his kinship with Prayag, a male, through their handshake and dialogue because 'Identities are vulnerable and always need to be (re)proven and (re)asserted' (Holland J et al 1993) – because Danny is insecure about working in a traditionally feminine receptionist position and taking orders from a woman, he must assert himself.

One of the reasons for participation in subculture is 'To get some relief from the daily routine ie. *Establish an alternate social identity*' (Holland, ibid.) Although 'members of subcultures do not necessarily seek to subvert norms' – they may consider their action 'normal practice,' (Falconer p.186) – Danny is clearly posturing. He interprets being a

hippie activist as necessitating that he wear Doc Marten boots and jeans, and idolise Che Guevara. Danny is technically a whitecollar worker, therefore he can be called an inauthentic advocate of the working class. It may be from the internet that Danny has compiled his incongruent identities, as his computer literacy is referenced on several occasions.

Presumptions are made about Jyoti by Danny, who has rebuked fellowship with other Indian immigrants and lends his affiliation in name only. ('How do you pronounce this shit anyway?') The immigrant cleaners may become fully settled, but if others classify them as immigrants, they may suffer this categorisation. Jyoti is given few chances to explain her work conduct, meaning that when she is invited to speak, her speech is jumbled, rushed and disempowered.

Model Railway

'I was bound to be disappointed if I was trying to see things that weren't there.' - Narrator

This is a story about miscommunication: specifically, the misinterpretation of a pair of prostitute-pickpockets' motives by a fellow passenger, a teenager. Wyn and Harris have noted that gender relations

mutate within subcultural groups (Wyn & Harris 2004 p.274.) It is difficult to locate the narrator of *Model Railway* in a specific subculture, but we can identify that he is obeisant and respectful towards women, speaks Noughties Kiwi teenage parlance, and lacks confidence, hence his voyeuristic actions. He probably comes from a stable home, because he is generous and references that his father took him to model train clubs. The reluctance of the female characters Zebra Girl and Purple Girl to engage with the narrator is because he doesn't apply pressure to them, and they already receive excessive attention from other passengers. It is implied that they are institutionalised and will only react to pressure from an overbearing interrogator – ie. a pimp or john.

Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber have investigated the relationship of girls to subcultures. Although it is hard to locate Zebra and Purple in their subculture (Prostitute? Pickpocket?), what we can see is that because these characters are barely involved with family and motherhood, they are more pivotal to their specific (and deviant) area of work (McRobbie and Garber 1975 p.113.) They have substituted traditional family for a much smaller, tighter unit of two.

We should also look at the narrator's mental health, which is implied to have suffered from the death of the narrator's sister (page 1.) In terms of health, 'youth are often positioned as helpless victims of social change' (Wyn pp 279-280.) Wyn writes that research on Australian youth (who share most cultural characteristics with New Zealanders) found diversity of lifestyle (sports, art, community construction) and positive relationships

help overcome poor mental health. The narrator in *Model Railway* has lacked these aforementioned remedies since his sister died. Playing with model trains has not refreshed his outlook – rather, it has blinkered his point of view.

As for the narrator's internet tendencies, 'the internet is a 'safe space for youth (...) where needs for information and support are met' (Wyn quoting Lynne Hillier in *Hecate* pp.119-27.) The narrator has been allowed to cultivate unrefined ideas in this safe, unregulated internet space. Indeed, the narrator is surprised when it is ultimately revealed that the girl he idolises as an innocent fashion model is actually a deceptive thief.

Paradise Lots

'Nobody told her her hair looked pretty with the pink loops securing her braids, or that her new cap looked fetching. She got wolf whistles though, everywhere, all the time.'

Codes of success are linked with anxiety amongst (young) women (Wyn 280.) The principal characters in *Paradise Lots*, Gina (empowered through business nous) and Aroha (empowered through physical

qualities), aren't primarily young, but they are anxious. Queensland's Life-Patterns project (Donald, McRobbie and Garber 2000) looked at measures taken by people to underscore their mental health, especially the struggle to achieve a balance in life activities. It was found that circumstances must be actively engaged with, and pragmatic choices made to invoke stimuli. This is why Gina goes gymming and engages with Aro, who is revealed to have her own struggle for lifestyle balance.

Gina and Aro have both been successful in domains traditionally dominated by males: real estate and personal training, respectively. This is relevant to the prowess of females in the classroom (Donald, McRobbie and Garber.) It can be taken that the pressures applied against Gina and Aro are mostly internal (guilt, self-doubt) but also external in terms of their persecution by the Paradise Lots residents and Gina's colleagues Tarariki and Mt Victor.

Regarding internal pressures, the reasons that Gina fears the gym are simple – exercise fatigues the body, and Gina already works hard. Aro, on the other hand, is used to the fatigue and endurance of exercise, but cannot leave her domestic situation and move to a safe, isolated domicile, as Gina has.

Gina and Aro are not as young as the Life Patterns subjects surveyed, but they are not fully matured either. Gina hasn't learned to confront those who mock her bulimia although she has a more powerful professional position than her accusers. Aro, on the other hand, is appreciated by most people for her physicality, but is victimised at home

by her neighbours, when she is not protected by her work. Thus, the subculture of gym prowess, and the condition of gymorexia (excessive concern for an overexercised physical appearance - Urban Dictionary Gymorexic <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gymorexic> November 2008), are shown to have identifiers (physical refinement, exhaustedness, high thresholds for achievement). Prowess in a competitive gym is not social protection enough, however.

Subcultural denial exists with Gina and Aro, located in their gymorexia. They come together through the personal trainer relationship which reveals what they cannot deny to themselves: Aro can't deny those who tell her that her physical prowess is worthless without vindication; and Gina can't deny eating binges. In comparing gymorexia to anorexia, the treatment of these women in traditionally masculine roles suggests that there are sexualised forces withholding them – 'those who have experienced such abuse are more likely to have more serious and chronic (anorexic) symptoms' (Carter et al 2006 pp257-69.)

Aro and Gina's story is one of withstanding social pressure in a Western cultural environment in which the pressures of physical prowess and business success are unrelenting, and must be confronted.

Eating Is Cheating

'You ask him what the hell he's searching for and he won't say because you're pretty sure he doesn't know. He starts heading up the stairs. He's headin for the top so he can look down at you.' - Narrator

Eating Is Cheating concerns a couple, who contribute very little to the world, finding redemption through their relationship. The female narrator goes out of her way to wreck the life of a virtuous visitor who enlightens her husband. Whilst attacking her own partner, the Narrator withdraws from social interaction, cutting herself off from friends and work and especially the religious community into which she is invited to join.

Anita Harris writes that 'When young people are reluctant to participate (in communication) their silences and absence must be interpreted carefully, for disengagement may be a way to retain power and knowledge' (Harris 2004.) By disengaging from the church and her social peers, the Narrator feels she is strengthening herself through consolidation. Furthermore, the Narrator has an uneasy relationship with unfamiliar cultures. Her own subculture is not tightly defined, but is implied as being 'trashy' and unrefined – Brake's subcultural model defining subcultures (dress; argot; values) can be witnessed here in considering the narrator's polyester clothes and bare feet, slang and expletives, and her solipsistic values. Normalcy and decency are less rigidly defined in the central city; in contrast, suburban areas are associated with more rigid codes of appropriate conduct (Falconer p.190) – hence the suburban Narrator's cultural insecurity as she is delivered to church in Act II.

An ongoing issue is the maturity of this narrator. An adult identity does not arrive during adolescence, rather, it is 'searched for' (Wyn 275.) The narrator is the one left behind when partner Jude elopes with their Christian neighbour Eve (a siren/temptress who represents the uncertainty of foreign cultures). The narrator reflects on the childhood independence forced on her when her parents abandoned her to the care of a zealous auntie. An important motif in this story is the search for a missing a rabbit's foot which symbolises belief: belief and strength in the couple's family relationship.

Looking at the narrator's apparent Maori ethnicity, it is important to note that as an indigenous person, 'Growing up means learning about 'interdependence' within a matrix... rather than becoming 'independent' (Wyn 278.) The Narrator grew up without parental support and received confused ideas about whanau support from her isolationist auntie. This helped to position the Narrator in a culture of xenophobia and mistrust, while she came to loathe the Christian spirit which should have supported her.

What ultimately happens is that the narrator watches Jude regain his mana and become restored to the centre of his world – he is judged worthy, and judges himself worthy (Martin 2002 p.157.) Mana is the opposite of marginalisation – it is passion for life nurtured by commitment to and concern for others.

Jude has been uneducated and without aspiration; he married young and has basic pleasures such as smoking marijuana and enjoying the

stereo in his work van. Jude is Maori or Pakeha or somewhere in between, and is removed from tradition in that he does not have a legacy of standards to live up to, and no whanau or community to impress.

Eventually the Narrator joins Jude's newfound spirit of redemption, opening her up to interaction with the elements which she fears – charity, responsibility and trust.

HART Act

'I knocked up five sheilas,' he said.

'Course ya did, mate.'

'We're not fags.'

'No one's sayin you are.'

HART Act's protagonist is a character from a confused subculture who finds it difficult to negotiate other cultures. Pieman MacManus has a colloquial-Celtic name; Kiwi ruralness is his subculture – he celebrates Southland rugby, doesn't wear shoes and works labour jobs. Pieman becomes empowered in an exotic situation – a privileged urban fertility clinic – and discovers a way to escape the abusive relationship imposed by his mate.

Kelly Barclay writes that 'Only sport and war have provided for expression of identity in New Zealand' (in New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations 2005 p.108.) Barclay is referring to the All Blacks and ANZACs in battle against foreign agents. The sport/war

expression culture is certainly represented in *HART Act* – Yatesy and Pieman compete, they fight, and they do not love each other mutually. Pieman's subculture 'espouses the normative white Australasian values of the pub, sports and backyard barbecue' (Butcher & Thomas 2003 p.200); His ethnicity is self-assured as domestic (Walker 1988 pp88-89.)

Pieman believes that he loves Yatesy, but subscribes to a macho hierarchy which stifles any homosexuality in its embrace. A study of schoolboy cultures by J.C. Walker in *Louts and Legends* (1988) notes that there is a predominant attitude that it is possible for someone to be a 'good bloke' and accepted even if heterosexual attraction does not target a normal female (the character of Huggins). However, Pieman still steers clear of 'poofterish' behaviour (rings, haircare, confidence with women - Walker), and strongly affirms that he is not a 'fag'. A close bond with a male peer, to Pieman, is associated with homosexuality, a concept which is confusing to him – Pieman is unable to grasp the concept of man-love or *menschkeit* (Peter Swank

<http://www.peterswank.com/menschkeit.htm>.)

Pieman comes from a culture which suppresses women; however, his culture also dictates that his (female) partner must be kept proximate because "it's just wrong" not to have a female partner. Pieman fears that 'any abnormal masculine behaviour will be promptly assimilated to feminine behaviour' (Walker). Pieman and Yatesy's relationship was forged in the schoolyard and hasn't evolved far since – Yatesy has formed Pieman's subcultural values for him, and the story of *HART Act*

describes Pieman discovering a virility which will enable him to break out of this set of values.

Go Ya Own Way

'Cute wee family overall really, a bit, well for Marrys they was anyway. I don't have a soft spot for they people much, considerin all the shit they done to me.' - Narrator

In New Zealand, skinhead subcultural identity is generally regarded as illegitimate because of its association with white supremacy and refutation by some Pakeha about the status of tangata whenua (McCreanor pp.52-68 from *NZ Identities: Departures and Destinations* 2005.) The skinhead's other pose, the pretension to be working class, is related to the original conflation of the racist skinhead subculture utilising the black West Indian music of ska (Stratton p.188.) These contradictions set up the conflict which forms the narrator's character in *Go Ya Own Way*.

Contemporary skinheads are typically a breed of white male who endorse brutality. The narrator of *Go Ya Own Way* is a Christchurch skinhead who unleashes his personal frustrations in the urban environment.

The skinhead postures himself as working class. This stems from consumer markets catering to create different youth 'styles' following the end of WWII, when incomes rose for young workers' (Stratton *ibid*); it

became possible to emulate working class identity while coming from a different background. Furthermore, 1980s turbulence affected standards of school completion and the reality of the post-school environment (White & Wyn 2004), encouraging the fraction of identity (contributing worker vs cynical outsider) found within this narrator. We know the narrator is a child of the 1980s through his constant allusions to 1980s music. The story's title and theme, 'Go Ya Own Way,' refers to the way that individualism is an important state to attain (for young males), and that breaking rules helps construct this individualistic image (Frosh p. 183 from Young Masculinities 2002.)

The narrator and the Maori character Mick are searching for cultural pride. The narrator reveals that he comes from a legacy of self-assured nobility underscored by deep frustration and resentment that a different ethnic group shares his circumstances. He spends the story describing a family with similar problems to his own, but blackguards the other family to affirm his own, because 'people must constantly cite 'norms' and renegotiate their identity, which is multi-layered' (Falconer *ibid.*) The narrator does not have an ancestral history of skinheadism; instead, his 'unique, new systems of meaning become developed in their own right, with their own understandings of values, in association with deviant behaviour' (Falconer *ibid.*) So, while the narrator affirms himself as a proud and honourable person, his behaviour is that of deviance, hypocrisy and destruction.

Subcultures such as skinheadism 'provide a means of rebirth without having to undergo the pain of symbolic death' (Stratton *ibid.*) Self-loathing drives this desire for rebirth; the Narrator 'dies' in severing loyalty to his family and their friends. Embracing skinheadism is for this character 'an attempt to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in (his) parent culture... combining this with a confrontational element' (Stratton.) Here we have the son of a Briton embracing Nazism, which in reality was once an enemy of his ethnicity.

This 'unemployed working class' narrator, who wears steel-capped boots and braces, remains in his social confines by pushing in all directions, inviting hostility and causing a centripetal effect to try to affirm his indigeneity.

Iesu Ah Scab

'He rubbed Iesu's afro. Iesu folded into himself then found the power in his thighs to stand up, albeit hunched over.'

Iesu Ah Sam is a target of bullying and repression because he is a 'fob' (Fresh-off-the-Boat referring to the original importation of Polynesian people to contribute cheap labour in NZ's industries and processing.) He has grown up in a home insulated in its Samoan identity and is unconfident in English language. Iesu can be seen as having some advantages – a loving father and rugby talent – but he has been held

back by an overbearing mother who established herself in the community at the expense of producing a well-rounded son.

Iesu Ah Scab concerns an ethnographic conflict with social undertones played out on the rugby field at a high school. Sport is the situation identified by Teaiwa and Mallon (New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations 2005) as representing the 'ambivalent kinship' which Pacific Islanders arguably receive in NZ. Iesu is gifted at rugby, and is the son of the late Lika who had been matriarch of the community. 'Fob' could be identified as Iesu's subculture; certainly, Iesu's identity is bound up with persecution and insecurity. In spite of his rugby prowess, his difficulty with language makes communication unfair on him. Iesu is easy to ostracise.

The rugby field is a scene of jealousy and tension and Iesu's size advantage is not welcomed. With youth, individuals gravitate towards solidarity and collective affiliations (Wyn p.275) and this can be at the expense of others – hence, we see another Pacific Islander, Sione/Chonny, leading the rugby collective at the school at the expense of Iesu, who is treated as *extraordinary*. The character of Coach, meanwhile, homogenizes the team and makes no exceptions for Iesu's shortcomings. This is because urban political power (Falconer p.182) is being upheld – with Lika gone, the threat of non-Anglo achievement is diminished. Iesu is not afforded the 'hospitality without subservience' which the tangata whenua should afford him, due to his ethnicity as a tuakana (Polynesian sibling of Maori, from Teaiwa and Mallon.)

Iesu is accustomed to an environment of scarcity and silence, so commonplace understandings and resources confound him. This infantilises him in the way that his mother had, despite Iesu being physically mature. A significant void is felt when his mother is removed, because 'Youth is a relational concept that draws its meaning from the ways in which both 'childhood' and 'adulthood' are conceptualised' (Wyn 275.) It is only when Mr Steele treats Iesu as an adult that he is able to overcome those who suppress him.

Iesu has a 'hybrid identification' (Teaiwa & Mallon), in that he is a foreign-born Kiwi who is ostracised within his country. Iesu has been 'targeted for assistance' (ibid) by his mother as Polynesians sometimes are in society, creating resentment. Iesu is held back from full kinship in the 'quintessentially Kiwi' (ibid p.209) sport of rugby to advantage others, despite the All Blacks model being a coming together of Pakeha, Polynesian and Maori (ibid p.212.)

Axe of God

'Gotta fight tag with tag, bro. Care about my place of ah, what was it, work eh.'

What happens to 'Big G' Scott in *Axe of God* is a clash between the threatening 'homie' gangsta subculture and the establishment of propriety and responsibility, embodied by Dick's character. Dick is portrayed as an uptight 'square' in comparison. G's expression is from 'a lifestyle developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant systems' (Brake.) It is not specified whether G is aware of the offence he is causing, or whether his offensiveness is unintentional and natural, because as a young male, G is going through a period of life in which it is almost expected that he challenge authority or normative functions (Falconer 183.) G could have ended up belonging to other affirmative subcultures such as hippies or skinheads.

This clash is a reaction to the acerbic subculture with which G associates himself: the gangsta subculture, which endorses ignorance and menace. We can define gangsta proponents as youth who are both extremely parochial (proud of their neighbourhood) and worshipful of US imports such as Grand Theft Auto, rap music and bandanas. They act dumb and are prone to violence to defend their beliefs. They are futurists – the opposite of atavists – and often they posture, but can also become authentic. Dick senses the culture that he is up against, but can't get support to oppose it because those in opposition to a subculture are less empowered to restrict behaviour when it is not illegal (Falconer 190.)

The popular prescription against this subculture is also 'an integral part in the lifecycle, by creating moral panic, then popularising and commercialising (the gangsta) sub-culture' (Martin pp. 66-74.) The panic

G creates is what encourages him. Public spaces for young people have diminished in recent times, and those that do exist are increasingly policed (White & Wyn 2004.) This may be an excuse for G to 'play' at work, ie. To abuse his own work space. Furthermore, ethnic youth often 'report racist surveillance and distrust in their relations with authorities in public places (Wyn 283), so his perception of oppression is what spurs G on.

Youth can and do exploit their subcultural effect (Martin pp70-73.) The reader should dissect G's commitment to the subculture: The fact that G succeeds in his particular mission by being challenged then exonerated suggests that he may be a poser who is protected by an emerging acceptance of his subculture (accepted by the characters Wimzy, Jude and Po-Lady). Lloyd Martin's treatment of youth subcultures in Chapter 2 of *The Invisible Table* is evidence of this acceptance. Falconer acknowledges that 'Acts are stunts' and that subcultural activities spike at the weekend (Falconer 184-88,) so it is likely that G knew exactly what would transpire at his work on Saturday morning.

6. Conclusions

Preserving slang and idiomatic speech has been very important in portraying how *Shorty* characters position themselves and how the reader positions them. The speech forms deployed are a conduit into the idioms and meanings of the character's subculture. The subculture manipulates communication and is manipulated *by* communication.

Most of the speakers in *Shorty* want to protect and defend themselves although there are characters who disgorge their message over others because they lack the capacity to express themselves subtly or manipulatively. It is the struggle for expression that defines *Shorty's* characters and interrogates which subculture the author, reader and character feel that character belongs to.

Shorty gives, has given and will give expression to archetypal characters of varying relevance and visibility. In these stories, their expression has been brought about usually through conflict – getting in trouble with the law, fending off love rivals, harassing or being harassed, coming to terms with their own relationships and beliefs, and other conflicts.

The most unique feature of *Shorty* is the manipulation of English language. To obtain the truthful voices of the characters who I have exposed, it has been necessary to spell words how the characters would spell them and to stretch punctuation to achieve the necessary expression when the reader interfaces with the written fiction.

To get to know Danny, Zebra Girl, Aro, Eve, Pieman, Mick, Iesu, Big G and others, the characters need to dialogue on their own terms, in their own language. It is no use treating these characters as if they have predictable ethnographic identities because it is the incongruence of their egos which defines them. *Shorty* is a dissection of some of the many conflicted identities existing within New Zealand: self-hating immigrants, juvenile voyeurs, hollow gym junkies, trash/haters, urban bumpkins, desperate skinheads, orphaned aliens and cunning crooks. These identities, whether known to each character or not, are responses to the complicated opportunities in New Zealand which have shaken up the roles of men and women, deconstructed religion, indigeneity and identity and made one's ethnicity a challenge rather than a right.

As Graham Greene put it, We would forgive most things if we knew the facts.

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Dirty Hands

After Danny's fourth attempt to spell Jyoti's name correctly on the cleaning contract, he gave Jyoti back her novelty pen and had her spell her own name. While she wrote, he picked up the World Vision snack box and shook it like a baby he couldn't shut up. He fished out a Cookie Time and crumbled it through the wrapper. Then he found a packet of cashews, and snapped these individually through the plastic, like bubble wrap. Then he resumed his seat at Reception, yawning and adjusting his underwear.

It looked like it was raining outside, but it was just the sun making the shattered kernels of safety glass sparkle in the windows. Although the rain had died, the pavement was sodden black and car windscreens were thick with droplets. Inside, the light and warmth were artificial.

'We get 'em for free if the snacks are broken,' Danny explained to Jyoti, slapping the snack box. 'Used to have a vending machine but those things are like coolies – you chuck money at them and half the time they don't even work.' There were images of sick Indian orphans with huge heads printed on the box. There were black things on their heads, either flies or curls of hair. He chucked the cookie back in the snack box, on top of the counter, and took his seat. Danny put his feet up on the desk and grabbed the pen back off Jyoti. The pen contained the W-h-i-t-e-w-a-s-h letters, which condensed and expanded when the pen was tipped.

'Pull up one of them chairs,' he instructed, 'I'll talk slow if you can't speak good.' Jyoti did as she was told. She clutched the yellow Pak N Save bag holding her purse. The bag had cost her.

Prayag had been out front smoking. When he came into reception, the bell at the top of the door jingled, making Danny curse and sit up to check who it was. Cool air followed him in. Prayag was a little man, but he was above Danny. He came over and checked out the spelling of Jyoti's name on the contract. He gave it to her, said something, and yanked it out of her hands, slicing her index finger. She sucked on it to heal it. Prayag

stank like an ashtray filled with bleach, and Danny turned his head away. He had white marks on his bumpy fingers and his Polo shirt had blooming white patches which looked like an attempt at tie-dyeing. He was dirty-thin – there wasn't much person there to deal with, and he was covered in stubble, some of which was bleached light brown, as were patches on his ponytail. Danny glared at the sign which read RECEPTION, resident beside his business card holder, and took it down so it wouldn't come between the two men. He indicated the part of the sign before the letter R.

'Labels, dog.'

He *tsked*, searched for eye contact with Prayag, but stubble made Prayag's face inaccessible. Prayag was unsteady on his feet. He mentioned something to Jyoti, turned away from Danny, then ambled outside to their Ford Laser, parked away from the Institute across the road. The state of the vehicle matched the state of the weather. The Laser's windscreen sparkled. He entered through the window. His t-shirt caught on the knob of the door lock and put a stretch mark in his shirt. A grey duvet blocked out the rest of the view. He put his feet up in the window.

'Dude's shagged like a dogsbody,' said Danny, and, 'Lol, you guys've gotta have a death wish, wanting to clean this place!'

He found a place for his feet on top of the cleaning contract folder, which had the Whitewash brand on it. He pulled the red Levis tab on his jeans until Jyoti could see it. He had Doc Martens on his feet too, polished so he could appear Working Class while looking classy at work. His business shirt was open; Ché Guevara looked out from his t-shirt. He smelled like ironing and cigarettes.

'You want some coffee? It's Fair Trade?'

Jyoti shook her head, smiling. Danny picked up the mug on top of his keyboard and sloshed it as he brought it back to his lips. His legs were stable, folded at the ankle.

'Do you know anyone who makes it? Back in India styles?'

'We are living not in India.'

'What about free range eggs? Liberation, dog. Can you eat eggs where you come from?'

'Papatoe?'

'Oh right yeah, lol, your ad said. Hindu though, eh. I'm vegetarian, me. Parents brought us up like that but I would've been anyway. Spiritual, dog, spiritual.'

Danny checked out her legs, the bruises on the shins, good working class legs. There were gold rings on her toes. Dust was glued to her jandals with syrup. Bleach splotches had dappled her feet. She wore a pink skirt with dancing elephants on it. There were frayed threads which could have been festive trunks or tails. The belt around her waspish midriff was two feet of indigo-coloured rope, suppressing her hips.

'Kay, it's up to the powers that be,' Danny began, jabbing the butt of Jyoti's pen towards the Manager's office, 'to sort out your contract as fair, seeing as your proba month's up. Manager might even come out and help ya's. She started out as a cleaner, didn't have a partner to help out, neither.' He tossed the pen at Jyoti.

'But I speaking to you on the phone about this and you are saying you are the man with the... ' Jyoti shook her fingers, trying to find Danny's words. 'You are saying you are the man with the plan?'

'For sure, yup, and your budget's under my discretion which is choice, makes admin more interesting. What we gotta do is look at your guys's responsibilities. Your pay, too. Got your invoice there?'

Jyoti handed over her invoice, folded into sixteenths and discoloured with sweat from her palms. She sucked on her finger, where the contract had hurt her. Danny crossed his feet, knocking over his coffee mug. It was hard to maintain eye contact as the puddle spread, but he managed.

'Don't worry, the cleaners'll get that.' He took the invoice from her hand, tried to shake it open with a flick of his wrist. He had to unfold it manually. He nodded at the numbers, then placed the invoice in the coffee puddle and patted it til it turned brown. 'Just so you know D, I'm on your side typa thing, don't let yourselves get stiffed. Like this Whitewash, this contractor— '

'They are listing for franchise busy-ness.'

'Yeah you buy the affiliation 'n that but since we got yous on Trade Me I'm just a teeny bit concerned about what they're paying you, listing fee and all that stuff they fleece off you... s.'

'But it is free to list and you are paying us?'

'Nah yeah but the principle's, like, don't pay too much on the franchise fee? They'll wash their hands of you in a flash, them dicks.'

Jyoti nodded with difficulty, as if the air were too thick.

'So this invoice, four hundy a month? For eight shifts? That's like... ' He shook the Fair Trade droplets off his calculator and used it, ' ...Fifty a shifty: twenty-five bucks each. How long does it take you guys to get round 'n do everything? Six hours or something gross like that? That's third world styles, man.' Danny waved his fingers towards World Vision. The kids didn't wave back.

'Approximately two hours in the maximum, but you leave us the note taking the rubbish out back gate when gate is lock before we are arriving for the shift— '

'Tell me about it, I work too, dog.' Danny put a clenched fist in the air and bowed his head for a moment. 'It's like at my flat when no one wants to take out the rubbish. Gotta have us a meeting, that's us. I feel your pain D, I feel ya.'

Jyoti wrapped her elbows around her yellow bag and inspected her slobbery finger.

'Those free range eggs man, we're talkin like an hour of your wages for a dozen eggs.' He shook his head. 'Battery's waaay cheaper.'

Danny slurped his Fair Trade coffee, remembered that he'd finished drinking it, and spat the grounds back into the mug.

'Anyway, twenty-five bucks for two hours? That's like twelve bucks an hour after tax dog, that's barely minimum – ah for FUCK'S sakes!' He slammed his fist down on his keyboard. He hauled his legs off the desk, tearing the cover off the Whitewash franchisee folder. Jyoti sweated.

'Danny I am sorry please— '

'It's this culture, dog, it's disgusting.'

'The fee of the franchise agent you will find is modest, Danny.'

'Whatever, right? At the end of the day someone's still gettin' ripped.'

Danny leaned forward and made Jyoti fish the Whitewash pen out of her bag. As he clicked it brutally, his gritted teeth unclenched and his grip relaxed. He stood up and patted himself and found his cigarettes in his pocket. He came out from behind reception. There was a delicacy to his steps – the leather of his Docs was reluctant to bend. He opened the front door and held it for Jyoti, standing on the tips of his toes, wincing. Jyoti was reluctant, and shivered in the morning outside, holding her bag against her womb. A light wind had picked up droplets in the air and broke them against Danny's and Jyoti's faces. Across the road, Prayag's feet were collecting moisture, but he was wiped out and failed to wake up. Danny pulled out a cigarette and tapped it on its box, cupped it, lit it and grimaced.

'My feet hurt,' he said, shifting from side to side, 'workin us like a dog, man. Oi: do you take shares? We could always pay you guys shares. Coz the more bling we save by cutting costs, the higher our share value. You have shares where you're from?'

Jyoti wasn't interested in shares. Danny decided that neither was he, and started saying how the Institute's stock was based on slave labour. He tiptoed about as he ranted. When he realised he was standing outside the Manager's window, the base dropped out of his voice and Jyoti had to ask him to repeat himself. Danny pranced away from the window, chucked his cigarette butt on the wheelchair ramp and went inside, where the weather was predictable. He held the reception door open for a confused Jyoti. She delayed a moment, and Danny said to her,

'You like it out here or something? Wind stings, D, it's like chemicals on your hands. Back inside.'

Danny came around the reception desk, sat his bum down on the wheelie chair and returned his feet to the desktop. They proceeded with their meeting when his feet were comfortable.

'How much are these pens? These are the shit.' His mood improved with each click. He compressed and released the letters. Jyoti frowned and squirmed.

'They are I am thinking... twelve dollars for the pen? Whitewash, they charge for the giving us.'

'Got any more?'

Jyoti confessed that Prayag had one in the glove compartment in case of emergencies.

'I don't want that one, he might've touched it. Twelve bucks though, twelve bucks... what was twelve bucks?'

He looked down at the Whitewash contract.

'Right... aw, I guess it's not too stink if you're doing a hundred hours a week sorta thing, yous're probly earning more than me! Lol, shame.'

He tossed the pen on the floor. He knocked back his coffee grounds. He curled up his sleeves and tucked them so they stayed rolled up, revealing a tattoo of a tiger in yellow and green ink against the brown of his flesh.

'So do your people live near the motorway? That's the only thing I like about your hood: Great South Road. Fastest way out of the place oi!'

He put his hands behind his head and the covering on his bicep was raised.

'Wanna know about my tat? Tamil Tiger, dog.'

Jyoti looked as impressed as she could. A clock hung on the wall above Danny's head and it was this which held her attention.

'Yeah dog I'm all about the patriotism, Tamil Tigers, Joddy, they carve up.'

'We can please talk about the cleaning inspection schedule?'

His phone rang, scaring him. His feet raced off the desk and hit the carpet, wrenching the cleaning folder as they went. He sat up straight and shut down Bebo on his monitor. The Manager's light was flashing. Danny didn't smile while she talked to him. He buttoned up his business shirt, concealing Ché.

'Take out the trash, right-o.' He placed the phone down, and checked that it was down. 'Joddy: management's concerned about what we're spending on yous versus your productive-ity.' He cleared his throat. 'There it is. Sorry, but... there's cheaper contenders. Trade Me's fulla awesome bargains, yous could almost afford yourselves!'

Jyoti did the first half of a nod.

‘Anyway, you guys’ve been here a month and you’re under our wing, so we’re just tightening... our wing. And you’ve gotta get yourselves on Bebo pronto, to help out your residency thing, which is gonna be an issue, coz of India being a subcontinent and not a country. I’m expecting to take the fall for that.’

Jyoti kept her head lowered and played with her cut finger.

‘Well, you’re welcome. It’s just – take care of yourselves, get rid of that franchise fee. On that note...’ He gave Jyoti a handful of business cards. ‘Oi, do you have my card?’ Running through the Institute logo, the cards read *Danal Keerthisingh – Reception / Personal Assistant to the Manager*. Danal had been changed to Danny on every card, crossed out with a biro. *Keerthisingh* was scribbled out entirely.

‘How do you pronounce this shit anyway?’ he asked her.

She explained to him, ‘This is *Keer-ta-sing*. Keerthisingh. Tamil from Sri Lanka.’

Danny looked like he disagreed, and mumbled his name to himself.

The Manager opened her office door and trotted down the hall. Danal scrambled on his desktop, found a piece of chewing gum and savaged it. Stale air leaked out from the Manager’s office. Flowers withered in her office, although the plastic ones thrived. She had a masterly air conditioning system, which pumped her hand-me-down air into Reception.

She wore an invisible cape which held her shoulders back and her chin up, but she studied the carpet with her eyes at the same time. She flicked her fingers and adjusted her rings. She said as she approached Danny, ‘My keyboard is filthy, it’s dirtying my hands. Are the cleaners not certified?’

She placed her fingertips on the reception countertop, then shifted the snack box and its off-putting Indians to one side. She reached over the desk and plucked the RECEPTION sign from Danal’s In Tray. She put it in its place. She toed the carpet, where there was a whitish patch.

‘Turns out they’re not on Bebo,’ Danal said, ‘haven’t tried Facebook yet though.’ His legs were well under his desk. The Manager couldn’t see his working class jeans. Whitewash’s cleaning advertisement was on the

Trade Me screen. Danal looked organised. He picked up the cleaners' log book, scowling at Jyoti. His wrist clicked. The Manager put her elbow on the countertop and rested her jowl on her palm.

'Oh, you're looking for your wrist pad? I've borrowed it.'

Danal said to Jyoti with a fresh pen in his fingers, stabbing at the log book,

'Can I just say while we've got my superior here: don't go writing in here in pencil okay? Know what I'm saying? *No-writ-ey in pen-cil.*' He waved the folder, which he had torn by putting his feet on the desk. 'It looks unprofessional.'

'I used to be a cleaner,' said the Manager with a smile, 'but I've cleaned myself up now.' Her smile vanished. Her boob job wobbled under the silk scarf wrapped around her upper body. Sunlight made the glitter in her eye shadow sparkle and gave definition to the cracks in her flesh.

'Ensure we don't pay for these items, they are disgusting.' She fingered the packet of broken cashews, the crumbled Cookie Time. She paused and sniffed. 'Has one of you been smoking?'

'So this is one of the cleaners, I dunno if you want to say some stuff to her or... ?'

'Have you told her the procedure? About their rubbish?'

'Yeah I've told them they're rubbish, like you said. Joddy, you'll need to pass that on to Prague, kay?' Danal swallowed to clear the clunky words from his mouth. He pressed the RETURN key, having finished typing nothing.

Jyoti's knees angled away from the Manager. The Manager took Jyoti's bruised fingertips out of Jyoti's lap and into her hand, and studied them. Her fingertips had the same bleached dimples and calluses as Prayag, a sign of their bondage. She fingered the paper cut and the spots and scowled and threw Jyoti's hand back at her. Jyoti lifted her finger, but didn't suck it.

'Listen to me: when you're splashing chemicals around I want you to be bloody careful, dear. Do you understand what I'm saying? *The-car-pet is ve-ry-val-u-ble.*'

She waited for Jyoti to nod, looking down on her.

‘The most important thing you’ll learn here,’ she said, flicking her fingers at the cleaner and looking around for the right words, ‘is that a tidy desk... begets the best. *A-ti dy-desk be-gets the-best.*’ Her smile came back. ‘I started out a cleaner dear, I don’t know if Danal told you that.’ She looked down at Danal’s desk. There were swamps of coffee. The Whitewash folder had been ravaged. She picked it up and tapped it on the countertop until there was order. A frown avalanched onto her brow. ‘*Have they not cleaned here?*’

‘Mrs Manager please I am telling Danny I clean last night he put the feet on the desk.’

Danal was shaking his head. He revolved his chair to face away from Jyoti. The Manager was looking into Danal’s brown eyes. He blinked for her satisfaction. ‘Are we under control?’

‘Think so. Yellow Pages online’s where you wanna go if you wanna get us some other cleaners. Or *Ferret.*’

‘You get the price down?’

‘I will do, D-*defo.* Got the list of flaws to give them, too.’ He nodded at her to affirm his remark.

The Manager poked the dead snacks in the World Vision box. Before lumbering away, she said with her hand cupped around her mouth, ‘The budget dinner – you people alright with butter chicken?’

Danal calmly released his response.

‘*Defo.*’

She went back to her office, fingering the Institute’s walls as she walked and inspecting her fingertips. She stopped halfway down the corridor and stared at her hands. She disappeared into the ladies toilets and there was the sound of water running.

Danny’s feet went back on the desk. He unbuttoned his business shirt in a hurry, as if he were about to fuck Jyoti, and unleashed Ché.

‘What hours d’yous do last night? Not that you guys are in trouble or nothing.’

‘We work the usual time seven thirty o’clock p.m until the nine thirty, for which contract you are paying, Prayag he read it in contract.’

‘All g, D, all g. What you’s’ve been fucking up with the rubbish though is, the gate to the skip’s locked at seven p.m. sharp. You’ve *got* to get the bags in there before they lock up.’

‘The time seven p.m., this is half an hour before we arriving for commence of shift.’

‘It’s only taking the rubbish out, dog. Don’t be afraid getting your hands dirty. Plus it looks good if you show up early.’

Danny searched the cleaning folder, but found no order requiring that the rubbish be taken specifically to the skip. He tapped the Whitewash documentation on his desk for the same reason that he tapped his cigarettes. The fingers of his which had touched the folder, he wiped under his arms.

‘It’s courtesy anyway,’ he argued, ‘either way, needs to be done.’ He took a roll of toilet paper from his drawers and rolled it towards Jyoti. It fell on the floor. ‘This is in case the Manager made you cry, which I hope she didn’t.’ He yawned and peered into his coffee mug. ‘I’m dog-tired, man, oughta be kippin’ in your Laser oi. There room for two blokes?’

A coke can rattled as it rolled across pieces of rubble outside. A chip packet cartwheeled after.

‘Look I’ll level with you, man to man – do the rubbish right and knock off your franchise fee and, like I said, you’s’ll be under our wing.’

Danny reached up, grabbed the edge of the snack box and tipped it until the Cookie Time and other snacks fell out. The sick Indians on the box stayed in place. The flies on their head were going nowhere. Danny tore the Cookie plastic open with his teeth and shook the fragments down his throat. Stray chocolate fell and melted on his thighs. ‘Levis man,’ he complained, swiping the stickiness off him and rubbing his hands carefully. He took a sheet of paper from the Whitewash folder, sighing, and gave it to the cleaner. He wiped the last motes of cookie dust off his Levis with dainty fingers. He offered Jyoti a free snack before linking his hands behind his head and closing his eyes

'That sheet's a list of stuff what you's've done in your cleaning. Don't worry bout the bit where it says 'cleaning floors,' that's a typo, it's sposda be 'cleaning f-l-a-w-s.' Just have a think and, sorta, maybe improve just a teeny bit? That'd be choice.' He got up and opened the front door and let the cleaner out into the sunshine and spittle. 'Have a think about it. Wouldn't want you to cost yourselves a job.' He winced.

'Danal, Prayag, every day he is—'

'I know I know. Oi: *tighten your belt*. Honestly, it's what the Manager'll yous. Tighten your belt.' He looked down at the rope around her waist. 'FYI, you can buy working class pants and cut out the middle man. Middle man'll fleece ya.'

He pulled out his cigarettes and waited with his arms folded while Jyoti scurried across the road, forced the window down and woke Prayag. They disputed something and moaning noises came from the thing in the duvet. After a minute, Prayag left the car, wearing the duvet as a cape secured with one hand. In the other hand was a can. He crossed the road and approached Danny, leading his small partner, and came up to Danny's chin and said

'Don't go tellin my missus to tighten her belt. *D'you understand what I'm saying?* You tight-en your own fuck-in' belt.'

He grabbed Danny's belt buckle, drew him close then pushed him away. He burped, overriding the smell of bleach. Then he said to Jyoti, 'Oi,' and went back to bed in the Laser. Jyoti hesitated. A passing car nearly ran Prayag over, and cursed him with a long honk. Prayag's feet returned to the car window.

It wasn't pleasant outside in the world. Danny shook his head and spat on the wheelchair ramp. As Jyoti went to follow her partner, Danny seized her elbow.

'We sweet?'

She said thank you and 'We will be the rubbish taking out on the Tuesday night,' but she followed Danny back into reception, tinkling the bell. Danny gave her a quizzical look.

'Oh, right,' he said. He picked up the World Vision box and tipped it until coins came out, a few silvers and one gold. He caught them before

they rolled off the countertop, scooped them into his hand and thrust them at Jyoti. She stepped backwards, holding her hand, cradling the finger where the contract had bitten her. Danny approached and pushed his right hand into hers and said, 'I know yous've got a stink job to do – glad some of us don't mind getting our hands dirty.' He nudged his head in the direction of the Manager's office.

Jyoti wouldn't take the coins. Danny chucked them on the carpet.

Jyoti stared at the hand Danny had shaken. She said to him,

'I am sorry, before I go I am needing just to washing my hands.'

Model Railway

When Dad took us to Model Railway Club, which had a sophisticated letterhead and not much else going for it, I'd get frustrated with the kids who drove their trains slowly and who built straight tracks. They say the point of a journey is not to arrive, but try telling the passengers that. Something's gotta happen on the train, for real. I used to make big booming noises that drowned out everything, then bring in the Fat Controller. He was great coz he was fat and proud of it and didn't have anything to hide.

This guy at the Club fully swore that if you took one of your sister's Barbie dolls and turned it upside down, you could see down her cleavage. I tried it right in front of him but when I declared that I couldn't see nothing, he said I had a problem with my eyes.

I tried it with Zebra Lady and Purple Girl – they were from a different set of toys, this bucket full of broken ones that were unlikely to get fixed. They were too broken to belong to the Barbies but they had more going on than the railway characters. Zebra had white hair. Purple Girl had hair so blonde it glowed in the dark. They were my sister's toys and I felt okay about keeping the toys alive after my sister got smooshed.

Zebra Lady, she had the toy equivalent of cleavage; Purple's chest was flat. I turned the Zebra Lady upside down and couldn't see any boobs. It made me feel stupid, firstly, and then ripped-off. I whined at Dad until he got my eyes tested. The optometrist explained that yes, I was bound to be disappointed if I was trying to see things that weren't there. But I carried on watching cartoons and going behind the TV to see the rear of the characters.

To really spice things up, I would put the broken figurines in the back of the carriages. I would pretend they were Jews on the way to Auschwitz. Certainly no room in the schedule to stop for food, although I'm sure Zebra and Purple would've thanked me for not encouraging their indulgence. I liked how they could only fold into a right angle, it was good for their posture. I would sit there on the carpet all bored with no one to

play with, folding the dolls, straight-bent, straight bent. I would sit them side by side, even if they weren't from the same set. I didn't want to make them too uncomfortable, although I think eventually they rubbed off on each other.

The Fat Controller doubled as a Nazi, just because he had authority. I made him interrogate the lady dolls because those were their roles. The Fat Controller needed something to antagonise him; Zebra Lady needed someone to remind her that she was broken.

When I straightened the dolls out to make them stand to attention, there was no room for them in the carriage.

* * *

I'm pretty sure she was a model, she was unreal this girl.

We got to Kingsland and the train purred up beside the platform like a horny kitty. I think the train stopped exclusively for her, but of course loads of other wankers got on. This young girl, she had blonde hair and soft cheeks like a gosling. Her old lady looked more like a goose, white with old silver hair. You could call the older one middle-aged if she was gonna live to be a hundred and twenty. The younger one was mint, she had a waist I'd say size four; the older four-and-a-half sorta thing. The older one looked like the younger, but a dried-up scarecrow version of her, frazzled perm and these kinda silver sidelock curl things that dangled like her big earrings. The youngster was pulling off grape coloured berets matched with wine-coloured short skirts; her old lady wore this nasty nylon jacket, black with white stripes or white with black stripes, I'm not sure. Rigid body too, that's what good posture will do for ya.

I think the younger's name was Polly, we'll go with that, I read it on the label of her blouse when I was standing behind her, Polly Esther if I recall it right. Polly had one of those relationships where she calls her old lady by her first name.

'Flaurel?'

'Speak.'

'Could I have the seat today?'

A huge man straining the buttons on his vest vacated his seat, leaving room for three Pollys. Commuters were dangling from the handrail like lamb carcasses. They looked worried when the man moved up and stood beside them, but their focus was on the ladies. Flaurel kept her lips shut tight, and her bum cheeks clenched. She got a seat that day, which was nice. This intimidated Asian girl gave her the big eyes and did a whole respect routine, stooped and brushed her skin cells off the seat and implored Flaurel to take it, led her arm and all that. Flaurel told her curtly, 'Gracias.'

I think the driver knew the ladies were on board. The train peeled away from Mt Eden gentle as, at pains not to shake any petals out of Flaurel's corsage. When the train was at cruising speed, making noises like singing whale, the ticket collector came round. Flaurel and Polly were on opposite sides of the carriage staring to the right of each other's head, pretending they were looking out the window. Flaurel held her head up as if she were slowing a nosebleed. I think it made people focus on her nostrils. The bridge of her schnoz looked like it had been broken back in the day, perhaps more than once. Polly's head was lower down, she was less confident. Sometimes you'll get collectors who're eunuchs or whatever who don't appreciate Polly, but that's uncommon. This time, the dude got distracted staring at the bumps on Polly's chest and put his foot right on the umbilical cord.

'Yes?' Flaurel went. Mama Bear became growly. The collector had to turn round. Polly lifted her handbag into her lap. It seemed heavy to her skinny forearms.

'Tickets plEase.' He was one of those squeaky fresh boys who hadn't grown into his lanky frame. The Asian girl and the huge man had done the beauties a favour each this morning so I supposed it was my turn. I whistled at the collector loud enough to get the evils from a few wankers on their iPods. Squeaky came loping over to me like a dog that's been hit by a car. I was gonna get one of those ten-stagers off him and I had my student ID ready in my pocket. There was some bother about the authenticity of my photo. I told Squeaky,

'The photo's plastic isn't it, I couldn't change it if I wanted to.'

As the dork was taking it, I realised there wasn't a lump inside my breast pocket and my wallet had done a runner. That's Mondays for ya. Squeaky told me he'd come back. I told him his voice box needed oiling. They're hardly air marshalls these people, not exactly trained for confrontation. By the time he'd tripped his way through the minefield of ankles, Flaurel had her purse secured inside her jacket and told him she'd handled enough purses this morning and shalln't be doing so again.

That cracked me up, good on the old broad. And I would've paid for her too! The ticket collector craned his neck round and got a quick look in at Polly and ruled her out too. She was under Flaurel's wing and he couldn't get to her.

They didn't talk more than necessary when they were on the train but soon as their feet hit the platforms at B-mart, all clacking on the polished concrete, they fell into a dispute. Flaurel pouted so hard I thought her jowls were gonna explode off her cheeks. Flaurel lifted the grape beret on Polly's head and stowed her wallet under there. Funny old thing, as if anyone's gonna steal her wallet! I wanted to know what they were talking about, but Polly's voice doesn't carry very well, it's like bubblegum, sweet and insubstantial. Models, eh. And B-mart as a whole's got acoustics like a swimming pool, often communication's hard. The trains are loud as guilt and they drown out everything.

I lost my ladies in the bustle and had to walk to work. Squeaky was already off the train and getting torn apart by his supervisor, an Indian dude built like Homer Simpson with a name tag saying Matel. He wore black, which is supposed to make you look slimmer, but he came off looking like he was in the SS. Matel didn't wait for the crowd to clear, he just built an ellipse round the two of them so the passengers could stream past. It was pretty classic, up the stairs I could see here's the ladies bickering about money while down on the platforms there's Squeaky and Matel having pretty much having the same argument. Course it wasn't the ladies' fault they didn't pay, or that I didn't pay. I got the impression Squeaks was learning that the customer's always right.

With no money, I had to walk to work. Toyworld's ages from B-mart, it sucked. The walk gave me time to think about things. I wished I'd asked Flaurel to spare one of her wallets.

On my break, I Googled the ladies but couldn't find any evidence that they existed.

Matel led the ticket collection the next day. Squeaky trailed meekly behind, getting shown how the job was done properly. Squeaky whacked his head on the railing where the straight people hang themselves - that's what you get for staring at model boobs and not doing your job. Truth be told though, Polly's chest is mostly padding.

Matel asked what he could do for the girls. Usually a bloke jumps in and pays for them coz they're pretty. I'd already paid my share the other day, or tried to at any rate. This time, Flaurel peeled out a hundy from a wad of the same in her purse. She held it away from her like it wasn't hers. Blades of morning sunlight coming through the windows made the watermark stand out. We were all staring at it, at her, at those stripes of hers. I didn't want to picture Polly wearing that jacket when she got to Flaurel's age. Hopefully by that age Polly would have her own train.

Matel told Squeaky he couldn't change a hundred and Flaurel said, 'I'm afraid you'll have to.'

'We cannot change, my fren.'

'I'd best take my money somewhere else then,' Flaurel responded. It made Matel go red with frustration, but not red like Polly. Polly was blushing to the max. She looked like an embarrassed geisha. The bloom complemented her lavender skirt, purple leather belt, boysenberry beret.

Flaurel didn't talk to Polly, but they sat side by side. Their posture was better than anyone's on the train – they looked bloody uncomfortable. At B-mart, Matel tried to take his problems out on Squeaky. I stood behind a pillar and watched them go at it, making extra noises as the trains rolled in and out. I heard Squeaky going, 'The mOdel dAugther though bro, did you sEe her? Did you sEe her?'

To set an example, Matel said fine, he'd pay for their fares out of his own pocket, and he reached around to his back pocket but couldn't find his wallet.

I was stuck looking at the back of her blonde head instead of her face, but that was fine by me. I'll bet if she ever got nits, they would've been a real gentle, cute variety, the kind that doesn't itch.

Today I was going to buy something for Polly, a gift. There isn't a huge selection to buy on these trains, but this was important to me. I had on good deodorant, the roll-on kind, not that aerosol garbage, and I'd painted my neck with it til my collar got stuck to my skin. When I wrapped my head around hers and put my face in front of her, she stumbled back and almost came off her heels. I tried not to catch Flaurel's eye.

'Got ya ticket?' I said.

'You're not the ticket man,' she deduced. She sounded like she'd been drinking helium. 'You don't have a clicker thing.'

'Nah I'm, can I, like, buy your ticket? And hers?' I waved my money towards Flaurel, who was seated. I don't think the sun was interested in illuminating my ten bucks, so she might not have noticed. Blokes around me were hanging from the handrail, gawping and dangling.

'He's lost his wallet.' Flaurel was staring at Polly, not me. Flaurel's forehead was looking tauter than usual and her jowls were tucked back under her cheekbones. She was either biting the insides of her cheeks, or—

'TickEts—' squeaked the collector, breaking his tenor. The hanging blokes parted for him like a curtain.

'Here, I've got her,' I said, breaking my tenner, 'I mean, like, she's on me. I want her... to be.'

Squeaky held his folder open. His fingers paused halfway into ripping off tickets for us.

'She's a model,' I said.

'Just rip them off,' Flaurel said, impatient. She grabbed Polly's hand.

'How many stAges?' Squeaky asked me.

I said, 'I'll have what she's having.' It sounded pretty good, I thought. It sounded like something you'd say to a model.

Maybe I could kiss her hand, if Flaurel let it go. Polly was trying to stand independently but Flaurel was pulling her down. Polly needed to either be straight or bent and there was no inbetween. I was actually a bit relieved to get out of the train at B-mart and into the pool of punters.

'Where do yous work?' I asked, half-jogging to keep up with them.

'Here,' Flaurel said.

'Auckland, right,' I go, 'Same as these people.'

'We must move off,' Flaurel said, drawing Polly towards the stairs, clutching her sleeve. I got bumped into as I tried to follow. Under her sidelocks, hairsprayed til they were hard as windchimes, Flaurel's shoulderpads had dust on them. She was scrabbling at her scalp with long fingernails painted black. She dropped tickets behind her as she trotted up the escalators. Used tickets, I hoped.

I followed them. There was a colourful paper trail spaced metres apart, different fare tickets, more than the ladies needed. People weren't even bothering to pick the tickets up, they were in a rush and pounding the steps. Flaurel held a folder of some kind in her left hand and Polly in the other. Polly's arm looked like it would detach from its socket.

After I made it up the first escalator, I turned around to survey the view. Everyone looked like a toy from up where I was, there were Barbies and GI Joes and Polly Pockets and Thomas and his Friends all jammed together. It was crowded and the figures were in their routines and there wasn't room to move or break away. I made noises for them, yabbering and booming and clocking on the concrete. I saw Squeaky counting the cash in his bumbag. Matel was checking a clipboard with a train driver. There were men from the train who were as into Polly as I was, but who were now meeting their girlfriends and kissing them. They didn't care about her as much as me, to them Polly was just some model on the train.

I went up the second escalator faster. Across the lobby and through the sliding doors I could see Flaurel dragging Polly away from a bus and towards a taxi. Flaurel dropped her folder. I had to sprint, and almost

slipped over on the tiles. B-mart's a fancy place, but fanciness entails risks. Better to keep it real sometimes.

Polly was surprised when I banged on her shoulder, but Laurel was different – Laurel's face was set. All she needed was a rhinoplasty and she'd be complete.

'Yes?'

'Yous dropped something, I think.' I handed over the folder. A finger of wind caught one of its covers and disembowelled it. Tickets started flying around us like a DNA helix.

'Why's,' I panted, 'why do you work? I mean, *where* do yous work?'

'I already told you that,' Laurel said, scratching her head and looking around, 'we work here.'

Because she was leaning in so far, I could see into her handbag. Tickets were settling in there and coming out and all sorts. She had like three wallets in her handbag. Bit greedy if you ask me.

Polly had her head turned away but there was a breeze and it blew a tear across her cheek, leaving a trail of purple eyeliner. She started playing with her hair, coiling it and pulling it towards her mouth. Poor starving wee thing. As she pulled on her hair I saw her scalp shift. She tried to put it back.

'I, I guess I know you work here. Get Polly back into modelling though, your daughter's done modelling right?'

'*Polly?*'

'Isn't she a model?'

'No, she isn't– '

'But she's so mint –'

'She isn't my daughter.'

Paradise Lots

Said the personal trainer to her trainee,

'We are open til eleven every night so if you were really worried about, oh, snacking or whatever, you could come down around tea time.'

'Course that's the Neighbours zone, can't interrupt that,' said Gina, and they had a chuckle together. Aroha said she couldn't watch Neighbours and preferred Shortland Street. Gina had a hand towel around her shoulders partly for sweat-soaking and partly for appearances. It looked normal. Aro had handed Gina the little towel after their final rort, and they walked along the corridor formed between the rows of gym equipment and the wall. This was to become part of the routine. There was plenty of space for Aro to gesticulate so one knew that Aro Was Speaking. She flailed to indicate where the stretchers stretched against the window panes. On the other side of the windows, tendrils of rain thick with soot left sediment.

'We can just keep our regular appointment then,' said Aro, 'and it's not like extra workouts here and there is gonna hurtcha eh.'

'Spose not, nah,' Gina said, dreading her second appointment. Extracurricular workouts between those she'd paid for seemed laughable. Value for the hundreds in cash money she'd supplied already, sure, but the fewer times she worked out, the more valuable each session was, logically.

'Y'like Neighbours eh?'

'Yeah,' Gina chuckled, 'yeah...'

Gina's feet progressed daintily; her thighs scraped together. Her breasts dragged on her shoulders, hunching her. Gym patrons pretended not to look up as the ladies passed. While they registered Gina's obesity, Aro radiated heat which warranted a thorough ogling, although her attractiveness was tempered by crow's feet and a shoulder tattoo from her old mob. But Gina knew she was the wealthier, but Aro the hotter.

Aro signed Gina out and explained the sign-in sign-out policy. Trying to sound enthusiastic and motivated, Gina said

‘And I can just come along and work out like on my own, any hour ‘o the day?’

Aro snorted and looked away, constraining her smile.

‘Yes, G. Y’pay me enough don’t ya.’

Gina wore her standard heavy, dark clothes – black dress pants; black jacket, dark polyprop underneath; trenchcoat. No whites. She loitered ten minutes in the lobby, mopping her brow. When she returned to her office she could claim to have spent the extra minutes exercising. She read the advertising and motivational slogans surrounding her. *Construct yourself.*

‘But my back’s sore.’

Wednesdays they would meet, and Wednesdays were a horrible time to go gymming. Apart from it being hump day – middle of the ugly week, time for painful introspection – Wednesday was also anticipated by Monday and Tuesday, which had their own reasons for being troublesome. And on Wednesdays it rained more often than not, which Gina was sure caused a moat to form around the gym and trap her inside. Nevertheless, the stress of a gym membership was obligatory for Gina’s career as a property developer, a commander of tenancy, a mover and shaker all rolled into one doughy lump. She stacked the fresh burden on her back and remained standing.

When Gina got home on a Monday, Tuesday night, she ate her dinner ‘n dessert, coffee ‘n cookies, and thought about building gyms, and whether that would qualify as gym attendance. She ate her Aero. She drew the curtains and eased out of her thick sweaty clothes and into t-shirts. She double-checked that the door was locked and curtains drawn. She thought over the one session she’d had with Aro and felt proud. She compared herself to the wrinkled Aro and her pride deepened. She felt sick on a Wednesday morning and her jelly thighs had trouble composing steps. Thursday through Sunday became blessed days untroubled by pre-gymstrual tension.

The arrangement of the days in the week were problematic for Aro. Her lifestyle, her treadmill-tromping, disturbed the neighbours downstairs in the highrise where she lived. The neighbours existed in a perpetual

condition of tension, blaming the weather. Aro was on the fifth floor of Paradise Lots. The tower of council flats had no palm trees, and little wood was used in its construction. It ascended one hundred and umpteen floors and swayed in the wind. Aro analysed the sound and could picture iron beams scratching at flimsy structural columns. She was good at design at school, when she was fifteen. The neighbours banged on her wall from some indeterminate side.

Aro had a jack russell, wee dog, manageable. The downstairs neighbours had three bulldogs. If they met in the elevator, Aro would be burdened with barking and blame which took a week to jog off. The way the tower complained in the wind and dribbled in the rain upset the whole community. And they were tough guys, Black Power Maori, darker than her, and harder. The men wanted her body, which upset their missuses. They jabbed the ceiling with a broom to upset Jack. They let their rottweilers roar to ensure themselves of their own presence. Aro couldn't stop her skin crawling, and as it did, it became impenetrably thick.

Once she looked into retreating upstairs, but there was no room available.

Their appointments had been set at eleven o'clock. Today's would be ten minutes late – Aro sent Gina an apologetic text, something about the neighbours.

At ten thirty-five, Gina was in the staff room at Propman, eating most of Tarariki's birthday cake. She sweated as she ate – partly gym nerves, partly Propman, partly Gina overheating in her trenchcoat. 'Riki was off to serve superior ambitions, leaving Propman for ManaProp, a rival property management firm. In the huddle which surrounded Riki, there were jokes about commissioning a shopping mall right over ManaProp. Riki was gonna miss you guys, aww.

'Hey I'm glad ya foundja cake, *Riki*,' Riki said to Gina across the room, 'did ya like how it's got your name on it writ' in icing? *Tarariki*?'

Gina had *arik* spelled out in icing on the wide slice of cake, her fourth, which was perilously close to her snout. She put the half-eaten piece

back on the cake tray and licked her lips. She had the power of employment or un- over a few of the chortlers. She was expected to be an exacting boss. Her shape made the Riki crew licentious.

‘Sorry,’ Gina mumbled, and dabbed at her lips with a napkin.

‘May as well eat it now,’ Riki said, ‘she’s half eaten.’

There was a wall of them, with a heat-haze halo. Their bodies reinforced Riki, but they were looking at Gina. She ate the half cake, ta-ta’d the spectators, puked in the toilet and took a taxi two minutes to the gym, because it was raining.

The gym was shaking like Paradise Lots. Guilty patrons were pounding their expanded waists into wasted expanses. They bypassed the turnstiles in a regular stream and acknowledged the reception staff whose names they didn’t know. The reception staff welcomed the names appearing on screen.

Aro was waiting inside the turnstiles for Gina, who entered the gym puffing from the entrance steps.

‘How’s your day goin hon?’

‘*Urgh*, hungrily,’ said Gina, frowning, ‘looking forward to lunch.’

‘After we’re done.’

‘Yeah...’

‘Over soon,’ Aro said. She made a large pointing gesture. ‘Get changed, I’ll see you through there.’

They practiced what Aro had discussed at their first meeting – building strength in Gina’s back, getting her running and stepping, and lifting basic weights. Gina was unimpressed when her ten minutes on the treadmill was declared a warm-up and Aro dragged her onto a stepping machine.

‘Just pretend you live right up Paradise Lots and you can’t use the lift,’ Aro explained as Gina trudged up imaginary stairs, ‘that’ll help getcha through it.’

‘That place? I thought no one lived there. *Eck*.’

‘Oi – it ain’t that bad.’

‘You live there or something?’

‘Um, yeah,’ said Aro, and planted her arms on her hips, ‘gotta admit though – sometimes I take the elevator up to mine.’

Gina tucked her head inside her t-shirt and wiped her brow.

‘How far up are ya?’

‘Fifth floor?’

‘You could prob’ly see my place from there.’

‘Where d’you live then?’

‘Aoraki.’

‘Aw, right,’ said Aro. Aoraki’s property values were as high as Paradise Lots was physically. Paradise sat at the bottom of Ara Valley. The tower was built so those in the basin could feel parity with the properties above and around them. Aoraki draped over the hills like a gilded gym towel. Aoraki was elevated. Paradise was just tall.

‘Y’like living there?’ Gina asked.

‘Let’s get you on to some o’these free weights,’ said Aro, and gestured with her head that Gina should follow. ‘We’re building your biceps here, see,’ Aro said, stroking Gina’s upper arms, ‘n that’ll convert some of this fat – ’ she grabbed a wavering hunk of Gina’s arm blubber ‘– into muscle. So your arms’ll take on tone.’

When they were finished and Gina was showered and changed, and Aro had waited twenty minutes at reception memorising slogans, Aro explained that next week’s session would extend from Gina’s strengthened back.

‘What time you finish?’ asked Gina.

‘Pretty late tonight, G. I don’t like going home. Durin’ rush hour.’

‘Y’like living in Paradise Lots?’

Aro looked at her watch and excused herself.

Gina’s arms ached. They’d spent fifteen minutes troubling them with heavy dumbbells, sitting on swiss balls and balancing and rolling around, so her pain was justified. Waiting at a few sets of traffic lights, bypassing the bypass and taking Ascent Ave up to Aoraki, she texted Riki

*My arms hrt frm gym ;o) Gt a persnal traina. Hav fun wth ManaProp c
u rnd xox G*

Gina was into prices, inflating the valuations of what she possessed and offering deflated prices for property which she didn't possess. Aoraki was preceded by Mt Victor, and in Mt Victor were enticing properties. But Gina could see Paradise Lots darkening the valley in her rearview mirror, and she wanted to buy that too. Mental note: *Propman more capital*. She neared her three-tier, finding something wrong with the neighbours' houses as she passed.

When she'd parked in the garage and gently switched her Merc off, Gina took her gym gear and attache case in one arm and cradled Riki's cake box in the other. Riki texted her back –

Njoi th cake tubbi

She ate it watching Neighbours. The characters spoke nicely to each other.

Up Paradise Lots, Aro Kapinga was stuck inside a suffocating elevator with a boy bleeding with sex and violence. She was clad in tight lycra covered with *Construct yourself* in various fonts. The boy was staring at her taut breasts. *Gofuck yourself*, she thought. Scraps of blue linen and black leather clung to the boy, making him a Black Power prospect. The leather stank of decay, and the youth's hair was wet. He would have been standing in the rain and shivering, guarding the entrance to the building, getting sick. Aro stared at the front of the elevator. She flexed her shoulderblades and triceps to try to intimidate the boy.

She'd hit the buttons for floor 50 instead of five, and was headed a long way up with her admirer. The elevator accrued a scowling lady and her terrier, which smelled rival dog on Aro; a couple of teenagers pashing; and a bikie without his bike, whose jaw widened to intimidate the Black Power boy. Eventually the elevator dumped its load and Aro got to her floor. As she came to her door, the one without blood and snot on the handle, a neighbour stuck her head out into the hallway.

'The fugg?' said the neighbour through a split lip.

'Sup,' said Aro quietly, wrestling with her key, which was reluctant to emerge from its keyhole. Around the keyhole was one of the few

remaining islands of paint on her floor. The naked wall, exposed by decay and the influence of children, was plaster which absorbed the mildew of its environment as well as tagging and fingerprints and smoke.

‘Fuggin’ mushelsh ‘n shit,’ said the neighbour, ‘shoulda bin a builda...’

When Aro was inside her flat and had her back against the door, the tirade subsided. She heard the neighbour’s man yell something. She heard their dogs bark. It made Jack bark in her defence. It made the dogs in the flat beneath her bark, and she felt her floor jabbed by a broom handle.

There was a body-length mirror in her main room. The main room was the non-bedroom non-bathroom room. She ran a dozen kays on her treadmill, watched herself in the mirror, watched Shortland Street. She saw the tonedest, fittest, healthiest woman in the entire building. She couldn’t watch herself for long.

She stared out the window with a sweat towel around her as the sun went down behind the hills, oblivious to the darkness settling around her. She watched the affirmative lights of Aoraki above her basin.

Weeks into their contractual relationship, Gina told Aro she wanted to attend the gym more often, maybe three times per week. Aro said that was a good idea and reminded her client that the gym was hers as often as she wanted.

‘I’m sure all your, like, clients say this to you but, I *am* glad I joined up, ‘s goin good,’ Gina told Aro, panting on the HotStepper, ‘Good reason to get outta the rain anyway.’ Aro smiled and looked away. She caught a tycoon thrashing himself on a rowing machine and staring at her behind.
Gofuck-

‘You’re doin’ okay,’ said Aro.

Gina had hoped for more – praise from her personal trainer that she was her best client, that Gina would put Aro out of a job soon

‘You um, you feel like ya lost much weight, G?’ Aro asked.

Gina saw herself at morning tea, chowing down on energy for the gym. *Protein*, she told someone, eating an Aero. She loved Aero – the chocolate looks hard but it’s brittle. Gina lowered her head.

‘G, hon, lemme say this straight up: you ain’t lost much weight, right, cos you’re still not managing your diet.’

Aro gave her client a few seconds for this to be absorbed. Then ‘...mmkay but what you do have is a good foundation for us to work on. Do this,’ she said, flexing her arm to tense the bicep, ‘y’see? Solid foundation eh.’

Gina crooked her arm and saw the flesh which Aro said was muscle tensing.

‘Kay. Thanks. I owe ya,’ Gina said, and didn’t smile for the rest of the session.

But she smiled when she left the gym and got back to work, and she smiled when she showed her biceps off to her colleagues, minus Riki.

‘Foundation muscle it’s called,’ she told them, ‘you can build on it.’

She wanted to build her career up.

Victor ‘Mt Victor’ Spire was General Manager of Propman Properties. He allowed Gina in his office to discuss her present and future prospects. She brought her portfolio of sales achievements and ambitions. She took her seat, feeling as if strapped in to a rollercoaster which had the potential to malfunction and rip her head off. The rain made conditions hazardous.

Mr Spire mused over the portfolio of ambitions in particular. His philosophy was that one’s ambitions said more about one than one’s accomplishments. Hence the motto at Propman – *Don’t Look Down*.

‘Obviously these are blocks of ah accomodation for the new university? Down Ara?’

‘They are, yup,’ said Gina, ‘the polytech’s going to be converted to a university over summer and I know they’re taking on an extra two thousand students, meaning Dealing Hall –

‘ – “Delinquent Hall”, yes, I see, ah, they’re expanding?’

‘Dividing actually, splitting into two limited companies, each of which will cater for just over a thousand tenants. So there’s a construction contract, but they’ll need to, like, buy out an existing accomodation facility, I think, to develop from. Bit too costly to build something new.’

‘Which is the, ah, second company?’

‘It hasn’t been incorporated yet, Dealing management are choosing how the board will be apportioned. But yeah, you can see I’ve touted some design plans to one or two of the board members, like just quietly, and unofficially we’re set to be the company for both the development and the management.’

Spire put his hands behind his head. His chair groaned as he leaned back. Gina felt as if the rollercoaster was exclusively uphill-bound, uninhibited.

‘Colleagues know what you’ve got lined up here?’

‘They don’t get to see me that often. I’d expect confirmation on this within, like, three weeks?’

Mt Victor nodded slowly. His arms, positioned to throw spears, cast broad shadows across his desk, which was covered in correspondence. With great importance he said

‘You ah, you need to know that I’m impressed, Gina.’

His eyes locked with hers. It would be meek of Gina to break eye contact first, but impolite not to be submissive. She nodded and used the opportunity to blink. Spire carefully selected his next words.

‘If I am to take you to a formal sit-down with some of the developers, my old boys,’ Spire began, ‘ah, you’ll need to, ah...’

Spire flicked his fingers at Gina’s torso, indicating something. He nodded as he flicked, throwing his struggling message towards her. The rollercoaster was rattling her about and she hoped for a spontaneous ending.

‘Well, I hear you’ve started going to the gym, mm?’

‘Yyyyup?’ Gina answered, nodding and frowning. Her fingers, resting on her belly, played with each other.

‘Keep the gym up. Ah, lose some ah, weight. Then, well, then, Gina, I can take you to a sit-down.’

The rollercoaster left the tracks and crashed through its buttresses, tearing Gina’s head from her body.

‘I owe y– Thank you.’

Thursday night was a better night to shop – there was no motivation to be found on Hump Day. The aisles of Pak N Save were thick with parasites jostling in a feeding frenzy of savings. They shook the weather off them like dogs, dribbling on the glazed floor, and the pubescent staff busied themselves erecting Wet Floor signs and staring at her from behind. Nobody told her her hair looked pretty with the pink loops securing her braids, or that her new cap looked fetching. She got wolf whistles though, everywhere, all the time.

Aro picked up her proteins – nuts, protein powder, bars – and bought them, and scowled at the chocolate bars, and scowled at the concept of impulse items, and carried the bags to her car at chest height. It made the biceps flex in her sleeves, specially-chosen spandex, to break the lycra cycle. She had the appearance of being perpetually ready for sport, ready to run at a moment's notice. She got in her car and drove home to Paradise Lots.

Her sunroof had been punctured by the persistence of the rain, made acidic by the log fires up in Aoraki. Her cap absorbed raindrops. She drove home through the sludge with her windshield wipers sloshing busily and parked in the dim garage under Paradise Lots. Her engine made disturbing noises which reminded her of the dodgy elevator. There were spaces for a hundred cheap Nissans in the parking lot, but there were only a handful of vehicles there. The skeletal community shouted at itself; the rest of the city didn't listen. Kids in soggy clothes were in a far corner, tagging. As Aro descended the ramp into the den, she flashed her lights at them and they gawped at her. There was no security to curb them, few seniors to lecture them. She watched them pursue notoriety in the rear-view mirror. They spat some challenge at her, although it was hard to distinguish the words. *Muscles*, she heard, she told herself she heard, *Aroha Aroha better than us, muscles*.

They'd been in the elevator – there was fresh tag. She tried to read what was written, but the characters were indecipherable. A message too sophisticated for the layman. And the elevator smelled, and she looked down and saw a can of beer half-filled with foam, and realised she was standing in piss. She opened the elevator doors without elevating. The

doors made dodgy noises which reminded her of the engine in her Nissan. She went for the stairs as the taggers called to her, *Aro Hardman*.

She traversed the longest thirty metres of concrete she'd ever traversed and made it to the fire door securing the stairs. Her biceps moved the door without exertion. The boys were yelling propositions. She hurried inside the comfort of the stairs, which were naked concrete with a carpet of lichen. She spirited up six flights, and enjoyed watching her thighs tense and relax.

She entered the fifth floor, the smoky lair with its bubblegummed carpet, and stopped admiring her thighs and trying to figure out what had been yelled at her in the carpark. She tiptoed past her neighbours and relied on their raised voices to drown out her footfalls. But the trolls who lived under her floorboards heard her cross the floor, heard Jack come ruffling up to greet her, heard her pouring kibble into Jack's dish. Their abuse and the barking of their dogs drowned out Shorty, so Aro went to bed early, 8pm early, rubbing her musculature for warmth.

She was glad to be inside, but not glad to be inside with him.

'Like, what's wrong with your shoulders?!' Riki's puzzlement was an implicit jibe. 'They're all... swollen!'

'I live, I've been bodybuilding, Tarariki,' Gina explained, and cleared her throat, 'could we stick to our brief? I can't linger, I'm sure you have other appointments as well.'

Riki snorted, which made his brand new double chins wobble. They protruded in the weather and had raindrops stuck to them. 'Who's your appointment with, a cake?'

'With Mt Victor *actually*,' Gina said, grimacing, 'listen if you're not going to take things seriously then I don't think Propman can accept tendering Manaprop a management stake in Dealing – '

'Nah nah nah I'm, I am taking stuff seriously, 'sjust, damn y'know Gina, you're actually lookin – '

'Nup,' Gina snapped. She began to rise and her short skirt slipped back down towards her knees. 'This is not appropriate.'

Her trenchcoat didn't match the skirt. She left it with Riki. When she looked up to see where the rain was coming from, she saw pale blue stains on the uniform grey.

'I like your shoulders,' said a random passerby.

Gina was stomping her treadmill to death and grunting.

'Y'reckon?' she asked, mopping her brow with a Nike mop-towel.

'Oh yeah, you're lookin' good,' the admirer said. Gina thanked her and wondered if she were a lesbian. She liked working the shoulders now that her back didn't hurt.

Aro silently slotted herself in at an exercycle beside Gina.

'Heya! Hey d'you actually reckon my shoulders are doin' alright?'

She expected Aro to chuckle and lend agreement. Aro, peddling with sculpted thighs and calves, and powerful lips curled into her mouth, mumbled

'Shoulshers're goob. Losh bloody a dozen kgs all ober though haben't ya.'

Gina's proud shiver flushed cold through her system.

'Wwwanna go somewhere and talk?'

'Shpo sho. Shauna or shomfin?'

'Something's up,' Gina said through the steam.

'How ja meam,' Aro stated through her mouthful, squinting and frowning. Her back was straight against the tiled wall, but her face pointed to the ground.

'Is it... am I like a bad client or anything?'

Aro looked at her and rolled her eyes. Gina held her towel tightly in place with her arms because there remained pockets of fat on her. Aro nodded at the beach towel 'Would'a fought you'd'a brought bat trenchcoat in wiv ya.' Red spittle escaped her lips.

'What's up, Aro?'

She was silent for a long time. Gina wondered if the staunch woman would ever blink. A bead of perspiration teetered on the brink of Aro's eyebrow then let go. She let the drop fall and disperse on her quads.

Finally she looked down at it, blinked, relaxed her lips a smidgen, took her hands from between her thighs and positioned them on her knees.

‘Gop dog, right? Jack Rushel? Jack’s hish name. Bloody... got... got hish froat ripped out by a wottreiler, bloody gang dog. Live in Paradysh Lotsh, whadya ecshpect. Not bat you’d know what a plaish like that’sh like.’

Gina’s first reaction was to regret having criticised her trainer for not blinking. Gina found her own eyes needed little lubrication because she wasn’t seeing through them – instead she watched a slideshow in her head of the times she’d seen dogs disagreeing and their owners barking at each other. Bared teeth and blood and breaking bones.

‘What’d you do?’ Gina asked softly.

Aro shook her head and produced a brutal smile with the teeth she had left.

‘Gangshtersh, what’m I shposda do? Building can’t be worsh two bucksh but the cuntsh don’t pay any rent f’t heir flatsh do bey, shit inside shmokin’ pure all day long, dogsh’re obviously gonna wind up shcizophrenic aren’t bey.’

Using her experience as a property-pusher, Gina prepared a long soothing statement in which she would appraise Aro’s circumstances then rule in Aro’s favour, reminding her trainer that her virtues were appreciated and she had a bright future ahead of her. And that Aro could find far better accomodation and stay at Gina’s while she got back on her feet and Aro would become Personal Trainer Di Tutti Personal Trainers and of course your body’s unrivalled hon and – and –

Gina extended her toned right arm and applied it to the back of Aro’s sagging head. She slid her defined buttocks along the tiled bench. She sealed the embrace with her left arm and pulled Aro into her bosom, which was still unrefined and soft.

Gina secured the Dealing Hall contract for Propman. Her back could support the new chip on her shoulder. The Dealing contract’s workload filtered down so that eight employees got the opportunity to hand out Paradise Hall Inc business cards with their names added in biro.

They appreciated what Gina had done for them, as any scavenger appreciates being thrown a carcass. One of them made a cake. Gina took out an Aero and stared at it. She stole away from the staff room to her office and familiarised herself with the legal documents concerning the Dealing deal. Outside, the rain thinned and the dissipating clouds revealed Paradise Lots in the distance.

In the afternoon, she shared Mr Spire's Jaguar and they drove down Ara Valley. Gina counted the falling property values of the houses as they neared ground zero. Spire approached the underground carpark at Paradise Lots, flashed his headlights in there, deemed it unworkable, and parked outside the front door of the building instead. A leathery punk sitting on top of a Coke machine asked Spire what he was doing, parking there, began demanding recompense. Spire ahlessly told him to shut up. The youth jumped down from the Coke machine and landed in a drying puddle. He rummaged in his pockets for something sharp.

Six vanloads of security guards made their way onto the shingled forecourt of Paradise Lots in single file. They surrounded Spire's Jag and parked in a semi-circle. The youth backed inside. Soon a hairy man and a fat woman came to the front entrance of the building, wearing patches and shades. Gina made to shake hands with them, but the man cradled his mitts protectively. Gina saw a white jewel sparkling on the man's knuckle. She said

'So you must be Mister and Missus...' examining her copy of the documentation, '...Power, Black?'

They raised their chins an inch and their necks flared widely.

'As agreed, payment by cash is what we're doing, Mr Spire?'

Spire muddled about in the back seat of his Jag and found the briefcase he was after. He placed it on the trunk of the car and gave the gangsters come-hither eyebrows. He opened the case and the bills expanded. The sun was coming out – the latches on the case flashed teasingly.

'Nah,' said the male, pushing the lid of the briefcase closed with his palms, clearly agonised, 'Sall good.' When his shaking right hand curled

its fingers around the handle, the tooth stuck in his knuckle fell out and clanked on the trunk. The heavies sauntered away.

Spire briefed the security guards and sent them into the building. Two vanloads of thugs made noises in the carpark then sped away, yelling and throwing bourbon & coke bottles. One bottle targeted a security van, smashing a side window. Part of the bottle rolled into a muddy flower bed which sat under the ground floor windows. There was a dog-sized bulge of soil in the bed with a cross sticking out of it.

There were few gangsters left in the building to haul out, meaning a six-to-one guard-gangster ratio as the stragglers were removed. The guards chuckled when one complained about getting his boots wet. There were pigeons to evacuate from the top several floors, a host of rats, and gang dogs howling with bewildered abandonment. Spire went and sat in his car. Gina dealt with the final occupants. She let the dogs chew on an eviction notice, let the pigeons poo on Riki's business card.

As they sky dried, it darkened. Aro's head was inclined towards the steering wheel as she pulled in, and her face was downcast, but it cheered into puzzlement when she saw a fit woman in her headlights sitting on a Jag with a driver waiting inside. Aro made to descend the ramp into the underground car park, saw it had been deserted, and stopped at the cusp of the slope. She got out of the car clutching a dog collar and peered Jagwards. After a few moments, she chose her exclamation.

'Barely recognised ya. You beem lookin after yashelf eh.'

Gina said, 'I owe ya.'

Eating Is Cheating

!

He's on choice form today, the hopeless idiot. Goes from searching for his keys to reckoning that if he doesn't get along to church right that second... well, he doesn't come up with what the consequences is, he just understands that there's a threat. You don't give him a hand, it'd only encourage him. You push your sunnies firmly onto your nose with the knuckle of your fist. You don't have to give nothin away.

'Found it yet?' you go, to hurry things up.

'Found what?'

Found *what?* Like he doesn't even know what he's searchin for. Jude's a bit of a unit sometimes, well, most of the time. If it wasn't for his bacon-bringing skills then you'd have you a *poor* unit. So a unit on eighteen bucks a hour's relatively good. He gives you a cut which is cute of him, seein as you can only do twenty hours before they gyp your student allowance. Not that work affects your moneys, but what Jude don't know can't hurt him. Or maybe it hurts him more. Whatever.

He roams the entire downstairs hard out, lifts up the couch cushions. If there was stones, he'd be searchin under them. Most of the lounge is covered by the fold-out bed that you sleep on, coz you can't be arsed settin a TV up upstairs. The flat's been stretched upwards sorta thing, you got three floors which is pretty exotic, although the floors is narrow. The top floor's always bright coz you can't be stuffed chuckin the curtains up. You surround this courtyard which has got a apple tree in a circle of dirty grass surrounded with uneven bricks, muddy gaps between em. When you're in the courtyard you feel surrounded. It's only really a place where they dumped some bricks and spread em. There's a patch of dirt in the centre where the Asians chuck their fruit rubbish. That's what the apple tree grew out of when it started warmin up in Spring. There's weeds, heaps of weeds, with buds on their ends, bit of colour stuck inside the

buds. They appear out of nowhere and ruin everything. They piss you off coz they won't leave dirt to be dirty.

You don't know much about the neighbours, except they're probly Asians coz they drive souped-up WRXs and Starlets with Hello Kitty toys in the back window. Evangeline's Asian something, come from outside, making trouble in your weed garden. She's got her eyes on your man, the dirty snake. Good luck, ho.

The only part of your flat what matters is where you and Jude sleep, where you come together: the bedroom, well, bedroom-slash-lounge. Jude sleeps on the side of the bed nearest the door. The 42-inch plasma is at the foot of the bed. Jude paid for it. Nitty's asleep on the bed at the moment. She looks like a dove when she sleeps, arms bunched up like wings. You wanted a cat for ages and then wham: you got preggers, got a baby instead. Nitty's choice enough.

She's sleeping. You turn her over, there's Jude's keys in her little fist and the rabbit's foot keyring in her mouth, covered in drool. Jude comes from this clan of superstitious hoarders out West. Buncha loser meth chefs, always gettin raided. Jude's got on every light in the house at the mo to help him find those stupid keys. It's like half-eight on a Sunday morning and you've got a t-shirt on and fuck-all else. Winter's not that far away, they reckon. Fall's just starting now. They call it Fall on the Discovery channel. Sky's always there for you. You tell Jude as he walks past, 'Too bright with them lights oi.' You ask him to pick up more Woodys while he's out. He snorts about it. The two of you got to bed when the sun come up. You're bitchy. Your mouth's completely disappeared, that's how hard you're puckering.

You hold the keys out by the lucky rabbit's foot. Jude snatches them and goes,

'Don't hold him by the foot.'

'Who?'

'Just don't. It's sacrelicious.'

'What, against the Easter Bunny? Don't you think it'd be more pissed off about being a three-wheeler?'

Jude tries to flex the cords in his neck to man up. He thinks his traps are massive, but there's room for improvement. You caught him eating K-fry the other day and gave him a rark-up about how bad that shit is for you. Now Jude lets his neck and his spine go and sags down an inch. He's a big idiot, there's a lot of him there and he doesn't know what to do with himself.

'Seek 'n you shell find,' he goes, quietly, proud that you found his keys. He's got the paua shell ash tray in his fingers. He thinks he's supposed to find a shell, and now he doesn't know what to do. Evangeline told him to say that crap. He's been name-dropping Evangeline since she moved in beside yous a couple weeks ago. She's some kinda religious dandelion wine-drinkin student organic hippie, into recycling and junk. Her name's too long to drop smoovely so Jude calls her Angel, says she likes it. She drags his arse to church. You yourself call her -

'Eve told you that?'

Course she did. And course he knows not what the hell he's saying. Jude's yours, not no one else's.

'I've gotta go. You got enough- '

'Jesus, yeah. What do I need money for on a Sunday mornin, buyin sleep?'

He reaches for his wallet on impulse then realises you're takin the piss. He shrugs at the message he's wrote on the kitchen noticeboard, Nitty Feed. He doesn't have the balls to actually ask you to pay for it. He doesn't slam the door when he leaves. Jude's a door repairman and installation dude. He'd never hurt a door. He'd never hurt you, either. You're in control. You can't *not* be in control. You say to him through the kitchen window,

'Faceplate, oi.' Jude can't leave the house without his faceplate. Or his bit of dead rabbit. This is a guy who'll drive to the dairy across the road just so he can show off his sounds. The idiot drives a cream bloody work van right, with a sad-arse work logo on the side and paint on the tyres, but his sound system's hard out. It's just about the only thing that puts a smile on his face, that and Nitty. The smile always disappears for

some reason when he steps into the house. It pisses you off, that he's got shit to be passionate about. You pick the faceplate out of the fruit bowl where it lives with the repo notices and pizza coupons. Ain't no fruit in there. He goes to you through the kitchen window, coz it's too much effort to open the door,

'Angel's picking me up.'

Eve, more like. *Eve-ill*. You wanna roll that slapper. On second thought, the door can stay closed. He can just stay at church forever. You snap the deadlock on him, put the chain in and burn tread for bed.

*

Next weekend they go off to their little church service again and you sleep through it. Just as he's leaving, you remind him to pick up some bourbs by throwin a can at his face. After you go back to bed for a bit, you wake up feeling like your skull got the bash and take the sleeping bag with you when you go to piss and grab a swig from the bottle. The sleeping bag's had the zip open and now it's got double the area. Jude came up with the idea but he gives you most of the bag, and sleeps curled up in a wool jersey, like a baby. Shame.

You step over the crap on the floor, ciggie butts and cans, crate furniture, scrunchies, apple cores and K-fry bones. Forget recycling the cans, recycling's gay. There's mushies from the yard too, they *poof* when you step on em. Jude brought them into your home. *Eve's* suggestion. Your place is stupid quiet. You can hear trucks chugging past on the motorway. You can't sleep anymore, coz Jude's not around to bore you to sleep. Even Nitty's asleep, she's in her lie-back on top of the bed. Jude shoulda took Nitty with him, she's making it too quiet here. You wanna tell Jude to clean up the floor but the prick's bailed.

Lying with your head back in the top-right corner, you can see up the stairwell to the second and third levels, floors one and two. Two's the floor Jude sometimes goes on about sleeping on. Him and his mates would have to carry the bed up, not you, you're not the one who's

supposed to be strong. Jude's strong. His body, that is. When he gets his shit together and works out, that is.

It's peaceful when you're not in the same room as Jude, but you can't sleep no matter how dark your sunnies make the room. After a bit you hear Eve's voice as she walks him up the three steps to the front door. Apparently three steps requires a escort. *Pfssh*, yeah: that's about right, Eve *is* a escort. Her foreign-arse voice sounds all sly and slippery, like if a snake was talking. You take your sleeping bag-cape and scurry over to the kitchen bench and raise your head til you can see her wheels in the driveway through the lace curtains you melted when you was doing spots on the stovetop. You blamed it on Jude.

This Eve, she rides a Starlet hatch, two door, virgin white. Choice stickers. Wicked head and taillights you guess, lowered, body kit. Puts Jude's ride to shame. Goddamn though, man, what a harlot, drivin a hatch to church... Like, aren't you supposed to drive a hearse or somethin to church? What a blasphemious dude.

You draw the curtains in the kitchen and the lounge. A bit of light's creeping down the stairs from the top floors where you ain't put the curtains up, but your flat's mostly nice and dark. You shuffle back to bed, and Jude comes in, and Eve hugs him before she escorts her arse off your property. She wears snakeskin boots and no make-up. That ain't right. You don't wear make-up, but that's coz you ain't gotta impress Jude any more. Evil's boots are goddamn hot, it pisses you off hard out. She picks up a dandelion as she passes through the courtyard and strokes it and acts like it's beautiful. It's the boots talking. Jude's wearin his best Hallensteins gear, and his Slayer belt buckle just for her. Looks alright when he makes an effort.

Jude doesn't come over and do stuff for you, just picks up the Woodstock cans on the bench and sniffs them. Woodys is great. Jude's a idiot though oi, buys a whole bottle of Woodstock bourb and the coke separately and he's gotta mix them himself, takes twice as long just for a drink. Jude eats too, when he's drinking, even eats with a ciggie in his fingers, sometimes K-fry but weird shit too like fruit. Eating is cheating, *you reckon*.

You were havin a domestic last night at some point, a outside domestic on the front steps, a argument what seemed pretty thin, you were telling him the fucking apples on that tree aren't healthy as you gulped from your can and drained your ciggy. You booted the recycling bin, booted the heads off some of the mushies tryina grow in the courtyard. Kina shells on the lawn – you dumped them on the lawn to decompose, not grow. He said to you, 'Angel says it's Fall, it's all good,' and took a bite out of one of the apples and tried telling you it tasted ripe. Kept a straight face, too. You told him, Eating is cheating, coz it is, you can't pussy out and line your stomach, eating's cheating. He went, I don't need any more to drink, so you chucked a Woody at his head. It missed. He skulked his arse back indoors. You broke a branch off the tree and battered on the door with it. You kicked the heads off some more mushies and there was like a hazy bloom around the top. You saw the half-eated apple Jude'd chucked on the ground and even though it was dark, you saw a worm stick its blind arse out and wriggle in the dark. Coulda been a snake, though. Freaked you the fuck out, in the dark you could see a whole wrigglin' garden growin between the bricks, the torn mushrooms steaming. You ran back into your flat. It was like running through Auntie's section, running from threats you couldn't see, the wet weeds slapping your knees.

You wait for him to come to you. He stands in the kitchen sniffin your empty cans.

'Still dark,' you go, 'Grab a drink oi.'

'Coz you got the curtains closed.'

'Just help yourself,' you go in his direction. He shakes his head. He's standing up straighter than the Jude St John that you know, straighter than he's got any right to stand. You don't know where this attitude of his come from.

'The Lord helps those who help themselves,' he goes, lookin at something you can't see.

'Eve teach you that shit?'

'You mean Angel.'

‘Evangeline, trampoline. Dumb name. Hippie eh?’ He doesn’t confirm her name’s dumb. Doesn’t need to, you got that ho clocked. ‘Did you get any coin from that church?’

‘It’s gotta end,’ he pertests, then his posture drops a little bit, just enough to make you recognise him. That’s him alright, that’s your cat door-installing ninety-five KG dropkick of a man. He pulls from his back pocket a little coin purse, old lady styles. Takes out his keys too and brings them over and strokes Nitty’s head and dangles the amputated foot over your little girl. She giggles and reaches up for him. You smack her hands.

He dumps the coin purse in front of your nose. You tip the money out under the sleeping bag blanket. Jeez it stinks under there, Jude needs to do his arse some washing. Thirty coins in total, small shit, no gold, fifties and twenty centses. He shouldn’t of bothered. Jude’s a fuck-up.

‘What am I sposda do with this?’

Nitty lies on her back lookin up. Jude hates going up the stairs but he starts up there now. He’s got this theory, that he does three lots of fifteen calf curls at the gym and any strain on his calves after that is going to upset his balance. Jude thinks he’s got a balance to maintain. Only balance you need around here is when you’re stepping over the bones and cans and – well, a apple core too, now. It’s buzzy, you look away for a bit and suddenly everything’s filthy.

You throw the coins all over the floor. Thirty stink pieces.

‘God, you needa raise your game, hard.’

Jude goes to the top, he actually does it. There’s not much on the top two of your three floors, hot water cupboard and a vacuum cleaner, but he takes his arse up anyway. View of Eve’s place up there, maybe he can see through her window, maybe they do faggy little waves to each other. While you still got your head out of the covers, he turns to you and goes,

‘There’s more to it than the money. And don’t blasphemer.’

Blasphemer, right. You grab the lucky rabbit’s foot out of Nitty’s mouth. You don’t like her suckin on that thing, there’s nothin in it. You throw it into the kitchen; it lands in the sink. You was aimin for the rubbish.

He comes down later. You look for the tail between his legs. Twelve o'clock on a Sunday after church, for Christ's sake... you should be doing family shit at the park. Sylvia Park shopping centre, that is. You tell him you wanna meet Evangeline, if that's her name, and he says Oh, um, choice. You don't know why he's bein so undefensiable, it throws you off balance.

He goes to the gym and you text him to tell him he sucks and don't get any drive-thru til after. His fault if he didn't get lunch in. Hopefully the text'll reach him just as he's startin to feel good about himself. You put the dummy in Nitty's mouth to shut her up.

Jude comes home, parks up, takes ages to come up the three stairs, drags the door handle down, comes in clutchin his faceplate. He looks at Nitty and a smile bothers his lips. He tries not to look at you. You're got a decent glare on, like a spotlight on his face.

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Jude's gymmin it up the regular amount of times, he reckons, but his body's gettin pussified, his chest goes from features to flat, same with his arms, like Lance Armstrong cyclist styles. You catch the bastard smiling on his own about some secret bullshit. The apples are disappearing off the tree. They're lookin eatible enough but you won't eat them. You wonder when the Fall's gonna end. The weeds are comin up. It still surprises you that they can find a niche to grow out of. You'd pulled a bunch out and kept a eye on them but they grew back under your eyes. Eve saw you shrieking and swearing at the weeds and kicking the wall and shaking the apple tree and getting worms and shit on you but she didn't dare speak out. She still ain't come inside your place and got jealous of your happy home. Not that you need her to.

So Jude's legs shrink and you can see the tendons. It'd be hot if he was fat before, but he weren't, so what he's doing is stupid. He runs. You ask him, what, you pay a gym membo so's you can run round the block and he goes no, on a running machine. He explains the dealio but it doesn't add up.

‘So you don’t like cover any ground? Well what do ya run towards?’

II

Sunday morning. It’s like a week can’t go by without Sunday comin around. Weeks take ages. You went out once in the week, far’s you remember. You chucked dandelions on Auntie’s grave. You could barely even look at what you were doing.

He says he’s gotta go do his teeth, and sprays deodorant in his mouth. Angel’s takin him to church.

‘Come if you want.’

You got a big swag of school work to do, to get your Hospo Unit Standards, and Nitty’s buggin you, being quiet. She’s a third wheel, is Nitty. You called her Trinity coz Jude likes that chick in The Matrix who saves the main dude. Also coz you were looking at havin a third trimester borshy but Cain said there’s money in the DPB so you sadded out.

It’s all g leavin the school work on the bed. Good things come to those who wait. You can wait it another week.

Eve toots and you open the door and yell,

‘Jesus Christ, for the luvva God, shutcha arse up.’

You’re bein nice to Eve but you also want Nitty to hear how adults talk. Jude’s got carpet imprinted on his face but he looks happy about something. Probly coz you let him have Sundays off from work. Jude slept upstairs on the first level in his wool jersey, under some washing. You told him, you sleep in it, you fold it. He’s only in his gruds but he runs out into the carport and gives Eve a hug in the driver’s seat and runs back in, goes up and gets changed into a suit.

No kidding, he’s got a suit. It’s a black ‘Who died’ suit from Auntie’s tangi and as far as you’re concerned, he can wear it to Eve’s funeral when you kill the bitch and then chuck it. But nope, he even does it up a bit by pasting some skatey stickers on his tie. He runs back upstairs and rummages for something or other, swears when he can’t find whatever it

is, says sorry for swearin, 'My bad.' You yell up at him, 'I'm down here if you wanna apologise.'

Eve comes up the front steps and says hi and God bless. You tell her if she's wanting the man upstairs, he's doing things in his own time. It'd be sweet if Jude took half an hour after that to justify what you've told Eve but he comes down and they rush out.

'Will you come?' goes Eve, blinking, turning back. Jude remembers he's supposed to turn back for you. He makes it up by stepping forwards and almost sorta blockin out Eve, for your sake.

'There's gonna be wine,' Jude goes. There's drool on his lips.

Jude leans the passenger seat forwards and you slide in the back with Nitty. Tight in there – three's a crowd, oi.

'Shall we chuck Nitty in the boot?' you go. Eve gulps real loud.

'She's joking,' Jude goes.

Forgot your shoes. Whatever. Jude grabs a apple from the tree to eat real loud. As you drive away from the courtyard, feeling less surrounded, you see the apple tree's sorta healing where you ripped its branch off, and the apples are looking a bit more eatible now. You wonder when the Fall's gonna end. You're glad Jude's headed away from the apples. It'd be sweet as with you if lightning fried it all up. You're used to stormy-arse weather, when it's warm and wet and dangerous. Reminds you of wandering round Auntie's acres hitting mushrooms and shit with a stick. The thistles were high and tryina step you out and you whacked their heads off and they grew more heads like a hydra. You couldn't keep them down, they came back from the dead.

Your stomach's bubbling and whining. You tell Eve to stop and grab yous some baby munchies coz Nitty's been howling since last night. Eve makes a fuss, what about mashed apple sauce, mm-mm, it's free and it grows naturally.

'What, like a 99 cent apple pie, like from Macca's?'

'Um, I guess – '

'Nah. Too expensive.'

You fold your arms, point out that you're at the lights and all she needs to do is chuck the handbrake on, run into the dairy and boost. You

say to her, DO YOU WANT THIS BABY? EH? WELL SOMEONE'S GOTTA LOOK AFTER HER SO THE LEAST YOU CAN DO'S FEED HER. Nitty starts wailing.

Eve does what she's told.

When she runs back out with a bag of chippies and hoons off, her hands are shaking like vibrators or something and she does a stink job of driving. She hands the chippies back. They're fruity-arse organic apple crisps, not even real chips. You give Eve a bit of grief, tell her to watch the road.

Jude's got a apple core in his hand and he's looking at it and looks like he wants to throw up. These churchgoing bastards, they're good for fuck-all. Eve's obviously pretty fresh. Jude should know better.

You feel that rush. You can't move unless you're stepping up. You can't stop unless you crash into a brick wall. You can't face church unless you're forced to go. You wanna crack cunts right in the mouth unless they crack you first.

You ask Eve exactly what it is she does and she goes how she's a agent for someone or other. You ask Eve who does she think she is, taking your husband to church, and she just about strays outside of the centre lane and goes

'Husband? Omigosh, I wasn't – '

Jude cuts in, 'Can you chill?' He's playin with his bunny fist.

'Just playin,' you go. You see Eve's stupid head nodding at this. She's got these real wide cheekbones, way too wide. Like how models look, nothing like you. You're what real peeps look like. You can smell the bitch's fruity shampoo too, she's gone all out. Don't get you started on her dress, it's cut way too low. See if you go in a hoodie and jeans like you, like a normal person, no one's gonna think you're a hussy like this ho. Auntie'd sort it out. Hard lady, hard to please, but she kept shit in order after your folks bailed.

Eve waits a while until she tries entering the conversation again. There's some parking coins in the compartment between the front two seats and you lean forward a bit, careful not to make Nitty cry, and snatch

a couple. Chuck 'em down your cleave. Pokies coin, nothin major. You'd better have 'em, coz coins expire if you don't use 'em.

Eve, looking ahead, goes, 'How old is Trinity?'

'Nitty's three, or thirty months, whatever way you wanna look at it. Surprised Jude didn't tell you that. He's pretty hopeless eh.'

'He doesn't talk about himself much.'

Most of the city's drivin in the centre lane with Eve. It makes you tense. You drive past a couple of perfectly good churches, one's got a boatloada Tongans on the lawn, the other's got Zimbabweans or something. You can stare at them all you like through your sunnies, and they can't see where your eyes are goin. You don't see why you can't just stop at one of those ones, you thought God was supposed to be all over the show. You just find it hard to face whichever direction Jude and Eve are going in. You picture the Starlet plowing through the church punters, chompin through their white shirts, omeletting into a brick wall, unstoppable, terminal.

When you do get to a church good enough for Eve, it's all patchy and wooden. White weatherboards. Crosses all over the show. You get edgy around crosses. Auntie overindulged in 'em. You don't like how on a cross there's three perfectly even knobs at the top but the base of it's down the bottom, gettin dissed. Shit's unequal. You can see tag under the new paint. Probably a few of Jude's tags from five years ago come to think of it, *Beast of Bourbon*, that was his tag, this was his hood. You liked it how Jude would come and go in the middle of the night. All he left was a promise he'd be back. Independent, that was him.

You linger in the car as long as you can, pulling your hair down the sides of your head, munching on the split ends, twirling strands of black regrowth amongst the caramel bleached bits. Your hair blocks out the view to your sides, and your sunnies protect the front.

Something's up with the church, for real. It's not the shape of it, you've grown up in loads of houses where the roof's DIY and the windows are in pieces. It's gotta be the peeps making this place weird. Not the building, building's normal. They got a recycling bin and it's *INSIDE*. Gay. You chuck your addy in the visitors book as you come in.

Under the Comments bit, you write EATING IS CHEATING!!! in big capitals.

Inside is buzzing with peeps which you find annoying. You're not agro-phobic, you just don't like other people getting ahead of you. If you gotta live on the ground floor, so do other cunts. And that's a Christian message anyway, like we're all supposed to corporate with each other. See, you know more about this shit than Jude does. Jude's a tool. Like right now, he's helpin his Angel out of the driver's seat coz her heel's stuck under the brake. Jude ain't here for no church, probably wants to tap this slut and he's gonna learn the long way that that shit ain't gonna happen. Learn through disappointment, that's how you roll.

You try to shove through the reception to get yous some good seats. Tough crowd though, lotta fat people. You'd love to slip round the sides, but the only way out is through. They're smiling. God these pricks know how to smile. Still, you won't take your sunnies off for nobody. Keeps the light out – you're used to the dark. You haven't been to church since, shit, since you was like thirteen? You'd forgotten how much people smile, you ain't used to it.

Holding Nitty's a good excuse not to shake peeps's hands. You think she shat her pants, she smells like burnt poos or something. You oughta change her nappies this week. Jude comes up and teases her with his keys, makes her fart. Reminds you of being at home, that stink. Lotta snooty peeps here, they'll probably kick up a fuss about the stench. Eve offers to hold her, smiling from one cheekbone to the other and you tell her God no, Get your own. You don't want them apple chips anywhere near Nitty. Eve goes, 'You shouldn't swear in front of babies. They can hear you.'

As if.

You move in slowly. The floorboards are all solid and dented from the geriatric dance-a-thons they probably have. There's red carpet and it's reserved for the bit up front with the levels, the pitbull, and it looks like they've got a body under a white sheet on the table. You know what that's all about, that's Jesus's body. You know how it works, you seen it on Discovery.

Most of the people stand when the preacher man comes in, he's wearing white robes. Preacher man does the local notices, bore-ring, then after a him he gets stuck into stuff about tolerance and how Jesus loved hookers. That's a new one. You wish you could run that by Auntie, she'd have something to say. You can still hear her voice.

There's gang kids with moustaches wearin their caps inside. You raise your chin when you walk past them. Their mums barely notice, too busy singing. The order of service is full of typos, it's madness. The fat-arse preacher's a ex-prison guard. The weirdest part's the church band. It's like how they have those dudes who do the drum roll during comedy acts, except the drum roll's for whenever the preacher goes Hallelujah or Amen, which is all the time. Asians in the band, Asians in the audience, coconuts, Zimboes 'n shit, it's like the Otara market. You ain't used to it – when you think about that religion stuff, you picture a worm-eaten holiday home alone in a valley with a lonesome monster in it.

Preachey don't even look at you when he speaks, he looks at the ceiling all the time, he's worse than Jude. You look over at Jude and yup, Jude's looking up too, queer-arse hopeful smile on his lips. Wide lips, wide jaw that boy's got. I've seen him take a lotta punches on that jaw before he goes down. Jude's learned this smilin behaviour from Eve, bet ya ten bucks. They're standing and singin him in Samoan, the hims is got no consonants. Sounds sorta like the sounds are natural and the consonants are like, like man-made obstacles that get in your way or whatever.

You do the Got-a-pen scribble motion to Eve when she takes Jude's hand and they sit down, and lucky Eve's got a pen in her handbag and she sighs when she hands it over. You give her the staunch chin. Her attitude's unbelievable. You do a Sudoku and it only takes you quarter of an hour. You're pretty ace at these things, you've got it goin on upstairs, you. Nitty keeps mostly quiet, until she dribbles and when you hold her up she kicks the back of this lady's head in front of yous. You tell the lady to mind her own fucking business. The him's loud and it drowns you out.

More singing. Everyone shakes hands. You don't. When they really pester you you give em a gangsta shake as best you can, with Nitty in your arms and it catches the geezers off guard. Uncultured, them peeps.

More singing. What_the_fuck. It's like High School Musical up in here. That movie was choice, it made you laugh in your belly. Your belly's groaning now, not chortlin. You can hear the acid washing against your ribs, scraping away bits with each splash. The sound's loud in your ears. You find some staunch in you, though. Eating is cheating. And you can see wine comin up.

They got this bit where they invite the partitioners to come up and have Communion. You listen up. See the dealio is you get to partake of the body of Christ and drink his blood. You respect that, honest you do. You wanna see the body. Blood's nothin new. The preacher fingers the sheet that's on the table and everyone gets amped up quite a bit, the old ladies have got their hankies out and they're mopping their brows, then the preacher pulls it back and it's what looks like sugarcubes and red wine. Sweet! Well, the sugar part's sweet. You almost forgive Jude, but you see Auntie's finger naggin at you. The wine would only be good for drinking if it's something class like Lindauer. Your stomach groans and you tell it to shut up. Jude steps over you and stands on your toes and you call him a fuckin' egg loud enough so he can hear you over whoever's playing bagpipes. He's holding himself up. Actually, Eve's holding him up. Old ladies is turning and looking in your direction, Jude's making a unit of himself and – get this – not only does he crunch your toenails, he takes Eve with him.

Yeah. They're actually clapping as he goes up. He couldn't be happier to get away from you right then. It makes your fingers go tense like sticks. You wanna grab somethin. The preacher welcomes Jude, knows his name, and he joins a bunch of kids up there, coloured kids from heathen countries.

You scrunch up your Sudoku. It won't be goin on the fridge. Jude fucked up the memory. Maybe it can go inside the fridge with the KFC bones.

When he's eaten and drunk in front of everyone, standing like two feet taller than the next kid up there, he stays and tries to sing to them tunes what sound like bagpipes. Eve's got a smile like a snake, sharp teeth, fangs, white too. Probly brushes her teeth every day.

Then you all get offered a feed, snack at least, they bring round the red stuff on li'l trays they carry by hand. The cubes of sugar or whatever are on big plates and you only get one each. You stomp it into the floorboards. Eating is cheating. Your stomach's rumbling. You put your hand over Nitty's mouth so they don't inflict any food on her. They try to take Nitty up to the table and you tell them to get the hell away. They look patient, they don't even step up. Eve goes, warm and sticky like blood, 'We'll get her next time.'

All around you they're goin, 'Body of Christ,' eating like pussies, like cowards.

Your bubbly's flat and the sugarcubes are bread. Everything in here's like a cover-up. The only thing that's blatant is Eve and what the fuck she wants from your man. Maybe he knows what he's in for, maybe that's what's got him smiling.

The music's got real loud, like a siren in your ears. The punters is singing louder and louder, drowning in their own sound. You look up and there's a portrait of Jesus done by kids with fingerpaint and handprints, they think this is good apparently. You fish out a ciggy and light the bastard and Jude decides he's holier-than-yo, actually wraps his big dumb arms round you and lifts you up taking you away, showin his strengf, you're kicking the pews and you hit a couple of the Zimboes and Jude hauls you out of there and takes you through the reception. Nitty's left behind and she sorta waddles after yous. You knock over a vase and water's all over the Christian mags and leaflets, you try to boot out the windows on the front door but don't quite make it, crack your shin on the frame and you bite into Jude's neck and he yells JESUS and his breath stinks like hungry and he drops your arse on the steps.

You lie there panting. You draw on your ciggy and choke, but they go bad if you don't smoke 'em. Jude picks up Nitty and hushes her and closes the door on you. Jude's hot when he's fired up, he's a stud, you

remember why you married the cunt in the first place, but you're still angry at him and you go,

'Eating's cheating,' you're strugglin to breathe, 'You're hopeless.' It's all the ammo you got.

*

'What kinda a church was it?'

'Methadiss.'

'That's like J-hoes and stuff eh?'

'No.'

'Why ain't that Eve wear make-up?'

'Reckons she doesn't believe in it.'

'She believes in all sortsa shit though. Believes in you, don't she.'

You're goin easy on him. It's Saturday night and you're just getting into it. Got the league on, volume off, got some smooove grooves playin, getting amped for a bit of exposure out of the house. You're in bed but it won't take you two secs to chuck a hood on when you're off. This Angel ho, she's coming to grab Nitty and take her for the night. When you tell Jude you're doing her a favour he goes, I thought you was havin a sad at her. You tell him you forgive her. It throws him off his guard big-time. Used to work on Auntie when she'd get on your case too much. I forgive ya, it's easy to say.

Jude's been hangin out in the kitchen heaps. You wish his boys at work could see him washing them cans out, it's sad. He's got flowers on the window sill in half-chopped cans, thistle flowers and dandelions. They're dead, you reckon. Still life. Except for the flies.

'Still life in 'em,' he goes.

Eve, Angel, Evangeline - you told her she's not allowed to throw water on Nitty's head. She almost laughed but she saw the shape of your mouth and changed her mind. You told her to block Nitty's ears if they started talking church shit. And no apple chips. She didn't argue. You gave her a couple bits of toilet paper to wipe off any of that bible water they try to splash on babies. You chucked two pairs of Huggies on Nitty,

coz she hasn't wore any for most of the week, and try to say a curse over her so she's your property. The best curse words you can think of are 'damn and 'smash.' You chuck a two-litre of milk and some bits of bread in her My Pretty Pony bag and hand it over. It was your bag from when you were a kid. Auntie said My Pretty Pony was idle so you were never allowed to wear it, and now it's too big for you. You'd lift a new one in a heartbeat if they still sold 'em.

Jude sits on the floor of the kitchen, right there on the lino that's sticky coz one of you knocked over your bourb. He chows down on a apple. You can almost smell it, though your nose is always blocked up with black bogies. You tell him to get up and come fuckin' get ready, you're going to Cain's then down the clubrooms, but Jude sads it up. You try to have fun in bed by yourself, smoke, turn the TV up, but he still won't come over. He ain't even sleeping on the side of the bed nearest the door no more, kinda curls up at the bottom. He just looks at the light coming out of the foot of the stairs. You thought yous were havin a good night. Guess not. There's a voice calling him. You yell at him, to make sure the voice he hears is yours. You tell him to get you another drink for fuck's sake.

Yous've got a spare TV, this TV's so sad it sits on the kitchen bench and you haven't even plugged it in. Jude mopes upstairs with it and chucks you a can on the way and you tell him not to clomp. You spill bourb on your Lotto ticket and it trickles onto your puzzle book and you scream at him. He turns around with the TV in his arms, biceps bulging. You make his flesh quiver. Your stomach rages, it makes you angrier. It demands flesh.

He's got half a apple clutched in his fingers. He looks guilty coz he knows he bloody should be.

'Fruit's healthy,' he tries to go. He's leaving you.

'Don't even fuckin think about dropping that shit on me,' you tell him, holdin a can to protect yourself, 'I know you're thinkin it. You're hopeless, no hope on ya, Jude.'

He goes, 'You shouldn't swear in front of babies. Jesus was a baby.'

You tell him his biceps are pussy and Eve's got bigger biceps, from turning veges, turning tricks, maybe that's why you like her, you yell at him, Eating 's cheating. The stupid Asians bang on the wall and say to keep the noise down in Asian. You yell right on back at them in your own language, practice your curse on them. Eve's through the other wall but she doesn't dare knock on yours. Then the wail of a little girl leaks through the wall. You hope you've got Eve crying, now she knows what it's like bein on the ground floor.

Jude follows the wall upstairs, pressin his lips against it, goin *Angel*. He doesn't like it down where you are anymore.

You pull into the courtyard. The boot's heavy with boxes of nappies.

'Take it back to the shop if ya want,' you say to Eve, shaking the pack of apple chips, 'they won't take it back though.' The apple tree's heavy and leaning right over the driveway, braches bending down, doin the limbo. Eve's ride knocks apples off the branches and they thud along the roof.

'Go around,' you tell her.

'Sorry,' she goes, 'gotta go through em.'

It's hard to get the dummy into Nitty's mouth. You let Jude hold her, you can't be arsed. You go to Nitty, I can't take you anywhere.

Jude tells Nitty, 'I'll take ya.'

You shake your head and blow toxic smoke out the window. You tell Jude to hurry up and get ready, you wanna go to the Park. You kick Jude's seat and tell him to let you out. When he gets out of the car he doesn't fob Nitty off on you, he holds onto her. He turns his back on you and gets back in the car, windows up and locks the doors. You mouth at him, *What_the_hell?* Eve takes his hand. They don't look at you. They run the engine, then reverse, crunching apples and mushies under their tyres.

*

You don't wanna eat until Jude comes home. You buy K-fry but it just sits on the floor makin maggots. Eating is cheating. You gotta be in control, control your gut. The rumblin's healthy. You tip out your Pepsi and fill the cup with Woodstock. The Colonel's grinning at you from the cup. You squeeze his stupid grinning face and bourb splashes out the top. You suck the fluid out of your sleeping bag, lick it off the bench. Acid's bashin against your stomach wall. Shit goes down easier with a pack of ciggies. They go bad if you don't smoke 'em. You can see yourself looking up at Auntie, her hands tight fists, a ciggy spellin a S with white smoke, the two of yous sitting at a third-generation table covered in dents, with a fruit bowl with no fruit in it, only ash, the apple tree at the window droppin its fruit into the long grass, the fruit getting taken to pieces by worms, wriggling in the green-brown husk, lookin like snakes.

You sit on the bed lookin at mailers or not lookin at anything. There's job ads in the community paper but they freak you out, make you sweat. You think, It's hopeless, and *hopeless* makes you think about Jude.

When you hoon Jude's van back into the driveway, the turn comes too sudden and it puts pressure on you. You steer right and make it in okay, but the shocks are wrenched somewhere on the ride. You park it and get out and kick it and curse it. You step into the courtyard and around you, kitchen curtains close. You scream at them they can all go to hell. Your words echo around you, *go to hell, go to hell*. You're surrounded. You pick up a stick and smash the apple tree and a few of the dirty fuckers fall on the ground. They're rotten now, you can't believe Jude bit them. He musta been desperate. You try to breathe deeply and the air tastes thick, tastes like soot, like the Fall's finishin, winter's round the corner. *Go to hell, go to hell*. You tell yourself to shut up. You go back to the ride, figuring you may as well park it properly. The front two wheels look alright – it's the third wheel that's the problem. The buckled shocks is dragging down the front drive. Suddenly the music comes on on the stereo, heavy-smoove R&B, and it scares you shitless so you attack it, manage to kick it till the faceplate snaps. You take yourself inside before people see that wet shit that comes out of your eyes when things aren't

going nowhere. You press your sunnies, they block out almost everything. You dig your hair straightener out of the bathroom draw, it's buried under band-aids and tampons and the make-up you ain't touched in a year. What was it Eve said about make-up? You straighten your hair til it hurts, to get the nigger out.

Jude sleeping upstairs would be better than nothing, but he made it up to the third level, where it's bright without the protection of the curtains, and now he's hardly here at all. It means you can't sleep, it's unfair. You know where he is but no matter how hard you bang on that cunt's door, she won't let you in. From high up in his level three window, surrounding you, one of the Asians tells you to keep the noise down and you offer him a fight. He's got the nerve to laugh at you. You tell him you know where he lives. He laughs even harder and shuts his window. The laughter lands on top of you, heavy as. You boot the heads off dandelions and thistles and spit on the apple tree. You shake its branches and a apple falls on your head and it hurts. What pisses you off is, if you'd left it alone, you wouldn't of got hurt. Jude's taken Nitty and you can handle how silent the lounge-slash-bedroom is, but you don't like that Jude's taken something from you. You never took nothin from him.

Your mattress is a thin oblong of Warehouse foam. Springs jab you in your bony arse. You blow smoke out your nostrils, use your belly button as a ashtray. There's unused nappies against the wall, spilling out of their box. You lifted a whole carton of the bastards when they were delivering at the dairy, so what if you got the size too small, Nitty's butt'll get smaller on that apple chips diet. Well, you hope not. Them apples is fulla worms. You've barely got bumcheeks yourself, just a tailbone and hollow space. Anyway, you didn't pay for the nappies so no-one's hurt.

You should really throw them away, chuck the cans in the recycling bin while you're at it. Recycling's gay, it's easier to chuck stuff away. Empty the ashtrays, chuck some mailers down on the carpet where you spilt tomato sauce. Shouldn't've drunk it out of the bottle. It's all gotta go, the sooty spottles in the kitchen, the burnt knives. The apple cores, especially. Eating is cheating, dick. You shout it through your empty flat,

EATING IS CHEATING. Your gut shouts back at you. You know that if anyone was upstairs they'd've barely heard you, your message just doesn't carry up there. It's clean and empty up there, you can't trust it, there's too many options, it's wide open, it's horrible, it's nothin like the courtyard, where because people are lookin down on you, you know you're down to earth.

It's a weekday morning, you don't know what one. You think it's still morning, though there's loads of noise out beyond them curtains. You keep 'em closed as long as you can to make the night longer. The day time sucks balls. People don't expect shit from you when it's night time. You hear the sound of Auntie bolting the door shut. In the dark, she didn't need to blink.

Jude was only ever around at night time. His fault for workin ten hour days. He would come in and yeah, give you a smooch and that, stoking the last embers of his dying smile, but then he'd go over and get all clucky with Nitty til late in the night. Jude would tickle Nitty with the rabbit's foot and they'd giggle like they was two babies. You would tell him to get his arse to bed coz he had work in six hours, or tell him to get down the gym. You would tell him to get his arse up and fetch you a ashtray. You poured bourb on his embers.

You want folks to come round but you jump when there's noise outside. Cain won't even come, reckons Jude's gone pretty gay these days, didn't he dump your arse for some virginal ho? For some reason all you can come up with is, Jesus loved hookers. He looks at you queer, goes You on the rag or somethin?

You pick your nose til it bleeds. Your nose stud is in the way but you can't stop pickin. You taste the black sooty bogies on your finger. You take out your nose stud and soon the gap seals over. The stud can never go back where it was. There's apples on the breakfast bar wrinkl in the sun. Jude brought them into your house. Eating is cheating. They're over-ripe, you're at the arse-end of Fall. Rain's normal now.

Jude pops round to hand his shitty wheels over to you, says there's a spare wheel remaining. You needed that ride for ages, now you don't want it at all. You see him taking you away from Auntie's shack out in the wop wops, holiday home, as if the dole even gives you a holiday. You'd got used to never leaving the place – when Auntie would go into town because you were desperate for something to eat, you'd beg her not to leave you. Eventually, the top of Jude's van would smash through the low-hangin apples, there was no way out but through, and you'd look in the rearvy and see her house getting small in the distance as you left her alone with the Big Jee.

Jude reckons he's already on a journey, won't need the van. He's got somebody in a pram at the bottom of the steps. There's a little fist clutchin a furry paw. There's a hand on the pram, but the owner of the hand's out of sight. The toes of whoever's in the pram have the same socks as Nitty had. Jude takes the keys from the pram, makin the child blubber like a baby, and you snatch them off him. They've still got the bunny foot on them. You have a go at him, shove him, spit on the lino. He's used to gettin shoved, he comes in anyway.

'I left something in there.'

He barely looks at you, cheeky. Pops upstairs, runs up quick, like weight's been taken off his back. You get back under the sleeping bag and cover yourself. You're using your school work to prop up your head coz you spilt Woody on the bed. Washing machine's bust and the vacuum ain't workin, you can't get things clean if you wanted to.

You check to make sure your sunnies are on, it makes you feel like one percent more safer. The curtains are drawn, you chuck the blanket over your head, clamp your wet eyes shut. Then you open them, but just a bit, just enough to see if Jude comes down and stays.

There's a sound after a bit – the front door slammin, and the chinkle of smashed window bits hitting the floor.

A wooden board covers that busted window for a long time. A draft weasels it way around the board, comes into your house uninvited. Jude the stubborn cunt tells you he'll repair it later, y'know, with the door-fixin

tools he left in his van, your van, he could do the job in like two minutes. Says he'll do it on a rainy day, but rainy days keep comin around, so he nails a oblong of plaster on the door, calls it irreparable. You wanna disagree.

*

You take Jude's ride to the shop where you got Eve to nick Nitty's kibble, thinkin about how dumb and lame it is. Nitty might need a feed when she comes back, should be any minute now. You know what it's like to have your stomach makin you wince all the time. You leave ten bucks on the counter under a jar of lollies when the lady's not looking. You sorta feel better, then you feel like shit for feelin good. Shop owed you one.

You swerve into the centre lane, it's too crowded, you swerve back. You get honked at. There's more things broken with Jude's ride, after a while you notice the fuel light's on all the time. You watch it instead of the road. No fuel's probably why the cunt fobbed it off on you. You look in the rearview and there he is, smiling like a dope, like he's smoked, some kind of bliss. You'd like to know what he put in his mouth to get like this, so fuckin' righteous oi. You can't come up with what he's took – Downers or H or somethin along those lines. Probably just mushies from the yard, probably some shit growin all around him, like them weeds. Probably looked around his life and realised he wasn't good enough for you, like Auntie warned you.

She's in the back with him right now. Your eyes are on the rearvy and not on the road. You get honked at and chuck your finger back at whoever, and push your sunnies firmly onto your face. The road's wet and the sky is always overcast. The Fall should end any day now. Auntie might even like Jude a bit better now that he's a God-fearin boy. You're pretty sure it's God what Jude fears. Auntie blasted that stuff at him, told him he was hopeless a million times. He'd get excited and spray deodorant on his tongue and come to fix her door when whatever man she was seeing bashed her up and chucked her out onto the wet lawn in

her dressing gown. It confused you, that Jude didn't treat her like most men did. Sure confused the hell outta Auntie.

The power bills come and they don't have a prompt payment discount on them which fucks you off, so you ring up the company and give them their beats down the line, fingerin your sunnies. Rarkin up the girl on the phone's supposed make you feel better, not feel the other way. You pace the house, go halfway up the stairs, throw the van keys far away from you, upstairs where you ain't likely to go. The luck's run out on that rabbit's foot. You let the weeds grow up under the van's tyres, sproutin in the splattery mud. Where you gonna go anyway?

The weeds are bushy and swaying, saying Sup to you. The mushies have long shakey stems. The apples have fallen and are rejuvenatin the bit of dirt. They'll grow, they'll make something of it. These weeds find their niche and go for gold. Not everyone's got that blessing do they, not everyone can get nutrients outta the dirt.

How can someone love a hooker anyway? What you would give for five minutes alone with that skank. You're not scared of shit, what does she got that you don't?

*

Something's up with Jude, big time. They're outside in Eve's ride and he looks like he's got no direction, keeps scratching the inside of the windows. Boy needs a map, for real. It looks like he's goin in for a headbutt, what the – ha, de-*nied*! Bummed out! Jude gets out of the car. You just know he wants to say to her, 'I left something in there,' and try to worm his way back in. He mouths, 'Angel.'

The way he's standing out there on the paving stones, among the wobbling stems, it looks like Jude's surrounded by snakes movin against him. He doesn't know which way to go.

III

You wonder when the Fall's gonna end. You're prepared for what'll come after. It don't matter if it's always dark outside, you got the same goin on inside anyways.

It's three-something in the arvo, probably. The curtains are open a crack from where you threw your can at em and the ash-colour day's messin up the screen on the box. The sky's fuckin up your Sky. It made you pissed off at Dr Phil. There's this brown treacle trail where you threw your drink at the screen.

You don't know what season to expect next. You're used to having a dude to bounce your ideas off. He came on after Oprah.

There's still money coming into your bank account. The money's a bit like a band-aid slapped on after a borshy, but it's something. You'd never tell him cheers though, not unless he was around to hear it. Fuck it.

'Thanks,' you say, lookin up the stairs, 'Cheers.'

You think you hear voices up on the third floor aping what you said and it creeps you the fuck out, 'specially after a big lungful of spotties. Cain dropped you round some oil but he didn't wanna stay for a drink. He asked you why you got dandelions and mushrooms and thistles in recycled Woody cans on your windowsill, aren't they weeds? You told him they don't hurt nobody, what's the problem? You didn't tell him you respect the weeds coz they grew up all by themselves with only a hater to take care of them.

It's not all bad when you go up to level three with a can to protect yourself, you've gotta be honest, the carpet's clean as, it looks like the carpet down in the main room back when you useda work. You see somethin move and you find yourself holdin out Jude's keys, holdin that rabbit hoof. You didn't even realise you picked it up. You're tired of cutting your feet on Woody cans and broken glass, deadly things slithering round on your carpet, that's another reason it's not so bad upstairs. Up there, the sun bakes the carpet and you find a spot and lie on your arse. You notice a glimmer in the corner – the coins from the service what Jude

brought back for you. You pounce on them, you can't help yourself, but when you've got 'em, you don't know what to do with em.

You open up Jude's ride and chuck the coins in the coinholder. You can do a drive-by and chuck 'em at the Methadiss church, get rid of them. The silver's filthy, it may as well be recycled. Still life in them coins.

It's them aimless days that are really exhausting, ones where you get up at lunch when Dr Phil's on and when the show's finished, you can't bring yourself to switch the box off. You only got enough energy to make Jude's side of the bed – well, straighten the sleeping bag, shake it out. There's been letters comin from Tech about your attendance. You're too shagged out to go to Tech. Letters from the church you got your arse hauled out of, coz you were dumb enough to write your addy in the guest book, letters about their upcoming picnics and what to pray for today. Always letters telling you what's best for you.

You feel a bit better after your trip upstairs. You pick a hair tie up off the carpet, pull the lint off it and tie your hair back. It feels quite good, not havin horse blinders on the side of your face. You check the mirror, the unbroken part of the mirror. The shiny black regrowth is curling through and you hadn't even realised. It makes you blush. Shame.

Your stomach clenches, the masking tape and dark spot on the door make you edgy. Your gut's been getting better, you've started cookin again, makin way too much of things, enough to feed three, but you clear space in the fridge and fill a sack and empty out the chicken bones and t-sauce. You can always salt and chill anything you make too much of, come back to it later.

Spose you'd better cook somethin today. You got them pizza vouchers but you ain't sure if you can redeem them any more. You wander the kitchen, turning in circles. You see there's more light in there now. You don't know where the light grew out of.

There's a knock at the door.

'Just a second, coming.'

You ride down the stairs on a couch cushion, it's your exercise for the day, not bad fun. But you're sposda get up and answer that door.

The plaster board's gone. There's light coming through the window, what's been fixed. Your stomach's doing something other than clenching. You fart, you need to pee. You blink like you're comin out of a cave. You step around the bones drying on the lino. Eve's not behind him. This ain't the same man at the door, 'saint Jude. You can't see Eve's wheels on the edge of the courtyard, blockin your view. You suppose she could be at work.

He comes in and he's worked up. He's got his overalls on and they've got putty and paint dust on them. You're glad he ain't wearing preacher robes. You got no idea what the time is, but you know he's not supposed to be home this early. You know this ain't supposed to be his home any more either. You don't dare say that to him though, in case it goes true.

He comes in and starts searchin, more than a man searchin for his keys, doesn't even lift up them couch cushions. You offer him the broken faceplate, but that ain't what he's searchin for. You offer him a seat – well, a beer crate – to sit on. You remember him searchin like this not too long ago, like as if he's been on a scavenger hunt and he lost his map as soon as he left the start. You ask him what the hell he's searching for and he won't say because you're pretty sure he doesn't know. He starts heading up the stairs. He's headin for the top so he can look down at you. You follow him up this time.

'Nitty won't stop crying,' he goes, 'I needa find it for her.'

You see that picture again, him leaning in to headbutt his Angel and Eve pushing him away and him gettin out of the car and not knowin where to stand. Jude, you are a hopeless–

Okay, so you're not hopeless Jude. You point out what he's after.

'Keep it away from her oi.'

He's asking why the rabbit's foot is at the top of the stairs. You tell him, all that's at the top of the stairs is unused space. A whole room for your keys. He goes, It's potential, you could grow stuff on the little balcony. You think of his weeds on the windowsill and it makes you smirk. You've got some vicious stuff lined up for him if you're talking potential, you're about to tell him just how little potential he's got. But you're just not

feeling it, you don't want to spook him by hatin on him. Jude's playin up like Nitty, you don't wanna set the noise off. The silence.

Your stomach relaxes. Eating is cheating, you try to tell yourself, but you can't make your guts go back to how they were. You fart and blush, blame it on Jude.

'Damn, boy, what you been eatin?'

Jude looks like he's been eatin good, he's pink and solid and his t-shirt's white and clean. You take your sunnies off and blink. The clouds are brooding. Jude takes a look out the window, looks down on the courtyard, littered with apple cores. The weeds'll die soon.

'Apples are all gone,' he goes.

Fall's over.

HART Act

She was a sterile birth ward with curtains for partitions, fair exposed really, not the best place for a man to get his relax on. Pieman was pacing the short distance between the walls of the hospital room occupied by Crystal. When Pieman pictured nurseries, the space inside those rooms seemed huge to him. This was because he couldn't see the ends of the room, couldn't see the walls, all he could see was Yatesy's fat head, another part of Yatesy's body bigger than Pieman's. Yatesy always had a large presence in his visions.

Crystal made clucking sounds about the purple thing clutched in her arms. Looked like a kidney bean out of can with juice on it, that baby did. Slippery-looking. Pieman knew he couldn't hold on to one of those himself. He didn't expect to be asked to hold it anyway. Pieman couldn't get over the darkness of that baby's skin, this caused his pacing. He stopped beside the bed, caught Yatesy's eye and asked,

'That baby's old man, you sure he weren't a black person?'

Yatesy's jaw chewed something. He itched the armpits of his Southland Stags rugby shirt. He stuck out his arm as if the Lindauer bottle he was holding were a gun. 'You're a fuck-up, Pieman.'

He might have held a glass, if he had one. You couldn't put a price on a new baby, so he'd chucked a twenty at the bottle of bubbles. It left him with change for the parking meter. The bubbly fizzed and sloshed with his emphasis.

'Don't swear,' said Crystal. She upheld whatever standards Yatesy decided he supported.

It had been an earlier rise than usual for Pieman, whose fingers smelled of the sweaty patch on his back he scratched night and day, although they rested in his crotch, thumbs stuck over the elastic waist band of his rugby shorts. He stood with his feet pointed inwards as if his

shoe laces were tied, scoping the floor. The baby had refused to shake hands with him. It was a bit rude.

‘Missus sends you a message, Crystal,’ Pieman said, reading from his cellphone. “‘I’m jealous and I hate you”, says here.’

‘That’s nice,’ said Crystal, eyelids sealed.

Pieman had been a dairy farm hand but was out of work since he’d left Valve Four open on the ILPS, the Initial Lactine Pumping something, and had flooded a good thousand litres through the spew valves onto the grass. Stank like bejesus, the lucerne did afterward. Cows wouldn’t touch that area of the grass, of course. The story of this, which Pieman told proudly, provided good yarn fodder, although the cost of the yarn, considering the car repayments he had to default on, now stood at over six large.

The baby flailed its arms. It reminded Yatesy and Pieman of the eel they’d beat to death with Yatesy’s cricket bat. This was in Pieman’s old lady’s garden, in a raised-up flower bed inside a shoddy concrete retaining wall which had *Y* and *Pman* historically engraved in the concrete beside the imprint of Pieman’s face. That eel had damn near refused to die and its raised side-fins looked like it was appealing for a hug. They’d dug it up an hour later and there was still nine volts of life in it. They’d cut it in half with the spade and let the side-by-side halves suffocate under a spadeful of soil. Pieman pointed at the writhing cords of muscle and said they looked like sperm, they eels were rutting, they were fag eels, eew.

‘They’re not gay, dumb,’ Yatesy said, grabbing his friend’s shoulders, ‘They need each other.’

‘Bet they’ll die at different times.’

Thinking about how much this new baby looked like a dying eel, but remembering his manners, Pieman said,

‘Looks like you, mate.’

Yatesy dug out his wallet and fished a twenty from a clutch of the same. There was a surplus of the greens – he’d installed a fair few roofs that week. He crumpled the note and threw the ball at Pieman, across the bed where Crystal was tucked in. Yatesy was a man who didn’t give a

god-damn about the Reserve Bank governor, nobody could tell him how to handle his own cash.

‘Get us some Rothmans. Supposed to hand round ciggies when your baby’s born.’

Pieman wouldn’t say anything contrary.

Pieman’s mind was on his woman, Huggins. She could be clucky, Huggins, she’d do anything to have what Crystal had, even though Crystal was always a sour one, and Huggins might’ve made a nuisance of herself in the bubba ward, Pieman reckoned. It was Yatesy who would’ve let him know how much of a nuisance Huggins was being – that is, were Crystal not present. Crystal and Huggins were reasonably tight, although not rubber band-ligature tight like Yatesy and Pieman. Yatesy was a sturdy rata and Pieman was the knotty vine wrapped around him. The hierarchy: Yatesy – Crystal – Pieman – Pieman’s missus.

Pieman listened to the slap of his bare feet on the hallway floor and thought Huggins could be behind him. She could usually be found in Pieman’s shadow, or between his legs, tripping him up like the pussy they used to have. Pieman wondered if, considering he was in a hygienic spot, he should have worn jandals.

He had *Rothmans* rattling around the front of his mind until *Genassistants* replaced the word. *Genassistants* was a sign on the wall. He read it as *GST* and thought, Tax is a bitch, but he might be able to cut through GST and get to the shop quicker. He needed to chuck more coin in the meter where Yatesy’s truck was parked, its arse sticking out into the traffic. The hospo gift shop, which made most of its money from selling ciggies, was two floors down, a bit far to just rush at, he could get to that soonly. Yatesy had a brand new bub and was in an alright mood, Pieman felt that would buy him a little time. And plus, what if they could stamp his parking at the GST? Perfect.

There was an advertisement for a laser surgery clinic which shared the building running the length of the corridor. The clinic was off to the right, free parking to the left. Pieman leftied it.

Genassistants had not one but two ladies at its front counter, which was curved, and made from what looked like plastic that had been growed on a tree, creamy white with wood grain running through it. The white might've meant they'd felled the tree when it was snowing. He approached the counter slapping the thighs exposed out of his shorts, whistling to appear casual, his footsteps all over the place. They would think he was drunk, but he was just tired and elated, giddy on Yatesy's behalf, whatever emotion Yatesy needed of him. Pieman wasn't the type to reflect on his image too much, rather, he looked after number one – number one being Yatesy.

He spoke to the woman at the counter, who was too old to be pretty but might've been alright before her Best Before date came up. He worked this out quicker than a pack of two-minute noodles. Pieman was a sharp enough tool.

'Rothmans,' he said.

'Sorry?'

'Not Roth, ah – can I cut through? What's the score here?'

'We're a fertility clinic.'

'Yous do free parking?'

'Well, if you're a sperm donor. Certainly.'

Pieman mulled this over, patting a rhythm with his sweaty fingertips on the plastiwood. 'Insemination?' he said. The word came to mind. Better out than in, Pieman reckoned.

'Fertility services is what we do here, yes. Are you looking to conceive or donate, sir?'

Pieman's mouth squiggled. *Sir*.

'Yeah nah it's... Don't know why I came in, tell ya the truth. You chuck the cum up the cows 'n all that? I've got a bit of experience down that road.'

The receptionist's mouth shrank to an inch. She moved back in her wheely chair in case her colleague needed to take over.

'Coz I've been dairyin' y'see and–'

The second receptionist leaned in. 'A pamphlet might help?' The sound of her offer was cool, personal, nothing like the standing-beside-a-

pool-table-yelling-without-looking-at-each-other yarnage Pieman was accustomed to in his circle. Well, not so much a circle. Two blokes. Boundary of some sort.

‘Go on, yeah.’

He was given a pamphlet, turned, and found himself confronted by a bloody nice reception area, a bit too posh to take in in one glance. There weren’t dark patches between the spell of each light fitting, it was a thoroughly lit place, although the lighting was soft. The joint had modern art which didn’t look like anything, nice white coffee tables and an all-white clientele to match. White business cards and paper cups. A water cooler with real water in it. No surface with a sharp corner to it. He couldn’t spot a motoring magazine for the life of him. Tucked into the recesses of the thick love seats, the cushions on which were enormous, there were couples and the odd baby.

Pieman wandered in a circle reading what he’d been given. It looked like that Arab writing until he realised the logo was fucked up, and he turned it upside down to realise that when held the other way, the writing was in normal talk.

Information on the Human Assisted Reproductive Technology
(HART) Act 1995 For Sperm Donors

‘Christmas crackers’ came out of his mouth as he read. He was a pretty ave reader, Pieman, and a shit speller. The HART Act information was a bit gruelling, and the subject matter was a bit risqué, it seemed to him. There were words which he had to read three, four times to make sure he was actually reading them. It made him mumble. This was like the *Penthouses* in his toilet but where they didn’t pretend to actually report on crap, they just cut to the banging. And banging there was – words like conceive, fluid, ejaculate, and sperm. *Sperm* appeared too many times. Whoever wrote the Act had had a party. The word *donor* came up.

When couples are asked about who they would want as a sperm donor, they usually say they are

after 'someone nice' roughly the same age as their partner.

Roughly sounded like Pieman. He got interested and scratched himself.

A donor may be a person with a narrow urethra, or a person who would like to help a lesbian couple conceive.

'Hang on – donor... ' That meant money. 'Oi – this cost us?'

'No, it's a donation.'

'Do they give ya anything in return?'

The first receptionist came back on track and the other rolled away.

'Can I set up an appointment for your and your partner to meet with our head of donations?'

'Partner?' Another troubling word. Pieman dropped the pamphlet at his feet. 'Partner like fags Broke Mountain typa stuff?'

'Hi, I'm Yosephine– '

'Jesus Christ!' She was blonde, and she was right behind him. Her mouth was stretched wide between her cheekbones like a hammock. She wore a smile which he could have spread on his pancakes.

' – Southern, Sperm Donations Coordinator.'

Her body was all g. Child-bearing hips. Pieman's current wiring had him inspecting ladies' hips before their rack, stemming from a comment made by Yatesy about his misfortune in the world of fertility. Yatesy had told Pieman that Pieman's sperm were like immigrants – a million get in but only one works.

'What's your name?'

'It's, ah, Marcus. But me friend calls me Pieman.'

Yosephine led him down a hallway to a private booth, apologising for things as she went. She was a pretty overflowing blonde sorta thing, petite, raffle-winning body. The yellow hair was comforting, like the dog blanket Pieman grew up suckling. Mohicans woulda loved to scalp her.

Pieman would've been lying if he'd told you it was the first time a blonde had taken him into a private booth, Yatesy's stag do was mint. Yosephine's raised heels clacked on the plastiwood, which they'd used to line the floor as well. Pieman wondered if sometimes punters got confused and walked on the ceiling. His sooty feet left a trail as he followed Yosephine. Yosephine's clacking heels were very different to the slap of Huggins's feet – Huggins was a sneakers woman who liked to tell Pieman that his avoidness of shoes was uncultured.

Yosephine wouldn't take a seat until Pieman had. He hung onto the door as if he could stop what he'd started. He asked her if she was in charge of the whole shebang, and it took her a moment to confirm that yes, the shebang was what she was in charge of. Pieman pulled an ergonomic plastic seat under his rump and sat himself down. He pulled the base of his Southland shirt over his belly folds. He tried to cross his legs to shield the erection he knew was coming, but a ripping sound warned him against it. He settled for leaning back in the chair, letting the lip of the table cover his crotch. He folded his arms over his gut curve, pale yellow forearm hairs barely visible against his light skin. Puberty had given Pieman the runaround.

She got some boxes ticked on forms. 'Which ethnicity are you, Pieman?'

'Kiwi.'

'I don't think that's an option... hrm. Anyway, to begin I'd like to *thank* you for considering donation. Have you had a chance to read over the information on the HART Act?'

'Not really, ya jumped me.'

'Ha. Well, let me talk you through it... *Pieman*.'

"The HART Act safeguards *god that rack ain't too bad but it's them child-bearin hips Yatesy'll tell ya that's where the gold's stashed Rothmans must remember the celebration ciggies at oh hup nah she's on to important stuff now best listen up ya might even be able to pull this off so to speak–*

‘ – the principle being, it’s the donor whose rights are paramount although as a donor your contributions *are* protected and you *do* have the option of withdrawal at any time.’ She took a breath.

Withdrawal, ha. Yatesy’d told him withdrawal weren’t worth it. Pieman puffed air through his nostrils and his lips curled upward. He scratched the pale wisps of hair clinging to his scalp.

‘Is your partner aware that you’re interested in helping a couple conceive?’

‘Partner? Yatesy?’

Yosephine made a note of that. ‘The first step would be to obtain an initial sample which we’ll freeze to determine the viability of your sperm.’

‘Do I have to blow me load in an ice cube tray or what?’

‘Well, the procedure is that we add an anti-freeze solution to your testing sample. And this will be added to subsequent samples.’

‘Yeah yeah, nah, all good, I’ve got some antifreeze in the ute, I can chug ‘er.’

Yosephine laughed at that, but Pieman hadn’t said anything funny. *So this sperm donation business ain’t for cattle.* Pieman furrowed his brow and scratched his pie belly. He leaned away to let a quiet one out, regretting the closed door, apologising without speaking. As Yosephine continued, her nostrils curled up like the corners of a burning square of paper, but she kept her cool, and treated Pieman with a respect which put more pressure on his gut.

‘Essentially what the HART Act’s doing is protecting the young child against – ’

‘Why’d ya need to protect a little baby?’ Pieman had seen a baby not five minutes ago. Them things are showpieces, something to live up to or look down on. Yosephine looked at the folder she had placed on the table. There might be answers in the paperwork.

‘Rothmans, shit,’ he said.

‘Sorry?’

‘Aw – gotta head off. Can I get this... ’ Pieman dug out his parking ticket.

‘A donation now would be absolutely smashing, I was hoping you could—‘

She talked him through it. The sample was to be produced from masturbation. She didn't flinch when she said *masturbation*. Might've meant she were uncultured. The instruction made Pieman snicker and scratch.

‘I'm sposda— ‘

‘Pieman, I'd again like to say thank you for choosing to donate with us. The best procedure now is to obtain the initial testing sample from which to see if your sperm is suitable for freezing. If successful, we would love you to make regular donations. And your parking's certainly taken care of.’

Pieman freed up his hands. ‘Right you are, ‘kay, let's do it. Cut through the baroquecy!’ He made a slicing motion with his hand. She leaned backwards as if he was going to karate chop her. She made a little note on her clipboard about it, tilting it away from him. Then she found him a container and some paperwork. She helped him spell his last name.

He chunked the curtains of the wank-booth open. Only perves keep the curtains closed. He tried his luck throwing the rub-down to an ad on the side of bus which stopped at the traffic lights, with some real estate chick on it. It didn't work out so he fished a jazz mag from the draw. They had *Fox*, a good filthy title. *Fox* only had articles on fucking, no interviews with Robert De Niro, no short stories. The thrashing he gave himself reminded him of flossing, not that Pieman flossed or put anything on his teeth healthier than mince. It was the Girls Next Door which helped him make it. For a few squinting seconds, Pieman relived his conquests. Conquest.

As he was wiping the threads from the hand basin he noticed the pink-lidded donations container which he'd forgotten about, and scooped the mess into the container with his nose-picking finger. He wiped it on his shorts. He looked at what he'd shot into the container, a container which looked like it should have held film. He hadn't come up with much,

only enough to white out a few lines on a document. Yatesy was right about him.

He tucked the Fox down the rear of his shorts and it made him walk with great posture. He might as well take it, now that it was soiled. Every few seconds, he pulled on the skirt of his shirt to cover his arse.

Pieman was reluctant to part with his sample. He released it only when Yosephine put her hand on his. She had soft warm flesh, like the driver's seat under Yatesy. Her nails were painted the colour of the lupins that grew in the roadkill gutters alongside State Highway 1.

Pieman got his parking stamped. He felt validated. She told him that she would be in touch as soon as the freezing results came back. The word *touch* made Pieman picture her hand on his. That head of hair, it could win a \$20 meat pack, no contest.

Pieman came away from Genassistants feeling like he'd been raped, or had raped someone else, but in a good way. It brung to mind the times he'd strained jizz from flabby bull cocks out the Rangitata, where he'd looked away and taken in the view because he couldn't look the bull in the eye while he milked it. The bulls and himself would look at the same point, but they weren't looking in the same direction. Farms out there were ninety percent pasture, fields littered with floppy lucerne and dull beets, and the cows would be led from one field to the next without realising how aimless it was to let some bastard lead you around all the time.

Rothmans. He found himself at the door of the nursery ward with one hand on the handle and the other clutching his HART Act, and Yosephine's business card, which had her number on it, very nice. He tucked them inside *Fox* and went into the posh room where Crystal and Yatesy were, slapping his thighs. He wanted to tell Yatesy how he'd got laid – a wank counts, it was an agreement they had.

'Laser surgery clinic next door to here,' Pieman announced. Yatesy frowned and tapped on his mobile. Crystal said, 'It's rude to text in front of the baby.'

Yatesy said, 'Tat removal. Crow's feet.' He folded up his text conversation and tucked it in his pocket. The action was steady, dictated by the heft of his forearms. He had a surplus of forearm and beat Pieman in every arm wrestle.

'Got us an ashie,' said Yatesy, wagging the empty Lindauer bottle, 'Ciggies?' He held out a hand to catch the packet.

'Sorry mate,' Pieman said, looking away at a chart on the wall, 'didn't ah... yeah. Bout that. Got you this though.' He took *Fox* from his arse, turned it so they saw the cover, cradled it with both hands like Crystal's baby, and gently placed it on the bed, in the valley between Crystal's knees. It looked as if Crystal had given birth to *Fox*.

Yatesy sat back down and spread the mag across his lap. He put one hand on his hip and with the other aimed a thick finger at his mate.

'You're a fuck-up, Pieman.'

Crystal said 'You're repeating yourself.'

What nagged at Pieman's ears as he drove the newlyweds home in Yatesy's new model Ford pick-up, with its air fresheners and plump lining, was the sense that a sorry was owed. They passed the tattoo joint with its skulls designs and neon sign and Pieman thought, *Sorry, too right*. He stuck one arm behind his back and itched the region between his shoulderblades with his thumb, the nail jagged from biting it. To think that Yatesy might owe him a sorry didn't really fly, so Pieman clicked that he might be sorry to Yatesy about something. He didn't like making Yatesy disappointed. What was going on, he wasn't sure, but he was sharp enough to know a seed had been planted.

Pieman pulled in, treating her gently, switched off, handed the keys over, and said, 'She's mighty easy.'

'Tell a man by his wheels,' Yatesy said.

They unloaded the bits and pieces Crystal had with her at the hospital, gifts and bringings. 'Put ya heart into it boy,' Yatesy told Pieman as Pieman struggled with a box which had maternity dresses leaking out of it. Yatesy smoked a Rothie and didn't help out. It was good to see

Pieman struggle, the boy could use some tempering. Too excitable, that Pieman. Pieman's failure to shoot his load inside a woman proper was symptomatic of this. Couldn't knock up his own missus. Yatesy had once instructed Pieman, If you can't fit your key to turn the lock, Go through the back door. Then he'd told Pieman that Huggins –

Pieman cleared his mind some by doing a good job of helping Crystal up the stairs to the place where they flatted. It looked dead similar to the other twenty joints in the unit. Yatesy glared at the wankers in the flat next door who had opened their window to yabber something in the way of Good On Ya. Yatesy's flat didn't suit him at all, it had arches and flower pots the size of barrels and a white and yellow paint scheme. Yatesy was letting the paint flake, determined to ruin the place. It didn't match the paint job on his Ford. There were glass sliding doors with a layer of lace curtain behind them which Yatesy battled often, yanking and tearing against. Yatesy referred to his flat as a lifestyle pad.

Yatesy stood at the bottom of the stairs writing a text on his phone. Flattened cardboard, crushed RTD and KFC boxes were stirred across the driveway by a breeze. He wasn't coming home to a wife and child just yet. He watched Pieman struggle over the threshold with a box of whatever. Yatesy spat on the asphalt. It reminded him of meeting Pieman back at school on the netball court, Pieman on his face crying, his pie split open. Yatesy had gave him a hand up. Yatesy had needed company.

The shit in them baby boxes Yatesy couldn't even use until months later. Not one but three photo albums; milk bottles, as if jugs didn't suffice; soft toys; big plastic keys – Yatesy hated to imagine the size of the vehicle those keys belonged to. A Smirnoff Cruiser packet bumped into his foot and he kicked it back into the draft then resumed his text to Huggins, *Ya Manz putn his hart in2 dis baby setup shit whn we gon hav a baby Hugnz ;o*). He didn't need to tell her not to tell Pieman that he was texting her.

They greeted him by name. Pieman couldn't believe his ears, he wasn't known as Marcus except when he was in the bad books with Huggins. He had a surname too, he wondered if they would dig that up and air it out.

'Thanks for coming in. I hope we haven't dragged you away from work?'

'I'm actually outta work at the moment, well, between jobs. Don't suppose you've got any vacancies?'

She told him Unfortunately, we don't. She didn't suggest that they keep his CV on file. Pieman was wearing his finest Southland top, proper Heartland gear, but hadn't got Huggins to wash it in case something went wrong. Pieman's heart was in that shirt. At the tattooist's, they'd used it to wipe away the sweat and ink between his shoulderblades. And he liked that the shirt had brought him luck at Genassistants. A better memory, that.

Pieman said, 'Laser surgery clinic next door,' to break the ice.

The receptionist said, 'That's correct, yes.'

'Look I'm actually a bit busting this morning, tell ya the truth, where can I empty me load?'

Pieman had long ago been informed by Yatesy that holding a man's bladder in is a sign of restraint and endurance.

The receptionists' soft cream tops matched the colour scheme. It was like a cheery version of the paint job on Yatesy's pad. They joined forces to point Pieman to the donations counter, which was segregated from the reception-waiting area, off down the corridor. Pieman headed towards Donations and thought, This is where the weirdoes go.

Pieman looked for Yosephine behind the counter in an office which was busy with several staff, and a clerk explained that Yosephine would be along presently. Pieman was handed a pink-lidded specimen jar and he exclaimed Jesus, he'd be needing a few more.

He took his bunch of jars into a donations booth, dropping most of them as he went, unbuckled his Hallensteins belt over the sink and

roared with the pleasure of release. The door to the booth was wide open. Only after he'd filled the jars did he kick it shut.

By the time he brought the jars full of bubbly piss back to the clerk, Yosephine had made herself handy.

'Might needa chuck a Wet Floor sign in that room,' said Pieman, jerking his head in indication of where he'd come from. Yosephine looked at the jaundiced jars in his hands and said nothing. She found a plastic bag, came out through the security door, sealed the door behind her, double-checked to make sure the door was sealed, took the containers from Pieman and dumped his offering in a rubbish bin in a random office.

'It's good to see you again, thanks for coming in today.'

'Too right, and y'self.' She walked him back down the way he'd come and they had a view of reception.

'Counselling: did I talk you through this when we met last?'

'You didn't, no.'

'Marcus: your sperm froze veeery successfully, it was very successful, so—'

'Yeah well I've been drinkin' antifreeze so next time I need to... y'know.' Pieman had fucked up what he had going here. *Rothmans*. A voice told Pieman he wasn't putting his heart into it. Yosephine carried on respectfully. She didn't want to verify what he'd said about the antifreeze. Pieman's shirt was covered in splotches.

'Two counselling sessions is a normal, proscribed part of the donation process. What I'm going to do is book for you an appointment with Apple Grosvenor, she's our resident counsellor, and what this will do is to give you an opportunity to have the HART Act discussed in depth. How does that sound?'

She led him back up the warm corridor to the reception counter. One receptionist lent her right ear and other lent her left, and together they listened and expressed approval as Yosephine told them, 'Marcus's sperm froze magnificently, we were very impressed.' They gave him three claps of applause and white smiles. They reached behind the reception counter and came up with a Genassistants polo shirt crucified on a piece of cardboard and wrapped in plastic. It was further sterilised with silica gel

packets. Pieman's feet shifted close together and he folded his arms over his belly. He suppressed a wretch as the antifreeze tried to escape his gut. It had him woozy and needing to piss very badly. He wouldn't drink it again. He held his shirt tightly. Yosephine was causing him more discomfort than the antifreeze. She was in for a let-down when she discovered that he was a fuck-up.

Apple Grosvenor, whose last name Pieman pronounced *Gross-veneer*, standing in front of her and reading from the business card, had high pink cheeks and a waterfall of ginge hair. There was a portrait on her wall of her and her family. Pieman didn't fall in love with her, there were no fleshy bits to grab a hold of her. She looked like one of them half-marathon runners who trains with her girlfriends in the beach suburbs, running under the Norfolk pines, putting their heart into it.

Her office was at the opposite end of Genassistants from the Donations wing. It was painted olive and its cushions were the non-threatening colour of Yosephine's hair. She told him to make himself comfortable. The armchair did wonders for Pieman's back – he'd wrenched it revolving the furniture in Yatesy's flat because Yatesy said he didn't wanna look at the neighbours every time they walked past, he wanted his back to them. Yatesy said this again after the job was already done. Pieman told him he was repeating himself.

'It's normal for your partner to participate in these sessions. Is she able to join us at all?' Apple had a cushion on her lap.

'He's not, nah, doesn't even know I'm coming to these things.'

'He?'

'What?'

'Your partner – he or she?'

'Partner? I thought I explained this to Yosephine already, Yatesy, he's not my *partner* partner, more of a—'

Apple waved his protestations down, and held her spread hand in front of him, as if warding off a sex attacker. 'Yosephine's noted that. Ah.'

'Laser surgery clinic next door.'

'There is, yes?'

‘Says they do removals. Not like furniture removals. Eh?’

Apple flipped a page on her clipboard and traced the situation with her finger. She found the name she was after and tapped it.

‘We also have a Ms Huggins listed as a partner?’

‘Oh, right you are.’ Pieman put his hands on the arms of the armchair, opening up a bit. ‘Yeah, she’s a partner.’

‘And how does she feel about having children in the future?’

Pieman was in the slaughterhouse with the cattle, at the end of the row. Apple was coming with the electric knife.

‘Can’t offer her much, I don’t think.’

Pieman smiled the kind of smile he used to give himself in the meatworks when he sliced through the grey rubber over a cow’s ribs, snapped the ribs away and pulled the heavy heart out.

‘Yatesy sounds like a special person to me, Marcus.’

‘Is he special to you as well is he?’

Apple gave a champ like a horse and looked down at Pieman’s form for a moment. ‘What I mean is: Tell me about Yatesy. Is he supportive of your decision to donate with Genassistants?’

‘Is he fuck. Good one.’ Pieman looked out the window. There were healthy trees between modern buildings. There were Audis and Rovers in the parking spaces. There was a racetrack bordering the facilities. Stuff was all greened up. The bus with the real estate ad pulled up at the lights and Pieman blushed.

‘Is he supportive, Marcus?’

‘Is he sportive, yeah, nah, we play social.’ Pieman got out of his seat and looked down at where his Terrano was parked, smudged across two spaces. Apple moved on with her question, replacing Pieman’s ribcage for the time being.

‘So you haven’t told him.’ She wrote on her file. ‘Now, let’s talk about your fertility. Yosephine, whom you’ve met– ’

‘Yosephine, yesiree.’ Pieman stuck his hand down his rugby shorts and scratched his pubes. He twisted his hips away from Apple, minding his manners. Apple could hear the bristling sound from her seat. ‘Good sheila. Great hips they reckon.’

‘They?’

‘Well, y’know, everyone reckons. Mate reckons.’

Pieman looked back at the seat where he’d spilt his guts. He didn’t want to sit back down in them. Apple had her clipboard and profile slate in one hand, resting on the knee of her legs which were folded into her. It formed a barrier which protected Apple from roughnecks sent to her. Her pillow was part of the barrier. Apple turned her spare hand over, lacquered nails pointed at the warm carpet.

‘It sounds like it must be really hard being friends with Yatesy.’

Pieman became very interested in a black-backed seagull which settled in the parking lot

‘Better not shit on my Honda,’ he said, ‘Go shit on the laser surgery ya bugger!’

‘Marcus.’

‘They can remove it with them lasers can’t they.’

‘Yosephine’s noted that you’ve enquired about travel recompense. Do you live out of town, Marcus?’

Pieman scratched between his shoulderblades ‘Just spend quite a bit of time drivin my mate around. I’ve gotta foot the petrol since he’s got a new bub.’ In the green-and-glass neighbourhood, a burglar alarm was going off, but Pieman didn’t register

‘Is this a new experience for you?’

‘It is a new experience, yeah, haven’t really had... mates to drive around before eh.’ Pieman rose from his seat again. ‘What is that cheeky bloody black-back–’

‘How many children do you see yourself having in your lifetime?’

Pieman thought he’d stay standing this time. If he had to duck any more questions, he could leap out the window. ‘Kids? Struth, a couple. Missus wants a couple. Everyone wants to make, like, y’know, a version of themselves to have a better go in life.’

‘Some people *do* want a duplicate of themselves.’

‘Snot what I’m sayin. Why’d ya be after that?’

‘It makes them feel good about themselves.’

‘That’s bonkers.’

‘Yosephine informs me your donations should be lucrative – how do you feel about having direct relations of yourself living in the same city?’

Rothmans. Pieman’s failure the other day still stung.

‘Feel alright about it, yeah. Thing is it’s... look, I don’t know what I’m doin wrong in the sack, tell ya the truth. Yatesy, he reckons Huggins is a burnt match and I need to fetch another out of the box. He’s probably right. Thought I’d been givin it to her exactly like he’d told me but,’ Pieman paddled the vinyl armchair arms, ‘Not much use for anything, like the man said.’

Apple did her best to maintain eye contact with Pieman. When he looked away and started swearing at the mynah birds, Apple made notations. Pieman asked her if the handkerchief which he had in his pocket could have the sperm rinsed out of it, Might as well donate while I’m here, Hankies are good for more than bogies y’know. Apple told him it’s best to ask the lab technicians, next time he comes in.

Pieman biffed the soggy rag in a rubbish bin. He said ‘I can’t do anything right,’ after Apple had already farewelled him. The receptionists giggled at Pieman as he waited for the elevator. In the elevator’s mirrored panels, Pieman saw that his shorts were on backwards.

Yatesy came round to pick him up, told him they’d better take Pieman out and fix him up with a bit of arse if he was gonna waste Huggins’s time. Huggins should get back on the paddock so the other bulls can have a go, he said.

‘Some blokes mate just don’t put their heart into it.’ Yatesy winked at Huggins, who had been surprised in her nightie. The gas heater was slow to warm the flat up and Huggins’s nipples were shooting bullets. When Pieman went to put some jeans on, protesting that he’d been planning to watch *Game of Two Halves*, Yatesy took a seat beside Huggins and stared at the side of her face. She got up and went to the bathroom and the door said *plock*. Pieman unwrapped the polo shirt which Genassistants had given him, it was the only item of clean laundry, and put the shirt on. It fit him well enough. A smile of belly at the base.

Yatesy jabbed at the Genassistants logo over Pieman's left man-breast. 'What's all that?'

'Huggins's,' Pieman said. He yelled a farewell at Huggins as they crossed the lino and went to Make Like Tom in the Yatesymobile. Pieman tried to shut the door behind him but Yatesy said 'Hang on. It says Fertility, right there.' He jabbed Pieman in his heart. 'Your missus getting the treatment?'

Pieman scratched his chin. He'd never been able to grow any facial hair visible from a distance. 'Sorta.'

Yatesy grabbed the collars of Pieman's shirt. The shirt had creased rectangles on it, a legacy from its packaging and storage. Yatesy put Pieman's back against the mossy brick wall of his flat.

'Is she or don't she?'

'Not really, tell ya the truth,' Pieman said.

'Someone's gotta give it to her. You lying to me?'

'Cross my heart.' Pieman looked sincere, but he pointed to the wrong side of his chest, where there was a cavity.

Pieman was given some helper monkey work, quote, with Yatesy's firm of three men, which included Yatesy. They were putting tiles on a batch of five rest home units. Labouring suited Pieman just fine – he knew he would thrive under Yatesy's pressure. He liked being best mates with the boss, too. Gave him something to look up to.

The day was sunny. The convoy of the tiles made Pieman's arms long but the beers receded out of his reach. Yatesy had them in trust. Yatesy supped on one after the other and made a show of how cold they were, and how many inches he could leave in the bottom of a bottle and call it a write-off, and how he could open the twist-tops in his eye socket. Yatesy had a loudmouth acquaintance on the team by the name of Salts who found Yatesy funny not in the uncomfortable way that Pieman found him funny, but in an overtly funny way which made Pieman feel that Salts got the joke and Pieman had missed out.

'Fuck it's hot out,' Salts said, drinking beer, 'Why you never take ya shirt off Pieman? Hiding something under there?'

Yatesy said loudly, 'Man's gut. It's his gut he's hidin.' He glared at Pieman until Pieman nodded. Pieman itched his upper back. 'Sunburn.'

'This guy here,' Yatesy said, aiming the neck of his bottle towards Pieman, whose back was itchy from sunburn, 'this guy, I told him, right: bang 'er up the shitter, up the main door, get ya tittie job on, ANYTHING bro! Ad he STILL card fuggen... fuggen CUM.'

Yatesy smashed his bottle on the driveway and spat. There were no tenants within earshot in the retirement dead-end, so Yatesy was alright. Pieman saw ten or eleven other bursts of glass splinters spread across the asphalt. Salts hadn't had many, Salts was more of a supporter and encourager. Pieman's face was maroon from the sunburn. The jibes made his face screw up and his eyes narrow.

Salts said, 'Why can't ya knock your lady up? She barren like Helen Clark type? Me, I've caused more preggers than you've had hot dinners.'

Pieman felt like saying, This fella seems perfect for you, whyncha have a bub with *him*. Instead he said,

'I got a narrow urethra or something, I don't know.'

Salts and Yatesy turned to each other, and – holding their crotches – exploded into laughter so fierce Pieman could feel himself being pushed away. They high-fived with fresh beers and the bottles smashed and they linked hands and do-si-doed each other as if running under a sprinkler. They cut their toes surely enough and had to sit down for a bit and take it easy. Easier.

The blood went to Pieman's head – the sunburn had stripped away certain layers of him – and he stepped up and made an attempt to get his brow under Yatesy's chin, which was where it came up to. Salts stepped in and pushed Pieman off his balance with a well-aimed shove of Pieman's left breast. Pieman hadn't any muscle in his top half to resist. He stumbled backwards and got glass in his foot.

It was a mint day and it would have been a sin for Yatesy and Salts not to sit on the steps of the posh units and take in some sun before it hit the water and fizzed away. Yatesy kindly informed Pieman that his wages had stopped thirty minutes ago and he'd better get a move on if he was going to get that roof finished before dark. Yatesy asked Pieman if he

could borrow a text or two from Pieman's phone, he had a special lady to text. Pieman asked who and Yatesy acted as if Pieman were dumb.

Pieman had to travel across the lawn several times and it hurt his bare feet. Yatesy told him his gumboots were in the truck, Help yaself, they're size twelve though. Pieman stepped into the gumboots, which were clammy, cold and sweaty. His feet were four sizes too small at best, and the gumboots wobbled when he walked, and pulled his feet down to the earth.

Yatesy dropped Salts off first, ten p.m., long after they were officially liquored. Pieman had had a ride as long as he'd known Yatesy, but Yatesy's wheels was always the vehicle of choice. Pieman couldn't leave the Ford until Yatesy told him to get out. Yatesy eventually got his eyes and thinker together and found what he was after in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. It was a CD-ROM with Crystal's handwriting on it. Pieman tried to ask What the hell, mate, but Yatesy shushed him like a bitch and scattered his arse out of the truck. When Pieman got in he said to Huggins, Fuck off, using the words he was looking for all day, and chucked the CD into the drive of Huggins's computer in the spare room. It was photos of Crystal taking her top off without smiling. In a few pics, she was pointing her middle finger directly at the viewer and using her other arm to obstruct. There was one photo which showed what was to become the baby's room, and Crystal's silhouette. Pieman couldn't even work up a semi. He needed Yatesy standing nearby telling him how to feel. He heaved his feet up on the desk, the gumboots were Yatesy's, and that helped some.

Huggins appeared but the argument sent her storming off to her room. He yelled out to her, 'What was Yatesy textin you about? Crystal know yous're talkin? Huggins?'

Pieman came to look forward to his donations, because he got to drive himself and unlike the Ford, there wasn't a kiddie lock confining him. Yosephine met him at reception, she looked happy to see him, she had a good beamer going on. It didn't make a lick of sense to Pieman. He

shook Yosephine's supple carseat hand and left stickiness on it. She pulled her hair back behind her ear.

'Have you told Huggins you're donating yet?' She clacked down the corridor with him. Pieman shuffled along in the gumboots. Dressing up for his appointments had become important to him.

'Sure, oh yeah, absolutely. Yup, she's where me heart's at.'

Yosephine didn't look at him full-on when she smiled this time.

Pieman put more heart into it.

'Yeah, gave it to her last night obviously, banged the shit out of her.'

'Who are you talking to?'

'Anyway,' he said, quieter, 'Let's crack one out shall we.'

It was a sombre session for Pieman. He pictured Yosephine in there with him. He pulled paper towels from the vendor aimlessly. He was needed in his wank-booth, and didn't want to leave. They'd have to rewrite the HART Act to make some mention of him. He sat back on the La-Z-Boy supplied and wondered why he couldn't have it in his stupid lounge and why Genassistants couldn't have his battered armchair instead, with bowling ball finger-holes in it and the moonscape where he'd picked the foam to bits. Still, he wasn't ready to bring Genassistants into his home.

Pieman signed the form for the somethingth time, declaring that he hadn't eaten contaminated beef, hadn't shared needles, hadn't had a new tat for a while, hadn't been having sex with men. He did picture Yatesy ordering him about and thought to himself, *I've been sucking dick all week, that ain't healthy*, but Yosephine wouldn't wanna hear that. Hell, even Apple probably didn't have time for that.

On the day that Pieman strode into Genassistants with his pants held up by a belt strapped between his belly button and his low nipples, Yosephine announced proudly to him that his sperm had inseminated five women.

'Five?'

'Five!'

‘Struth.’ Pieman ran a hand through his bald spot. He’d had a modern mullet constructed – mostly bushy on top with some tails at the back. It took attention off the ‘pie crust’ as Yatesy called it. ‘Can I keep any of ‘em?’

‘Keep your hat on, Marcus. What it actually is is that your sperm has caused gametosis in five ovum – which is wonderful! - although not all of the gametes will be retained.’

‘They gettin the coathangers on the case?’

Yosephine said, ‘Something like that,’ looking away.

After the session, Marcus went down to the gift shop and bought a pack of Rothmans to celebrate the quintuplets he’d made. When he got to the car, he looked at the ashtray. It was spotless, Huggins had found time to clean somehow between working and sleeping and arguing. He threw the cigarettes out the window. They weren’t his anyway.

Huggins worked. Work was no problem for her. She didn’t flood things at her job, or amputate without being asked to, or get mud on the insides of machinery, or burn cows’ tails with her cigarette lighter coz they looked like wicks. She worked at a pharmacy and spent an aggravating amount of time fending off speed fiends, who ranged from sweaty and weak to lithe and aggressive. They attached hooks to her – when she got home, the hooks still stung, and she had to make sure that Pieman knew.

He was usually there before her, watching Heartland matches, often repeats. Sometimes he would be round at Yatesy’s, reinforcing Yatesy, listening to the same recommendations that Crystal would tell Huggins in person anyway. He would come home with these half-remembered and puke them up.

‘Stal reckons you’ve gotta lay on your back after we bang, gravity makes the sperm drip-feed into the egg she reckons.’

‘She told me that one too.’ Huggins’s uniform caused her to wear a prim personality. ‘And Yatesy reckons he could have me pregged before I knew what hit me. Quote.’ She couldn’t afford to be flexible with Pieman when her uniform packed her breasts into her lungs. The tight canvas pointed the top half of her skinny body towards the sky. She was a great

cook when she had reason to be, but wasn't an eater. She asked Pieman to unzip her. A twist-rod for operating Venetian blinds lived beside the couch. He found it with his left hand, passed it to his right without looking at it, watching the commentators on screen, and used the small hook on the end to catch Huggins's zipper, so that he didn't have to leave the couch. She asked him to scratch her back and he contributed a couple of strokes. She talked to him across their tiny hallway as she showered.

Huggins cleared her throat and said, 'Those photos of Stal do anything for ya? I found the CD in my drive.'

'Not really. Set the bar a bit higher I guess.'

It took a moment for Huggins to take the force of the blow. She turned the shower off so they wouldn't have to yell, and stepped onto the mat.

'And what other wisdom have Yatesy and Crystal been giving you,' Huggins said in the firm and loud tone she used against druggies, 'About conception techniques?'

'Yatesy reckoned I oughta copy from the master.'

'That's what he said is it? Fits. He said the same to me.'

'The man repeats himself.'

Pieman turned the rugby volume up. Yatesy would want the score tomorrow. Pieman had lost track for a moment and couldn't tell who he should be cheering. Huggins tried to add more to the conversation but Pieman got up and pulled the bathroom door shut. It didn't stop her, she emerged with one arm around her body and the other towelling her head and rubbed hard. Huggins had a similar itching problem to Pieman. Probably mozzie season.

He was quietly surprised that Huggins didn't tie him up and stab him with questions. This was a technique that Crystal had been seen to employ against Huggins. Crystal took lessons in the treatment of her friends from Yatesy.

'It's about different positions, 'Stal reckons.' Huggins beat her scalp with the towel.

'She reckons that does she.'

Huggins nodded. The tide of silence pulled them backwards. Pieman was made to get off the couch. Huggins gave him the last note from her purse. It was all coins and Subway cards after that. Pieman fetched their dinner from the Caltex up the road, a pie each, sausage roll and Eta chips. Pall Mall Menthols for dessert.

They sat on the steps, Huggins smoking. The weather was wet and uninteresting. Their neighbours weren't bothersome. There wasn't much to shield or distract Pieman from his failure to hold a job. Toyotas and Hondas sat dead in the gutters and neighbouring driveways. A car alarm was doing its thing. Pieman talked right through it.

'Bought them Rothmans today,' Pieman said to whoever was with him.

'Yeah? Where?'

'Oh.' Pieman looked at Huggins. 'Chucked 'em. Never mind.'

'And we can afford to chuck away ciggies can we?' Huggins lit another cigarette.

'I've seen it done.'

They watched the distant side of their suburb, the streets, the service station, the laundromat, the tattoo shop. The tattoo shop attracted reckless vandals into their neighbourhood. Some people had fires tonight; Pieman and Huggins simply waited for the warmth which would come tomorrow. Yatesy had a box fireplace in his flat. Pieman had the feeling that Yatesy burned logs during temperatures like this just to remind him that he was a relative success.

Pieman heard a voice say, I got at least five ladies preggers at this fertility clinic they got. The voice became more confident and avoided the high notes, And they got this beautiful sheila in command there, she appreciates what I've got to offer. I don't know why we're not makin it happen, I really don't, believe me it's not what I had planned.

Instead he said, 'Any more pie left?'

'Sorry I'm a bit late. Had to drive Little Pieman to the clinic.'

Yosephine assumed that was Pieman's name for his penis and didn't pry. She said it wasn't a bother if he was late, she'd be there for him. Pieman couldn't look her in the eye in case she was telling him the straight story. He clutched the CD-ROM, he'd give it a go today. Yosephine's voice troubled him in the groinal region. Yatesy had a captivating voice in his own way, an attention-demanding grumble, it certainly fishhooked Pieman, but he hadn't had a hard-on around Yatesy in ages.

'Are you okay to donate this morning?'

'Am I what. Brought some pictures of me mate's... Got a computer handy?'

'Not in the donation booth I'm afraid.'

'Right-o. Knocked up five sheilas though eh!' Pieman slapped the receptionists' counter. The pewter of his engagement ring took a dent. Pieman scoped Yosephine's fingers.

'You're missin your wedding ring?'

'No,' she said, 'I don't miss it.'

The receptionists said that they were very impressed with the Big Five. Yosephine took care of the rest of the chat.

'And did you have a glass of champers on the night?'

'Ah, sure, yup. Well, drank us some Vicks.'

'Is your partner able to attend your counselling appointment today?'

'Nah. Workin.'

'Marcus, we're likely to terminate four of them after creating a growth chart over three days.'

'Seems a waste.' It was what he used to tell himself when he heaved frozen calves onto the back of the truck.

'Twins would be a complication for any couple.' Pieman didn't respond. 'Just because it lives, doesn't mean it *should* live.'

'That that philosopher? Nitschke?'

They stood at the counter where Yosephine served Pieman. Pieman's elbows were the only thing that stopped him from slumping onto the ground. The two of them had a quiet moment, their elbows on the

counter dividing them. Yosephine took Pieman's hand and held it demonstratively as if Pieman had been doing something naughty with it. Clients were flipping House & Garden magazines in the background.

'You reckon me and the partner should keep goin? Or terminate?'

'You can't bring a baby into an unhealthy relationship. If it's going nowhere, that is.'

'Who says...' Pieman scrunched up his brow.

'Your counselling today—'

'Later on, yeah.'

'It's not interrupting work, I hope, or—?'

'Nah,' said Pieman, and stuck his hands deep in his pockets, pushing his shorts down, exposing the crack of his arse cheeks, 'been doin a bit of labouring but I'm not workin per se.'

'Come with me,' said Yosephine, 'Apple's delegated to me for today.'

'Apple what?'

'I'll take you through your session today. Is that okay?'

Pieman didn't want to take a seat, he claimed he had to watch the birds because they had savage plans for his auto. Yosephine said, Didn't your friend drive you today? Pieman said, Droze me crazy, and chuckled, and stopped chuckling.

Yosephine gave Pieman a good four minutes of listening. Pieman rummaged around and came up with a few nothings, Weather's beaut out, What's the record number of donations in one sitting, How much is the laser surgery? And from out of nowhere, or somewhere close:

'I can't tell no one about me donations. They think I'm down the WINZ job-huntin. Sucks man – them three days absinthe you tell us to have before the donations? She's hard to hold it in.' A fold of blubber was oozing over the top of Pieman's belt.

'Laser surgery clinic next door.'

'They share our lease.'

'So ladies can get your crow's feet done?'

Yosephine leaned away in her chair. Pieman had to lean in to stay close to her.

‘Ladies don’t like that do they. Sorry. Led astray on that one.’

‘Let’s talk about sex.’ Yosephine gave Pieman a chance to take his seat. He crossed his legs, found this uncomfortable, placed his hands over the bulge at his crotch. Yosephine conducted the conversation for them both.

‘Is your sex life going okay, Marcus?’

‘Got any positions going here? I could roof ya.’

‘Let me ask: Have you told Huggins yet that you’re a sperm donor?’

‘Sure you don’t need roofin?’

‘There aren’t any positions I’m afraid. Look let me advise you of this, if you’re desperate for work. Well, okay, not so fast!’ Yosephine smiled as much as she could without breaking into laughter. ‘Sperm can... occasionally be sold online.’

‘Real?’

‘Really. Outside of Genassistants I can’t legally condone it but – look, Marcus, you’ve been very good to us. We’re very very pleased that you’re donating with us.’

‘Wouldn’t give it to anyone else.’

They enjoyed a silence. Pieman rubbed the veneer of his armchair. Soon he started taking deeper breaths and opened his legs up. He shook his head as he relaxed, then hung it on his chest like a ventriloquist’s puppet with the controlling hand removed.

‘Sell me jizz? For real?’

‘Really. Online, mm-hmm.’

Pieman heard a voice say Mate, whether from his own lips or not, he was unsure. He thought, Yatesy, you’re repeatin yourself.

Huggins moped. Pieman drove. Crystal let them in. Yatesy didn’t get up. Pieman’s mind was on home pregnancy tests. Huggins wouldn’t tell him what the colours had meant.

Dinner was a radiated family pie, microwave beans and marge. Yatesy’s plate was delivered first. He finished his meal at the same time that Crystal sat down with her plate. Yatesy got up himself to fetch another slice, and came back with a small bottle dangling between his

fingers like a keyring. Yatesy tossed the bottle between Pieman's open thighs. It was a bottle of hot sauce rated at 600,000 on the scale of nastiness. The decorations on the bottle were of flames and pitchforks. Yatesy came over, yanked the bottle out of Pieman's hands, decapped it, tilted his head back and put a drop on his tongue. 'Get some a that down ya.'

Pieman carefully guided the bottle lip onto his finger because he needed to measure exactly the same quantity that Yatesy had had. It was like putting a match out on his tongue. Pieman checked the reflection of his tongue on his knife, which was shiny with disuse, and was surprised that his flesh wasn't red and bubbling. Pieman tried not to make eye contact with his mate. He stared instead at the framed Southland Stags top on the wall, an original, signed, number 8, one of a kind. Yatesy's and Pieman's had been made at the same time, but Yatesy's was protected and untrashed. Yatesy laughed deeply at the discomfort the hot sauce caused Pieman, real belly-laugh which made his feet rise off the floor. 'Doofus,' he called his mate. Pieman tried to laugh along, and copied the rising foot motion.

Crystal returned to sitting on Yatesy's lap with a handful of VBs. Yatesy opened the beers with his teeth, because the crescent slices in his eye socket were still raw. They watched the news together and Yatesy called the politicians a buncha crooks. The reporter spoke and he sublimated the news with his volume control and said that Helen Clark's barrenness was her policy for the country. Huggins rolled her eyes. 'You're repeating yourself, Yatesy.' Yatesy added that Clark was a dyke, in case he were proven wrong about her being barren. These were original ideas conceived by Yatesy.

The volume went back up. An ad came on, two for the price of one on something they didn't need.

'Tryin'a get Crystal into the roofing trade,' Yatesy said. Huggins, sitting beside Pieman, who was cooling his tongue on his bottleneck, looked over at Crystal.

'Double the money, two of us on it,' Yatesy said, answering a question no one had asked.

‘What about five of ya’s.’

Yatesy turned away from the screen. ‘Meaning?’

‘Like, what if one dude could like knock up five—’

‘Five *what?*’ Crystal screwed up her nose.

‘Whoa!’ said Pieman, and dragged a smile onto his face and slapped the flab of around his lost kneecaps. ‘Oi flip it over to 3, *Plays—*’

‘Mate,’ Yatesy began, pushing himself out of his throne, letting Crystal stagger onto the thin carpet, ‘You can’t even knock your own poor wifey up, let alone five bitches.’

‘Don’t swear,’ Crystal said to Pieman. Crystal’s fists protected her bosom. She stood at Yatesy’s side. The two of them faced in the same direction. Pieman received an image of Crystal hauling roof tiles with Yatesy and sharing Rothmans with him while their baby cried. They still hadn’t named the thing.

The baby began to cry, in the spare bedroom. Pieman was surprised he was sensitive enough to foresee the tears. He wondered if the baby had dropped its pie. Crystal left the scene, bumping Pieman as she passed. She put her hand on Huggins’s shoulder and Huggins brushed the hand off her. Crystal advised Huggins as she passed, as if imparting familiar wisdom at the departure gate, ‘If you’re heart’s not in it, it’s not worth it.’ She jerked a thumb at Pieman, who sat beside Huggins absorbing his friends’ advice.

Yatesy told Pieman he’d become upset and didn’t want to see Pieman until seven the next morning, roofing the working men’s club, Can’t pick you up. Yatesy sat down in his armchair and writhed in it, like an eel chopped in two.

At the traffic lights, Pieman opened his door and tried to vomit. Huggins patted him on the back. Pieman couldn’t unleash the burden in his guts naturally so he tickled his tonsils. It made his fingers sticky. Up came the family pie. Its present arrangement reminded him of the gunk that congealed when the milk he’d spilt in the paddock began to curdle. ‘Seems a waste,’ he’d said to the cows. He could have turned the valve off and saved himself a thousand litres, but his reactions were frog-in-the-pan slow. Fingers of the milk trail met around his feet. He was trapped.

Huggins said to him, 'When you're a daddy, I don't want you fighting.'

Pieman sniffed his vomit-fingers then wiped them on his shorts.
'If your heart's not in it, it's not worth it.'

He hoped his gut issues, the ulcers and such, would subside after his op at the surgery. He'd paid for the op with the cash from his travel reimbursement. Bile fizzed into the upper reaches of his gut as he switched his phone off. He thought Yatesy might still call so he took the SIM card out. He thought the SIM card might sneak back into his phone so he put it in the pocket of his shorts.

He took off his Southland top. It was only good for soaking up tears. Yatesy had the original framed on his wall. Just the one would do them both. The Genassistants top still had some life in it, however.

The tattooist said no. Pieman hadn't planned for that.

'Are you sure,' he said, 'She gave me her business card and everything.'

'Nope,' said the tattooist. He didn't blink or scratch his shaven head or keep his feet together. 'I don't think your heart's in the right place. No, I mean – your heart's in the right place, right – but, you're actin. She ain't the one.'

Pieman settled for a different name. There was another girl in case Pieman's heart were in the wrong place, as Yatesy said. Same colour scheme, Southland maroon, with a bit of pink to make it fruity, Huggins would like that. Or, whatever colour Huggins liked. Lime maybe, like the uniform she chose everyday.

'You sure?' The tattooist was learning here was a punter who'd stand still and risk bleeding to death because running for help might worsen things. Pieman wiped the sweat off his brow with his shirt.

'Just let it out, mate.'

Pieman unleashed his gut. Holding it in wasn't comfortable.

'Nope, mate, you're not listening to me – *let it out.*'

Pieman bit his top lip, looked at the smoke alarm on the ceiling and the tattooist's rollie smoke rising toward it, and let the tears dry up around his eyes. The tattooist ran a hand over Pieman's back.

'Don't cry mate. I think your tat's bloody cool.'

Pieman properly sobbed. The tattooist switched off his needle, but Pieman begged him to continue.

'Don't ordinarily do girls' names for blokes, heart's not usually in it, they'll change their mind on ya.'

Before he traced the name of Pieman's true love, the tattooist fingered the letters inscribed on Pieman's back. It hurt more than the needle hammering his skin had. Pieman banged his fist against where his heart should be.

'I'll tell ya: I think it's cool, bro, it's real cool. Your mate must have the matching tat, yeah?'

Pieman wiped the snot out of his nose and onto his forearm.

'I knocked up five sheilas,' he said.

'Course ya did, mate.'

'We're not fags.'

'No one's sayin you are.'

The tattooist did a great job of the tat. She'd love it. After a session of blood-wiping and silence and rollies, when he was close to finishing, the tattooist told Pieman, 'Y'know, you can always get it removed. They have laser surgery can do that.'

Pieman took a deep draught of air into his nose. The air was heavy with sweat and thin smoke, but Pieman appeared refreshed. He had a special lady on his mind. He offered the tattooist his eyes, swollen and pink with blue at the heart.

She told Marcus she'd vouch for him. She apologised for milking him over the course of their relationship.

'I oughta have set up a Mr Whippy van oughtn't I!'

Marcus produced what he'd been hiding behind him – flowers, slightly withered but mostly immaculate. Someone had put a lot of love into them.

'Can you believe these were just hangin' out on on a traffic island?!'

She told him to give them to his partner. He said if she didn't take them he could always put them back, hold the flower head against the stem and let them reattach. Yosephine told him that wouldn't work. She repeated the Nitschke quote. She slipped up once and called him Pieman and it seemed funny to him, used to being Marcus. Marcus felt like a cloned superior.

'So you'll vouch for me. For real. Like on the web?'

'As a registered fertility consultant.' She led him to reception. She couldn't thank him enough for his donations, she said. He told her she'd already thanked him enough, she was the one doing *him* the favours. She told him his tattoo was the sweetest most considerate gift he could have given anybody, especially considering he was in shit with the bank.

'Ah well, sell a little cum eh, she'll be right.'

'Pay your tab next door at the surgery I suppose?'

'Too right.' He took the bill out of his pocket.

'And – Marcus – you can put your shirt back on now. Huggins will love her tattoo.'

He would put his shirt on in the lift, he said. He showed off what he called his new tan. The light-coloured people sitting in the well-lit reception averted their eyes. He tried to flex his blistered breasts and Yosephine giggled at him.

'Huggins been in the same mood as you. Probably coz she ain't had her period in two months. Or coz I ain't done the dirty in four.'

Yosephine opened the elevator for him and stood before the sealing lips.

'Can your friend help you set up your website?'

'What?'

'You know, to advertise: *'Sperm for sale.'*

'Nah, I mean – what friend?'

Yosephine laughed because nothing else fit the gap.

‘There’s always Little Pieman to do it I spose,’ Marcus mused, frowning thickly, ‘He might grow up to learn all that computer junk. If his Dad gives the say-so.’

Little Pieman could have been any one of Marcus’s twenty successful inseminations.

‘Who’s ‘Little Pieman’?’

‘Mate’s kid. Well, ex-mate. Crystal’s kid.’

‘Er... that’s an interesting name?’

‘Not my call.’

‘Celebrate with your partner, Marcus.’

‘Might do. If she can put her cellphone down. Always textin, that girl.’

The lips of the elevator closed on Pieman, who stood there with his shirt off, *Huggins* written across his heart, a large bandage taped across his back, a bill for laser surgery in his hand that had cost him more than anything.

Go Ya Own Way

They're piping music in, it's the Mac and I'm goin me own way. Cellmate looks unimpressed. Doubt he'll wanna karaoke with me. Mate, this song takes me back.

'You're the spitting image of a wee tyke I useda know eh.'

'Uh huh,' he goes. I get a bit more of a look at him. The bars of the holding cell block out half our light so she's a bit of a squinter. His skin's brown – he stands out against the white-painted cindies, which I might add provide bugger all insulation. Apart from the chipped one, kid's got some nice teeth, white as the cindies. Needs some ciggies on them teeth. I'm glad our ticket to move on's coming. Should be, at any rate.

'Marry kid too he was. You're a tribesman arencha?'

Kid nods.

The Taylors were obviously Marry, y'know, but they weren't obviously Marry. They were just trash, this family, not like the cultured broes we got today with they mana 'n that. On their personal résumé, they class woulda come above their ethnicity. That term, trash, that's great it is, coz these days you're alright to slur a class society, rather than race or religion or any a those less significant determiners. I didn't have the terminology at hand back when I was five to work these things out, but the memories have recorded the fundamentals of this stuff nice 'n good. This was back in the eighties mind – you were free to be mates with whoever was your neighbour back then. I'd say it was the nineties that invented racism, suddenly being mates with a Marry gave you a complex. Lord knows what they Marries had to say about it.

First clue they was Marries: that brown skin. Brown on Dad and the kids, and black hair and brown eyes. The mum, Carolyn, she musta been culturally sensitive or culturally indifferent (means the same dunnit), coz I don't think it dawned on her what she was getting into, that when 1990 came about ya had to force yaself to look the other way bout a bloke's race instead a jus goin with it. She was a airhead though, didn't even

know what a race was. I don't remember her saying a single complicated phrase. ("I do"?) Her voice was nasal and cigarettey. I don't know why Mick took her on. But Mick's not your average Marry, so their marriage had an element of unpredictability to 'er.

Mick looks like a Mexican, Dad pointed that out, or a bear. Mexican brown bear if I had to name the species. He's about yea high, about your height, mate, and he's got thick dark eyebrows and puffy cheeks and this adorable little moustache and the cutest lil smile.

Fuck off, I ain't a fag. Stop bloody snickerin mate or I'll have you up against the wall.

Anyways, Mick worked proud at the Bond & Bond at one of the malls I've never been to, Linwood praps. Aw, I tell a lie – I been to Linn's mall once to get league trading cards. Mick drove us, Alby and me. He was a bit of a good bastard was Mick, a bit cultured I guess. For trash. This is back when I thought the Bulldogs trained at Lancaster Park and couldn't register things accurately. Mick's working at B & B seemed like an important job. I asked Dad what sorta a name for a Marry was Mick, and Dad goes it's short for Micktrola. Some sorta electronics salesman joke that. By the time I's seventeen though, suddenly Mick's job didn't seem so commendable y'know? Dirty even. Hell, Bond & Bond would've employed *me*, had my shag buddy from school not usurped me. Shows their standards. Ah, y'know, she looked cuter in the uniform than me, hell, I surrender. Cripes, Dad really rearranged me jaw when he caught me stabbin her in the back at their Barina! She was a tiny ride though y'know, just about tipped 'er on her side.

The car I mean. Yeah sorry yeah, nah yeah sometimes I do start speakin two languages. No room for that in here.

Another thing's possible about ol Mick though, what I'm considerin with the benefit of hindsight (hindsight bein a skill I picked up in Christchurch Men's) – that they used to pay better and that Mick's job was respectable. Could be, could be – in which case, who brought the trash in with that family? Let me evaluate me memories and get back to you on that.

Don't worry: I'm makin sure I tell this shit in the right order. Shit, amen, Lord, I do apologise – yeah, Christian mate, you're onto it. Don't blaspheme or swear. The old man sorta hammered that principle home y'know. Men a principles we are.

That Carolyn shoulda been working instead a playing with the kids. She needed a Presbo work ethic. Anyways, lemme finish tellin the story.

Who do I run with?

Jus lemme finish the story mate. I'll tell ya bout the Church.

They house was in Changi, Christchurch, Marryhow to be specific, where the land and the house prices dip. Most of it's reclaimed swamp from the estuary. Ya know ya close to the sewage ponds when ya got a seagull bringin in The Press in the morning. The houses out east are usually a coupla stories pavalova'd on top a one another and they look scruffy what with the gum trees shitting – amen – leaves on the uneven footpath and graffiti on the utilities teachin the kids how to spell. Us, we was out west side, where there's sheep shearin not heron sharin', Sharon.

East meets west mate! Aw yeah nah, ya got some might in that handshake there, she's not bad, seen worse shakes. Less put the gang signs away though eh? Quite frankly ya don't have it in ya, do ya. Good lad.

They had kids. That's important. Shoulda let you in on that earlier. Well she's my bloody story not yours so don't inerupt.

Anyways, see the thing about Carolyn and Mick's kids – they're Carolyn & Mick by the way, not Mick & Carolyn; I don't know why Carolyn's name come first, maybe coz she's white, maybe coz she's a lady, maybe coz Mick's a pushover, maybe coz she's Mum's mate and Mum's our breadwinner but that's another – aw actually that's intransit to me story – *whatever*, Carolyn & Mick's kids were Albert, first, and Desdemona second. Trashy names eh, like they're strivin at glamour. Coz Desdemona's from a Shakespearean work eh, while as Albert's.... a prince? Well they are trash, I promise ya. Too much checkin the map with

they people, not enough direction eh. Dad shoulda shouted some a that Presbyterian work ethic into them, worked for me eh.

I'm tellin ya, they was trash mate. Stop interjecting me story.

Not sure what age Alby was when he was born but I always saw him as a eight year old, purely eight. I'd play with him and kick his arse every time, throw him round like a golliwog doll eh. And he'd cry and Phil Collins would drown out most of it. Phil made his voice heard back in them days. If Dad'd heard over the Phil, Dad woulda beaten young Alby into submission eh, toughened boys up it did. That was one thing Mick failed to do with his kids, disavowin his Marry obligations he was. Ol' Dad, he was good at repression eh, woulda carved up at Raglan eh. Me and Alby though, we'd walk on down Charles Upham Ave to the park, through the twisting bungalows with they willow trees and bottles of water on the front lawn to keep the dogs from shittin. I'd practice me Scottish accent but she was hard to communicate with that shit so I'd get a bit angus at poor Alby. We'd run the last half a kay to the park and we'd do Karate Kid fly kicks on the rubber dust and his big mop a black hair would get some air in it and he'd inevitably get a heel in his nose and he'd be wailin and the blood would travel along the indents of his little jowls – looked like his old man a bit come to think of it – and this brought out The Rage, mate.

Alby's blood turned out to be the same colour as me own, bit of a surprise, but throughout me life whenever I've had cause to see me own blood it's never brought about that kinda reaction. I member sayin to Dad, Dad I've taken mosta the skin off me fingertips on ya belt sander but he just locked the door of the study like he was busy and I had to wait til Mum got home. This Alby's Rage though mate, it knocked me on me back more than once. Lord knows where The Rage came from. It was his state of grace, that Rage was. If Alby wasn't sulkin, he was stickin up for his old man. Had a attitude sometimes with that Rage eh, like the time he goes 'Your Dad's richer but my dad works harder.' Chipped his tooth that time, with a ankle to the chin. We looked for the chip too. Couldn't find it in the grass and Alby couldn't see what with his eyes fully cryin' 'n shit. Amen.

That Desdemoaner one, she was 99 percent cherub – chubby ruddy cheeks like her Dad and her bro, fringe like her mum's. God, I wish that had been the only trait she picked up from her old lady eh. The calm demeanour too, you'll notice that – softly spoken through them fluffy, gentle lips, more wont to retreat than entreat. Still though, you'd have the kids dropped off at ours when Carolyn and Mick wanted a day to breed or whatever trash do, and I'd give Alby a puckerfulla the red stuff and inapendently Moaner would bust out the salt eyes and Dad would have to crank the Alison Moyet to drown er out, and he'd yell at her to shut up over Ally's baritone. That's why we called her Moaner. Not to her pares' face a course, I wouldn't say that crap behind someone's back.

Cute wee family overall really, well for Marrys they was anyway. I don't have a soft spot for they people much, considerin all the shit they done to me. Then there's Carolyn.

Mum's an unlikely friend for someone like Carolyn. Mum's a medicine woman, mate. She's upper English middle class so she fit right in with mucha the folk in this city. She's the breadwinner in the pares' household to be honest but ya would never of guessed from the way Dad holds shit down, amen. Dad's a man in love with control – a teacher, and a ferocious Scotsman too. Mum was upper middle class even when she was a student, even though she had no money. Carolyn's still got no money, even though them student days is long gone. Credit cards is money. Maybe that's what they had in common. Maybe Mum's got a interest in poor peeps, maybe she's soft for they people.

I don't like to talk shit about people much, amen, but this lady gives white people a bad name eh. Where'd Carolyn come from? At a guess, outta the swamps a East Christchurch? Caravan park name for a caravan park girl. Micktor – Mick – could be slurred, but there's nobility in that name. Unless it really is just short for *Micktrola* and Dad hasn't filled me head with a packa lies. But yeah, this story ain't about him.

Anyway, Carolyn flatted with mum and worked the kind of jobs when she was a student that she'd ultimately rely on thirty years down the track with her nursing career down the gurgler. It's like what ya learn later in life

colours ya interpretation of shit what's already been done, relationships that've already run they course eh. Makes me wonder to what extent Carolyn panned the stream before she struck gold with Mick, y'know, was she born a troublemaker or was it bred? Coz ya can be bred to be a troublemaker, I've seen proof. I wonder about alla this shit.

White bread? That's funny ta you is it mate? Lemme talk, dick.

Mick's not too bad a hitch if ya consider his personality, if ya into that shit, amen, man's part cuddly teddy bear, part knowledgy electronics salesman, part everyman. Well not everyman, he's a coon eh, but ya get my mean. I can see Carolyn seducing him, promising him she's worth it, flattering him, saying nice things about his belly. I've seen their wedding photos, the two of em look pretty blissed. Maybe. I'm not sayin it's not possible.

They were round one time on one a they rainy Church Sundays and we were all eating chips out of a bowl, as ya do, well as most famlies do I'd say, not my one but the Taylors at any rate. Moaner was sucking her thumb with a couch cushion over top of her; Alby had found Dad's cane and was swirling it around but I's getting a bit old to be sword fighting with the kid. Dad was making small talk with Mick and pouring out cheap-arse raisins into a snack bowl, as if that was all we could afford. Coulda afforded more if Dad had a job with a bit more dignity eh but at least it paid better than selling electronics. Dad told me under his breath to offer a couple raisins to Mick the Spic. But yeah, Mick'd had his dirty digits all over our new stereo, fixing it coz Dad couldn't set er up properly. Stereo was bought with B&B discount thanks to Marry Micktrola the Spic, his full title according to Dad. Dad grumbled when Mick got success fixing the stereo and I sorta imitated Dad's grumble and Mick was looking a bit nervous and he only ate y'know three raisins. Broke the stereo in with *Rhiannon*, Mick did, and Dad didn't even say thanks, just went up to Carolyn and Mum's gossip and butted in and said to Mum, 'Remind me to pay the repairman.' So Carolyn grabs Mick's sleeve as Mick's sorta skulking past and Carolyn goes to him, 'Bout time you got their stereo

fixed,' and she slaps the man on the back of his head. Get the impression Moaner heard that through the cushion eh.

Dad stomped on up to his office. I tried to follow him up, tried to stomp the stairs two at a time like him. *Go Ya Own Way* was playing and Dad almost y'know sung the lyrics eh! He goes

'Ye cun *gore aware*.' I looked down and Mick gives me the come-hither head and a real pleasant smile and I went down with me shoulders a bit slumped y'know and...

Ya lookin uncomfortable, ya right? Good-o. That's a Marryhow High top ya wearin, they pick ya up straight after school? The poes'll do that eh, they got quotas to fill. Two faces on they poes.

At they place, Carolyn and Mick left lights on in stuffy rooms without windows open, and the purple drapes drawn. Albert and Desdemona's pares were good lower classies, brought they kids up on Coke and potato chips. They left albums playing in the lounge wasting power. Some a they tunes was even quite edgy, Bone Thugz and Boyz II Men 'n that. Edgier than a copied Dire Straits cassette at any rate. Dad woulda chucked me down the stairs if him or Mum caught me wasting power, drinkin fizzy. Only on me b'day did I get a bottle of Coke. I do drink a fair old bit o' that stuff these days, with bourb in her of course. Can't tell me off now can ya Dad. Got headphones on me b'day too, to connect to the main stereo, so long's I didn't leave the room eh. Back to the Taylors though.

Here's what happened with Mum and Carolyn: Carolyn did Mum no particular hurt, and may've even provided some good times. Well, if ya know Carolyn you'll know she couldn't've helped mum memorise all three hundred bones in the human body so this lady must've had some other use right? Mum had brought her Brit culture a shame to Christchurch, so what Carolyn did for her was temper this with her for fashion sense. Mind you, Carolyn did take to bleachin her hair in later years.

Real moaner that Carolyn, musta took after her daughter, 'Awww Sally' she'd moan, looking at an imported Jap sedan rolling through pauperish Sydenham, 'I need a car like that.'

‘Whyn’t bike?’ Mum would ask, ‘I cycle to the clinic every day.’

Too right – there was this hard plastic bucket seat for me to plop into. I’s a bit smaller back then I was. Had the same scalp though, not much hair on there eh. Christchurch was free of ambition, and saturated with green, which was the only colour that didn’t separate people.

Mick met Carolyn on a blind date and remained blind until she left him. This is back when Dad had a moustache, and Mick had a moustache, and every cunt with balls between his legs had a moustache. Amen. Somethin to do with Fleetwood Mac, go your own way they said, so half the planet went in the same direction. My Dad just stayed on the course and didn’t heed no one. But they moustaches eh, god damn amen they were some heinous shit amen. Sign of the times, like race relations in the 90s. Parently ya got considered handsome with one a they moustaches though so I dunno, y’know. That Roger Douglas had one eh, I know Carolyn woulda jumped all over that dude. Now there was a man who didn’t heed nobody.

Me, I ah... I became a bit of a bad man as I grew up, I did. Developed a few ideas about Marries eh. Developed a few ideas about Protestantism and beliefs and values too. Like I said, Dad was a teacher. I had what I believe they call a Interrugnum, when there’s like a power struggle – yeah, history’s the only thing I gave a damn about in high school eh. Some a these things only make sense later on.

Time I reached fifteen, I pictured them doin’ it. I ain’t gonna mince words – I bloody threw the fuckin on meself over they images, so she’s my dirty little secret, so now ya know. Somethin about they trash families I was always a bit green-eyed over y’know? Keep that to yaself.

What’s it like to have everyone condemnin’ ya?

I wouldn’t know mate: boot boy ain’t I. Answerable to no one. Reckon Carolyn was the first to spot the ol’ transition I was goin through. She woulda been complainin about her man not bringing in enough dough and looking at my famly with our two storeys an me gettin offered a

opportunity with the Fourth Reich. So she hit on me, pleading with her hurt-arse voice, beggin the little fifteen year old masturbator that I was. Made me too nervous to be perfectly Sinatra with ya, this MILF twirlin her whorish hair and flutterin her eyelids. I could spot a black widow from miles away eh. She'd already poisoned Mick now she wanted the other white meat eh.

Magine that about Carolyn 'n Mick though eh, she's ridin his little portly-arse belly, his moustache is standin on end, they got bloody MC Hammer or some shit playin in a another room. I used to wonder how I's conceived eh, just couldn't picture Dad takin the rod outta his arse and givin Mum some pleasure. The only reason Dad'd take the rod out of his arse would be to crack me upside the head really.

Mate, we all got to crack skulls occasionally.

I'd been goin more than off the straight and narrow. I'd been goin in the shape of they SS lightning bolts, jagged and aggro.

The olds had a conversation right in fronta me about runnin with the boot crews. They decided I should get a job. How in hell that'd change shit I dunno, but the long 'n short of it is I had Mick makin me a proposition, and not the sort he gave to Carolyn. Man's proposition was basically like, I don't care if you hate me and my people, you're still family, I'd like to give you a chance to improve your lot. Completely different to what he proposed to Carolyn eh. Mick got us a job at Bond n Bond.

I can't handle customers eh. Krew, he was our head boi at the time, Krew'd been explainin to me what capitalism is an how that Karl Marx invented it an it's like Jewish 'n shit y'know, amen? We're a purer people an we uphold our religious scruples – fuckin, amen - so that's why ya don't have to feel obligated to buy into customerism eh.

Which is why Mick came outta the store room just in time to see me tear away a pretty hefty speaker from one of they Sony jap jobs, snap the cables 'n everything, an I brought it down on this gook cunt's skull eh, he'd been yappin on his cell too loud eh. Krew explains it in words best

really, I'm not all that elegant, like Krew said they fourteen words of national socialism, we gotta secure the existence of our people and a future for White children. Not much room to care about other children.

Mick got right up in me face he did. See I'm a tall boi I am, had me Docs on all eighteen laces done up right, an I've got an adam's apple which coulda poked his eye out, but Mick's still right up in me face right, I've given you a chance, you might not get another, you need to leave, you can't work here any more, I've got to get mall security.

Man was sorry for some goddamn reason. Amen. Joke's on that idiot eh, I don't know what that cunt's angle was.

Did parta the haka as I's stepping over the gook groanin on the ground eh, an I starts moshing, and I jab the toe of me Docs near his snout, an I'm chanting ONE A THESE DAYS THESE BOOTS ARE GONNA WALK ALL OVER YOU!! Mick looked up, an he looked Marry, an he looked more hurt than the gook on the ground.

They had a trampoline and a yard full of leaves. We had a manicured yard with huge spaces you could've put a dozen tramps on. I guess Carolyn musta thought havin a tramp wasn't all that coz one day she just up and left Mick. I was bouncing on the tramp at the time, shaking me suspenders loose, and Dad was hanging round the car coz he wanted to go, and Mum came outta they house and her face was all red and said let's go, but I was up in the air and Dad tried to move the tramp out from under me as I's coming back down for another jump.

Mick had the tramp pulled out from under him too. No warning. And I's just getting into masturbating to that Carolyn in me fantasies, bout that age, dirty tramp she was. Real shame what she did with her opportunities.

Carolyn and Mick had other mates to officially declare it to first, Dad and Mum weren't number one on they Christmas card list. A phone call came in the morning. The phone whinged across the great gulf that was our dining room and stairwell region. The ceiling gets ten metres high at one point, she's quite majestic. So Mum's on the phone sayin things like Oh God Oh Gosh I'm sorry Caro Would you like to come and stay

with us and I'm thinking she's not a bad idea, I can practice me king hits on Alby and maybe catch Carolyn comin out of the shower now and again.

Ya look a bit uncomfortable there mate. Hang tight, she's not far to go. Don't mean to digress.

First time I ever saw a bloke touch another bloke was when I came into the lounge lookin for me suspenders and there's Dad with his arm round Mick's shoulders and Mick had a boxa tissues and Dad didn't like me seein 'em like that one bit although Mick shoots these big loving eyes towards me. Dad's up and sliding the lounge door shut De ye nae gnaw hoo tay nork ya wee booger git tay fook wi' ye. That's the most he'd said to me in a month. I quite liked this ol period y'know, I's sixteenwards and I knew where I stood with Dad, he was well and truly cutting himself off from me so he could hold Mum in her place pretty tight. Mum was looking at leaving her clinic and taking fewer hours at one of those Southern Cross private gigs but Dad said Aw nae ye dinnae, they'll no pay ye dearly enoof. An all about how as Presboes we had an identity of stick-to-it-iveness 'n shit. Amen, fuck that eh: ya identity's what ya make of 'er. Up to you. Don't let others influence ya, an don't tell others what box they should be in coz it ain't fuckin nice. Amen.

Mum had given Dad his principles. Dad'd found an identity through this shit, and tried to give this to me. As *if*. I just wouldn't blaspheme eh, she's disrespectful.

And while Dad 'n Mum're arguin about alla this shit, over the period of a year or two really, Dad makes sure he finds time to explain to me, 'Oi: ye didnae see us hoogin that coon, say shootcha noise.' Said that on a monthly basis, he did.

I go, 'He doesn't really seem that much of a coon.'

'Yir identitae's what ye fookin mack ay her. Amen.'

What with Dad in control, Mum stayed in her place didn't she. I'll tell ya who couldn't stay in *his* place though: Mick. Carolyn's the one what turfed him out and not the other way round. This despite testimony from Mum that Carolyn was shaggin around and tried to whore herself into someone else's household, tryin'a tell people in that wounded voice her

husband's a Marry and do-I-gotta-come-right-out-and-say-it-he-beats-me-obviously-sob-sob. I know Dad told Carolyn where to go when she tried to throw the fuckin' on him, and I told Carolyn personally what I thought of her when I got bored of exploitin her, but I understand her sob story worked on a man by the name of Tim. Roped him in with that hurt voice eh, like she was the one what got hurt in this whole affair.

Tim's as trashy as Carolyn, they were perfect for each other. Tim made Mick – who I might add wore a moustache until 1996 – look like a aristocrat. Tim had the pretence of thinking there's something good goin on with him but the man had a mo until 199-*nine* y'know, so: Shows what that man's made of. So moustache yeah, he wore a lotta denim too, and didn't take his sports shoes off when he came into Mum 'n Dad's place. I didn't even live there at this stage, seventeen-eighteen, I's kippin at the gang pad every night and using they fly kicks and king hits for real, on real Marries. Harris Gang too, crossing paths with those degraded hillbillies. Made me ashamed to be white power. I'd run into Carolyn and Tim all the time though. The concept of us shoppin at the same stores was hard to come to terms with. Tim's a big man he is, there's a hundred KGs of scum there.

Now, I reckon Dad might've even offered the man a Rheineck – not a Canty Draught, a Rheineck – if old Tim'd been a good cunt. But he was far from a good cunt was Tim – he was just a cunt. And because the cunt was dumb as a post, ol' Carolyn used him like a stake stuck right inna that marriage. That flattering voice a hers, aww Sally, aww Tim, aww Alby, but never a care for Mick. That's disrespectful to Mick it is. So what if the man's a Marry, give 'im his due.

See wee Moaner and Prince Alby got split up. Mick went on up to the North Island, that's how bad Carolyn warped the man, went to Palmy North of all places. I know there's a few boot brothers round them parts but other'n that the town's got nothin to say for itself. Mick took Alby with him, so who'd I have to practice me fisticuffs on? I joined in on some rumblin for sure, to compensate, rolled with them Fourth Reichers and

oi'd up the Cathedral Square we did, but I did miss sparrin with the wee coon Alby, good fun he was.

Yup, yeah yeah, drugs is right mate, you're onto it. Albs went onto drugs next. Found his proddy work ethic too at the same time. Ox moron eh. So while this Tim character – white bastard too I might add, real disgrace – while Tim's draggin down what little dignity's left in that Carolyn, they kids are struggling to stay afloat eh. Sorry arse white trash they were. Coulda used a Mick around the house.

Alby worked on a conveyor belt putting cakes in boxes. Alby's 14 at the time right, I'm, y'know 19, not makin much coin, stringin together the odd tinny I can sell and wranglin donations outta foreign diplomats in the Square. So Alby's got alllll this cash and the boy can't be fucked amen goin to b-ball practice so he spends 'er on drugs don't he. He never bought shit off me sadly, amen, and we never ran into each other. Go ya own way they say. Some people say.

No, you're wrong there mate, don't stick up for him, this kid was fuckin-up proper Christchurch styles. No, nahp, I just told ya, he was goin his own way yeah but she was the wrong way.

Meanwhile you've got Moaner gettin worked on in the playground with l'il hoodlums. I'm serious mate, she was lettin 'em finger her at age 10 I mean that's fucked up innit, gettin exposed to sex when you're just young. Poor role models is the problem eh, ya need reliable parents who give a fuck doncha, amen. The fallapart a they Taylors gave Dad all the proof he needed that the ol minority report wasn't welcome in our neck of the hood but Mum... Mum had a diff'rent interpretation.

Mum was prouda me even when I's booted up and got the first tats on me neck. Dad watched me go, and gloated from his office markin school work an swearin at the papers, and tellin me how daft the spelling of kids' names is, Mohammed 'n Chan 'n Moana 'n shit, amen.

'Ah fookin heat immaygrents,' he goes in his Scotch accent.

I heard em talkin about Mick later in the night, least I think they was talkin about Mick, Mum right goin 'Do you think God might perchance have a plan for him?' and Dad bein like 'The bastard's tackin thay rung

rod, lit 'um redeem heysel.' N then Dad'd read a bit aloud from Genesis or one a they other books an relate it to modern times and people they know and the coons what Dad said was in charge of they Education System.

Tell ya the truth, I only crashed at Mum 'n Dad's sometimes coz I liked hearing Mum talk about the old country, merry old bloody England, an Dad talkin bout the parta Scotland he's from, and how they kept they manorities in they place back in his day. The brothers wouldn't much understand me livin in a mansion.

Krew didn't know the ol famly had niggers for mates, broken-up famly or not. I come in one night and Mick's down in Churchtown from Palmy for, what was it, right right yeah he's down to visit with Alby an have some sorta formal discussion with that Carolyn.

Yeah, sound familiar? Maybe you knew 'em or somethin. Six degrees, boy.

Krew pulls up in the Valiant – y'ever thieved one a those? Piece a piss ain't it. See that's why ya gotta keep ya Val in ya garage don't ya, only take er out when you've got enough boys to defend er with your life. And we certainly did have enough goddamn boys that night I'm tellin ya mate, five brothers in the back just rearin ta separate some lips from jaws with steel-toe dentistry.

That's bootin in a cunt's face, for you Marries what can't afford steelcaps. She's annoyin how they take ya shoes off ya for they anti-suicide measures in here eh. Bloody 36 holes I've had to undo this evening. Undoin shit's tough.

So I'm in the front seat – this is coz Krew ain't seen me in a few weeks and he's givin me noogies y'know, dustin me scalp with his knuckles, all hard cracked skin from the meatworks. Krew sends me in to get CDs coz he's got new sounds hooked up, freshly plundered, you'd know all about the mysterio stereo wouldn't ya mate, ya boosted a few?

Yeah, course ya have. What about how they Marries leave the music goin just in case somebody comes along an wants to listen to it, what kinda shit is that, leavin things you care about unattended. Dad'd never leave the radio on, specially since he was almost always locked away in his office. Not that this story's about him.

That night Mum an Dad are in the lounge watchin Coro and talkin in they British language. Mick's sittin as far away from Dad as you are from me mate, he's at the dining table with a photo album out. Quick glance show they're little brown bodies he's gettin all weepy over – famly photos evidentially.

'Glad you're home,' Mick starts goin, all warm 'n shit, amen, 'How *are* you? I had to tell you, there's an opening at the Westfield store here and your parents tell me you're needing work, we could forget about last time there's– '

He's finally taken his eyes off they pics a Moaner 'n Alby in nappies. No pics of Carolyn in there. I see there's a piccie of me playin with Alby though. So he scopes me out an goes all pale. He's eyein up me boots, which have bitsa safety glass embedded in the toe. He goes all buggy at me tapered jeans eh, boot cuts. Flannel shirt. Trenchy. Suspenders. Shaven head. Tats on me knuckles.

'Oh my God it's Russell Crowe!' he goes. Doesn't rise to shake my hand.

'Who's picking you up?' he's askin. Finally he goes

'Where'd you get clothes like *that*?'

I'm a bit of a hard case as ya can tell mate, but me face has gone all red an she's a bit hard to look Mick in the eye at this point. I go an get me CDs, Annihilator an some Mac an Phil, white music for all me moods eh, all me faces. Even Ethnic Cleansing's album, the authentic stuff. Can't forget nineties music. Krew strides up an kicks mum 'n dad's curtains an grabs me by the ear and goes Hurry it up, brother.

An he scopes Mick sittin there lookin all flustered, an he goes real loud so he can be heard over Coro an Mick's page-flippin,

'What's with the coon? This one a them noble savages?' An I go

'Leave him.' An he sees I've got best of the Mac and tells me to leave that shit behind. We left Mick with his jaw hangin down lookin like he'd taken a blow. We went our own way.

We'd hear from Mick with defreq – decreq – decreasing frequency. Not often y'know. When Mick the Spic'd ring on the ol' telling-bone, the conversation would revolve more around the kids, first, and Carolyn second. Tim third. No one really wanted to know what Mick had to say eh, the man didn't carry mucha – what's that shit called again?

Manna, right, good native translator you are mate. Carolyn took Mick's manna. She was a mannagrubber, takin the man's manna, what's a Marry got left after that? Meanwhile we got the govment 'n that sayin how we gotta tiptoe round race relations, tiptoe towards unity... Christ mate, my family and the Taylors? We was goin our own way. Gettin lost, yeah, but goin our own way.

Doc Martens don't tiptoe.

Now I get the impression you're in the car conversion trade too are ya? Yeah nah yeah, that's what brings me here tonight meself. Too many Jap cars in this city, they're askin to get rolled. That's the thing about boostin cars eh, ya get tangled up scramblin wires and by the time ya ready to move 'em she's already too late..

Me? I get outta here soon as they organise they charges. Y'self? First-timer? Shivers... Back to me story though:

Havin bin forced to go his own way, Mick slowly rebuilt himself. I understand he couldn't take much up to Palmy, just his halfa the wedding photo. Aw and he got The Moaner for a few years, she's never settled down wherever Carolyn lives, whoresville, so best she goes with him. Really looking quite pretty for a Marry too, and I bet she's used up all her tears so that mascara'll never run. The wee thing managed to avoid getting fully fingered into the gang which is good for that family's standards I spose. I know some a the brothers would've shown her a time.

Not sure what became of Alby eh. I understand he ain't been in school coz I got a coupla boots at Marryhow who ain't seen him in yonks. Let me know how he's doin if you cross paths with him. Hope he went his own way somewhere safe.

Mick's shop's called Micktrola Appliances & Natural Audio. Know what? Mick's always been bloody cultured come to thinka it. His kids' names are fuckin' wicked. At least the man thought laterally unlike *my* old man. Like I said though mate, this story's not about him.

Not two months ago I's round havin a grog with Dad and Dad mentioned that Mick's actually making some decent money these days, there's farm types what come in from they North Island dairy farms with all this dosh to spend on surround sound with rimu pannelling 'n shit, amen. I wonder if he still leaves Boyz II Men playing in case Moaner wanders into the room, like the music's there for her. Or maybe Mick just plays all that to drown out the sounds of Alison Moyet and all that nonsense, and Kate Bush and Genesis, and especially Fleetwood, comin' from the side of the city where the other half lives, half a myself included.

Carolyn showed her colours good and proper when she waited for Tim as he did two years for fraud. Mum's wondering where the money she's lent to Carolyn's gone. Dad didn't tell Mum to cut Carolyn off, he just sorta strained his ears from his office to gloat as Mum cried. It's more satisfying to see someone else suffer than avert that shit with a timely warning. Carolyn's paying Mum \$20 per week for a coupla grand she borrowed on Tim's behalf, but Mum's told Carolyn to take her somewhere cultural, y'know nineties style, so Carolyn takes Mum to them maraes in the eastern city an that flea market at Riccarton Racecourse, an they do little drives round Marryhow an see a bit more of each other. Course Dad don't wanna be associated with Carolyn, he's pretty sensitive about his identity is me Dad.

Sucks for you then dunnit mate, being a first offender am I right? No family history a that? You're like that Carolyn really, you're a blank canvas and you're yet to be painted, never mind the brown on ya. That Carolyn, she tried hard to get painted, to get like an identity and some colours 'n shit. Amen, shit I'm blaspheming a lot tonight eh. I always just... I reckon she *asked* to be looked down on, y'know? Marryin a Marry I mean, for cryin' out loud. One beautiful little girl whorin' herself out at age

eleven, stickin her first piercings in the wrong parts of her body, a son what coulda been a quality streetfighter who's now God knows where.

Nah I don't care for 'em. Fuck the buncha em.

Hiya.

Me or the kid?

Righto – BRB mate.

Right, so I've talked to the poes and let's just say, ya rap's taken care of. Told them to give they stereo a boot too, that skippin' driving us nuts. I get a feelin we'll hear that song again though. Funny how they say the record's skipping when it's actually stuck in one place eh. Anyway mate, told 'em to ship they audio needs to this repair joint I know up in Palmy, M-A-N-A she's called, told 'em some good people there. Meanwhile they've got Tina Turner on the stereo now, that's got us locked in bloody 1992 innit. Ah, fuck it mate: I'll admit, there's some good darkies out there. Tina's got that manna stuff.

Yeah, tappin that shit-arse Audi? She's on me, don't worry. Nah I said don't worry. They know me round here, know I'm honest and objective 'n all that shit. Ah don't give us that gangsta shake shit, shake hands like a man else people are gonna remember ya as a boy, not a man. Amen.

Yeah, go on. Go back to school for cryin' out loud, getcha arse off the street mate, she's no place for a small-time like yaself. Poes don't like doublin up on paperwork anyway.

Yeah yeah yeah. Nah I ain't huggin ya, I already told ya I'm not a fag. God damn, if my dad coulda seen you mate, he'd have you straightened out. So best be away with ya eh.

Go see ya family mate. Go make things right with ya old man. Go away. Go ya own way.

Iesu Ah Scab

Iesu Ah Sam – da Hoarder, da Miser – hated to throw things away. Sometimes he was manhandled until he physically placed a pie wrapper in a rubbish bin, but it was standard for him to stuff his pockets with rubbish. A quartet of goons had stripped him of the socks his father had bought for him three years ago, which bunched around his ankles like an accordion, and forced the fist which clutched the socks into the bottom of a rubbish bin. He never wore socks again. Mutations of his name were circulated – Iesu Ah Scab, Iesu da Miser, Sik Sam.

‘It sa pun,’ explained Celeste in English, through crimsoned lips. ‘Pun for a Sa.’ Iesu didn’t get it. He was tearing apart a cold chicken drumstick under his desk, a donation from Celeste, whose parents ran a Malay-Chinese takeaway shop and would have left the chicken in the dumpster had Celeste not appropriated it. She gave Iesu something to munch on every day because she wasn’t allowed a puppy. Iesu accepted the contract. Celeste pretended not to know him outside of school, especially when she was behind the counter and Iesu came into the shop to get free drinks from the water cooler. It tasted better than tap water.

His thighs poured thickly from his grey shorts. A quiver of jellymeat landed on them. Iesu was a voracious and focused boy, with slanted eyes which had heavy folds of flesh on the top lids, blinkering his view. Celeste told him he had eyes like her father.

‘Yeah, he real ugly.’

Iesu’s drumstick was a mess. He picked up the grease and added it to the process which relayed chicken hunks into his gullet. He snapped open the bone and sucked the marrow out.

On top of everything else, Iesu was miserly with his communication. The only eye contact he allowed Celeste was when he peered through the bone to check for edible residue.

‘Iesu from the Bible.’ From the top of the class, she was able to look down on Iesu.

'Kss, you no have read Bible,' he decided, and turned away. Puddles in the pages of his exercise book were transparent. He licked the grease-spots with shiny lips. If Iesu rebutted Celeste with any more firmness, he could lose access to the chicken chapstick. He felt a jab between his eyes, which alerted him whenever his body registered mockery. Waiting for Iesu to respond was like waiting for the lights to turn green.

'Have too, in one night I read it. Mister Steele tell you. Anyway: I bored. Miss Chidgey?'

Ms Chidgey was marking. She turned her wattle. Her earrings bashed her neck. Ms Chidgey liked to pay attention to herself, and was less interested in her students, half of whom were sleeping the period. She realised she'd written their marks in the wrong column.

'Can I take Iesu to help with me lift student council stuff? And book for class?'

'Which books? Which stuff?'

'Lift staff?'

'Shut up Scab, it in your Bible.'

Iesu shut up. As Council Rep for Year 11, Celeste enjoyed authority. She told the teacher,

'You know we need book, right?'

'If you're meaning the course books, don't get anything tough for Iesu – he didn't even finish him mum's course.' Iesu's mum had dusted off the institution and set some benchmarks. She'd also swept her rubbish discretely into the cupboard.

Chidgey sent them on their way. She inched towards her contact-free period. One student looked up as they left. Celeste placed next week's completed assessment on the boy's desk. The boy went back to chiselling with his compass point.

'And don't you let him distract you from your work,' Chidgey added. Her rubbish bin was overflowing with jagged computer parts. She used her legs to shift the bin away from Iesu, whose split shoes made flapping noises as he followed Celeste. Iesu's wide arse bumped her table, knocking her palm mirror down.

They ambled down the stairs avoiding gum and spittle and drying tag. The walls were a non-threatening shade of beige. Celeste's attempts at breasts bounced slightly as she descended. Iesu thought about bras. He hadn't seen one for many months, apart from on the neighbours' washing rope. He wondered how long it would take to collect every type, and how much that collection was worth. He tried not to let the image of Celeste's boobs sully his vision of profit.

'Class boring,' Celeste decided, 'and you English bad.' She was out of food to degrade Iesu with, and made use of language instead. Her words and their footfalls toured the stairwell.

'Bad class, not my Englis. Bad class – has no rubbish.'

Iesu loved rubbish. To him, rubbish was not rubbish. His favourite rubbish was reclaimed in metalwork, during which he swept shavings into plastic bags and straightened bent nails which he rescued from the floor. He would go to class and make hooks to keep his fly done up, or racks and hooks to convenience his father. Mr Steele indulged Iesu da Hoarder because Iesu didn't think Mr Steele's name was funny. He let Iesu engrave *Mumb* on a scrap of iron. Iesu didn't mess about with the forge like the other boys, throwing apple cores and chip packets into the magma. Iesu couldn't destroy anything. He seemed unaccustomed to the forge's warmth, and more familiar with the cold recesses of the room.

Through the doors at the end of the hallway he saw the metalwork block and the gym across the quad and his hands became tense. He fingered the white callouses and warts on his wood-coloured flesh. He worried about P.E. after lunch, where no one would have food to donate to him.

'Which book we get?'

Celeste stared straight ahead and puffed her little chest out. She stepped to one side so he could come past her and hold open a door for her.

'Book for you. Dumb book.'

'I not dumb.'

'Yeah, you not dumb Iesu. The bell going in,' she checked her watch, '...two minute and you homework you left in class.'

‘Home Ec?’

‘Home *work*.’

‘Home wok? You cook in? Bring me?’

They emerged onto the quad, which contained a slanting basketball hoop, tiered benches, and a pavement of fruit peel. The quad was bordered by prefabricated class-towers, erected in case of Soviet takeover. Three oaves were positioned on the benches, in an arrow formation with two oaves reinforcing the prime oaf. Their postures identified them even before their schoolbags came into sight. Celeste pushed her shoulders back further.

‘You lucky I pick you, Scab.’

‘No pick a scab. You pick a scab, it scar.’

‘Scab on you forehead scar. Did you father teach you that?’

They tiptoed through a zone of mandarin and yoghurt. One of the oaves, wearing a hoodie and clutching a rugby ball, stretched his lips with his little fingers and whistled. Celeste puffed out her bosom, took Iesu’s brutal hand in her elegant paw, and jogged the two of them over to the benches. The Whistler slicked the hood off his head, revealing a huge forehead and solid brow. His hair was thinning. He drew the rugby ball behind his head then shot it forward, connecting a pointed end with Iesu’s crotch. Iesu crouched in pain, then sat down on the rough concrete with half his buttocks in the fruit salad. He put a hand down his pants and winced.

‘Why ya got da miser with ya?’

‘Tell Chidgey I going to get book for class and council,’ Celeste said, pushing up her bust with folded arms. She put on a pretty smile. There was a vague amount of sunlight to flash on her braces. Mostly the sky was overcast.

‘Usi! Gimme my ball bank cunt,’ said The Whistler to Iesu. Iesu rolled forwards and raised his chunky body on insecure footing. He limped a few metres and handed The Whistler’s rugby ball to him. There was a sniggering from The Whistler’s cohorts. One was a freckled ginger with pink, downturned lips and a can of V. The other was a dark boy who carried a cannister of Lynx in his pockets, slicked his hair back with

toothpaste and wore a chain around his neck with the paint flaking off. Their socks were pulled up high. Their shorts were pulled down low. The Whistler was the biggest of them, and still smaller than Iesu.

Celeste told Iesu to be on patrol for teachers.

'I pet troll?'

'Yeah you patrol for teacher.'

Whistler: 'Oi, oi dat fing what we talk about, is you gonna say yeah?'

Celeste blushed. The ginge on top of the benches craned his neck to see down her shirt.

'Still thinking, Chonny,' she said.

Iesu interrupted, hand down pants. 'But his name Sione, no Chonny. He is Tonga boy.'

'Oo you live on a garbage truck with your dad eh,' the dark boy contributed, 'And you pay ya rent in garbage eh.'

The boy's scent made Celeste's eyes water. She asked him, 'Is *Gravity?*'

'*Accelerate*. Da Scab could use some eh, spray ova all dat garbage oi.'

'Is no garbage.'

'Here's some garbage dickhead. Ginge?'

The ginge handed his Coke can to Chonny Whistler. Chonny steeled himself, crumpled it, then threw it into Iesu's face. There was a scar in the place where it hit him between his eyebrows, in his third eye. It made his senses dull. Iesu rocked, stumbled, picked the can up, rubbed his brow. The prickling sensation became acute. Iesu placed the can in his pocket. Celeste covered her mouth, though giggles slipped between her fingers.

'He took the can! What a pauper!'

'Miser mufucker.'

'Here's some a this for free, Scab.' Dark Boy sprayed Lynx at eye-level, and Iesu flinched, and backed away, rubbing his watering eyes. He saw Celeste in the blur looking concerned for somebody.

'Where you go? You da patro— '

He left the scene, but turned back to look towards Celeste. Chonny rolled her a cigarette and she coughed as she tried to smoke it. He saw her radiant braces covered up by taut lips. Her saw her feeble breasts shuddering.

Back in class Iesu lowered himself, and Chidgey was disappointed in him, and sent him back out to get the books which Celeste had convinced her she needed.

The bell rang. The books were knocked from his arms in the crush, and damaged. When he returned to class, Chidgey had left for the staffroom. He waited until she returned, after interval. He kept his head down as she berated him for leaving class with an agenda, and told him the books weren't necessary.

They needed a nail for Dad to hang his keys on, but the only surplus metal in the house was aluminium. Baking trays had been puttied to cover holes punched and kicked in the wall. Iesu was at the table spinning the flattened can he'd had thrown at him.

'How many can you have?'

'Have four hundred can Dad.'

'You can sell?'

'Five cent can it say.'

Iesu ate a mouthful of sludge. He would have loved a bite of the family pie sitting in the freezer, but it needed a family to go with it. Dad thought about things, became interested. He was easily distracted from his own cooking, they both were.

'Worth more than gold?'

'Not that much.'

'What else you do with aluminium?'

'Hoard onto.'

He had tried storing water in his soft drink can collection in case of earthquake – the TV campaign had told him to. The water evaporated. Iesu tried to find out about getting new lids for the cans and selling canned water, but the librarian kicked him off the computer. Today's can might be destined for the can pile.

Dad fetched spoons, custard and a bag of sugar for dessert. He rubbed Iesu's hedge-like afro, and the boy's vacant expression was interrupted. Iesu looked at the stains on Dad's fingers, which indicated what kind of a day Dad had had at work. The fingers were whitened, except for a pink strip with a piece of metal around it. Between Dad's eyebrows was a burn where he'd been rubbing with bleachy fingertips.

'Dad, is any cans worth more than gold?'

'Nothing is.' Dad's eyes drifted, 'Forget you can. Moof on.'

Iesu tipped the dinner bowl into his mouth, wiped the cream away, washed the bowl, washed Dad's bowl, filled it with sugar, grabbed a spoon.

'What this?' he asked, pointing at Dad's finger.

'From Coke can.' Dad held up his finger so Iesu could take a look at the can tab wrapped around it. 'You be careful when you take apart the can.'

Iesu packed up their supper and scraped the leftovers into a foam McDonald's container. He opened drawers looking for a plastic bag, found the wrong drawer full of empty Rouge Pulps,

'How you pink you finger?'

'Take off the ring, Iesu,' he said. 'Sol' the ring.'

Iesu washed the dishes and wiped down the benchtop. He turned the cold tap on, gave the tap a minute to produce tan water, let the tan run clear. He put water in a vase full of mummified hibiscuses. He sprayed bleach and wiped things clean. Their kitchen smelled sterile, and looked

it. Dad liked for their family's hoarding of cans and containers to be done in private, without causing eyesores for the visitors who came to pity them and stir the ashes. It was healthy to bleach the stains away. It took a lot of treatment to suppress the stains.

After dessert, Dad hoisted himself up from the table and navigated their dark house. He wanted to shift his tired frame into the armchair, and he hovered over the light patch on the carpet where it resided before he'd sold it. He sighed and got to work. Tonight he was varnishing the door to Iesu's bedroom, should Iesu ever choose to sleep by himself again. Dad passed the door to his own bedroom. The bedsheets weren't tucked in. There was a trail of plaster dust silting onto the bed from a hole in the wall above the pillows. Dad smiled at Iesu's books on the boy's side of the bed. Iesu had been obsessed with the Billy Goats Gruff for a year, and also devoted attention to a Mulan colouring book from Disney. Mulan's eyes and lips had been reinforced with the same maroon crayon many times over. Dad moved on down the tight hallway, its busted walls Prozac yellow, and fetched the varnish from the newspaper on Iesu's carpet. The drink cans on the floor were arranged in a pyramid, and there were computer parts under the bed. He ran clay-coloured water into the tin and thinned the varnish, and painted Iesu's door. There was a hole in it, requiring future attention. When it came to preserving the height notches scraped into the doorframe, Dad didn't water down the varnish.

The sky was bruised and threatened the trainees, who didn't want to be there. Grass languished in the gooey soil which had come from the opencast mine, which once gave the community an identity. The mine was now planked-up and full of water and buried under earth with a rugby field on top. When the worms turned the dirt, they made it sparkle with exhumed minerals.

When they got a break, Iesu tried to eat dinner remnants out of a bread bag with his fingers and the coach laughed at him and put his arm around Iesu's neck and told Tighto to get himself orange slices from the

chilly bin, but not the good ones. Coach tried to get the other kids to call Iesu Tighito, which he swore was an honourable title.

'He's built like a pine tree this boy, moves as fast as one too. And he's got no money, like a pine tree. *Tighito* we'll call him, that's a good name.'

They still didn't take to it. Chonny Whistler said that Iesu was a fag who probably sleeps with his dad, which decided the team's opinion for them. Coach couldn't contradict his skipper.

Although the ground was slippery, Iesu was hard to topple. He played Back, usually, although his mum had stretched him to Wing occasionally. His legs were too chunky to kick, but the position kept him away from the ball. If he did receive the ball, a front-rower would sprint back to take care of it for him. Usually he stood down the rear around the ten-metre line making daisy chains, which he secured in the pockets of his aged shorts. When he tackled, he turned his bulk side-on so that the daisies were protected. He came down on the opposition like a falling tree and had trouble letting them go.

The clouds sent out a thunder of intent. Coach clapped. Chonny whistled. A gaggle formed. They drank Powerade. Iesu drank water out of a Powerade bottle until he found an orange peel. He put it in his bottle and shook the water up.

'You're on oranges next week pal,' Coach said to him. 'Chon – how many games we got left this season?'

'Four?'

'Too right boys. Silverlode Shield's all that's connectin us to the ol' mining traditions round here so, y'know, without the ah, without the miners you're just a buncha aimless young pups. Bunch of, ah, minors.'

Chonny jerked a thumb towards Iesu, who was catching rain drops in his bottle. 'This dickhead gonna be rotated?'

Iesu tucked the bottle down the back of his shorts, where his bag of sludge was stowed. His mum had never let him eat sludge, she had

cooked to save them all. The aperture began to let the wind into Iesu's bum crack, so he removed the goods.

'I'll have a look into rotating. Tigho: oranges next week. Not orange peel.'

'Oo he'll bring one mandarin like last time.'

'Tigho, no more mandarins eh. Chon – whistle.'

Chonny whistled for them. The team dispersed.

Iesu helped the coach pack up. He found a raisin box on a sparkling wormhill and blew into it. The team had an alternative whistle.

'We're actually a bit lucky Lika imported that Chonny, gave him the English 'n all that. If he didn't have to do them remedial classes we wouldn't've needed you, Tights.'

'You be prepare in case you lose.'

'Your mum, she'd'a had us a whole boxa whistles,' Coach said, 'whistles what spoke English.'

The clouds released spittle. Iesu fingered the scar on his brow.

'What you do with mumboard?'

'I build computer a home.'

'*What* you do with mumboard? I assuary think you melting they.'

'For why?'

'Gold condutcters. Or silver. *No?*'

The exhaust of Iesu's panicked nostrils made Celeste's eyebrows quiver. Iesu was holding a bucket of steaming water at chest-level. His fists clenched sponges and rubber gloves. He tried not to spill or drop anything in the admin corridor.

'How you know– '

‘Don’t you know how handle valuable thing?’ She had turned to face him full-on. ‘*Don’t* jeopardise the valuable!’

There was a great amount of venom in the small girl. The steam she inhaled and breathed out made her look like Mulan's dragon friend.

‘We handle Silverload. Don’t you be reckless.’

‘I– ‘

‘Don’t fuck me up!’

Iesu eyed the floor. The dean of their form leaned back on his office chair, kicked himself into orbit, and stopped the wheels at the door to his office. He looked down the hallway at the irate girl and her tight body and her dogsbody. Dean Koloamatangi said to Iesu,

‘Who are you?’

‘Good thank you sir.’ He lowered the bucket a fraction. Celeste’s hips sprouted hands.

‘He help me clean Silverlode.’

Leaning out of his doorway, appearing to hover, the Dean glared and tried to remember which Asian girl he was talking to. This one had braces. He mopped his brow with the tie he was wearing that month.

‘Which one are you?’

‘Celeste? I head girl, you Year Eleven.’

‘You're cleaning the Load?’

They nodded.

‘What’s this biz about your mate and motherboards?’

Celeste poked Iesu in the belly, breaking her nail. Iesu picked up the purple shard and offered it back to her. She lost her temper.

‘HE TAKE BUSTED COMPUTER APART!’

The Dean pulled the frame to his office door with both hands, managing to wheel himself into the corridor where the linoleum conducted

him with less effort. The floor had lumps in it, where the earth was uneven. He rolled towards the kids. Iesu tried not to tower over him.

‘Some things are worth hangin onto; Others: not so much. You’re that hoarder kid? The Late Mrs Ah Sam’s boy?’

‘Is yes,’ Iesu said with his eyes winced shut.

‘Long as you got permission, it’s not too much of a problem. Put the bucket down, pal, take it easy.’ Iesu did bid. ‘You dismembering those IBMs?’

‘IBM in bin sir.’ His hands protected the scar on his brow.

‘He a thief!’ squawked the girl. She flashed purple talons.

‘We’re getting an upgrade right? Rubbish is rubbish– ‘

‘Rubbish is not rubbish!’

Dean Koloamatangi gave Iesu a quizzical eyebrow. He settled Celeste and Iesu on the floor and had them explain, without Celeste shouting, that they’d been sent to clean the Silverlode Shield. Chidgey had let Celeste choose a companion to help her, told her that English was wasted on Iesu.

Chonny Whistler came around the corner and strutted down the hall, his head tilted back to hold his broken sunglasses on. He used the male staff toilets and sighed relief when he exited, hoisting his pants up and down. He waved a KCs gang sign at the Dean, who shook his head back at the lad.

‘On with it, then,’ said the Dean, ‘and yous use one of these spirit level dealies if the cabinet’s sloping. Sione!’

The Dean was handling a black spirit level. Chonny sauntered into the Dean’s office. Celeste eyed his behind. The Dean wheeled himself back into the room, mostly closed the door, and wished the star luck at their next match. Iesu’s name was mentioned, followed by laughter. When he sent Chonny out, Chonny was told to hand over the level. When Iesu

reached for it, Chonny lowered it out of reach and sneered. The bubble rose to the top.

They spent the morning atop wheely office chairs, the kind which Dean Koloamatangi favoured. The chairs tended to develop AI without notice and slide out from under them, but lethal hazards were preferable to being stuck in class. Iesu knocked a wayward screw off the top of the trophy cabinet which landed on the lino, then rolled in the direction the office chairs were trying to. The corridor floor was on an angle; the bucket of water was slowly escaping. The cabinet made a groaning noise under the weight of Iesu's left forearm and started to detach from the wall. Iesu took out the Silverlode Shield, concentrated his thighs, and maintained a balance. The seat of the chair turned and Iesu negotiated gravity. The cabinet found equilibrium.

The trophy wasn't heavy to him, Iesu had shoulders like soccer balls, yet it carried a lot of weight. The Silverlode Shield was a prize created by their community around the first World War, when the school still had students with blue eyes. The young Aryans were shot by Young Turks far away, and the school lacked rugby talent for decades until it incorporated Marists in its zoning, and later other human denominations. The school collected a few victories, then began to record them on an engraved plate.

It had not been silver until a fundraising campaign ten years ago secured some ornamentation for it – silver threading and raised script and tiny tropical flowers. It was an old cricket trophy which had been appropriated. The decorative batsman figurine was yanked off with pliers. The Silverlode Shield became The Load.

'Don breath on it,' Celeste told him, 'is vey expensive medal.'

'What kind medal?' Iesu asked. He was examining his reflection. He turned his profile until the scar on his brow was unnoticeable.

'Vey precious silver,' Celeste explained.

'The wooden bits aren't silver,' the Dean corrected her from his office.

'Conductor?' Iesu asked. 'I need conductor for to other metal.'

'What the fuck you are doing for this?'

'Language!' From his office, the Dean's dampened voice said 'Didn't you take Mrs Ah Sam's class?'

'Soy sir.'

'Celeste,' Iesu said with excitement, 'I melt Coke cans.' His head bounced up and down and he allowed some eye contact. 'Engrave in metalwork! Memoial'

Celeste was too rumbled to respond.

They cleaned until after morning tea, at which point the hall became flooded with students feigning illness. They streamed past the No Thoroughfare sign and made noise beside the fingermouth sign which said Ssh in large lettering. Some of them choked the sick bay and forced the nurse to flee. Others made it to the parking lot without signing out.

Celeste told Iesu that the spirit level the Dean had handed to them would be a conductor to the spirit world. There was no one around to hear her being considerate. She told him to give up trying to melt the silver. Iesu stopped rubbing the shield and blew on his blistered fingertips. She told him to place the spirit level on the slanted part of the shelf and see what happened. The bubble moved upwards and settled under the Load. Iesu was rapt. He thought of Celeste.

'Celeste, you wan' talk to you Dad?'

Celeste split, kicking over the bucket of water as she left. Iesu found himself on an island in a shallow sea. He wheeled his chair to the caretaker's cupboard where he found a mop.

Celeste had gone to commiserate with whoever would share her company. Iesu wondered if his name was mentioned. He began to hope for this. The quad at the heart of their school had a human gaggle at each

corner, with Chonny's goon squad an overbearing tangent. Through the window, he watched Celeste flit between the Samoans and the Tongans, the Maori and the misfits, and trade exclamations with each group. Chonny watched her too, scowling. Celeste moved between groups without the invitation to sit down.

There were fewer students in the admin corridor now. Iesu released his flattened thumb from the spot where it clutched the Shield and squeezed his blister. He polished the engraving until *Made possible by Lika Ah Sam* was clear, and checked for his reflection.

He saw a constellation of pimples on his forehead. He saw heavy eyelids over his black, horizontal eyes.

Dad was in charge of church preparations. The big man and his big son were late for church every time. Half the year, this was because it was too cold outside. The other half of the year, it was too hot. Their association with Lika Ah Sam, backbone and pillar, excused their tardiness. Dad had some standing of his own, occasionally recognised.

Iesu wore the same shoes he wore to school and rugby. He wore the same shirt and the same shorts. Dad made an effort by washing his hands and bidding Iesu do the same. Dad put a ring in his pocket. Its spiky floral ornamentation dug into his leg.

They sat in a pew rear enough to allow a quick exit before the parishioners bombarded them with condolences. The parishioners allowed a wide gap where a large rump once was. 'Taito,' they murmured, nodded.

Mr Steele of Metalwork saw them come in, nodded at Iesu. Iesu looked at the floor.

Iesu secreted a print-out about metals in his mitts. Dad's stash was the personals ads from the newspaper, which he folded into the order of service. A widowing regular whose lap-folded hands were crushing a newspaper leaned into Dad's ear and related his theory that there were

Tongans amongst them, who were too lazy to make it the extra mile to the Tongan church. Dad made an outraged face, then winked, then tried to take his wink back when the man didn't reciprocate.

The pastor in the Hawaiian shirt began to talk about what you can take to heaven. There were murmurs of disappointment from the audience. Iesu straightened his back, as if it would help him listen better, and hoped for advice on how to bring his riches with him. His aluminium haul could surely be valued upon his death.

'You cannot teak Sky TV wis you, o' you Bebo, you iPod, you All Blecks... '

Iesu read his print-out. The words dribbled into the front part of his brain and made combinations, some sensible, some murky. The man two seats along inspected the congregation.

Silver is a very ductile and malleable (slightly harder than gold) metal with a brilliant white metallic luster that can take a high degree of polish.

Iesu knew he had no Polish in his genes, but he read on. Reading was easier than speaking and there was no one to tell him to shut up.

It has the highest electrical conductivity of all metals, but its greater cost and tarnishability ..something which Iesu couldn't understand something... exception is in high-end audio cables.

Iesu got the overall gist of the article. He could line his clock radio with silver and talk to the dead.

A rustling of papers disturbed the pastor, who spoke louder, and suffered a coughing fit, and drank holy water. Dad was folding the Truth so that the news content didn't affect the girly ads. His neighbour tried to read over his shoulder. Dad leaned away.

A malleable metal is capable of being flattened without cracking by the process of hammering. This property is important as materials that break under pressure cannot be hammered. Brittle metals must be molded; strong repulsive forces cause other non-malleable materials to shatter.

It meant something to him, some of the words stuck out.

'Malibu,' he mumbled, too loud for church, running his finger under the word *malleable*, 'malibu don' break under pressa.'

Iesu had an article on Lula Da Silva. The accents on the words made comprehension difficult, but he picked up how Lula defended the poor and intervened against exploitative mining. He read on about malleability.

Gold is the most malleable metal, followed by aluminium and silver. Many plastics, and amorphous solids such as Play-Doh are also malleable.

Iesu's mum appeared before him, and her mouth was open wide. Her skin was golden and her swaying earrings were silver. Her breath was sweet but her tongue was coated in bubbles and her belches stank. She told him never to hide anything from her. She was holding his bed up in the air and the blubber on her arm was jiggling. The church bells were ringing and she still had her good shoes on. She took a can of Coke from the dozen secreted under his bed, and released the bed, which crashed down and crushed his collection. The hibiscus behind her ear fell to the floor. The can his mum held became immediate before his eyes and then her arm was back in the distance again, and the can was dented, and she was using the sturdy base of the can to beat him into the carpet, and sweet Coke sprayed out and when she left him, she drank greedily from the tiny crack from which nectar vented. Bubbles were rising, trying to get out.

'Iesu! Ssh! You whimper!'

Dad had his hand on his son's shoulder. The widower was glaring at Iesu as if the boy belonged at the other church. The Pastor was speaking as loud as he could. The pimples on Iesu's brow leaked shiny gunk which he wiped onto an open Bible page with shaking mitts. The Pastor told his congregation that they could take no food with them to heaven, and there were gasps, and the widower growled to Dad

'I hope you no take your crybaby wis you to heaven!'

Dad's hand came away from Iesu's shoulder and Dad rose. His fist began an arc towards the widower's nose, but as it did so it left Iesu without support, and the boy was covering his forehead and shivering. Dad's fist dropped its ambition.

The parishioners were rising, confused by Dad's ascension. The pastor waved his hands downwards. The widower leaned far away from Dad, disturbing a young woman beside him, whose league-playing partner took offence.

The church was rattled. Iesu and his Dad stepped on many toes to escape. The collection plate was thrust at them from an old lady on their way out. Red-faced, Dad dug into his pocket and found the ring. He slammed it into the wooden dish, knocking the dish out of the lady's hands. The pastor's voice broke, the bubbles boiled.

It was bloody cold. It was always cold before a game.

The boys' legs were puffy with goose pimples. Their socks loitered around their ankles, because they shaved their legs. Coach's tracksuit had a great rent from the right shoulder to the elbow, and the zip was broken. His tracksuit was all that remained of Lika Ah Sam's second major fundraiser, after she'd milked the community of their jewellery to put a silver lining on their sorry shield. The old miners couldn't tell the fearsome woman no.

Iesu was loping across the field with a bread bag under one arm. The team watched him stop to inspect some gem in the worm-churned mud. Chonny whistled in his direction.

'Run, faggot! I'm hungry!'

They begrudged a space for Iesu in their circle. He splashed along the ruptured track which Coach's ute had made. Celeste was huddled inside the vehicle. Coach had wrapped her in a tarpaulin. Iesu entered the group puffing, his thighs shaking. He had a can tab between his lips.

'D'you bring the opposition Tigho?' asked Coach.

Iesu was unsure.

'D'you bring the oranges at least?'

Iesu proffered his bread bag. Inside, coated in crumbs, were a few yellow fruit. Celeste opened the passenger door and flopped the glove box open. Iesu hesitated before he handed the fruit over. Celeste looked away from him.

'Laps!' The team dumped their Powerades and lurched into a slow jog around the giant rectangle. Iesu trailed them. Chonny lapped him, with a chinking noise in his bouncing pockets. The Ginge tapped Iesu's ankles with his boots. Iesu's sneaker came loose and he had to stop and put his foot back in. His right shoe had a shoelace, and remained on his foot. Chonny made a diversion to the ute, ran around it, jumped in the back, opened the driver's side door and tooted the horn, made Celeste giggle.

Their opposition showed. There was a similar-sized and coloured boy for each of the Load defenders. Swearing and threats occurred. Chonny mucked up his gang sign and his rival *tissed* at him.

It was home ground for Iesu's team, but the only family members were on the visitors' side. The referee was the father of one of the visitors. He got mud on his boots and acted surprised. He was disappointed with the state of the field, and the Loadbearers in general. Coach argued. The visitors' coach argued. Iesu was benched, but the bench was the cab of the ute, and Iesu was too large and had to sit in the deck. Coach warned him about keeping his attention on the game. Iesu was called on shortly before half time when the other back lost both his boots in the mud. Iesu asked Coach if Coach wanted him as a wing or fullback. Coach told him to stay at the rear of the field and get the ball to the centres As quickly as poss.

Iesu had clubroom feet – they were oblong chunks, all corn and bitter toenail. He kicked the ball out twice, crazy angles. The Loadbearers thought they'd reached the zenith of how dirty they could play to win, but Iesu's performance forced them to become resourceful. Dark Boy played

as a hooker who ran outside the lines to get past his opposition. The Ginge grabbed the ball in one hand and his rival's balls in the other. Chonny's whistling ensured confusion. The referee blew a superior whistle and chastised Chonny. Chonny had the digits from the referee's letterbox in his pocket, and shoved these in the ref's face.

They cooled down at half time, standing in drizzle. Celeste didn't come out from the cab, but she shooed the benched boys out and handed the bag of fruit after them. By the time Iesu arrived, at the back of the pack, the fruit was already trampled into the mud and the boys were chugging Powerade. Coach's eyes were red.

"D'you bring us goddamn lemons Tighto? Got bloody taro 'tween ya ears son?"

Iesu was collecting raindrops in his palms, but now his hands shot up to protect his forehead.

'You- you ripen they... '

'Can't ya dad buy ya oranges? WHAT THE FUCK BOY!'

'Dad work today, he got to clean da quad.'

There were threats against his life, and reminders of where Iesu and his caretaker Dad lived. Iesu was confused, he knew exactly where the two of them lived.

Iesu was benched again. Celeste locked the ute's doors. Iesu picked the rinds of lemon from the mud and sucked on them, and relieved the bitterness with palmfuls of rainwater. The edges of the clouds were illuminated. He waited for the sun to come out from behind them.

There was a fracas in the middle of the field, guttural moaning and youthy squeals. There was a chinking, and Chonny was waving something in the ref's face and throwing it at him.

The ref ruled in the Loadbearers' favour.

Ms Chidgey couldn't shut Celeste up about the rugby, and obliged when the girl asked if she and Iesu could return to cleaning the trophy.

Dean Koloamatangi welcomed them, and balanced the spirit level on top of Iesu's bucket. The Dean was proud of the Loadbearers' achievement and wanted the trophy cabinet looked after some more, Clean the clean off and start again, he said. The bucket was wrapped in Iesu's arms; his drumstick rested in his mouth. Celeste walked in front of him, chest out, bottom swishing. She stuck her head into the sick bay and had a goss about the rugby.

She cleaned daintily, although the yellow rubber gloves she wore were much too large, and sagged at her elbows. The office chair on which she stood barely registered her weight, and was not a safety hazard. Iesu struggled to regulate his balance, and tried turning the wheely chair upside down so that he could reach the top of the trophy cabinet. He said to Celeste,

'Why you no use spirit levu? You no wanna talk to you Dad?'

She looked at the black oblong and slid it along the shelf towards Iesu. Her eyes squinted even further. She closed her lips.

'I want to hask you – how come you have braces? Espensive?'

Celeste made a hacking sound with her mouth, but there was no one else in the hallway to understand her disgust. So she answered him.

'My dad, he inheritance? He die, leave money. Okay?'

This took a few moments to register.

'My mum, why she no leave– '

The chair gave up supporting Iesu. He grabbed the glass shelf. The shelf came halfway out. He let go in a panic, and impressed his weight on the plastic of the chair. Two of the legs broke, and he lost his balance. He stepped towards the ground, but his bulk pulled him over and he landed on his bum. The spirit level hit him on the head. It landed square on the

floor and the bubble travelled towards the Load. The shield itself came towards him, paused on the lip of the shelf, and then fell away.

Celeste was looking past the falling shield into Iesu's face. She had slits for eyes which were pushed up into dark angles when she was enraged. Her eyes were like this often.

He caught the Load. He couldn't believe he'd caught the load. He sighed relief. His forehead was treacherously slippery. His massive arms brought the shield close to his chest, and then he felt confident about placing it on the floor.

His arms were too heavy, and he brought it down with a *clunk*. The point on the bottom of the shield rumbled. A long strip of fine silver pressed into the wood peeled half-away. Celeste suffered a logjam of rage, and couldn't express herself. Her tiny nostrils stretched wide. She showed off her braces.

Dean Koloamatangi wheeled out of his office, asked What the hell, didn't you use the spirit level?

Iesu turned the battered shield in his fat fingers. He twanged the protruding veins of silver.

'Silver malibu.'

Mr Steele was happy to see him, because he'd had a morning of disrespectful kids who'd burned and scratched themselves and sprayed sparks at him. It was interval now and the kids had been tipped into the quad to congregate or segregate. Iesu went the other way, and retreated into class for the break period. His gait was more sluggish than usual. He carried something heavy in a plastic bag.

Iesu Ah Scab was never effusive with his eye contact, but when he came into Mr Steele's workshop, he didn't look up at all. The boy nearly fell into the mouth of the furnace, but was saved by bouncing off the hot façade and lurching the other way, his body uninterested in direction, which saw him stumble into the waste bin and knock it over and put a nail

through the bottom of his right shoe. The nail lodged in the leathery corn of his foot. Iesu was too ashamed to care. He hobbled a circuit around the benches, refusing to look up. Mr Steele got him to set the bag down and unpack its contents. He had to stand to get the lower-back strength to hoist Iesu's wounded leg upright. He placed the foot on a stool and fetched his pliers. He felt sick when he pulled Iesu's shoe off around the nail – the sole was a piece of wet cardboard.

'Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. Right?'

Outside, the students were laughing and whistling.

'Was good to see you in church. Hope you're goin for *your* sake, mate. D'you take in the message on Sunday? Intangibles and all that, stuff you can't take with you?'

Iesu remained silent.

'What's happening with this trophy, mate? This the Load they all go on about?'

Iesu's lips slowly opened for him to speak. Steele's pliers crept towards the nail and seized it.

'Broke.'

Steele yanked the nail out. A ripple of reaction pulsed through Iesu from his foot to his eyes. There was a dab of blood on the end of the nail. Steele righted the bin Iesu had knocked over, and turned to throw the nail into it, but the boy looked up at him with red eyes and swollen eyelids. Iesu reached out and took the nail and tucked it in his pocket.

'You broke the shield Iesu?'

Nod.

Mr Steele let them sit without speaking until he started to hear Iesu's breath. The bell rang. It was a while before footsteps and questions arrived at the door. He eased Iesu's foot off the stool and onto the

ground. He rubbed Iesu's afro. Iesu folded into himself then found the power in his thighs to stand up, albeit hunched over.

'We can replace the bits you broke, okay? Don't worry too much about it. Just need something shiny, am I right?'

'Gold?'

'No, I think you'd have trouble finding that. Just need a bit of aluminium I'd say.'

'Play-Doh?'

'Don't think Play-Doh'd do it, sorry.'

'What I do with this? Fell off the Load.' The boy's fist opened. It contained battered silver flowers and script.

'Didn't your mum work her arse off for that thing?'

Nod.

'Well it's your inheritance then isn't it. You mum was king of the community, backbone and all that, but she wouldn't listen to anybody. Old and foolish, right? This shield nonsense is a waste. Spend it on education I say.' Steele stretched his arms and gestured around the room. 'Had a few close ones with Coach she did. Didn't listen to reason. And did she live to see out her legacy?'

Steele moved to receive his next class at the door. He turned back to Iesu and apologised for raising the subject.

'No offence, that is. Forge is over there if you want to Lord-of-the-Rings it.'

Mr Steele unlocked the door. His class of fools rushed in and looked for ways to injure themselves. Iesu hobbled out with the Load under his arm. The fools bounced off him.

His bag was bulging, and clanking, but Iesu added any cans he came across, and stuffed them all inside the bag. In the changing

rooms before P.E., the talk was about the Load, which made Iesu uncomfortable. They played corfball for the first ten minutes, and Iesu fumbled the ball more than usual. Chonny was on Iesu's team. Chonny threw the ball at Iesu's head. Iesu registered seconds later, and picked up the ball and turned it in his hands. The opposition seized the ball and Iesu's team lost. Iesu wasn't even playing their game.

They returned to the changing room half an hour later, smellier than before. The Ginge began negotiations about how much Iesu's performance sucked at their match against the visitors. The Ginge reckoned Iesu wasn't as bad at the match before this, and had got shitter. Dark Boy asked Chonny what he thought. Chonny whistled to himself, then declared that Iesu played better when his mum was watching. The Ginge wanted to add injury to the insult, and poked Iesu in the forehead.

Iesu locked himself in the disabled toilet stall. The spaciousness was comforting. He guarded the cleft on his forehead until the changing rooms were empty.

Outside in the quad, Celeste was doing revolutions of Chonny, trying to get his attention. The gang was distracted, and Iesu made it past in peace. He had English last, but skipped this. Celeste had probably given her chicken to Chonny anyway. She needed a man to control, or be controlled by. Iesu hoped that Chonny could provide.

His hands began to shake. He tucked his head into his armpit to protect his wound. The air was getting chilly and his sweat condensed. He trotted towards the metalwork room and had the door halfway open until the bell for last period sent a horde straight at him. The kids were small, Year Nines, but there were many of them and they destabilised him. He waded through them and retreated down the wheelchair ramp. There was space underneath, amongst the moss and gravel and Ripples packets. He found a hole that cats used and made it under. It was difficult to get his rump through.

The clomp of students' shoes on the wood above his ears reminded him of the noise a goat would make. Iesu liked the goat's antagonist better, though. Nobody thought about the troll.

He waited for Mr Steele to prove him wrong about the troll's social standing, and fell asleep.

The vision hit Iesu quickly, walloped the back of his eyelids. Lika Ah Sam, a mover who shook, was inflicting an argument on Dad, and Dad was up against the walls of their lounge. Lika made the better boxer, she maintained the middle ground while Dad was confined to the perimeter. Beyond the perimeter was Iesu, without a towel to throw in. Mum on the offensive:

'He need to stay in the school get student allowance!' She took heavy breaths between statements. 'Get money! You don't get enough money! Tock like a island, he need da litacy, Sefo!'

Dad was not quick with comebacks. She punched him in the nose. It began to bleed. Iesu watched his father's fists rattle like geysers, but they remained by his sides. His thumb was grappling with his ring, trying to revolve it until it came off his finger. Mrs Ah Sam, backbone of the community, had thin eyes which were pushed up into dark angles when she was enraged. Her eyes were like this often.

'We need to get him chob, Lika— '

'Need to make a boy a man a school!' Gasp. 'Iosefo, Iesu is a disgrace!' Gasp. Her nose was flared like Mulan's dragon friend. It was hard for her to draw breath.

'Allowance money is crap money, dey muck you around Lika— '

'Is *Ms Ah Sam!* Is *Ms Ah Sam!*'

She bashed him in the head. He managed to remain upright. Her ring was mostly white gold, but it had aspects of silver along its edge which twined into a tiny flower. This was the part of the ring which cut into

Dad's forehead. Each punch scooped another nugget of flesh from his third eye.

She stopped to catch her breath. She had to sit down. She fell into her armchair, wobbling like jelly. Her breasts shook sideways. Dad's bum had put a hole in the wall. He slid down it like spattered paint and landed on the carpet. Plaster dust settled around him in a ring. Lika ordered him to fetch her her oxygen. He was reluctant to get up, but managed the feat, and startled Iesu, whose wet face was peeking through the door to the hallway.

'Ahoy down there,' said Mr Steele, 'wakey wakey.'

Iesu lurched into the now, banging his head on the underside of the ramp. He jerked away from the wood and covered his brow. He picked a splinter out of his forehead. He remembered the importance of the plastic bag containing the Load, and scrambled to find it.

'Period's over – she's starting to rain. You'll drown under there.'

Iesu crawled out from under, hard as it was, after a quick survey for dropped coins. His hands squelched in the muck and moss, but he kept the Load bag dry. Steele was holding a thin metal insole for him. He held the door open for the boy. Iesu took off his shoe and Mr Steele put the insole in it. He locked the door to the metalwork room behind them.

'What do I make in da forge? Forgery?'

Mr Steele laughed at that. Iesu didn't laugh.

'Something like that actually, yeah. This wee tribute thing you've done, the Mumb?' Steele held Iesu's crude sculpture and wiped the dust off it. The boy had executed the engraving poorly, too hamfisted to compose the lettering with curves. 'You could build it out of precious metals for all God cares, he still won't let you take it with you. And this shield, the trophy? She's just a trophy. It won't get your mum back. Like the man said in church.'

Iesu picked wax out of his ear and chewed it.

'She was a backbone yeah but, Is— '

'Do I still gottu play da rugby?'

Steele shook his head and took the Load from Iesu. 'What, just so you can chase this thing?' He gestured towards the furnace with his elbow. 'Move on, mate.'

They moved on. They chipped the scraps of silver from the Silverlode Shield with a chisel. Other remnants were yanked off with Steele's pliers.

Made possible by Lika Ah Sam was on a superficial plate. This part was hard to remove. The shield lost its allure. It was a heavy piece of wood and metal. Steele said,

'Jesus, that must've been a mission to carry.'

He told the boy to batter his Coke cans into smaller chunks of aluminium, to be smelted more quickly. Iesu's eyes rolled back into memory as he emptied his can collection onto a workbench. Steele wore a grim expression and looked vindictive as he placed each strip of silver in the grip of the tongs, which took the silver to a thick iron skillet.

Iesu smelled Coke breath in the sugary droplets leaking from his collection. He took a large mallet from Steele's collection and brought it down hard, battering the cans until they weren't recognisable.

The malfunctioning barrier arms at the school's entrance hindered them. The speed humps slowed them down. Dad grumbled. There were plenty of kids at the school who deserved a good running-over. Dad vowed not to let the speed humps impede him on the way back out.

'Thank for you dropping me, Dad.'

They were where the carpark met the grass. Iesu opened the door of their van. Father and son took up the front; there was room for a family in the back. Dad's hands rested on the steering wheel. On Dad's bulging

finger was a ring bulging with silver, battered into a crude ball. Malleable aluminium.

'This da final,' Dad said, 'You going win the shield for the school?'

Iesu didn't respond. He clutched a parcel with bloodstains leaking through the paper. He looked across to where the teams had gathered. Because it was a Saturday morning, there were few spectators out, although if they won, it would be labelled a Community Victory.

'Sure you don' want me to wash?'

'Please, Dad.'

Dad nodded, as usual. His head was built without the capacity to swivel side-to-side, he couldn't refuse anything. He put a hand on Iesu's thigh and squeezed. His son's eyes squinted and the boy's teeth flashed. His forehead glistened and his pimples bulged. He patted Dad's hand and took his bloody parcel. His hands were concentrated into fists and there was red goo on them.

As Iesu lumbered across the field towards the action, the wind began to investigate the ground, foraging under muesli bar packets and oak leaves. Dad's finger ascended to the steering wheel, hovered, then fingered the scar on his brow. Then he played with his new ring. He was allowed to watch his boy from a distance, but couldn't get close to the team any more. That was Ah Sam business; Dad sided with the Ah Scabs. And Dad was more into touch rugby anyway.

The ground was damp. There was a rim of sunlight around the clouds. Iesu moved across the grass like a crab, side to side, and came close to turning back. There was a rubbish drum near the pitch, lying on its side with banana peel coming out its mouth. Iesu stopped for a quick inspection. Dad hoped that the boy wouldn't turn to look behind him at the van, but he also hoped that Iesu would. Iesu tried hard to be in the team, and the team tried hard to do without him.

Iesu had become the biggest student at the school, and the pimples along his jaw sprouted hairs, but his voice had retreated and he learned

to fear speaking. Ms Ah Sam's accelerated English classes didn't help. Dad hadn't wanted to push the boy in any direction. He let Iesu grow unassisted, even lopsided. Now his mother wasn't there to balance him.

There were some younger children running around the pitch who looked like Chonny Whistler. There were slightly older children who looked like Chonny, too – five of them in all. There were no parents around who looked like Chonny. Chonny himself was kicking a hole in the ground with his toe and heel, and yarning to Celeste, who was tarted up and shivering in a sunshower. Their backs were against a sedan with mud and grass spattered in arcs across its body. The Load was positioned on the car's roof, sparkling, and Chonny appeared to be guarding it. He hit his siblings when they came near to it. Iesu didn't come close, but Celeste called to him. A caking of Rouge Pulp bulked up her lips.

'Iesu Ah Scab! Oi!'

She got Chonny to whistle for her. Iesu blocked his ears, but came on over anyway. He stood side-on to protect his soft parts.

'Celeste, I make you pleasant.' Using his fists, he gave his bloody package to Celeste. Her face and Chonny's melted and they backed away. 'You open,' Iesu insisted, 'I pay you back.'

Chonny knocked the package out of Celeste's hands. Iesu hunched. Chonny booted the package and pieces of meat went flying. Iesu grabbed after them.

'But, I pay back Celeste for da chicken neck–'

Celeste rolled her eyes.

'What were you do with the Load? Why it disappear?'

'It no despair. Mista Steele he help repair dent.'

Chonny kicked mud out of his hole onto Iesu's shorts. 'You couldn't break da Load if you tried, Scab-dick. Oo, oi: you on reserve today.'

'But is da final?'

'Yeah nah shut up though, we got shit sorted. We could carve shit up with or without a back, hard out. Just leave shit up to me.' He wrapped a forearm around Celeste's waist and raised her into the air. She went red, squealed and gasped for breath. *Gasp.* Iesu's eyes bulged and he started forwards. He grabbed her shirt. She kicked him away. Chonny put her down and his hand seized Iesu's throat.

'Touch my fuckin— '

'Iesu Scab don' my grab shirt!'

'Jus' piss off Scrooge McDick! Fuck away from the Load.'

'You Tonga stole my princess!'

Ginge and Dark Boy had shown up. Ginge shoved Iesu and he fell into the mud. Dark Boy kicked mud on Iesu, like Chonny had taught him. They told him they could get by with whatever fifteen men minus one is. Coach pulled up in his ute and honked. Dark Boy acted nonchalant, sprayed Lynx on his wrist and rubbed it on his neck. Ginge breathed through his mouth, waiting for a reprimand to protest against. Coach leaned out the window.

'Yeah Tighto, son, instead of sitting in the mud pal, perhaps you could put the cones out for us?'

Iesu needed the support of his hands to get into a crouching position. It was unstable ground. He slipped over again, and became completely saturated with brown water and wormhills. He crawled to the ute instead of trying to stand. He kept his head low. When he pulled himself up the frame of the ute, Coach indicated the cones.

'Don't get mud on them.'

Iesu took a few moments to gather up his scattered chicken necks. He collected them onto their wrapping, hesitated, then jammed them down into the rubbish bin. He tipped the bin upright, stuck his leg in, and stomped down on Celeste's present.

He circulated the field with his cones. He stopped when he saw a single daisy peeking through the mush. He looked around for another

daisy to thread it through, to make a chain, but it was on its own. He put it back where it was, patting it into the ground, precious as a hibiscus, but it fell to the side. Its stem was broken.

There were squelching and splattering noises. Taxi vans appeared, carrying the opposition, who were from an all-boys school. Iesu shuffled back to his team. Chonny and the others began denying knowledge of why the visitors were late, in case anybody asked. The visitors said that their tyres had been let down.

'Get used ta getting let down! Shoulda taked a taxi!' Ginge and his team laughed.

The visitors called Chonny's team a bunch of co-eds. Chonny's team called the visitors no-eds, and fags. A melee began, and Iesu watched from the middle of the field. Coach drove his ute into the middle of the swarm to disperse them. He tooted loudly. He would have used Chonny's whistling, were Chonny not driving his sprigs into the no-eds' guts.

Iesu made eye contact with Celeste. Although he looked away in a hurry, he could see that she was crying. She held the Silverlode Shield against her breasts. It was more often used as a weapon than a shield. Her teeth were gritted. Iesu wondered if he could take scrap metal from her braces.

They organised a match, eventually. Chonny's nose was bleeding, so he chewed off pieces of his shirt and stuck them up his nostrils. Dark Boy had been knocked unconscious with an accidental boot to the face from Chonny, and was spending the match in the back of Coach's ute. Finally, they were ready to huddle, formulate tactics then charge. Chonny was not the only one making whistling sounds – Coach has lost a tooth.

'Down to shirteen men, boysh, sho obviously y'know... don't ah... don't... loosh.'

Coach searched for more wisdom and came up empty.

'*Fourteen* men boys play,' said Iesu, standing outside the circle.

'What, Tigho?'

'Fourteen. Wisout Dark Boy I play back field.'

'Didn't you drop the Load in the admin corridor? This right?'

Iesu protected his scar.

'Yeah yeah yeah Chonny's bird was telling me – you dented the shield? This right?'

Chonny grabbed the Load out of Celeste's arms, scratching her. He told her to shut up.

'How could ya drop this? It's light as!' He turned away dismissively. 'Just cut him already. Scab holds on to the ball for too long, he can't let shit go.'

'Yeah El Capitan's got a point there boys,' Coach decided, 'Tighto, you're a hoarder on civvy street and you're a hoarder on the field. Think you'd better sit this one out.'

'Yeah go sleep witch a dad, faggot,' added Chonny.

'But is da final match an you hef thirteen player– '

'We don't really need a dropnuts today Tighto. You've done things for us yeah and your mum woulda been very proud but she's not makin the calls any more. You done more than enough. *Sit it out.*'

Ninety later, Dad's snoring was interrupted as Iesu pulled open the van door and climbed into the passenger seat. Dad sat up and moved the driver's seat into an upright position. The Truth slithered off his belly and onto the floor. Dad took a glance in the rearview as they left the parking lot. There was commotion on the field as one player or another held the Silverlode Shield above his head triumphantly. The Load was large but the player shook it easily. It didn't have as much weight as he thought.

'Who won?'

'We won.'

Iesu asked if his mum would've been proud of him. They went over a speed hump, a cartwheeling rubbish bin, a dropped pie, but nothing impeded them.

Axe of God

We're standin where the carport meets the road, tryin ta have this conversation over the noisy horns 'n shit.

'Glad you came,' this dick goes, 'You've heard we've been burgled?'

'Woulda come in anyways, workin til six bro. Chris tell you I work weekends?'

It's early on Satday mornin.

'Chris _____?'

'Wimzy – Williams – general manager.'

'General manager for _____?'

'Aw – C-dos, up on the second floor. We do website design. I'm pretty high up in the company eh. Who you workin for?'

The man looks at me mistrustful as, steppin me out with his eyes. Eyein up my bag too, hard out. Termsa physical stature, I gots the advantages but the man's older, like a teacher or somethin. Can't really get away wiv mouthin off ta older people 'less you're in school. That's gotta be the only reason to go back there I reckons, apart from ta bomb the place. One thing I like about standin out here though is you can let shit slip out when the traffic goes past, so I takes the advantage and runs with it, call him this 'n that under my breath under the honks. Loads a cars is comin past round Biscetti Junction past our buildin eh. Real loud.

'Who you workin for?' I goes again. Bloody traffic.

'Netcom. I'm General Manager. You've probably read about us '

'Can't read,' I goes.

'Your name is _____?'

'G. Big G..'

'It's not G on your birth certificate I'll bet.' He sneers, makes a double chin. 'How do you spell your superior's name?'

'W- uh-Y- y'know, howeva ya spell Williams.'

The man's cellphone rings. 'Just hang tight alright?'

Hang tight about what? Like this dick needs to be in control. Probly don't hear though, he woulda only heard his mate on the phone. The man

goes he's here with a G who says he works for C-dos.

'Yes, we'll wait here. I'll enquire, hang tight.' The man tucks his phone in his armpit.

'You have some sort of ID or proof that you work here? Work permit?'

'Eh? I'm Kiwi, work permit what? Don't gots ta need ID bro – they just gaves us the codes.'

'If you could show me how you entered the building.' The man goes back to his phonecall. 'Young lad's going to show me how he entered.'

'Not *that* young.' What a short-arse bloody... I'm sure peeps is eyeballin us from the road. I'm lookin out at the traffic on Union but they don't seem as interested as they should be.

The dick laughs in my direction. Someone on his moby's backin' him up. 'Those people... the bag, oh yes.' He snaps his mobile shut and whistles at us.

'Can I ask what's in your bag there?'

'Lunch 'n junk.'

'Are you prepared to show me?'

'Nahp,' I goes, holdin my bag real tight.

'And might I ask why there's spraypaint residue on your bag?'

'I's taggin,' I goes, 'Straight up – but, like, coverin up other peeps's tags.'

'You admit that you were graffitiing.'

'Gotta fight tag with tag, bro. Care about my place of ah, what was it, work eh.'

'To be discussed. Show me how you got in then. I'm uncertain what's holding up the – ah.'

A bluey pulls into the carpark while he runs his mouth. Wore my FUCK DA PO-LICE hoodie today. Somethin about it makes peeps look at me all suss but I ain't sure what. The colour? And I know they's gonna pull us up about this tag-bag shit again. The poey gets out of her vehicle as I turns to punch my punchcode in the stairwell door. The lift ain't workin good. There's hell-as rents in the stainless steel lips which are sposda close on each other with a sigh, like a nice kiss. No kisses now

though, just the whine as the motors tries ta force the doors shut and can't. Rents mighta been caused by a crowby or even a axe. Lift's got tagged and pissed in, no way we's goin in it. The mergency phone's off the hook.

The poey takes a readin of my hoodie and looks a bit angus. She musta think I stole it. If she arkses us about what's writ on it I'll tell I can't read what it says.

So this short-arse mil-aged dick's all up in my face:

'Your punchcode? Show me it on the keypad.'

'Keypad's busted,' I goes, 'I'm tryin'a show ya – just round the corner here.' The poey's prodding the cinderblocks with her fingertips, making notes on her notepad. Not bad lookin for a lady po, real wide hips eh, like Jo Cotton, bros reckon I'm wack for lovin the wide ladies but they's ignorant.

'Here: code.' I punches in the code real quick. Someone's had a go at the buttons, they're munted.

'Show me again.' His arms are folded. I whams the code back in, bit slower for the dumb-arse audience.

'Satisfactory,' he goes, smilin all reluctant-arse, obviously still hatin' on me, 'but let's wait here for the officer to have a word with you, hey?'

'She can have a word with you too bro,' I goes, on the offensive!

Judith's strollin up as well. He nods. 'Ah – perhaps this woman can clarify things.' She has a quick word to the officer, who's waitin for her break. Judith don't look unpissed.

'Break in I understand?' Judith goes. I cut Dickman off before he can make me look bad.

'Yeah check out the wide-as rents in the elevator, woulda been a crowbar they woulda used,' I goes to her, just to her, not lookin at my *mate*. Better arks his name at this point I thinks.

'By the way bro what's y–'

'You work for C-dos do you?' Judith arkses me. Man, I've stood beside Judith loadsa times in the kitchen scrapin shit off my lunch plate makin a big-arse effort to show her I care about hygiene and that. And what do I get for it? Disrecognized.

'I've stood beside ya Judith like, countless times! C'mon! I'm real high up in... that company what I work for. The one what I said before.'

'He does say he works for C-dos,' Dick goes.

'Oh yes, I suppose so,' Judith's like, 'you're better dressed most days though aren't you Gary.' That makes us even anguser. Shoulda wored my FUCK JUDITH hood instead.

'What's in your bag there?'

'Jus lunch eh, ah, Jude.' She glares us up.

That dick goes, 'Left your briefcase in the Porsche, hm?'

Miss Piggy comes up and joins us, done talkin on her radio for the mo. She's got a walkie talkie on one side, countless accessories on her belt eh, pepper spray and capsicum spray and stuff, lookin' like Batman 'n shit. She doesn't prebble on and on like these other cunts.

'Sir, were you here when the burglary occurred, were you the person who called emergency services?'

'Nah yeah well I rang yous and no one answered, what's up with that? Had to call that security firm instead. Mergency phone's all smashed up now.'

'But it's not so smashed that you couldn't call?'

'Used my moby.' I takes out my phone and waves it side ta side.

'What was their response time?' She pulls out one of her sprays and I recoils a bit. Memoirs of that stuff lingers with ya. Turns out it's a notebook though and she starts writin shit down.

'Arks this guy, they sent him down.' I jerk a thumb at the jerk. He steps in front of me, literary. It's like a eclipse of the sun.

'Security protocol for the firm - that's S-@-F-E \$ecure, got that?,' he prebbles, 'protocol is for S@fe [\\$ecure](#) to have a senior employee at the site investigate any disturbances before they dispatch a security guard, due to fiscal foresight.'

'Fiscal force... wot?'

'*Money*,' this dick goes, firmly, 'budgeting. However my own company, that's Netcom, you might've read about us, has me indemnified for accident or injury sustained while investigating untoward incidents of this nature, Axe of God. Same as the others in the building. Our levies are

discounted if their guards don't have to be called out. So I've come down here this morning with a certain...' he fishes in the air for some metaphor, '...Dutch courage.'

The officer gives the dick this real queer look and write on her notepad. 'So you're Dutch, sir?'

'No?'

'But you *have* been drinking?'

Judith interventions. 'This is Dick Netta – he runs Netcom? You've probably read about them.'

The officer writes more stuff down. 'A burglary's covered as an Act of God is it, Mr Netta?' She gets Mr Netta to spell his name for her.

'What's a Axe of God?' I arks.

'Axe of God,' Judith goes, 'are axe for which no one can be held responsible – this means they are hard for insurance to cover, and insurance likes to avoid such claims. Or to make them somebody else's responsibility.' She sighs. 'Comparable to our current circumstances – we're still to determine why the alarm wasn't activated.'

Dick steps right into the middle of our four-sided shape, squintin up at me wearin like magnifyin glasses:

"G", I'm going to ask you this without preamble, because preamble would be both a waste of mine and your time, and that of the good officer here, and Ju– '

'WOT?'

'Did you see any burglars this morning?'

'Nahp.'

'Has anything been taken from C-dos? Or my offices? Or any of the others within the building?'

'Dunno.'

'Why'd you call security?'

'Keypad's munted, obviously. Escalator too.'

'*Elevator*. G, you need to get your superior down here to assess damage, confirm things with Judith and myself. And to check whether the alarm's working.'

I want to tell him I don't have no superior but, whatever, I gets out my

moby and gives old Wimzy a call. He says he's in bed reading the NBR. I arks him if it says who won the league. Then I tells him there's been some kinda a break-in, nah haven't been up to see if anythin's stolen but the excavator's shot and we got a poey and Judith, you know her, and some dick standin round tryina suss things out. The short-arse gives me a sick-arse look when I call him a dick. Soon as I'm hung up, he goes to me:

'Let's get efficient: did you break in here?'

'Nahp.'

The poey raises her eyebrows. Judith's got her arm folded.

'Why did you call security instead of the Police?'

'Told you straight up, I rang 911 and you pricks didn't answer. This is like what Mum said, like how God only helps them what help themselves.'

'I'd just like an explanation about the alarm system,' Judith goes. The poey finally runs her mouth.

'I visited S@fe on the way down here,' she goes, 'which held me up. They confirmed the alarm system was disconnected this morning. Perhaps by whoever did all the graffiti.'

'There we go!' I goes.

While we's waiting for Wimzy to turn up, I goes and fiddles with the scraps of the alarm circuitry all hangin out of their box. This is round the corner where the concrete gets rougher and there's broken glass all over the show. That short-arse Dick comes round and arks me what the hell do I think I'm doin with evidence and he summonses over Judith and po-lady.

I go, 'Hey is this a Axe of God?' indicatin the smashed up shit, 'coz it looks like For's carved up wiv his hammer. A hammer's pretty much a blunt axe.'

'For?'

'That Glaswegian god dude.'

'Unlikely,' Judith goes. But she kinda starts smilin for some reason.

'Who pays for the damage, if insurance don't? And like to replace the stolen shit? If it is a Axe of God.'

The poey chuckles. Dick, who you mighta read about, goes

'The *taxpayer*,' real angry.

I'm like, 'Jeez, / ain't payin taxes – they'll hafta *take* em from me yo.'
That sets em chucklin even harder.

So Wimzy turns up wearing his dressing gown and I cracks up. He tries to gimme one a them fist pumps like my main man Obama. Wimzy's got this thing about connecting with the youth, givin us opportunities. Introduces himself round to the three stooges, shakes all their hands holdin his gown closed with his free hand. Wimzy's all g but he's kinda one a them effluent fag types what drinks their Lion Red out of a wine glass.

'So, you're in charge of C-Dos, Mr Williams?' goes the piglet

'We are, yes. Hi Jude. Our Godfrey here, Godfrey Scott, we let him come in on weekends and do a spot of web design work. During the week he's,' and Wimzy leans in and gets all conspiracy styles – 'well, he makes a fine cuppa tea.'

I pulls my hood up, this is stink.

'Got your lunch there eh?' he goes to me, chur as, 'Mum's egg sandwiches again?'

Stink as.

'I hope they haven't given you too much grief, Godfrey.' But Policey cuts in,

'I see C-Dos isn't registered on here,' fingering the sign what says what companies is inside. Sign's a bit old so I know my man's gonna get a bit of a grillin.

'That's out of date I'm afraid,' he goes, gives us faggoty wee chuckle like it's not his fault we ain't listed, which it is and makes a bloody nuisance for me when I get couriers pokin their noses in our office askin if we're Netcom.

'Anyway,' po goes, tuckin her notepad back on them luscious hips, 'please indicate to me which components of the alarm system will need repairing. I can contact your security provider and insist on expediency.'

'Right-o, will do,' Wimz goes, 'listen, G: you *are* obliged to work today– '

I swears at that, but at least I won't get disturbed if everyone's buggerin off now. It's not so bad workin' in a trashed orifice by myself. I work in mysterious ways.

'Until what time are you working, hon?' Judith arkses me, all concerned and shit, 'We want you to be secure up there.' I go, real mournful—

'Aw, better do my full hours eh.' Come ON Wimzy, I'm thinkin, intravene! Help me out!

Wimz goes, 'It's not safe up there, there are thieves about. Just give my office a clean-up and head home safely. Don't worry about any programming for now.' He shakes hands again and retreats back to his Jag. Jude tells Dick to stay away from the office until the cleaners and locksmiths is done their shit.

'And don't fret about cleaning my office, Geoffrey. Just give my coffee mug a rinse if you would.'

'Chur Jude.'

'Hang on,' Dick goes, 'let's not exculpate the human element – will anyone be sought?'

'It's less than likely we can identify a suspect. Let insurance clean up.' The po tucks her notepad back into them hips. 'Thanks for your help, G.' She gives us a wink.

Tells her she's welcome. The dick who ya mighta read about tries to linger and give me another earful but the po toots at him. My hood's up and I pull the drawstrings tight and I couldn't hear Dick if I wanted to.

The switch to activate the escalators is identified by a small red box painted above it. Seen tonnes of these eh. I find this one beside the fake fern. I switches it on, ride the lift up in style. One thing I loves about havin the alarm deactivated is I don't have to remember the code, which is like eight digits long and I don't have time for that shit. I don't wanna linger round here, there's bad peeps about.

The kitchen's just off left from reception. Walkin through, I'm about to grabs a Reader's Digest, they got mean-as jokes in em, but that's a waste of bag space – spray cans be takin up room. I dumps my lunch out on the

kitchen table and rip mum's sammies into little pieces and smoosh some of them down the sink and chucks the rest in the bin. Mouth's a bit too dry ta eat.

I reckon I'm a pretty faithful employee eh. I follow Wimzy's command to a T and clean out his office real good. Nab his laptop, gold Parker pens 'n shit. Then I moves through to Jude's part of the office, find me some petty cash, lotta prepaid envelopes too, Mum arksed me to pick sum up coz she writes lotsa letters, specially letters to the principal. Hopefully For'll help me not get too weighed down with mum's gear – like mum said, God helps them what helps themselves.

Man, if I's at work they would've fired us.

Lasties I move up a floor to Netcom. The door's a bit hard for me to kick down so the l'il axe in my bag does the trick on the lock. Hatrick's what they call a l'il axe. I find the office of Dick Netta: General Manager. I opens one of his draws and dumps Wimzy's laptop and shit in there, and Jude's cash. Mum'll jus be happy with the envelopes.

I remembers just as I'm leavin that I gots ta rinse out Jude's coffee mug, what's on her desk. Give it some quick lovin under the tap. They'll be needin a new teaboy on the job I reckon when I fill the gen manager openin at Netcom.

I fills out a timesheet, just for the hour's clean-up I's arksed to do. Otherwise it'd be dishonest.

I catch the lift back down and switch er off. I hope Dick's in shit when Insurance gets some detectives on the case. Or maybe he can blame shit on a Axe of God.

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NOTES